



A SWISS SECRET

Traipsing around the hidden gem that is Winterthur.

TEXT **CHARUKESI RAMADURAI**

If someone had told me few months ago that Switzerland had hidden secrets left to discover, I would've laughed out loud. Remember, this is the country that has played a leading role in popular Indian movies for fifty years now. Thanks to Bollywood, it would seem like every snowy peak, scenic lake and picturesque town of Switzerland is now familiar to a frequent traveller. But as it turns out, it's not.

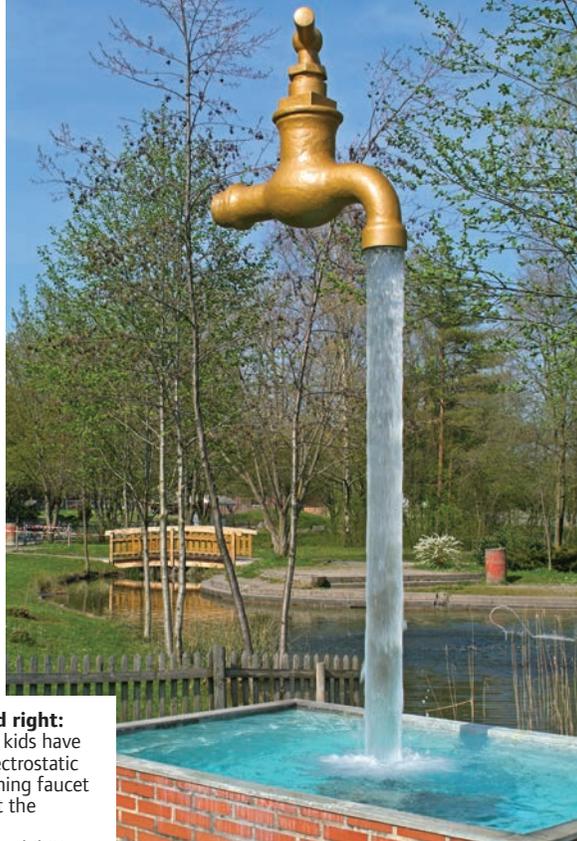
Switzerland's sixth largest city in terms of population, located just fifteen minutes by train from Zurich, has been hiding in plain sight all this while. It is true that until a few years ago, Winterthur stayed off the tourist trail, since it was known almost only for its industries. However, in the last few years, it has become a hub for art and culture, containing within its small core no less than 16 museums catering to all ages and interests.

It is at one of these museums, with the grand (but apt) name of Swiss Science Center Technorama, that I begin my tour of Winterthur. The term 'hands-on' assumes a new meaning at this science museum that packs in fun and interactive exhibits across four levels. As I walk through these spacious rooms, I find myself shedding my listlessness and turning into an enthralled child, along with the dozens of other school children who have been trooping in all morning.

The exhibits cover a wide range of themes, from everyday air and electricity to the

This page: The twin-towered town church is the landmark of Winterthur's Old Town.





Above left and right: At Technorama, kids have fun with the electrostatic machine; A running faucet with no pipes at the museum!
Below: Visit an exhibition at the Fotomuseum Winterthur.

magic of mathematics and the mystery of soap bubbles. My absolute favourite part – one that I find it difficult to tear myself away from – is the Mindscapes Gallery, where all manner of simple but brilliant illusions and mindbenders are on display, equally fascinating for children as they are for adults.

Fittingly, the museum is described as a space for ‘science, art and human perception’, a phrase that takes away from the scariness of science and makes it immediately approachable. “Everything here is not about conveying a message; it is also about letting kids have fun with science. We are sure they will learn by themselves along the way,” says Roy Schedler, the Head of Marketing, who gives our small group a whirlwind tour of the museum before letting us loose to explore.

A few hours later, we walk out straight into the Swiss sunshine and head on to Sulzer Areal district, the part of town that has seen the most stunning revival, from industrial zone to hip neighbourhood. Literally located on the other side of the tracks, this was where the ‘working class’ of the city lived, employed by the prosperous diesel motors industry (the neighbourhood is named after the company), till recession hit hard in the 1970s.

The entire neighbourhood went into a state of dilapidation, till about a decade ago, the town began the revitalisation of the estate, beginning with the land closest to the railway tracks. As I begin the walk along with my guide Katja Kundig, a Winterthur local, I find it difficult to believe that this was a derelict zone till very recently.

Today, it is a popular hub for students, and young people are out in droves, eating lunch, getting drinks and just hanging out together,



enjoying the fine weather. The whole area seems bathed not just in sunshine but a sense of hope and optimism; once again, I get a glimpse of that famous Swiss productivity and foresight I keep hearing about all the time.

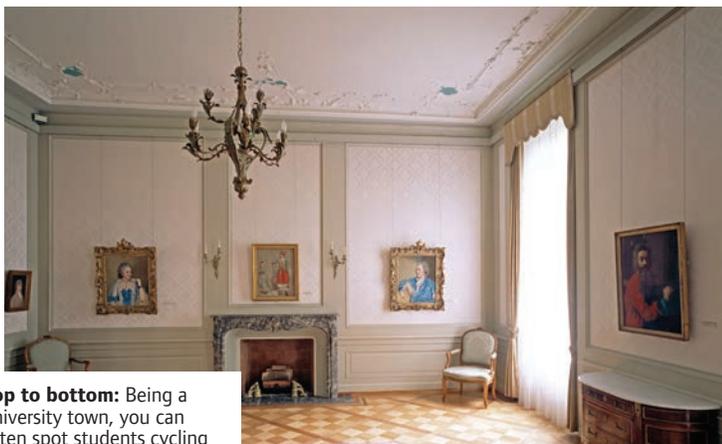
Katja takes us into a beautiful building with a glass facade, where everyone is silently reading, working on a computer or having hushed discussions around small tables. It is the new library of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences, an expansive and cheery space located in what was once a factory making engine parts. A few minutes’ walk away is another similar concept: the hall for architecture students, bustling with the chatter of a dozen young voices. Katja says this used to be a grimy factory workshop till it was repurposed a couple of decades ago into its current avatar.

However, not all of Winterthur is new and shiny. Later in the evening, I take a walk towards the old town, which is much like other charming European cities, with a history dating back to at least 1175 CE. The Museum for Photography (also known as Fotomuseum Winterthur) and the Swiss Foundation of Photography (Fotostiftung Schweiz), located close to each other, have remarkable exhibitions going on, featuring eclectic themes, from racial tensions in the USA of the 1970s to the unseen wars in Africa over the decades. I could linger here all afternoon, but once again, the attractions of the balmy outdoors are too hard to resist and I zip out far too quickly.

Although Winterthur is poised to give stiff competition to Zurich, with over 300 stores and boutiques, I am more inclined towards an aimless stroll through what is supposed to be the largest pedestrianised area in all of Switzerland. Surely enough, the heart of the city does not fail to charm, with its old churches, narrow alleyways, medieval fountains and buildings with colourful facades.

Later in the evening, I sit down for dinner at a garden cafe called Stricker's, under the shade of a sprawling tree bearing bright pink flowers. As I kick back from the tiredness of an entire day of walking, the waiter fetches an array of small dishes from across the globe: crunchy lentil salad, tangy guacamole, creamy hummus, soft breads and a mushroom risotto, with a final dish of *roteli* – Swiss cherry liqueur – ice cream to wash it all down at the end.

All of a sudden, Winterthur feels like the centre of the world, and I am not sure if it is to do with the food, or just the experiences it has given me through the day.



Top to bottom: Being a university town, you can often spot students cycling around; The interior of the Oskar-Reinhart Foundation Museum; Stroll through the fully-pedestrianised Old Town and stop at a quaint cafe at Steinberggasse street.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO:

- ✦ The Oskar-Reinhart Foundation Museum, named after the Swiss arts patron and art collector, who was born in Winterthur, features various works by Swiss, Austrian and German artists.
- ✦ Bäumli-Viewpoint is Winterthur's most popular vantage point. From here, you can enjoy views over the entire city and even that of the Alps. Perfect for those picture postcard shots!
- ✦ Just outside Winterthur is Kyburg Castle, home to an international award-winning museum which offers insights into castle life over the last 800 years. You can take part in a court of justice, look around the cellar, the torture chamber, and even sniff at spices in the medieval kitchen!

THIS YEAR, GO IN TIME FOR...

✦ August 9-20: Winterthurer Musikfestwochen, the 42nd Winterthur Music Festival, over the course of twelve days will see contemporary music and cabaret celebrated in the alleys.

✦ November 7-12: The Winterthur International Short Film Festival is Switzerland's largest short film festival, and takes place every November.

✦ December: The Christmas Market in the heart of Winterthur's Old Town attracts thousands of visitors from the region each year. Take in the spirit of the season with delightful aromas of cinnamon and mulled wine, twinkling lights and charming stalls.



Above: Christmas season is a lovely time to be in this city too! Seen here is the Justitia Fountain on Marktgasse street.

Below: A timber frame house stands tall in the Old Town of Winterthur.



Jet Airways operates daily direct flights to Amsterdam, Paris and Abu Dhabi. From here, connect to Zurich with codeshare partners KLM via Amsterdam, Air France via Paris, and Etihad Airways via Abu Dhabi. Winterthur is a short 30-minute drive or 15-minute train ride from Zurich.

QUICK FACTS

ACCOMMODATION

The stylish boutique hotel, Sorell Hotel Krone lies on Marktgasse street – that runs through the Old Town – and is close to a number of museums and other sights to see. The Best Western Hotel Wartmann is a modern business and city hotel conveniently located right next to Winterthur railway station.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit to www.myswitzerland.com