

Fribourg – Past, Present, Future

Fribourg - Birth of a Free Town

The foundation of Fribourg in 1157 by Duke Bertold IV of Zaehringen demonstrates the political will of the Zaehringens to consolidate their power by establishing a circle of towns in the district of the Aare and the Sarine. In some places, they gave an urban character to an existing settlement, such as Solothurn. Elsewhere, such as Berne, Berthoud, Morat and Thun, they founded cities on the sites of former bridge-heads, castles or villages. At Fribourg, the plateau of the present district of Bourg, shielded by its cliffs, and the ford across the Sarine in Auge, probably used since prehistoric times, offered interesting topographical advantages which favoured the founding of the town.

At the death of the last of the Zaehringens in 1218, Fribourg comes under the rule of the Counts of Kyburg who sell it in 1277 to the Habsburgs who, in turn, surrender it to Savoy in 1452. After becoming an Imperial city in 1478 at the end of the Burgundy Wars, Fribourg joins the Swiss Confederation in 1481. The Reformation then isolates it as a stronghold of Catholicism within the Protestant republic of Berne.

Owing to an intelligent policy of alliances, the city became the centre of a small republic through acquisitions and conquests effected mainly in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The Canton of Fribourg: 500 Years of History

On 22 December 1481, thanks to the combined efforts of a mediator and astute politician, Nicolas de Flue (1417-1487) of Obwalden, and a talented diplomat, Jean de Stall of Solothurn, Fribourg and Solothurn are admitted into the Confederation and join the eight original cantons of Zurich, Berne, Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Glarus and Zug. The Helvetian Diet had its seat at Stans, not far from Ranft, where Friar Nicolas lived as a hermit; a messenger, Master Heimo, served as an intermediary so that the "living saint" was so well informed that there was no need for him to go to the capital of Nidwald in person. His advice appeased the harsh quarrel between the city cantons, who were in favour of adopting the two new candidates, and the country cantons, who were against it for fear of upsetting the balance of power in the heart of the alliance. Fribourg and Solothurn were grateful to the "man of peace". Being important economic centres, they were glad to secure their safety by linking their destiny with one of the most formidable military powers of the era.

For Fribourg, 1481 marks the end of the mediaeval age. The "free town" of the Zaehringens joins a Confederation which is indeed younger, but powerful. After three centuries of exemptions, fees and immunities, which characterize the urban liberties of the feudal system (1157-1481), come three centuries of authoritarian principle (1481-1781). This is first asserted by an extension of territories towards the West and the South (Broye, Glâne, Gruyère, Veveyse), then in religious matters by refusing the Reform, and finally politically by establishing patrician rule with the power in the hands of a few privileged families of the nobility and the upper middle classes.

In seizing the State's most lucrative charges and progressive meddling in communal and parish affairs, the patrician administration incurs deep opposition from the farmers, ordinary classes and even the nobility. This hostility is fostered by the modern ideas of liberty, equality and democracy which come to light in the eighteenth century, especially after 1781, and give rise to the "Chenaux Revolution". Challenged from the eighteenth century onwards, the old Régime - "Everything for the people, nothing by the people" - is shattered and collapses in three phases: in 1798 with the arrival of the French revolutionary troops; on 2 December 1830 under the blow of the "Journée des bâtons" (Day of the Sticks); in 1847 with the breaking down of the Sonderbund, a separate federation of the Catholic cantons resulting from the hostility of the "Old Switzerland" to industrialization and all centralization.

Thus the two centuries of the contemporary era (1781 to date) begin with a highly agitated period, which expresses the difficult passage to liberal democracy and individual liberties finally guaranteed by the federal constitutions of 1848 and 1874, as well as by the cantonal constitutions of 1831, 1848 and 1857. With the return of stability and peace, Fribourg and Switzerland now concentrate on managing their affairs as best they can through "change in continuity": evolution takes over from revolution. It is in this climate that democracy, at first basically representative and authoritative by will, slowly becomes semi-direct, pluralist and includes participation through the introduction and extension of common rights (legislative initiative in 1921, financial referendum in 1945), with proportional representation at the Grand Council (1921) completing today's renowned consensus, a compromise aiming to satisfy, as far as possible, all the legitimate needs and deep aspirations of the citizens.

From Fortified Town to Confederal Solidarity

In becoming a member of the Swiss Confederation, Fribourg adheres to the Covenant of Stans, a federal pact of non-aggression and mutual assistance, signed in 1481. In doing so, the new canton indeed reinforces its own security, but at the same time contributes to the military consolidation of the ten States. Beautifully situated in an arm of the Sarine whose cliffs protect the city on three sides, the fortress of the Dukes of Zähringen represents a spectacular architectural entirety. Considered to be impregnable, Fribourg will remain unviolated until 1798. Moreover, the military organization of the city makes each inhabitant a soldier whose position at the ramparts is fixed. The town and its surroundings is composed of four districts, called banners, each one under the command of a banneret. Artillery and cavalry complete this body, from which certain units participate in the Battle of Morat (1476) alongside of the Confederates. When Charles the Bold is defeated, then killed (1477), the people of Fribourg request the conquerors to convert their occasional alliance into a perpetual alliance.

For Fribourg and the Confederation, the modern times (1481-1781) are the era of the mercenary and service abroad, the outlet for the demographic overflow. Service in France is the most popular for those whom a royal ambassador calls "The Swiss Gascons" and their courage induces the king to keep them by his side. Through certain families, the nobility of Fribourg thus acquires several regiments of the Royal Guard. The gallantry and loyalty of the guards, which are not merely a legend, are confirmed on 10 August 1792, a tragic day: they fight fearlessly step by step and shed their blood at the Palace of the Tuileries.

The troubled period which opens the contemporary era (1781 to date) rightly heralds in the end of the great adventure of mercenary service. The 10th of August becomes a symbol: democracy and absolutism are incompatible. At the mercy of revolutions and counter-revolutions, the regiments serving France, which were discontinued after the massacre at the Tuileries, are reinstated (1803, 1816) before being finally abolished for good (1830, 1848). A large number of men from Fribourg then join the Foreign Legion, created in 1831 and originally under the orders of a Swiss, Colonel Stoffel of Arbon. Others continue to serve at Naples, or in the Swiss Guard of the Pope, which today remains the last vestige of a long tradition.

Another tradition gradually dies out, that of the military sovereignty of the cantons. From 1848 onwards, with the Federation of States becoming a Federal State, centralization is accelerated in spite of oppositions and refusals. A judicious measure, the creation of cantonal regiments - in Fribourg, the 5th regiment in 1875 followed by the 7th regiment in 1907 - avoids a blockage. The pedagogic testing of recruits creates a rivalry between the cantons, which provides a stimulation for the primary school in Fribourg: in 1902, illiteracy has practically disappeared. The two world wars once again display the soundness of the Fribourg troops. Today the canton participates fully in the effort of total defence.

Fribourg in Europe and in the World

Fribourg-en-Nuithonie and its elder sister cities Fribourg-in Brisgau, Offenbourg, Villingen, Rheinfelden, Neuenburg, Berthoud, Morat, Berne, Thun, Breisbach am Rhein, Kirchheim unter Teck and Lenzingen, so many towns founded in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by the Dukes of Zaehringen. With the end of this dynasty, the Kyburgs inherit and continue their work on the left bank of the Rhine. Austria, then Savoy, follow them as rulers of Fribourg. But from 1403 onwards, a treaty of association links Fribourg and Berne, the latter drawing its western neighbour into the Swiss orbit.

The Reformation in the sixteenth century threatens to destroy the Confederation. Fribourg remains Catholic and finds itself isolated in the midst of Protestant lands. Its enclavement is compensated by alliances with Catholic courts: Escorial, Versailles, Vienna and, of course, Rome. Did Pope Julius II not declare the people of Fribourg to be the "defenders of the freedom of the Church"? Nevertheless, Fribourg remains a loyal partner of the Confederates. The protestant, Abraham Ruchet from Vaud, states this at the beginning of the eighteenth century, even before the end of the religious hostilities of the two Villmergen Wars in which Fribourg remains neutral.

Loyalty and discretion account for the very ancient role of Fribourg as a capital of diplomacy. The people of Fribourg are considered to be the "Solomons of Switzerland". After the Battle of Morat in 1476, conquerors and conquered meet together on the banks of the Sarine to negotiate an honourable peace. Fribourg takes advantage of this occasion to express its desire to become a member of the Confederation. In 1516 after Marignano (1515), it is again at Fribourg that the Swiss and the French sign a treaty of perpetual peace, which marks the beginning of Swiss neutrality. In 1564, the alliance between France and Switzerland is renewed in Fribourg and in 1803 the Diet convenes there to take reception of the Mediation Act signed at Paris with Bonaparte, thus ending the civil war between the Confederates.

Men of peace and good soldiers at the same time, the people of Fribourg contribute towards populating the world through military and civil emigration. The latter is almost world-wide, even if the neighbouring states, especially France, are the main countries of welcome : Swiss clergy undoubtedly, but also farmers and craftsmen, manufacturers and traders in cheese, missionaries going to far-off continents, and students. For a long time, the Catholics of Switzerland will go to the University of Fribourg-in-Breisgau. As far as so-called settlement emigration is concerned, two facts suffice to underline the importance or benefit. In 1665, " The Canton of the Swiss " is founded in Canada, the actual name of a region in Quebec, then baptised " Canton of the Swiss from Fribourg ". As for the Brazilian city of Nova Friburgo, it is born in 1819 from the departure of more than two thousand emigrants from Estavayer-le-Lac and Basle. Canada and Brazil have preserved something from Fribourg across the centuries.

Today, the 80'000 or so people from Fribourg who live outside of the canton, constitute what is called the 8th district of the canton. They unite within the Joseph Bovet Association, named after the priest and poet from Gruyère whose popular tunes are still very much alive in the hearts of everyone from Fribourg. This association, which was founded in 1957, has 4000 members and has its seat at the Musée Gruérien in Bulle. It is the point of contact between the 37 Fribourg circles which exist in Switzerland and abroad. The aim of the association is to reunite the people from Fribourg scattered outside of the canton, to cultivate friendship between them and to maintain the customs and traditions of Fribourg. Every three years, the association organizes within the canton a large assembly of people from Fribourg who live outside of the canton.

But Fribourg owes its present influence in Europe and throughout the world mainly to its university. Numerous intellectuals from the five continents, after spending several terms on the banks of the Sarine, have taken back a little of the " spirit " of Fribourg to their own countries.



Work and Days of Activity : An Expanding Economy

As a symbolic gesture of gratitude, when Fribourg was accepted in the Confederation, it made a gift of a beautiful piece of cloth to Nicolas de Flue. The town of the Zaehringens with its five to six thousand inhabitants, a large population for that period, is one of the principal centres of textile production in Switzerland and Europe. But the passage from sheep farming (for the wool, a raw material) to cattle rearing (to manufacture cheese), the shifting of the main commercial centres (fairs), the religious tensions and the success of mercenary service abroad provoke or accelerate the economic decline of this great cloth manufacturing city. In 1800 the capital of Fribourg has hardly any more inhabitants than it did in 1481. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the mistrust of the ruling class towards industry and, even more, the undeniable success of agriculture delay the advent and rise of modern economy in Fribourg, in spite of an attempt in the 1870's to industrialize under the stimulus of Weck-Reynold.

At the end of the last century and at the beginning of this one, particular attention should be given to the creation by Georges Python, the future founder of the university, of two important State companies : the " Entreprises Electriques Fribourgeoises " (Electricity Company of Fribourg) and the " Banque de l'Etat " (State Bank). Since then, strong links exist between these three public institutions, the two latter ones contributing regularly to the financing of the university, a happy recipe which has made it possible to expand the buildings of the university several times, even recently with the help of the Confederation and private industry.

To evaluate the state and evolution of the economy over the last quarter of a century, the easiest way is to review certain statistical data which are revealing. There are 66'279 jobs in the canton in 1975, of which 12'128 are in the primary sector. In 2000, of the 107'840 jobs available, 11'951 are in the primary sector. These figures show the passage of an essentially rural canton to one in which the economic activities are more varied.

The economic evolution of the canton of Fribourg can also be seen in the volume of construction and in the number of private cars. 1955 : 51 million francs for construction ; 1965 : 283 million ; 1975 : 541 million ; 1979 : 586 million ; 1989 : 1.457 million ; 1994 : 1,515 billion. Fribourg has managed to make up for its backwardness in the sphere of collective premises. Motorization followed a similar trend : 8'325 private cars in 1958, 32'213 in 1970, around 62370 in 1980 and 165'114 in 2016.

Finally, tourism and the hotel trade play a very important role in the development of the districts of Gruyère, Veveyse, Lac and Singine particularly. 133'000 hotel nights in 1955 against 277'000 twenty years later and 282'512 in 2003. In other branches of the tourist accommodation trade, it has increased from 345'000 nights in 1966 to 610'114 in 2016.

Three conclusions can be drawn from these figures : firstly, the vigorous development of the canton over the last thirty years ; next, a continuity of expansion due to the need to " catch up ", which has been satisfied ; and finally, the lure of a future prosperity to be confirmed with the help of good will.

In spite of a successful economic " take-off ", Fribourg has nevertheless maintained its cultural traditions and spiritual values, insomuch as the canton is well placed in the Swiss pattern to fulfill the role, designated by geography, of mediator at the crossroads of all kinds of activities with a view to combining the quality of life to quantitative development.

At the Crossroads of Language and Culture

At the exact meeting point of various influences, whether Germanic and Latin, Swiss German and Swiss French, German and French, Fribourg is a cultural bridge over the Sarine linking northern and southern Europe. Was not Bertold IV of Zaehringen Swabian by his father and Burgundian by his mother? Was Switzerland not formed and maintained between the Rhône and the Rhine, independent of the divergent languages, religions, mentalities and economic interests? Fribourg, a miniature Switzerland, still reflects the past and the present of the Confederation. Evenmore, in this respect, Fribourg is historically an innovator: 1481 marks the entry of the first French-speaking canton in the Swiss alliance.

Therefore Fribourg adopts German as its official language without imposing it on those under its administration living in the country. In town, certain families germanize their names: for example, Bourquinet became Bourgknecht, Cugniet-Weck, Dupasquier-von der Weid, Monney-Müller, Théraulaz-Thurler and Tornare-Dreyer. This does not necessarily imply a change of language, moreover since at the height of French civilization in the eighteenth century, there is a trend in the opposite direction; Burgknecht becomes Bourgknecht, and von Lenzburg becomes Lenzbourg. Finally, French is designated as the official language in 1798 and 1830 at a time when modern democracy and the principle of majority rule compel recognition. Today linguistic peace reigns. The "Institut fribourgeois", founded in 1957, published the Charter of Languages in 1968 which put French and German on an equal footing. The Grand Council approved the principle in Autumn 1990.

In spite of being a university canton and town of learning, Fribourg has given Switzerland only three writers of an exceptional nature, striking because of their importance within Europe: Pierre Canisius, a 16th century Jesuit, was the author of a new catechism and the founder of the College St-Michel. Well-known throughout Europe and a respected churchman, he dedicated a large part of his life to youth development. Father Girard (1765-1850), a Fransiscan and chief of the schools of Fribourg, was one of the forerunners of modern pedagogy.

He developed simultaneous teaching, the active system, work in groups, foreign language instruction, and teacher training schools. Gonzague de Reynold (1880-1970) was a poet, historian and thinker. First celebrating "the cities and lands of Switzerland", and in particular "the spirit of Berne and the soul of Fribourg", he next applied himself to the "formation of Europe" a monumental work of historical synthesis. He then wrote his "mémoires" which contained a wisdom which was drawn from Cressier in the Fribourg countryside at the junction of languages and cultures.

At the end of the Middle Ages and in the 16th and 17th centuries, Fribourg blossomed artistically in the fields of sculpture, painting and architecture. Houses, fountains, statues, altarpieces and painting give Fribourg its present reputation as one of the best conserved mediaeval and renaissance cities of Europe. Names and dates are dull. The tourist only has to discover for himself the streets, bridges, chapels, churches and signs in the Old town whose charm alternates with the rhythm of the seasons! The artists of Fribourg still exhibit each year at the "Musée d'Art et d'Histoire" (Museum of Art and History).

Fribourg and song have perhaps been synonymous since Abbé Bovet, poet of Fribourg, understood how to express the deep feeling of the people of Fribourg for music in general, and the lyric art in particular. The canton has more than 200 choirs and choral societies. The Conservatory is a pole of attraction for young people's fascination for musical studies.

This cultural panorama would be empty without Fribourg's excellent gastronomy, a minor art but an art nevertheless. Rather than describe it at length, a list of the traditional "bénichon" (Thanksgiving) menu will give Confederates the time to sample a land and its well merited cuisine : "cuchaule", butter, "moutarde de bénichon", bouillon – boiled meat, celeriac, carrots – lamb stew with grapes and "poires à botzi" (pears poached in cinammon and wine) – ham, sausage, cabbage and green beans – leg of lamb, mashed potatoes and beetroot salad – a bowl of fruits from the farm – Gruyère cream with berries – "beignets", "cuquettes", "croquets", "pains d'anis" and "bricelets" (all special "bénichon" biscuits)...



Fribourg, a Touristic Town : a Worldwide Influence

A medius-sized town with about 38'800 inhabitants, capital of the Swiss canton of the same name, Fribourg is situated in the western half of Switzerland on the main axes of the motorway and rail networks of our country.

Fribourg is at the border of the French and German speaking population and is therefore bilingual with 70% French speaking and 30% German speaking inhabitants.

Although a small town, Fribourg is important because it serves as the administrative centre of a whole region, and particularly because of the numerous international companies who have their head offices within the city walls. Moreover, all the services of a large city are available. Its international influence comes from its vocation as a centre of study, due to its many educational institutions and Catholic university which, in 1997, counts about 20 % of students from the five continents.

The town's highly varied industrial sector, dominated by the food industry, assures an active economic life.

Fribourg is one of the most important art centres of Switzerland. The area of the old town, the whole of which is classified a historic monument, constitutes the country's largest mediaeval entirety. It comprises churches, public monuments, fountains and no less than 1000 bourgeois houses, which have all been consistently very well preserved.

Every year, numerous visitors come to Fribourg to admire the outstanding works of mediaeval and religious art of Switzerland, which are exhibited in its churches and museums, or to participate in the many events of its rich cultural life.

Finally, Fribourg is an ideal place to stay and makes a good base from which excursions can be made to visit the many places of interest in the canton (Gruyères, the district of the lakes) as well as the main tourist attractions of western and central Switzerland.



Places to visit in Fribourg

The Old Town

The old quarters to be visited are mainly those of Bourg, Auge and Neuveville which date from the 12th and 17th centuries.

Fribourg has preserved a mediaeval entirety which is unique in Europe and perhaps world-wide. Its churches, public monuments, the fountains of Geiler and Gieng and, above all, a thousand or so bourgeois homes are well preserved and together form a coherent, integrated site in a picturesque, twisting location overlooking the deep valley of the River Sarine.

Cathedral of St-Nicolas

The Cathedral of St-Nicolas, built between 1182 and 1490, is in the late Gothic style of a basilica with pillars, endowed with an immense tower at the front with a rich architectural decor and valuable examples from different periods.

The stained glass, created by the Polish artist, Mehoffer, between 1896 and 1936, constitutes some of the most important in the domain of religious Art Nouveau stained glass in the whole of Europe, and is completed today by the works of the French artist, Alfred Manessier.

The organ, which reunites classical and romantic characteristics, is the work of the local organ maker, Aloys Mooser, 1824-34. This instrument very quickly acquired an international reputation which attracted such famous musicians as Franz Liszt and Anton Bruckner.

The 74 metre high tower, which has a spiral staircase with 365 steps, is the most original creation of its kind for the late Gothic period in Switzerland.

The Franciscan Church (Eglise des Cordeliers) in Bourg and the Augustinian Church (Eglise des Augustins) in Auge

These contain important masterpieces of Swiss religious art, including the altarpiece “ Master of the Carnation ” (1480 ; Cordeliers), the most notable and most important work of Swiss art in the second half of the 15th century.

The Museum of Art and History, Rue de Morat

Made up of several sections, the museum offers a wide panorama of the history of Fribourg, a rich collection of Swiss mediaeval sculptures, the “ International Triennial of Photography ” collections, etc.

The Natural History Museum, Chemin du Musée

This houses a permanent zoological exhibition (native fauna as well as from the whole world), crystals, samples of rocks and geography, as well as various temporary exhibitions which are held frequently.



The Swiss Puppet Museum, Place du Petit-St-Jean

Presentation of Swiss and foreign puppets, both contemporary and ancient (glove puppets, stick puppets, string puppets, shadow puppets, stage puppets).

State Bank of Fribourg, Pérolles 1

A commercial building of contemporary architecture, by the Ticino architect, Mario Botta.



Jean Tinguely/Niki de St.Phalle Area

Exposition of both artist's masterpieces.

Swiss Museum of Graphic Art and of Communication

From Gutenberg to Internet (opening planned for 2001).

Jo Siffert Fountain, Grand-Places

Kinetic sculpture by the Fribourg artist, Jean Tinguely, dedicated to the automobile racer, Jo Siffert.

Numerous Art Galleries and Antique Shops

In the old town.



FRIBOURG – A Brief Historical Chronology

1157	Duke Bertold IV of Zaehringen founds the town of Fribourg-en-Nuithonie
1403	Civic alliance of Fribourg and Berne
1476	Battle of Morat (22 June) and Congress of Fribourg (25 July – 12 August) ; Fribourg asks to become a member of the Confederation
1481	Fribourg and Solothurn are accepted into the Swiss Confederation (22 December)
1516	Perpetual peace between France and the Swiss cantons (29 September)
1564	Renewal of the alliance with France at Fribourg
1781	The “ Chenaux Revolution ” unsettles the patrician rule (May)
1798	The capture of Fribourg by French troops causes the temporary fall of the aristocracy
1803	With its seat at Fribourg , the Diet takes reception of the Mediation Act which reestablishes the cantons and restores peace between the Confederates (4 July)
1814-15	Reestablishment of the patrician administration
1830	The “ Day of the Sticks ” brings about the final fall of the patrician administration (2 December)
1870	First phase of the industrialization of the town
1874	Arrival of the railway
1889	Foundation of the university
1900	First expansion of the modern day town
1960	Beginning of the second wave of economic expansion
1971	Creation of the protected zone of the town aiming to safeguard the old districts in their entirety
1981	500 th anniversary of Fribourg in the Swiss Confederation
1991	700 th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation
1998	150 th anniversary of the Federal Constitution
2004	Neue Kantonsverfassung. Stimmrecht für Ausländer auf kommunaler Ebene.
2007	850-Jahr-Feier der Stadtgründung Freiburgs, verschiedene Ausstellungen und Anlässe. Lancierung des Gemeindefusionsprojektes Gross-Freiburg.
2011	Eröffnung des Neuen Stadttheaters Équilibre.
2014	Einweihung der Poya-Brücke.
2016	«Tinguely-Jahr» zu Ehren des 25. Todestages von Künstler Jean Tinguely