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Zug: Cobblestones and clock tower offer old-time charm

The city of Zug, capital of one of Switzerland's smallest cantons, is best known as a tax haven and base for multinationals and millionaires. But just a short walk from the gleaming office towers and bulging wallets of international entrepreneurs lies the city's old town, with its clock tower, cobblestones, and chapels.

The city's traditional heritage is largely hidden behind the international corporations and wealthy elite who have given Zug its unofficial title of the richest place in Switzerland.

Less than a five-minute walk from the business district, along the shore of Lake Zug, lie narrow streets densely packed with wooden and stone houses, which have barely changed in the decades since the millionaires moved in. The city's dual identity can best be observed by climbing to the top of the 13th-century clock tower. In a place of such conspicuous wealth, it's refreshing to discover that a trip up the 99 steep, wooden stairs to the observation gallery costs nothing.

In the seven centuries since the tower was built, the building has doubled as a prison, a lookout post for firemen and an entrance and exit point into the town. At 52 metres, the tower is just high enough to provide a vista of the two faces of Zug. On one side, office highrises tower in the distance. One of the most prominent is the tinted glass façade block built by the billionaire commodity trader, Marc Rich, who fled to Switzerland in 1983 to avoid the US tax authorities.

Concrete to cobble stones

But take a few steps across the top-floor observation platform to the

opposite window and the concrete and fibreglass disappear, replaced by cobblestones and stained glass. The spire and whitewashed walls of the Oswald's Church, built in the 15th century on the site where a chapel to St Anne once stood, stand out as a symbol of the city's religious heritage. A third window provides a view of the surrounding mountain peaks and glistening water of the "Zugersee", a lake admired by visitors and locals as much today as it was once feared by their ancestors.

Twice in its history, Zug has been devastated by floodwaters from the lake, which killed scores of people and damaged hundreds of homes. In 1435, two rows of lake-side houses plunged into the water, carrying 60 of their occupants with them.

"The second disaster took place in 1887 as the city was being enlarged and houses were being built too close together along the lake," says Cornelia Zahner, manager of the city's tourist information service. "It was a stormy day and as the water level rose, a section of the housing started to move and the whole lot tumbled down."

Eleven people were killed in the collapse and a further 300 lost their homes as a result. "It was a real catastrophe and the place where this occurred well deserves its name Catastrophe Bay," Zahner adds. A modern-day catastrophe sent shockwaves throughout the city in September of this year, when a lone gunman stormed into Zug's parliament building and shot dead 14 parliamentarians before turning the gun on himself. The city, indeed the country as a whole, is still attempting to come to terms with this tragedy.

Zug's modest past

Scores of multinationals have been settling in Zug, at least since the 1950s when the city began to offer tax incentives and financial sweeteners in a bid to attract companies to settle here. But Zug's reputation as a haven for millionaires in the middle of a wealthy country has had an inevitable impact on the city's popularity as a tourist destination. Tourism authorities say the reputation is unjustified and stress that a bulging wallet full of credit cards is

not a prerequisite for enjoying the local hospitality or city sights. "We do have a problem with the way people refer to Zug only in terms of its wealth," Zahner says.

"For a long time, the city was in fact very poor and people had no money to build new houses, which is why the Old Town has remained largely unchanged through the centuries." Zahner points to the annual Bäcker-möhli festival in January as proof that poverty was once commonplace in the city. On the last Wednesday of the first month of the year, the city's guild of millers, bakers and pastry chefs join forces in the Old Town to hand out baked goods, fruit and sweets to children. "It serves as a reminder of the way the poorest people in the city once got something to eat," Zahner says.

Edible delicacy

Food is what brings many tourists to Zug all year round, with bakeries across town staking their livelihoods on the city's most celebrated edible delicacy: Kirschtorte. The baked sponge in Zug's famous cherry cake is soaked in 45 per cent proof cherry liquor, enough to ensure that even the thinnest sliver will provide a tonic to both impoverished tourist and wealthy businessman.

Albert and Catherine Meier, who run one of Zug's most famous Kirschtorte bakeries at a prime location right outside the railway station, say the international atmosphere in Zug has contributed to the fame of the city's edible export. "Its reputation stems in part from the large number of international firms in Zug," says Albert Meier.

"Companies based here sent the cakes back to their customers overseas and so Zug developed a reputation for its Kirschtorte outside Switzerland". Settling down to a coffee and slice of the city's famous cake at the end of a morning stroll along the banks of Lake Zug, it's hard to separate the two faces of the city. The citizens of Zug may be wealthy, but the streets of the city are not all lined with gold. The cobbled lanes of the Old Town and the hourly chiming of the clock tower serve as a powerful reminder that national heritage is not for sale.

by Ramsey Zarifeh / swissinfo.org