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Favorite Streets in 12 European Cities

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BERN

Grosser Muristalden

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Photo



CreditReto Albertalli for The New York Times

Seen from a distance, the Grosser Muristalden doesn't look like much, especially against the arcades and alleyways of a city as pleasing as Bern.



It is just a road and not even a cobbled one at that. The asphalt rises sharply over the cold, green Aare River and then bends at a big chalet to become just another street. There are no shops and no museums, just the evolving views of Switzerland's most beautiful city framed by giant plane trees.

Most people don't get this far. They stop at the Altes Tramdepot at its base for a hefeweizen and spaetzle or wander left instead of right to reach the Rose Garden. If you really want views you can ride a funicular up the Gurten, Bern's home mountain. To appreciate the Grosser Muristalden, you should walk.

I found this out by accident one late-summer day. I had just arrived as a wide-eyed immigrant and set out on my bicycle to discover the city where my daughter would be born. From the Zytglogge, a 13th-century clock tower, I rolled east past Albert Einstein's house and down toward Bear Park, where a flat path shot along the river. I missed my turn, the road cocked skyward, and I learned the Grosser Muristalden is best on foot.

Up and up I pushed the bike, the city undressing itself with each step. Below me stretched the Matte, a medieval warren where the streets spoon a bend in the river. I spotted a building where Rodolphe Lindt played with cocoa butter and a new conching process that made the Swiss forever famous for chocolate.

Farther to the north stood a jazz club and a house that some club-bearing insurgents hit with a cannonball in 1802. (You can still see the wound.) Above it all towered the late-Gothic spire of the Münster, a cathedral started in 1421. From its airy top the Alps felt so close you could smell their breath.

As a 17-year-old in the late 1800s the artist Paul Klee would sit along the Grosser Muristalden and sketch the scene below, using only contrast to form his lines. During my years in Bern I sometimes stood where he stood and watched how the seasons braced against each other to create something new. Golden leaves became snowy steeples. Boughs turned prickly, and the geraniums bloomed. Every time it felt like mine.