

# SWITZERLAND

A Cultural Guide to Switzerland





*It is gaiety, basically, that  
allows us to have no fear  
of the problems of life  
and to find a natural  
solution to them.*

Sophie Taeuber-Arp,  
Swiss Artist

These booklets contain the relevant information on intercultural diversity in everyday business life - short, concise and compact. The practical booklets support mutual understanding and provide a basis for open exchange. Thanks to their targeted selections of topics, their tips and handy format, they are a helpful companion in everyday business life.

We emphasise the importance to provide you with up-to-date information. Despite in-depth research, small errors however might be found. Please note that these brochures might reproduce stereotypes and we do acknowledge, that every individual is unique in its own way.

Feel free to share with us your experiences or suggestions for improvement. Thank you!



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## Introduction Switzerland

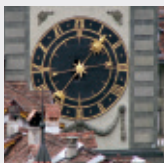
A brief summary of Swiss culture



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# Introduction Switzerland

Switzerland, located in the heart of Europe, is characterized by mountains and hills, rivers and lakes. It is also called the “water castle” due to the fact that several major European rivers have their source in the Swiss mountains.

**Switzerland** is a country with few resources. Therefore, it has always been dependent on agriculture, tourism, trade, research and development to secure its prosperity. The Swiss realized quite early that they needed to add innovative thinking and precision manufacturing for the development of their economy. They became leaders in fields such as complex machinery, pharmaceuticals, foods, and precision instruments. Today the finance sector and strong brands such as Swatch, Nestlé, Novartis, Toblerone, Ricola and Swiss Army knife), underpin the image of Switzerland.

A long history of over 700 years influences the political, social and value system of Switzerland to the present day. Swiss people are proud of their humanitarian tradition (e.g. The Red Cross), their successful economic development and

their political neutrality. The practice of moderation, which is vital to the Swiss conditions of neutrality and historical diversity, can be seen as the central and most significant Swiss trait.

Switzerland is considered, worldwide, to be the country with the most extended, differentiated and traditional institutional structure of direct democracy. Apart from regular elections at the local, state and federal level, the Swiss people can influence the political decision-making process by initiating additional topics to be voted on. These can cover many subjects including taxes. Although this can be sometimes regarded as a rather sluggish process of direct democracy, it provides a relatively high degree of self-determination in political and social issues.



## Facts and Figures

Switzerland shares borders with France, Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein and Italy. It has 41,300 sq km, divided into 26 federal cantons (miniature nations – self-financing). The highest point in Switzerland, the peak of Dufour, is 4,634 meters high.

## Climate

Switzerland has a mild climate with moderate heat, cold and humidity with clearly distinguishable seasons. Depending on the region the climate is very diverse. E.g. the south of Switzerland (Ticino) has a mediterranean type climate.

## Population

8.67 Mio (data from 2020).

Two-thirds live in the German-speaking part, close to one-third in the French-speaking part and the remaining in the Italian-speaking part.

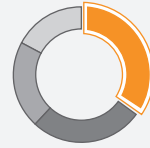
## Languages

“Swiss German” is the common native language. 17 of the 26 cantons are German speaking. “Swiss” German is a spoken language; it is not a written language. Nevertheless, people pick up “High German” on TV, on the radio and from newspapers. “Swiss German” is quite different from standard German, called High German. French is spoken by the population in western Switzerland. Italian is spoken by the people in the southern part of Switzerland and “Romanisch” is spoken in Grisons in the southeast. A large part of the population grows up bilingual. Within these four main languages numerous dialects are spoken.

## Religions

Switzerland is not only multicultural but also has diversified religions, mostly within the Christian faith.

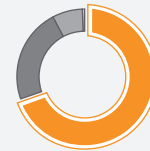
## POPULATION



- 65+ years (19%)
- 40-64 years (35%)
- 20-39 years (26%)
- 0-19 years (20%)

*(census statistic 2020)*

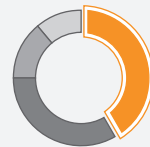
## LANGUAGES



- (Swiss) German (62%)
- French (23%)
- Italian (8%)
- “Romanisch” (0.5%)

*(census statistic 2019)*

## RELIGIONS



- Roman-Catholic (34.4%)
- Protestant (22.5%)
- Islamic and Jewish faith communities (5.7%)
- no affiliations (29.5%)

*(statistics of the year 2019)*





## Important Values

The Swiss culture is characterized by the diversity of its people, ranging from bankers to cheese makers. Four national languages, four cultures (each of which is influenced by its neighbouring countries); geographic extremes and a highly developed industrial and service economy are further characteristics of Switzerland. In order to successfully approach and navigate this diversity, a basic knowledge of the culture is a great advantage when living or working in Switzerland.



## Stability, trust, punctuality, reliability

Honest communication; Swiss people generally say what they think without ulterior motives.

Promises are expected to be met (a word is a word).

In general, the Swiss see time as precise and linear in quantity. A clear knowledge of temporal sequences, constant punctuality and the meeting of deadlines are essential values.

Reliability is illustrated by seniority – respect for age, whether for a person or for a company, is one of the internalized codes of conduct.

## Consensus

Faced with a complex, traditional and highly developed institutional structure of direct democracy, Swiss people are prepared to compromise in order to reach timely decisions. This sense of balance and moderation has become a basic value and is internalized to satisfy even minorities.

Swiss people maintain harmony by avoiding confrontation, seeking compromises and adopting a non-assertive approach.

The ability to look for balanced solutions, when confronted with controversial points of view, is considered an important step towards a constructive team atmosphere.

## Aesthetics, innovation, quality

Swiss people maintain in general a neat appearance (“dress for success”), a clean environment, a high level of conformity as well as discretion about their wealth. Wearing ostentatious jewellery or fur coats is not appreciated.

Switzerland is one of the countries holding the largest number of Nobel Prize winners in relation to the population.

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*Other characteristics of the society are: Patriotism, a strong work ethic, discretion and an intricate bureaucracy. It must be noted that some values can be experienced differently within Switzerland. Some can be influenced by bordering countries (e.g. punctuality in the French part of Switzerland is slightly different than in the German part).*

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*Tensions and  
dissatisfactions  
are addressed in a  
factual and calm  
tone.*

---

The Swiss tend to be impatient with mistakes. They appreciate quality and dislike to be confronted with errors.

## Hierarchy and Power Distance

Most Swiss companies have a flat and functional hierarchical structure. The relationship between managers and employees is quite pragmatic and the emotional distance between employee and superior tends to be informal but respectful. Tensions and dissatisfactions are addressed in a factual and calm tone.

Medium-sized Swiss companies, which are the backbone of the Swiss economy, usually maintain a family atmosphere with a casual tone, regardless of hierarchical levels. Status considerations are of minor importance.

In the process of decision-making, employees are encouraged to speak up and express their opinion directly and honestly, even if they contradict their superiors. Once the decision has taken place, however, employees are expected to respect and to stick loyally to the decision.

## Long term orientation

The Swiss, with their deep-rooted and long-lasting history, appreciate tradition and stability. Therefore, Swiss companies do not tend to make quick decisions and are reluctant to let

themselves be swayed by short-term, fashionable trends. The behavior of the Swiss may be perceived as slow.

## Traditions

There is still a strong rural-oriented population which lives in the alpine regions (eg. Appenzell, Central-Switzerland, Graubunden, Bernese Oberland).



*The alpenhorn has no lateral openings and therefore it gives the pure, natural harmonic sound of an open pipe.*



*The Almbtrieb is an annual event in the alpine regions in Europe, referring to a cow train in autumn.*

These regions very much value traditions. Examples are: the seasonal processions of cows, bearing very ornate bells, marching up in spring to the alpine pastures and down again in late summer. Costumes are decorated with hand-made embroidery; there is traditional music (yodelling, alpenhorn), public festivals (e.g. "Äpler- / Schwingfest") and highly appreciated cheese production.



# Social Behavior

## Non-verbal communication

If a Swiss person is quiet, it could either mean a lack of enthusiasm or that they are actively listening. The Swiss are reluctant to expand in grand gestures and do not use expressive body language.

Noticeably chewing gum or talking with your hands in your pockets may be perceived as a little too casual.

Backslapping or thumping the table for emphasis may be seen as over-familiar and as a loss of personal control.

Swiss people will keep their distance physically and emotionally, so do not get too close and make someone uncomfortable.

## Topics to be avoided

Swiss mostly do not like to talk about money, income/earnings, banking secrecy, politics or religion. However, when part of conversations, interesting discussions can evolve from these topics.

## Trust and Relationship

Honest and clear communication is appreciated and should be done via face-to-face exchanges or by phone, rather than relying too much on emails.

The Swiss are proud of their country, so be careful when criticizing. It is best to have patience and let a relationship ripen a little before voicing challenges. Swiss culture is based on politeness.

Arrogance and direct, assertive approaches are readily perceived and disliked. It is best to remain thoughtful and humorous.

Swiss people may sometimes be perceived as abrupt and rude when confronted with problems. Some may assign blame and judgment statements to other individuals. If possible, don't take it personally; mirror the assigning of blame, when the confrontation has calmed down.

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Each service has its price. What you say is important (e.g. to build up trust), but only the signed version of a contract counts.

The Swiss generally separate business and private life and it takes a while to establish private relationships. Respecting individual space and privacy with patience will end in success.

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## Business Greetings

If no one is there to introduce you, do it yourself by addressing your first and family name or family name only, such as Mr. XX., Use the first name only when invited to do so. Swiss people might be irritated if you introduce yourself with your first name only.

To greet someone, shake hands (firm handshake) while making eye contact. A reasonable strong hand-shake is perceived as showing self-confidence, friendliness, strength and willpower.

In the German-speaking part, to say "hello" you can use "Guten Morgen" (good morning) before noon, and "Guten Tag" (good day) or "Grüezi" (the Swiss dialect form of hello) all day long. To say goodbye, use "Auf Wiedersehen" or "Tschüss" (informal) or "Auf Wiederhören" on the phone.

## Business Meetings

Arriving on time, either for a meeting or an invitation, is expected. If running late, information with explanations by phone or by e-mail is appreciated.

In general, an agenda for the meeting is circulated in advance. Business meetings are formal and task-oriented, with only a little small talk at the beginning. Stay focused on the defined goals for the meeting.

During the meeting, discussions are conducted in a friendly tone and everybody contributes with the aim of achieving consensus and leaving the meeting with a clear action plan. Agreed upon deadlines must be observed.

## *Do's:*

- + Be aware of cultural values, understand the conditions and characteristics of the foreign culture and distinguish between your own and the foreign culture.*
- + Learn basic German in order to interact with the locals.*
- + Keep in mind: Swiss appreciate punctuality.*
- + Welcome the people with a smile and a firm handshake. Be aware that in rural areas everyone greets each other ("Grüezi"). Note: Kisses on the cheek (3 times) is done among friends.*
- + Say thank you whenever you receive something.*
- + Small talk: Sports; football, ice hockey, car-racing and skiing, insights about a foreign country, travel experiences, food and beverages and, last but not least, compliments about Switzerland are good topics of conversation.*

## *Don'ts:*

- Do not speak too much or too loudly.*
- Do not hesitate to ask questions (this emphasizes your interest).*
- Do not miss agreed dates. In case of problems, inform in advance (this will greatly increase understanding).*



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*Make clear from the beginning, that until it is in writing, nothing is truly agreed upon.*

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The mobile phone is switched off or put on silent. Answering the phone, writing messages or clicking loudly with the computer button is not tolerated and perceived as rude and disrespectful.

## Business Negotiation

The Swiss-German managers maintain a sober, pragmatic and fact based negotiating style. The business people from the French part of Switzerland as well as their colleagues from the Italian speaking Ticino, however, tend to prefer a holistic approach (personal assessment first, followed by facts and figures) of their counterpart.

Swiss business people negotiate cautiously, deliberately and diplomatically. In general, they enter into a negotiation with an approach that seeks benefit for both sides.

In general, there is little room for negotiation on prices. They are meant to be fixed, and the Swiss mostly dislike bargaining.

Enter well prepared with all the relevant details and compelling reasons. Openness, honesty and reliability will help towards a successful end. Make clear from the beginning, that until it is in writing, nothing is truly agreed upon. In order to achieve clarity for all parties and to prevent unpleasant surprises, the Swiss prefer a written agreement prior to an oral one.

Be patient and wait silently for agreement. Assertive behavior may harm the process.

## Decision making process

As previously mentioned, Swiss employees, not only managers, like to be involved in the decision-making process. Therefore, they should be given the opportunity to express their ideas and thoughts. In addition to that, they expect their ideas to be taken seriously and recognised.

Submit a solution to agree or disagree upon. Set the parameters of the discussion and be certain to actually make a decision.

## Gifts

*A modest gift, with symbolic meaning, is highly appreciated. Not appropriate would be a large precious gift. It may be perceived as unusual and in some business environments it is sometimes even forbidden. An artifact from a foreign country is an appreciated gift, when invited into a Swiss home.*

### Examples:

- + *Flowers*
- + *Wine/Spirits*
- + *Chocolates*

In case of urgency, make information available to people so that they will act faster. Present the decision not as your own, but as one the full team has collaborated and agreed on.

The process steps are: planning > discussion > consensus > decision. The decision-making process is sometimes slow and consensual.

## Problem or conflict solving process

Swiss people approach conflicts soberly, impartially and pragmatically. Nevertheless, they might be perceived as less subtle when expressing disagreement and might get to the point more quickly.

They examine the issues carefully and decide from case to case, while including all options for finding a solution.

Conflicts at the workplace must be managed in the same way as any other aspect of business in Switzerland – by consensus. Each person involved should get a chance to bring in its view, but the leader will make the final decision.

## Virtual Communication

Conference calls are quite common, nevertheless, meeting people face-to-face remains the most successful way to communicate. If the call is in English, keep in mind to slow down and grade your language to express yourself clearly.

Communication style by e-mail and web: Keep your language simple but not too casual and keep your message short. Use bullet points to summarize, highlight information or list options that you are proposing.

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## Business Dinners

Business dinners usually begin between 7pm and 8 pm and start with an appetizer. Then three to five courses follow. It is polite to not begin eating until everyone is served. Keep the wrists on- and the elbows off the table.

Toasting is a formal process. Before beginning to eat, the host will propose a toast (“prost”) and will make eye contact, in turn, with everyone sitting at the table. The counterparts do the same.

The Swiss rarely invite business associates into their homes, however, they happily give up their weekends for client entertainment.

Equally for out of office-events, guests are expected to be on time; this means not too early and no later than 15 minutes after the proposed time.

## Dress Code

Business dress is relatively formal. Classic dark coloured clothes with fine tailoring will earn your respect, particularly in banking

## *Basics of Swiss table manners*

*Basics of Swiss table manners: The use of the cutlery (e.g. knife, fork, spoon) is subject to a particular rule.*

- 1 Hold the fork in your left hand, the knife in your right hand.*
- 2 Keep both in your hands while eating. Don't put knife or fork down except to drink or pick up bread. The knife (in your right hand) is also used to help discreetly guide food onto your fork (in your left hand).*
- 3 Do not cut up an entire piece of meat at once. Cut off a bite size piece and eat it before you cut off another piece.*
- 4 If there are more utensils than just a knife and fork (salad fork, dessert spoon, etc.), the rule is simple: Move inward from the outside for each course. Sometimes spoons are placed above the plate rather than on the side.*
- 5 When finished, lay your knife and fork side-by-side on your plate pointing to the centre, with the handles on the lower right rim (five o'clock position).*

and corporate finance. Men should wear a suit and tie, and well-polished shoes. Women also wear suits and other smart clothes for work.

In some industries, dress code is far more casual, people may wear jeans to work. It is still prudent, nonetheless, to dress smartly on a business visit.



# Practical Knowledge



*The Swiss health care system has gained a reputation for being one of the best in the world. If you need a doctor that speaks your native language, contact your embassy or consulate as they can often provide a list. Hospitals (Krankenhaus, Spital/hôpital) can be recognized by a white „H“.*

## Daily life

The overall Swiss transportation network is well developed and efficient. All places in Switzerland can either be reached by train, bus, boat or taxi. To avoid unpleasant traffic and parking problems, the use of public transportation is advisable. Trains and buses are clean and mostly on time.

## Shopping / Dining

In rural areas the shops close at 6.30pm. In the cities however, most of the shops close at 8pm. On Sundays and public holidays shops are closed, except in train or gas stations.

In general, the Swiss eat three meals a day. Early breakfast, lunch at about 12am and dinner around 6.30pm (at home).

On weekdays the restaurants are empty by 11pm and on Sundays the downtown areas are deserted, except during the summer months of July and August.

## Survival tips

Don't be afraid of making mistakes. Swiss people are helpful when asked.

The tap water is of excellent quality. Three-quarters of Swiss people drink tap water. Furthermore, innumerable wells provide fresh drinking water.

## Other sources for references

**Gateway to Switzerland:**

[www.swissworld.org](http://www.swissworld.org)

**Tourism:**

[www.myswitzerland.com](http://www.myswitzerland.com)

**Travel and transport company:**

[www.sbb.ch](http://www.sbb.ch)

**Internet search engine:**

[www.google.ch](http://www.google.ch)

**Online Marketplace:**

[www.ricardo.ch](http://www.ricardo.ch)

**Federal office for migration:**

[www.swissemigration.ch](http://www.swissemigration.ch)

**The Swiss portal:**

[www.ch.ch](http://www.ch.ch)

**Web-based culture navigator:**

[www.countrynavigator.com](http://www.countrynavigator.com)

**I-phone apps:**

language translation

## News papers

[www.world-newspaper.com](http://www.world-newspaper.com)

[www.mediatico.fr](http://www.mediatico.fr)

[www.zeitung.ch](http://www.zeitung.ch)



## Useful Expressions

English	German   French   Italian
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Switzerland	Schweiz
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Suisse

Svizzera

Hello

Guten Tag

Bonjour

Buongiorno

Hi

Grüezi

Salut

Ciao

Good bye

Auf Wiedersehen

Au revoir

Arrivederci

How are you?

Wie geht es Ihnen?

Comment allez-vous?

Come stai?

Cheers

Prost(Toast)

Santé

Salute

Thank you

Danke

Merci

Grazie

My name is...

Mein Name ist...

Mon nom est...

Mi chiamo...

What is your name?

Wie heissen Sie?

Quel est votre nom?

Come si chiama?

Where can I find...?

Wo finde ich...?

Où puis-je trouver..?

Dove posso trovare..?

I'm hungry/thirsty

Ich bin hungrig/durstig

J'ai faim/soif

Ho fame/sete

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