Olten
Literatour,
(Stadt)

Olten Tourismus

A walking tour

through Olten's history

Switzerland Tourism.
Member

Majestic: Obelisk, a monument commemorating 4 significant Olten citizens, erected in 1905.

Dear guests,

We are very pleased that you have decided to visit our region and warmly welcome you to Olten!

Our charming town on the river Aare surprises with an intact historical town centre and an extended car-free pedestrian zone comprising numerous coffee houses, restaurants and shops. On your tour, discover the 30 attractive squares, alleyways, manor houses and other buildings in the town that are all described in this brochure. The old wooden bridge dating back to 1803, the frescoed façades of the Rathskeller or the Zielemp, which is a contemporary witness of the old town castle, are particularly beautiful.

Special recommendation: Embark on a journey from the past to the present and get to know our unique offer: The Schweizer Schriftstellerweg (Swiss Writer's Path) convinces with more than 50 audio stations, the Quai Cornichon with 30 more cabaret gems as well as an interactive puzzle cabin, where small and big riddle solvers are challenged in a playful way.

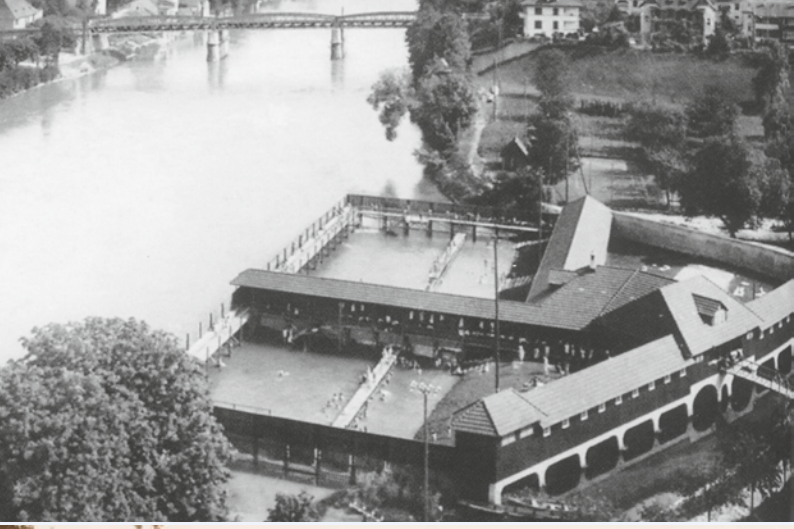
We are pleased to make your valued visit and leisure day in Olten an unforgettable experience and will be happy to advise you personally.

Cordially,

Stefan Ulrich
Managing Director Region Olten Tourismus

Listen to stories by Alex Capus, Franz Hohler, Pedro Lenz and Christian Schenker (in German).

Cover Photo – Authentic: View of Olten's historic centre with the city tower in the background.



Historic: A glance in the past. A picture of Olten from around 1919.

A brief outline of the history

The early Olten

Until the 19th century, Olten, as it was first mentioned in 1201, remained an insignificant small town with little economic impact. Unlike the lords in the aristocratic Solothurn, those who wanted to succeed in Olten, which became an episcopal fief of Solothurn in 1426, could not simply "live off the interests". The purchase of the seigneurial rights in 1532 further substantiated the Solothurn power. Resultantly, Olten's citizens proved to be rebellious and insubordinate subjects. When they entered into a pact with the rebellions and provided the "Huttwiler Brief" with the official seal of the town, they were deprived of the town privileges.

Progress towards autonomy

Despite the perceptible dictation by Solothurn, Olten always maintained a certain modicum of economic and political independence. In the 16th century, Olten became a regional centre for the publishing industry and from 1786 it was a meeting place for the Helvetic society – an interdenominational association of people striving towards enlightenment. From the 18th and early 19th century onward, intensive efforts to overthrow the old patrician regime emanated from the "Oltner patriots". Their political skills helped Olten, as the first municipality in the canton, to secure an organizational statute in 1817. This paved the way for the city's re-emergence to substantial cooperative independence. The democratization following the overthrow of the patrician rule, the rise of the railroad offering new economic opportunities, the struggle between the catholic church and the State (the so-called "Kulturkampf") and the increasing industrialization combined with an almost explosive growth of the town – supplementally and in part to the influx of "new blood" by new immigrant citizens – made Olten a self-assured town counting about 7000 souls.

Development and growth

While overcoming enormous infrastructural problems, Olten still proudly promoted its culture. The town library and the town's museums were converted into public facilities. Alongside the Centrahlbahn workshops and prestigious privately owned companies (von Roll, Giroud,

Strub & Glutz and Sunlight) other new companies located to Olten. The period between the two wars was marked by an economic crisis comprising high unemployment and reorientation. Olten distinguished itself as a place for meetings and festivals, and for sports events: As early as in 1924, the first cycling days took place in Olten. From 1931, regular motorcycling races with international attendance were held in the industrial part of town. On several occasions during the seventies, the Tour de Suisse ended at the stadium Kleinholz, right next to the artificial ice rink, which is the homestead of the EHC Olten, the town's most important sports club.

Following the chaos of the war, Olten, as other towns, benefited from the "economic miracle". The town obtained a new bridge at the railway station and developed urban planning visions. Visible signs: the new town hall.

The year 1974 was characterized by the rapidly growing inflation throughout Europe, which also had a negative impact in Switzerland. The recession also led to numerous company closings in Olten. Its population of 21 378 in 1958 dropped sharply to fewer than 17 000 inhabitants in the following years. The population has grown back to around 19 000 inhabitants today.

Olten today

Thanks to its central location, Olten has emerged and continues to grow as a centre for service providers. Olten enjoys its recognition as an important railway junction in the Swiss and European rail transport network. As the largest town in the canton of Solothurn, Olten offers a varied and large number of attractive jobs. With its more than 3500 students at the high school, the vocational training centre and the university of applied sciences, Olten has gained a reputation as a seat of learning. Olten is also abundantly rich in culture: The cabaret festival, the dance days and many other smaller events provide for a lively cultural scene. Since the inauguration of the Schweizer Schriftstellerweg (Swiss Writer's Path) in 2016, Olten has also positioned itself as a centre of literature. Three fir trees decorate the coat of arms of Olten, therefore the town is also called "Dreitannenstadt" (town of the three fir trees). Olten is nestled between the Jura, Born, Engelberg and Säli. A vast recreational area lies at Olten's doorstep.

Original text © Martin Eduard Fischer

Impressive: St Martin's church Olten.

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❶ Stadthaus (town hall)

Built from 1963 to 1965 according to plans by the architects Frey, Egger & Peterhans, Solothurn and Berne. Seat of the municipal administration. Moved into in November 1965. Inaugurated on April 30, 1966. Renovation in stages since 1992.

❷ Former Oberer Brunnen (upper fountain)

Purchased in 1860 in connection with the preparations to the Swiss Song Festival in Olten and set up in the old town next to the former house with the oriel (corner Hauptgasse/ Hintere Gasse). Moved to this location in 1930 to make space for the construction of the former Felbert business building.

❸ Hübeli-Schulhaus (school building Hübeli)

Designed by J. Kälin, Solothurn, and built from 1868 to 1871 as the first actual municipal school building. During the Franco-Prussian War it was used as the main headquarters under General Herzog.

❹ Haus der Museen (house of museums)

Designed by Olten architect Fritz von Niederhäusern and built in 1930 in connection with a job creation scheme. It was intended as part of a new multi-winged town hall, which was planned in 1929. Fire brigade building, schoolhouse and museum. As from autumn 2019, the house of museums will accommodate the historical museum, the nature museum and the archaeological Museum.

❺ St. Martins-Kirche (St Martin's church)

Built between 1908 – 1910 by the Roman Catholic Association according to August Hardegger's plans and situated next to the wing now used as a hall, originally an emergency church during the "Kulturkampf". Most important hall church of the historicism era in Switzerland, in the style of a Romanesque Revival basilica with two monumental front helm spires and a triapsal chancel. Rich reliefs above the front portals (Henri Geene, St. Gallen) and adorning the inside are frescos by the Einsiedeln church artist Fritz Kunz. Above the high altar stands a portrayal of Christ with the evangelists, flanked by the name saints of the founding benefactors, Albert and Hedwig Strub-Müller. This emblem marks the return of Roman-Catholicism following the "Kulturkampf".

❻ Wangner Vorstadt (Wangen quarter)

Former small craftsmen neighbourhood.
Oldest structural elements are from the late 15th century.
The houses were supposed to be replaced by a new large-scale town hall project in 1929. In 1975 transferred to private ownership and renovated according to historic preservation guidelines.

❼ Former school and administration building

Designed by Colonel Konrad Munzinger and built in 1840 as a school building and seat of municipal administration. From 1872, it also contained the Naturalienkabinett (collection of natural science) and from 1901 onwards the Disteli Art Collection. After the move to the new town hall at Frohburgstrasse in 1910, it became the first site of the town library until 1925. From 1926 to 2018, it housed Olten's museum of Natural Science and its Art museum.

❽ Chorherrenhäuser (houses of canon regulars)

Built between 1701 and 1705 in connection with the move of the convent of canon regulars Schönenwerd, which

was planned but never realised. The originally open attic was used as a tithe barn by the authorities. The house on the western corner was used as the mayor's seat from 1701 until 1798.

❾ Gasthaus zur Krone (Crown inn)

Built in 1701 as a "canonry" in the row of the canon regulars' houses. In 1746, it became the site of the Gasthaus zur Krone. From 1781 to 1794, it was the meeting place of the "Helvetic Society". Later, it became an inn with its own brewery and also housed the "Krone" pharmacy. In 1922, it became the department store Krone and the restaurant Kronenstube (until 1946). After 1965, it was used as the centre speciality store of CVO (Co-op Olten). After different intermediate uses it has housed the restaurant McDonald's since 1994.

❿ Stadtkirche (town church)

Designed by Blasius Baltenschwiler and Niklaus Purtschert and built between 1806 and 1813. Stucco work by Franz Georg Rust, Solothurn; ceiling fresco by J. Georg Vollmar, Berne; side altars by Xaver Hecht, Willisau; high-altar painting by Sebastian Gutzwiller after a design by Martin Disteli. In possession of the Christian Catholic parish since 1874. Overall renovation between 2016 – 2018. Reopening in September 2018.

⓫ Former Kronenbrunnen (Kronen fountain)

Created by Solothurn stonemasons Rust & Baumann in 1834. Original site was next to the Gasthaus zur Krone on the corner Kirchgasse and Mühlegasse. It was moved to this location in 1939 for reasons related to traffic engineering.

⓬ Frohheim-Schulhaus (school building Frohheim)

The school castle was built on "Galgenhölzli" (hangman's ground) according to plans by architect Karl Moser between 1898 and 1900 in a Jugendstil interpretation of German New

Renaissance style. Cambered gables over three central axes and flanking projections, central ridge turret clock tower. Tower bell with Grütli-like motto, “Durch Bildung zur Freiheit” (Freedom by Education): an acknowledgement of the educational ideals of liberalism. East extension 1936 – 1938 by Hermann Frey and Ernst Schindler in the spirit of modernism.

⓭ Ringwall at the Hexenturm (witch’s tower)

The last remaining part of the former ringwall, which, at one time, surrounded the entire town except for the section along the Aare river. Still clearly visible under the pinnacles: the arrow slits. Behind it is a 40m stretch of the former battlement parapet. From the crenellations of the Hexenturm, which can only be seen from inside the town, a witch is supposed to have caused a terrible storm during Olten’s occupation by Solothurn and Berne troops in 1383.

⓮ Kapuzinerkloster / Klosterkirche (capuchin monastery / Minster)

Typical Capuchin construction. Founded by Jakob Graf from Solothurn in 1648. An additional storey was added to the convent building in 1931. The church was restored in 1975. The high-altar painted in 1640 by Johannes Wil, a student of Rembrandt, is a synoptic representation of the Passion of Christ.

⓯ Rathskeller (town hall cellar)

Former guest stable of the inn zum Löwen (Lion inn). Converted to a residential house in the late 19th century utilising some set pieces of the Löwen’s former façade. The restaurant has been there since 1896. Rebuilt and furnished in Historicism style in 1906. Frescoes by Emil Kniep, Lucerne. On the side facing the wall “der letzte Frohburger” (the last Frohburg citizen), on the side facing the town “Auszug der Oltner in den Bauernkrieg 1653” (Olten’s forces setting out to the Peasant War of 1653).

⑯ Concert hall and administrative building

Representational buildings in the Renaissance Revival style, at the former Zielemp Quai of 1868, today the Amthausquai. The construction of an administrative building with a concert hall added on in 1884 was suggested by the supervisory authorities of what was then the municipal savings bank Olten. In 1885, it was expanded to include the Amthaus, an administrative building for the municipal authorities.

⑰ Obelisk

Erected in 1905 by the Verkehrs- und Verschönerungsverein Olten, an association for the improvement of the town's traffic and appearance, to commemorate four famous Olten citizens: Federal councillor Josef Munzinger (1791 – 1855), Johann Jakob Trog, Director of Schweizerische Centralbahn (Swiss Central Railway) (1807 – 1867), Martin Disteli, painter (1802 – 1844), and Pater Ildefons von Arx, author of the first chronological work on the town's history (1755 – 1833).

⑱ Zielemp

Remains of the old town castle, partially dismantled in 1868 and reduced by 1½ stories. Former seat of the Frohburg town reeves. Originally, a walled-in building complex extending from the Aare river up to the Frohburger-Hofstatt (Frohburg courtyard) and to the Kapuzinertörchen (Capuchin gate): town castle, "Rittersaal" (knights' hall) and barns. Refuge emergency water supply (cistern).

⑲ Stadtbad (town baths)

Oldest recorded inn in Olten. First mentioned in 1413. "Town baths" until the 19th century, with the privilege to use the excess water of the former "lower fountain" by the town hall for its bathing facility.

⓴ Former Unterer Brunnen (lower fountain)

In 1975, this fountain replaced the former "nyderen Brunnen" (lower fountain) by the town hall serving as its memorial. Together with the "oberer Brunnen" (upper fountain), the "lower fountain" provided the water supply for the old town for centuries. When the old town hall was converted to become the town library, the former "nyderen Brunnen", a big stone trough, was removed.

㉑ Former town hall, now town library

Erected in 1705 on the site of the former town house of the Bumann family, an old clan of noblemen in the king's service. It housed the big town store on the ground floor and the great council room on the first, and above that was the town dance hall. The bailiff's apartment was on the attic floor. Completely renovated in 1925 and converted into the town library.

㉒ Gasthaus zum Löwen (Lion inn)

Olten's oldest inn. The current appearance dates from the mid 19th-century. Parts of the old façade – such as the former arms cut in stone above the entrance – were reused in the Restaurant zum Rathskeller. The inn included the former adjacent hall (with the hoisting gable), a big barn outside the town's gates and another building at the site of the current restaurant Rathskeller which then served as guest stables.

㉓ Schultheissenhäuser zum Bögli und zum Kreuz (Mayor's houses zum Bögli and zum Kreuz)

Since Conrad Umbendorn's instalment as mayor by Solothurn in 1514, it was the mayor's seat until 1655. In 1532, it was expanded to become the Haus zum Bögli through the addition of a wooden bower above the former alley. In 1655, the government exchanged it for what was going to be the Haus zum Kreuz. The Haus zum Kreuz was the mayor's house from 1655 until 1701, when it became privately owned through another exchange and turned into an inn.

24 Spittel, Spittelscheune und Hexenturm (hospital, hospital barn and witch's tower)

It was bequeathed to the town by Werner and Elsa Scherrer in 1482 to be used as community poor house and orphanage. As such, it was used until the early 20th century. The Hexenturm (witch's tower) in the courtyard between the old hospital and the hospital barn was used as a prison. From its battlements, Metzina Wächter is said to have conjured up such a heavy storm that the Solothurn and Berne troops had to break off their siege of the town in 1383.

25 Stadtturm (bell tower)

Erected by Konrad Gibelin of Solothurn in 1521 as a bell tower for the former town church that had burned down in 1422 and was newly consecrated in 1461. From 1676 to 1682, it was refurbished in the Baroque style with an additional storey added. When the dilapidated church was torn down in 1844, it was left standing as a clock and bell tower. Renovated in 1928, 1975 and 2006.

26 Public swimming pool / lido

Built between 1936 – 1938 in the course of an urban job creation scheme. Rebuilt from 1988 – 1990. Generous facilities (changing cabins, restaurant, terrace, rectangular sun lawn with an in-set pool) in the shape of a monumental, abstract sculpture, the work of architects Hermann Frey and Ernst Schindler. The elegant flat-roofed buildings in fair-faced concrete recall a steamboat, exemplary realisation of modernism's ideals. Modern Olten's town landmark.

27 Former chaplaincy / chaplaincy square

The chaplaincy square today was originally the walled-in private garden of the chaplaincy U.L.F. After the chaplaincy was abolished, it was turned into a public square. Second house in the narrow passage to Hintere Gasse: Chaplaincy Sancti Elogi 1520 (founded by miller Rudolf Winter). From 1545 on, it was the seat of the town clerk and from 1606 to 1815, it was used as Olten's first schoolhouse.

28 Alte Brücke (old bridge)

A fortress protecting the river crossing as early as Roman times. The bridge is first mentioned in 1295. It burnt down several times in the course of the centuries and was damaged or swept away by floods or ice drifts. It was last destroyed during the French invasion. The current bridge was built in 1803 to replace the temporary bridge from 1797, both designed by Blasius Baltenschwiler.

29 Ennet Aaren (customs house across the Aare)

The impressive Disteli house, the parental home of the polemic Olten caricaturist Martin Disteli (1802 – 1844), together with the municipal customs house, which is adjacent on the north side and was also built in 1876, and the group of three buildings behind, are the last remaining parts of the former boat, float, and fishermen quarters of "Ennet Aaren". In its function as bridgehead before the gate on the right side of the Aare that burnt down alongside with the Schönenwerder gate during the French invasion in 1789, it had a certain importance.

30 Railway station

Complex built between 1854 – 1856, probably after a concept by the Swiss Central Railway architect L. R. Maring: railway building, two wooden boarding halls, two locomotive depots and front parking with two guard houses and toilet blocks. Following the introduction of the new Gäu line in 1876, conversion to a double-sided station. Main building damaged by fire in 1896 and altered several times, platforms extended in 1898 (first underpass), and covered by a double barrel-shaped roof on high columns in 1903.

Thank you for your support

Olten

Schweizer Schriftstellerweg (Swiss Writer's Path)

Audio tours (in German)
Scan the QR codes with your own smartphone or tablet at more than 50 listening stations and on Quai Cornichon and indulge in stories that last two to four minutes. You can download the QR code scanner for free in the App Store. The tours and stations can be combined at will. The standard tour for one writer comprising eight stations lasts around 45 minutes.

iPoad rental
You can rent iPods for CHF 5.– per device at the Tourist Office (Monday to Saturday) or at the Hotel Astoria to scan and listen to the stories in the event you do not own a smartphone. Reservation is advised!

Story CD
"Jetzt hören Sie mal!" (listen up) You can get this story CD with 25 of 40 pieces for CHF 15.– at the Tourist Office. Ideal as a gift or to listen to the literary gems time and again at home.

Story book (in German)
"Die Prinzessin, der General und die Sängerin" (the Princess, the General and the Singer) – the complete stories by Alex Capus, Franz Hohler and Pedro Lenz are gathered in one book. You can acquire it for CHF 19.80 at the Tourist Office or at the local bookshop. Exclusive package offer: Book and signed story CD at the price of CHF 27.–!

Headphones
Improve your hearing pleasure with the trendy "Olten LiteraTour Stadt" headphones. You can purchase these for CHF 5.– at the Tourist Office.

Family tour with Christian Schenker
The tour comprising 11 listening stations in the car-free historical part of Olten will surprise you with funny and entertaining stories and songs. The corresponding CD, "Chumm, mir boue e Isebahn", (come, let's build a railway) can be bought at the price of CHF 18.–. Matching the tour, you can pick up an explorer's map with gripping counting puzzles at the Tourist Office, at the Hotel Astoria, or at the Glace Galerie.

Picturesque: View from Sälischlössli (Säli castle).

Discover the pretty historical centre of Olten on a guided tour, individually or in a group. The visit of the old wooden bridge from 1803, the magnificent city tower and the frescoed building Rathskeller will seduce you!

Information and advice

Region Olten Tourismus
Frohburgstrasse 1, 4601 Olten
Phone +41 (0)62 213 16 16
www.oltentourismus.ch
www.oltenliteratourstadt.ch

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