

Contact: Nicole Schaffner
Direct line: +41 (0)31 328 12 42
Email: nicole.schaffner@bern.com

Media text

History of the City of Bern

The foundation of the city

Berthold V, Duke of Zähringen founded the city of Bern. For strategic reasons it was necessary to have a strong fortification on the peninsula formed by the Aare river, and the Duke accordingly entrusted one of his noblemen with the task of building a city there. At the extreme end of the peninsula already stood a mighty castle, built probably in the 11th century as a free imperial castle. In the course of the 12th century, a small settlement had sprung up around the so-called Nydegg-Castle. Cuno of Bubenberg, who was responsible for the execution of the Duke's orders, had the oak forest, covering the peninsula, cut down and the wood of these trees was used to build the first houses. That was in the year 1191 when Bern was part of Upper Burgundy, ruled by the Dukes of Zähringen, who had been appointed to this position by the Emperor Lothair III. Cuno of Bubenberg built a first city wall in the center of which rose the great Zytglogge (Clock Tower) functioning at the same time as main gate giving access to the countryside beyond. In front of the city wall was a natural hollow in the ground which served as moat.

The city's name

In the year 1224 the well-known and oldest coat of arms of the city appears for the first time. It shows a bear (in German "Bär") and the name of Bern. According to the legend, the name Bern (in local dialect pronounced "Bärn") was given to the city by Duke Berthold V of Zähringen after a hunt, held in the wooded surroundings of his new town in which his first prey was a bear. Certainly, the similarity between the word "Bär" and the name Bern lends authenticity to the legend.

In the 13th century, under the protectorate of Count Peter of Savoy, the city's frontier was extended westwards and a new city wall with the Käfigturm (Prison Tower) as its main gateway was erected. In the 14th century there were further additions to the city carried out so that it reached up where the Main Station stands now. The third city wall that was built in the short space of one and a half years, remarkably quick for those days, was torn down only a hundred years ago.

The big fire

In 1405 the greater part of the town was destroyed by fire. The houses were built up again on the old foundations. Instead of wood, sandstone from nearby quarries was used as building material. Most of these houses were replaced in the 16th and 17th centuries by new buildings whose harmonious appearance and richness of detail delight visitors still today. Bern had, of course, to defend its freedom against attacks. The most important battle for its independence, fought against the united nobility of Burgundy, was at Laupen in the year 1339. The city of Fribourg, founded by the father of Duke Berthold V of Zähringen, had joined Bern's enemies. The Bernese troops were victorious and this battle marked the final defeat of the nobility and ensured the future of the city. In 1353 Bern joined the Swiss Confederation but continued to pursue its own policy with much energy. Bern's biggest territorial power was reached between the years 1536 and 1798, mostly gained at the cost of the House of Savoy. Large territories along the Lake of Geneva came under Bernese rule and it is largely thanks to Bern that the French part of Switzerland belongs to the Confederation today.

The French invasion

The invasion of the French in 1798 destroyed Bern's position of authority. With the new Switzerland emerging in 1815 from the ruins left by Napoleon I, Bern had to give up almost half its territories to permit the formation of two new Cantons (Aargau and the Waadt).

The city of Bern became, however, the cantonal capital and in 1848 had the honour of being chosen by the First Swiss Parliament as the capital of the Swiss Confederation. Its former subject states were decisively in favour of this choice, a mark of recognition which pleased the Bernese very much.

The past 50 years

In the past fifty years Bern has greatly expanded. Wide bridges span the Aare river to link the old town with its new suburbs. While maintaining its mediaeval appearance, the old city has developed into an important business center, and its arcades, historical fountains, towers and attractive streets delight the visitor. The most famous places of interest in Bern are the old city hall (1406-1416), still today the seat of the Bernese government, the Bern Minster built between 1421 and 1527 by Matthäus Ensinger and Erhart Küng and the BearPark, the delight of young and old. There are over 70 embassies and legations in Bern and several international organisations such as the World Postal Union, which was founded here in 1874, have their head offices in Bern.

Out of the old Bern, vigorously defending its freedom against all corners, has developed a new city. Its great past lives on in its old streets and the sturdy character of its citizens. Its mission, to successfully unite the German and French parts, has been completed, and as capital city it continues to unite the many qualities which constitute the Swiss nation.

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