

Franconian Switzerland -- Castles, Caves, And Culture
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Nestled in the triangular plateau which lies between the Franconian cities of Nuremberg, Bayreuth, and Bamberg is a natural wonderland out of which one might, at any moment, expect to see the Brothers Grimm striding.

Being one of Germany's oldest tourist areas, Franconian Switzerland (German: *Fränkische Schweiz*) is a nature park in which gently rolling coniferous-forested hills form a backdrop for quaint villages. Located in the heart of the Franconia (*Franken*) region, the villages' half-timbered houses and the ruins of medieval castles rise from the Earth above a network of limestone caves as impressive as you won't find anywhere else.

The Wiesent River, over the millennia, has carved deep valleys and sheer cliffs throughout Franconian Switzerland. During the Middle Ages those cliffs served as the sites of military strongholds. The valleys, with their water-powered mills and verdant farmlands, represent a more peaceful aspect of life.

The area's attractions, spread out over some 2,500 square kilometers, attract international hikers, cyclists, golfers, kayakers, rock climbers, and fishers. Here are my suggestions for some of the best of what Germany's Little Switzerland has to offer:

Spend a few hours at the Burg Rabenstein, perched on a hill overlooking the village of Ahorntal, where a river slowly meanders through an endless sea of trees. Your stay will immerse you in all the romance of Arthurian days, when chivalry was a way of life. Witness one of the castle's falconry exhibitions or jousting contests. You'll return home haunted by the cries of falcons soaring high above.

Ahorntal is home to the Sophienhole, one of more remarkable of the more than one thousand caverns snaking beneath Franconian Switzerland. Discovered in 1833 by the Castle Gardner, it contains some astonishingly intricate limestone stalagmites and stalactites. Two of its sister caverns, Klaussteinhöhle

and Ahornloch, are also open for public tours.

By timing your visit to Franconian Switzerland for April or May, you can feast your senses on the spectacle of hundreds of thousands of apple, pear, plum, and cherry trees bursting into magnificent bloom. Visit one of the region's liqueur breweries to sample some Franconian cherry liqueur, of such excellence that it has made this region of Germany the world's largest producer of sweet cherries!

A springtime visit will also allow you to take in the area's marvelous Easter fountains. More than 200 villages throughout the Franconian Mountains have a centuries-old tradition of decorating their public fountains in the spring. Flower garlands, ribbons, and brightly painted Easter eggs celebrate the high point of the religious season and the end of winter.

If you're still in a religious spirit, head for Gößweinstein, at the confluence of the Wiesent, Ailsback, Püttlach Rivers. Stand in awe before the Burg Gößweinstein and the Wallfahrtskirche, a baroque basilica dating back to 1730. In the spring and fall of each year, thousands of religious pilgrims trek by foot to the basilica to pray before the Gnadenbild, the cathedral's Statue of Mercy.

For outdoor adventure, arrange a "Hiking without Luggage" tour of between four and seven days with the region's central tourist agency. Enjoy the healing waters at the Obernsee Thermal Spa, or test your stamina and strength with an afternoon of rock climbing in the Trubachtal Valley.

Tired of traveling under your own steam? Then by all means book yourself passage on the beautifully restored steam train which follows a route through the picturesque farming country of the Wiesent River dale. The village of Aufsess, population 1500, is notable for its four breweries, but all of is beer country! ;-)

Bottom line, no matter where you turn in Franconian Switzerland, you'll find something new to do or see.