

Lake Constance -- Who Needs The French Riviera Anyway?

Where the depths of the [Black Forest](#) give way to the open spaces of southern [Baden-Württemberg](#) and the northern Alpine foothills lies an enormous, stunningly beautiful crystalline lake. Its climate is so mild that potted palms line the streets, sunbathers bask beneath a Mediterranean-like sun, and twenty-five species of butterflies flit among the flower animals surrounding a pink Baroque island castle.

This is Lake Constance (German: *Bodensee*), set against the backdrop of the snow-capped Alps. Although its 260km (160-mile) shoreline is shared among [Germany](#), Austria, and Switzerland, the communities along that shoreline are united by a common history and culture.

Getting to Lake Constance, also known as the German Riviera, is best accomplished by train to [Constance](#), or by plane to [Friedrichshafen](#). Getting around in the lake region itself is another matter. The most reliable means of transport is the fleet of white BSB (*Bodensee-Schiffs-Betriebe*) boats which depart each hour from both Constance and Friedrichshafen with stops at the lake's other ports.

The first place to begin your tour of Bodensee is, naturally, in the city which shares its name. [Constance \(German: Konstanz\)](#), straddling the mouth of the Rhine, is actually closer to Switzerland than it is to most of the German towns along the lake. It was spared from the [WWII](#) Allied bombardment for precisely that reason!

Its river promenades front 19th-century homes which might have been imported from Mediterranean shores. Its center is networked with winding lanes between Renaissance and Baroque-style buildings. The Münster's 250-foot/76m Gothic tower provides those fit enough to climb to the top with an outstanding view of the town, the Lake, and the far-off Alps.

Look to the south for a glimpse of the Schnetztor, with battlements protecting Constance's thriving shopping district. The most popular public beach is Freibad Horn, and the nightlife revolves around the Konstanz Casino.

Crossing the footbridge from Constance to Mainau is like receiving a free trip to a Caribbean isle. Mainau's lush tropical vegetation and brilliant blooming plants are the glorious culmination of centuries of horticultural experimentation by [Baden](#)'s royalty. Stroll among preening peacocks and fluttering butterflies as you take in Mainau's dazzling crown jewel, the Teutonic Knight's 13th-century painting Baroque palace.

From the New Lighthouse tower at the harbor entrance on another Bodensee island, [Lindau](#), you'll view not only Austria and Switzerland but the towering Alps. The best times to visit Lindau are in the early morning and after dark, when the final ferry carrying tourists back to Constance has left.

The third of the Lake's islands, Reichenau, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has a monastic history dating to the 8th century. Reichenau's Benedictine Abbey had an enormous influence on European religion and culture throughout the Middle Ages.

Across the Lake from Constance is Meersburg. The city's fortress, built in 628 A.D., is Germany's oldest inhabited castle. Today it has authentically furnished dungeons and living chambers from the 16th to 18th centuries, and a small Zeppelin Museum with the world's largest collection of zeppelin memorabilia.

Just a short distance to the west is Überlingen, transformed from Germany's largest corn market to a 19th-century royal spa.

The area's links to Zeppelin history, however, are stronger in Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin's birthplace, Friedrichshafen, where the harborside Zeppelin Museum explores the airship's development. There's a 108-foot (33m) replica of the ill-fated Hindenburg, as well as full-sized models of its passenger compartments. Between June and September, 30-to-90 minute Zeppelin trips over the Lake are available. (The Zeppelins run on nonflammable fuel!)

Come to Lake Constance prepared to get wet. Sailing, windsurfing, and canoeing are all possibilities, and on cold days you can enjoy the many heated swimming pools at Meersburg, Immenstaad, and other towns. [Kressbronn](#) is a great family vacation spot, with canoe tours, sailing lessons for the kids, and classes for adults prepare to qualify for a Lake Constance sailing license. :-)

Whether you're in, on, along, or above the Bodensee, I'm sure you'll enjoy the vacation of a lifetime!