
TRAVEL

In Geneva, Art Thrives Where Watches Were Made

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When the strikingly redesigned Musée d’Ethnographie de Genève (Geneva Museum of Ethnography) reopened in October 2014, the Quartier des Bains, the neighborhood that’s become Geneva’s own little SoHo, got a defining new landmark. Bound by the Rhone and Arve rivers in the southern part of the city, this unexpectedly hip gallery- and museum-studded neighborhood in a town best known for banks, international institutions like the Red Cross and luxury watches has emerged as one of the liveliest and most innovative contemporary art districts in Europe.



The motor behind the metamorphosis of a formerly working-class neighborhood once dotted with the ateliers of watch and precision-instrument makers was the [Quartier des Bains Association](#), a neighborhood arts group that was founded in 2004. Today the association includes 13 privately owned art galleries and six major local cultural institutions, including the [Centre d'Art Contemporain](#), the [Centre de la Photographie Genève](#), the [Mamco](#) (Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain) and the [Médiathèque du FMAC](#) (Fonds Municipal d'Art Contemporain), the latter being a public archive that conserves one of the largest and richest art video collections in the world. Three times a year, the association stages “La Nuit des Bains,” a night of after-hours openings (6 to 9 p.m.) at all member galleries, the Centre d'Art Contemporain and the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain; in 2015, the remaining dates for La Nuit des Bains are May 28 and Sept. 17.

The Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève (MEG) is one of a number of museums and galleries that have opened in this formerly working-class neighborhood, the Quartier des Bains.

Credit

Reto Albertalli for The New York Times



Café des Bains, a favorite of Geneva's art world.

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The Quartier des Bains lacks the rough edges of similarly repurposed industrial neighborhoods in other European cities. The only clue that this tidy precinct of modern low-rise apartment buildings with spacious balconies, along with solid five-story 19th-century houses with steep slate roofs, was once a workshop district are the functional-looking atelier buildings with oversize windows

that are scattered through the area. Bicycle racks are now everywhere, and health-food stores and stylish bistros have replaced the cafes with pinball machines where shift workers once stopped in for a beer or two.

Rents that are lower than they are in the center of Geneva have helped the Quartier des Bains emerge as a hot gallery venue, said Philippe Cramer, an architect and designer from one of Geneva's leading art families. Mr. Cramer studied at Parsons School of Design in New York and then returned home to open [Cramer & Cramer](#), a showroom for his furniture, jewelry, porcelain, silverware and crystal, in 2003.

Mr. Cramer described the neighborhood's robust community of gallery owners, curators, artists and designers as "aesthetically and commercially nourishing, since we run into each other all of the time at places like the [Café des Bains](#)," referring to the bistro that's become the stylish canteen of Geneva's art world since its 2000 opening.



[Restaurant Le 15](#), which changed owners in 2013, is another fashionable table in the neighborhood for the excellent modern European market-driven cooking of the chef Jacques Modena, including dishes like cream of Jerusalem artichoke soup and lamb shank braised in port, and [Le Gruyérien](#), which recently opened, is a good address for anyone hankering for fondue.

Beyond its contemporary art credentials, the Quartier des Bains is also home to the [Patek Philippe Museum](#), one of the world's great collections of watches, timepieces and enamels. The venerable

watchmaker opened the museum in 2001 in a building that formerly produced watch bracelets, chains and cases.

The historical worldliness of the city also explains the richness and variety of the collections at the recently expanded and renovated [Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève](#), locally known as the MEG. Many of the objects on display were donated by diplomats posted to Geneva, local missionaries returning from overseas tours, or local merchants and bankers with foreign offices.

Beyond the museum's eye-catching sustainable architecture — there's a mosaic of diamond-shaped aluminum lozenges on the museum's new concrete roof — the most impressive aspect of the revamp is the dramatically lit and curated reinstallation of one of the richest collections of ethnological objects — everything from Japanese samurai armor to a slit drum from Vanuatu made of breadfruit tree wood — in Europe.

“What the MEG brings to the Quartier des Bains is an opening to cultures from all over the world,” said Boris Wastiau, the museum's director. “The Quartier des Bains was established to initiate cultural interactions and exchanges. The MEG is similarly committed to the broadest possible engagement with the general public, so there's a dynamic relationship between us that I expect will deepen and evolve in the future.”

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