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GIVE PEACE CITY A CHANCE

GENEVA basks in its role as peace capital of the world. The home of a cluster of international organisations, including the Red Cross, the World Health Organisation and World Trade Organisation, I've always viewed the city as a bit of a drive-by place. A 24-hour stopover to re-acquaint myself with La Vielle Ville, the historic old town, and the Jet d'Eau, the world's tallest fountain. What's changed? Two of my best friends now live in Geneva and over the past few years I've spent several weeks exploring its unspoiled mediaeval architecture, museums and the breathtaking wine country just beyond the city limits.

Geneva's bureaucratic image is fairly recent. Switzerland's reputation as a tax haven may have played a major part in luring celebrities, movie stars and dictators to buy second homes in the country, but the sheer beauty of one of Western Europe's largest freshwater lakes has sealed many a deal.

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Le Manoir de Ban, Charlie Chaplin's idyllic hideaway, looks much as it did when the great comedian lived there. Although the tranquillity is sure to be shattered next year when the multi-million dollar Charlie Chaplin Museum opens on the site (chaplinmuseum.com).

With so many visitors brandishing corporate credit cards, Geneva is crammed with luxury hotels. The five-star Hotel Les Armures (hotel-les-armures.com) is in the centre of the old town and its guestbook ripples with famous names, including George Clooney, Hillary Clinton and soccer superstar, Pele. If you don't want to pay \$450 or more per night, the Hotel La Cour des Augustins (laccourdesaugustins.com) is a four-star designer hotel where prices start at close to half that rate.

The outer suburbs of Geneva may be riddled with standard-issue modern architecture, but the old town is a charming network of

narrow passageways, cobbled streets, tiny courtyards and 17th century squares. Pricey boutiques line the Rue du Rhone and the Rue du Marche, flogging fashions, antiques and watches. John Calvin once thundered from the pulpit of St Pierre cathedral during the Reformation and the fairly fit can climb the 157 steps in the north tower to experience one of the most stunning views of the city and the Saleve, the mountain that looms in the back of the majority of picture postcards.

Geneva has its fair share of fine arts museums, but the ones that really can't be missed are: the Tavel House, a 14th century mediaeval mansion-cum-time capsule, the Musee Voltaire where the great French philosopher once lived and the Fondation Martin Bodmer, one of the most important private libraries in the world. Over 160,000 exhibits are on show from an Egyptian Book of the Dead to cuneiform tablets and a Gutenberg bible.

One of the real pleasures of staying longer in Geneva lies outside the city in the surrounding wine country. The Swiss have made enormous progress in improving the quality of their wines since the 1980s. The vineyards surrounding Geneva have six appellations and there's certainly a lot to learn about Swiss wines from unfamiliar varietals such as dole, humagne and comallin to a new monicker for pinot gris - or Malvoisie as it is known in French-speaking Switzerland.

Thirty years ago, growers, vigneron and the local canton government teamed up to propel Switzerland's third-largest wine-growing area back to respectability. Hectares of chasselas and gamay grapes were uprooted and the vineyards were replanted with 40 varietals. Some were new to the region such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot, pinot noir and chardonnay, and others were classic Swiss grapes such as

garanoir and gamaret. The move paid off and the annual Caves Ouvertes festival, literally open cellars, takes place in mid-May. Once a local shindig, the event now attracts thousands of wine lovers from all over Switzerland and France.

I've always loved the Vaud region for the sort of breathtaking scenery that iPhone snaps can never hope to do justice to. World Heritage-listed for its picture-perfect wine villages and terraced vineyards that date back to the 11th century, the area is also very popular for hiking and biking from spring through autumn. Two small trains weave through the mosaic-patterned vineyards - the Lavaux Express and the Lavaux Panoramic. They are so dinky because most visitors prefer to saunter across the network of trails that snake through the landscape to enjoy the spectacular views of Lake Geneva and the Alps. You can stop at wineries along the way, but the hi-tech Vinorama in the small village of Rivaz allows you to sample 200 wines from the surrounding wineries - big and small. The best route is the Grand Traversee de Lavaux, a 35km trail that links the Chateau de Chillon to Lausanne.

La Cote is the ritziest section of the Lavaux wine country, boasting 32 chateaux scattered like film sets among the vineyards. Many of them have been turned into luxury hotels such as the Chateau Rochefort in Allaman and the Domaine du Burignon in St Saphorin. One of the most celebrated restaurants in Switzerland - Restaurant de L'Hotel de Ville Crissier (philippe-rochat.ch) - is nearby. Founded by legendary chef Fredy Girardet, his successor Philippe Rochat has not only retained the restaurant's Michelin three-star rating, it is ranked 14th on San Pellgrino's 2012 World's 50 Best Restaurants list. A short drive away you'll find Le Pont de Brent (lepontdebrent.ch). Although it rates a less stellar Michelin two-star rating, chef Stephane Decotterd's exquisite menu listings are only a shade less expensive because of his shooting star status. Perfection on a plate.