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Switzerland, ***officially the Swiss Confederation***, is a federal republic in Europe. It consists of 26 cantons, and the city of Bern is the seat of the federal authorities. The country is situated in Western-Central Europe, and is bordered by Italy to the south, France to the west, Germany to the north, and Austria and Liechtenstein to the east.

History

Switzerland has existed as a state in its present form since the adoption of the Swiss Federal Constitution in 1848. The precursors of Switzerland established a protective alliance at the end of the 13th century (1291), forming a loose confederation of states which persisted for centuries.

Modern history

In 2002 Switzerland became a full member of the United Nations, leaving the Vatican City as the last widely recognised state without full UN membership. An application for membership in the European Union was sent in May 1992, but not advanced since the EEA was rejected in December 1992 when Switzerland was the only country to launch a referendum on the EEA. There have since been several referendums on the EU issue; due to a mixed reaction from the population the membership application has been frozen. Nonetheless, Swiss law is gradually being adjusted to conform with that of the EU, and the government has signed a number of bilateral agreements with the European Union.

Geography

The Swiss climate is generally temperate, but can vary greatly between the localities, from glacial conditions on the mountaintops to the often pleasant near Mediterranean climate at Switzerland's southern tip. There are some valley areas in the southern part of Switzerland where some cold-hardy palm trees are found. Summers tend to be warm and humid at times with periodic rainfall so they are ideal for pastures and grazing. The less humid winters in the mountains may see long intervals of stable conditions for weeks, while the lower lands tend to suffer from inversion, during these periods, thus seeing no sun for weeks.

Environment

Switzerland's ecosystems can be particularly fragile, because the many delicate valleys separated by high mountains often form unique ecologies. The mountainous regions themselves are also vulnerable, with a rich range of plants not found at other altitudes, and experience some pressure from visitors and grazing. The climatic, geological and topographical conditions of the alpine region make for a very fragile ecosystem that is particularly sensitive to climate change.

Culture

Switzerland is home to many notable contributors to literature, art, architecture, music and sciences. In addition the country attracted a number of creative persons during time of unrest or war in Europe. Some 1000 museums are distributed through the country; the number has more than tripled since 1950.

Among the most important cultural performances held annually are:

- The Paléo Festival
- Lucerne Festival
- The Montreux Jazz Festival
- The Locarno International Film Festival
- The Art Basel

Sports

A. Winter Sports

- Skiing
- Snowboarding
- Mountaineering

B. Traditional Sports

- Swiss Wrestling
- Hornussen (cross between baseball and golf)
- Steinstossen (variant of stone put)