

LIFE | TRAVEL | OFF DUTY TRAVEL

The Craziest Reason to Visit Zurich

The staid Swiss city, known for order and affluence, celebrates the 100th anniversary of the art movement Dada with chaotic performances and absurdist exhibitions. Making sense of the nonsense is fruitless, but fun



ZURICH THE ABSURD? | Cabaret Voltaire. PHOTO: GAETAN BALLY/REDUX

By ANNA RUSSELL

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IN 1916, in the first of many manifestos, German artist Hugo Ball wrote of Dada: “Just a word, and the word a movement. Very easy to understand. Quite terribly simple.” At Zurich’s Cabaret Voltaire this June, however, I wasn’t so sure. On the stage of the theater where the art movement was founded a century ago, chaotic performances were under way. A man shouted in German and made a smoothie. Later, a performer practiced pliés over a model of the Eiffel Tower; another slathered himself in mayonnaise.

While in Switzerland for the Art Basel fair, I’d taken a weekend trip to Zurich because I’d heard the city was hosting a yearlong series of events to mark the 100th anniversary of Dada. My college art-history classes had left me with a vague understanding of Dada as a precursor to its more famous cousin, surrealism. Which is to say, I knew Dada had something to do with monocles. And nonsensical poetry. As I caught a morning train from Basel, the movement’s oft-repeated phrase, “Was ist Dada?” came to mind.

For all its manifestos, the movement is often defined, frustratingly, by what it is not. Dada has been variously described as antilogic, antiwar, antibourgeois and antiestablishment. Both an art movement and an antiart movement, it involved giddy speeches and a man dressed in a cardboard cone. Even its founders couldn’t agree on the origin of its name: Dada might mean “hobbyhorse” in French, an affirmation in Romanian or something else entirely. “Dada is the world soul, dada is the pawnshop. Dada is the world’s best lily-milk soap,” wrote Ball, as helpful as ever.



Zurich's Limmat River PHOTO: ALAMY

In quiet Zurich, where the lake water is almost pure enough to drink, Dada is still something of an anomaly. After its birth at Cabaret Voltaire, in 1916, it spread to Berlin, Paris and New York, all the while fading slowly from Zurich's memory. It took a 50th anniversary, and then a centenary, to bring it back into the public eye. Now it's a boon for tourism in a city better known for affluence than the

avant-garde. Dada tours, Dada soaps (lily-milk), Dada chocolates and Dada exhibitions are up for grabs, blurring together like the nonsensical sound poems made famous over boozy nights at Voltaire. At an open-air cafe in the city's old town, my friend and I mapped out a Dada route, determined to ask at each stop, Was, exactly, ist Dada?

By day one's end, we were well into our own boozy evening at Voltaire, and our mission had hit a roadblock. On our way to the backroom theater, where nighttime performances took place, we were stopped by a young man named Varun, who introduced himself as the "Guardian of the Guild." Only guild members were allowed to see the shows, he told us. To join the guild, we'd have to propose, then perform, our own short piece. And we'd have to do it soon, before the other performances that were scheduled to begin in a half-hour.

'Another performer slathered himself in mayonnaise.'

My protestations ("But I'm a journalist...") were met with blank stares. So I sat at the bar and wrote a proposal suggesting that I interview Varun,

Guardian of the Guild, on the meaning of Dada. A tense 10 minutes later, I was onstage, with a fog machine cranking away somewhere, before an audience of maybe 25 people, lounging on the floor, drinks in hand. What do you think Dada is, I asked Varun. "I'm not sure it is anything," he ventured. "I think it wasn't—it has never been." Afterward, guild-membership card in hand, I ordered a Dada cocktail, made with thyme and a dash of absinthe. I asked art student Cyrus Hung, who earlier smeared himself with mayonnaise, for his definition. "Dada popularized the readymade," he said, referring to works like Marcel Duchamp's famous urinal-turned-sculpture. "For example," he added, indicating his beer, "I can point to that if I'm an artist, and it's a readymade."

The next morning, at the city's modern art museum, the Kunsthaus Zurich, we sought the academic view. In a room dedicated to Dada, we studied a collection of the movement's magazines, pamphlets and printed posters. We also learned the Dadaists were international and vocal but not consistent. "There was a whole row of manifestos, and they contradict themselves," said Cathérine Hug, a curator at the museum. Across the hall, a temporary exhibition on sometime-Dadaist Francis Picabia (coming to New York's MoMA in November) was equally slippery. "I am neither a painter, nor a writer, nor Spanish nor Cuban, nor American...nor Dada, I am alive," he wrote in 1924.

Crossing the Limmat River, we looked for more concrete signs of Dada at the sleek Galerie Gmurzynska, on the city's swanky Paradeplatz. We wandered around a display



The Kurt Schwitters exhibit at Galerie Gmurzynska. PHOTO: GALERIE GMURZYNSKA

on Dada associate Kurt Schwitters (designed by the late architect Zaha Hadid). The gallery attendant said she sometimes found it hard to believe rules-bound Zurich gave rise to the movement. Its founders all came from elsewhere, in search of Swiss neutrality during World War I.

Through the windows, we could see the austere headquarters of UBS and Credit Suisse. “Most of the time it’s hard to grasp,” she said of Dada.

We ducked into Confiserie Sprüngli, the sweets shop next door, for an afternoon pick-me-up. In the wood-paneled upstairs parlor, where the Dadaists held their first shows, the waitstaff served ice-cream sundaes on silver trays. We picked up a box of chocolates and continued on.

Up a cobblestone street, next to an art nouveau storefront that once housed a butcher shop, we passed the apartment where Lenin lived for a year, in 1916. There’s speculation (but no proof) that he stopped into the nearby Cabaret Voltaire for a drink or two, between drafts of “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism.” He might have felt at home; the Dadaists were engaged in revolution, too. Across town, a show at Hauser & Wirth featured work by Dadaist Hans Arp, who incorporated chance into his collages—by tearing up bits of paper and letting them fall randomly into place. “Dada tried to go

Dodging raindrops, we stopped at the Zunfthaus zur Waag, a 14th-century guildhouse and upscale restaurant, where Hugo Ball read the first Dada manifesto. A group of motorcyclists had gathered outside to perform a concert using their bikes as instruments. A woman conducted as a crowd looked on. A fountain in the square, we were told, occasionally spewed wine instead of water. I tried to make sense of the scene, a confusing one, in a country not my own. All of sudden, I stopped. It was a fool’s errand, like trying to define Dada. I listened to the music and ate another chocolate.

The Lowdown // The Art of Visiting Zurich



The library at B2 Hotel, in a former brewery.

Staying There: Near Paradeplatz, Baur Au Lac offers old-world Swiss luxury, with a view of the alps (*from about \$582 a night; bauraulac.ch*). In the old town, Marktgasse has 39 rooms in a renovated 15th-century building (*from about \$269 a night; marktgassehotel.ch*). B2 Hotel features rooftop thermal baths and a towering library (*from about \$354 a night; b2boutiquehotels.com*).

Eating There: The mid-19th century Cafe Schober serves decadent hot chocolate and pastries in grand style (*conditorei-cafe-schober.ch*). For lighter fare, try Hiltl, the world’s oldest vegetarian restaurant (*hiltl.ch*), or go traditionally Swiss at the Alpenrose (*12 Fabrikstrasse, 41 44-271-39-19*). Stop by the rooftop Sky Bar at Eden Au Lac hotel for views over Lake Zurich (*edenaulac.ch*).

Finding Dada There: For this year’s Dada-inspired events in Zurich, visit zuerich.com/en/visit/100th-anniversary-of-dada

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