

BRIEF GUIDE TO GRUYERES AND FRIBOURG FOR AH STUDENTS

Gruyères, in the canton of Fribourg, is one of the best preserved and most visited of Swiss villages. The population today is about 2,000 and everyone pretty much lives off either cheese or tourism or both.

The first settlement here was a Roman town on a hill, the remnants of a grand Roman villa were found on the plain nearby. In the 1100's, a castle was built on the hilltop to protect the Saane valley, and to tax goods coming up the river. It was named after the heraldic animal of the warlord who built it, the Count of Gruyères - the crane ('grue' in French) you'll see plenty of crane decoration in the town.



The castle is on the highest point, the tip of the hill, and you will be visiting it separately.

Outside the castle, in the early middle ages a village began to develop, along the layout we have today, with a broad central street (the rue du Bourg), where markets were held.

The village is remarkably intact – the broad street layout meant it was relatively protected from fire, and so there is a range of buildings here from the 1300's onwards. Right at the end, just outside the start of the extensive castle grounds, you will see a wooden chalet (helpfully labelled Le Chalet) – this was moved here during the nineteenth century, it isn't a town house and is much too rustic for a proud little town like this one.

From the fourteenth century onwards, merchants and farmers grew wealthy on trade and replaced their old wooden chalets with substantial stone houses along the main street. There are especially notable examples at number 7, 39, and 47 – the windows and doorways show the pride and wealth of the families. Notice to the heavy wooden eaves which overhang the sidewalks, these were put up to protect goods on market stalls from spoiling in poor weather. Place du Molard in Geneva used to have them as well, and in some other market towns, such as Berne and Fribourg, they were replaced by stone arcades.



The money here came from farming. Fribourg's agricultural land here is very rich and dairy and arable farming dominated the economy for centuries. Cheese was already made here in Roman times, in fact one emperor is alleged to have died after eating too much of it. Production continued in medieval times and in 1342 a tax on Gruyère cheese was fixed and they were importing as far as Paris and Italy. By 1762, it was so well known that the word was being included in dictionaries, so the tradition is a long one. There are many different varieties of gruyere and some are still made following the old methods, up in the summer pastures and using a copper cauldron.

On your right towards the end of the main street), you will see a stone block with the scoops in it which were used to measure grain and other dry goods to give fair measures



As we've seen in Geneva, towns promised security and the rule of law. The stone circle in the centre of the street was where the pillory stood: here those who gave short measure were trapped and chastised by the inhabitants of the town.



You'll find the water fountain here too, clean piped water was brought in wooden pipes at the end of the 18th century – before that, open wells were used. There was a lot of disease here, despite the efforts of the hospitals – a special plague house was built in 1341 and there was also a general hospital (founded in 1431 and run as a religious establishment). Despite this, in 1612 140 people died of plague, about a quarter of the population. The survivors built the Chapelle du Berceau in their memory.

To the right, you'll see a small chapel. Fribourg is a Catholic canton, and the reformation didn't touch either this little wayside cross or the chapel of St John the Baptist within the walls of the castle. The church, St Théodule, was dedicated in 1254, but it has been substantially rebuilt several times since that date, most recently in the mid nineteenth century- only the tower and the choir are older than 1860.

You should also walk around to see the ramparts and the enclosure where cattle were held when the outlying areas were deemed unsafe.