



Pont de Martel



Day 4:

Couvet → Saignlegier



Distance:

70 Kilometers



Climbing:

1184 Meters

You're going to get up and then go up: you've got a 4km/350 meter ascent after breakfast. Once over the hump, you'll be in a valley called *Pont de Martel*, known for its spongy peat soil and high marshes. If you get here early enough, you may see thick morning fog hovering over the ground. Perhaps not a good enough reason to get up early,... nevertheless.

Soon you'll be coming by two important sister cities of the Jura: Le Locle and Le Chaux-de-Fonds. Again, the route doesn't actually go through these towns, so you'd need to go off course a bit to get there, but only by a kilometer or so.

I went through both cities for the first time a few years ago and was surprised to learn that they were both deemed World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. Although I could immediately understand why the vineyards of Lavaux and the Jungraub region made the list, it wasn't apparent why these two isolated industrial towns were chosen. But as UNESCO explains:

The site of La Chaux-de-Fonds / Le Locle watchmaking town-planning consists of two towns situated close to one another in a remote environment in the Swiss Jura mountains, on land ill-suited to farming. Their planning and buildings reflect watchmakers' need of rational organization. Planned in the early 19th century, after extensive fires, the towns owed their existence to this single industry. Their layout along an open-ended scheme of parallel strips on which residential housing and workshops are intermingled reflects the needs of the local watchmaking culture that dates to the 17th century and is still alive today. The site presents outstanding examples of mono-industrial manufacturing-towns which are well preserved and still active. The urban planning of both towns has accommodated the transition from the artisanal production of a cottage industry to the more concentrated factory production of the late 19th and 20th centuries. The town of La Chaux-de-Fonds was described by Karl Marx as a "huge factory-town" in Das Kapital where he analyzed the division of labour in the watchmaking industry of the Jura.

Needless to say, if you've done your Phd in the History of Urban Planning, these towns are a must-see.



 The local beer

I enjoyed my visit there, but I also enjoyed leaving. The towns reminded me of the year I spent in Andorra's capital of La Vella: a big-little city, nestled in a narrow valley with mountains on all sides. I felt claustrophobic living there as I waited patiently for that 20-minute period of sun each day. In these towns everything seems damp and gray. It's well-known that Switzerland has the highest suicide rate in Europe, and according to a Swiss friend of mine, La Chaux de Fonds has the highest rate in Switzerland! But, don't let me dissuade you from stopping by.

Some of the Jura's best scenery is just up the road. You're now in *Les Franches-Montagnes*, a region of the Swiss Jura where pastures, fences, farmhouses and parcels of forests form a harmonious landscape perfect for cycling.

Although all appears fresh and green, this is not the best land for farming. The pastures that you see contain just a bit of topsoil with limestone underneath which leaches the water and makes it impossible to grow much except for the grass. So, even though it rains quite a lot here, water used to be difficult to come by. This is why the houses look as they do. You'll often see massive roofs that descend almost to the ground. These roofs were just big rain collectors, so keep an eye out for them if you run low on water.



 Saignlegier is famous for its horse market

Next up: Saignlegier. You'll probably smell the town before you arrive. It's famous throughout Europe for its horse culture and autumn horse auction. So, if the smell is bad, remind yourself that it's the price you pay to look at all the pretty horses.

We use two different hotels in Saignlegier. The Hotel de La Gare is our first choice because it's in the town centre, has large rooms and is quiet. However, we also use the Hotel Cristal which is in the town's sports complex. They've got a swimming pool, jacuzzi, sauna, restaurant, bar and even an indoor skating rink. But the rooms are smaller and the place can be noisy if hosting a school group.

In spite of being the regional capital, there's not a lot going on in Saignlegier. The Hotel de la Gare has the best restaurant in town and there is a good independent brewery (BFM) that runs a lively bar in the town centre.