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1 The River Sihl

More than a thousand years ago, the River Sihl was called «Silaha», a name that refers to a small river which often has little water and is almost dried out. The importance of the Sihl for the City of Zurich was and is very great. The region from Enge to Limmatplatz (Limmat Square) was once a huge delta on the Sihl, and only by taming this region could the city grow. Even in the last century, the Sihl would reach flood levels where there was barely enough room for all the water to flow below the Main Rail Station. It was a spectacle which always lured a large audience.



On 7 July 1562, the River Sihl rose above its banks and swept the covered bridge at St. Jakob away with it. Source: coloured pen and ink drawing, Graphic Arts Collection, Central Library, Zurich.

Since the 1930s, the water from the Sihl has been contained in Lake Sihl, and a large portion of it flows through a tunnel to generate electricity and then exits into Lake Zurich. 2005 Zurich only narrowly escaped serious damage by the floods. If the centre of the rain storm had hit the Sihl catchment area instead of the Bernese Oberland, then the Sihl would have flooded some parts of the city too. Even with low water levels in the river, the damage would have been significant due to the buildings underground. The canton of Zurich is working on a protection project for the river Sihl, which should be implemented by 2028 at the latest.

2 Sigi Feigel Terrace

After a referendum vote in 1997, the parking facility at the Sihl Post Office was replaced by the underground parking garage at Gessnerallee. In its spot, a recreational area sprung up in the middle of the city. Steps made of sand lime brick invite you to relax, and they provide direct access to the River Sihl. The new square is called Sigi Feigel Terrace after the long-time president of the Jewish Community of Zurich (ICZ).

3 Kulturinsel (Culture Island)

At one time cavalry horses trotted through the riding halls which were built in 1858, but today there's a small cultural district, which because of its location between the two

ivers is also called the Kulturinsel (Culture Island). Situated on the Schanzengraben, the Theaterhaus Gessnerallee has been dedicated to contemporary dance and theatre since 1989. Across from it, the Theater der Künste (Theatre of Arts) provides a stage for students at the Zurich University of the Arts. And finally there is the El Lokal music pub, where regular concerts are staged in a unique mix of furnishing styles with keepsakes from all around the world – and here you can sometimes even meet pirates.

www.gessnerallee.ch, www.stall6.ch

www.theaterderkuenste.ch

www.ellokal.ch

4 Stones in the River Sihl

In 1998, the Zurich artist Peter Ott painted three large stones in the River Sihl red. They were placed there as a refuge for fish, and this work is named «Homage to the Sihl». Since then, Ott has had to wade into the river time and again to repaint the stones as a result of night pranksters painting them over in other colours.

5 Sihlporte

During the Stecklikrieg («War of the Sticks») in 1802, Helvetic troops marched to the front of the Sihlporte, the western gate to Zurich at the time, and fired cannons on the Old Town. It was the second-last time that Zurich would be fired on in wartime – the last time was in World War II when Allied planes mistakenly dropped bombs here. In 1937, on this site Robert Ober opened one of Zurich's most modern commercial buildings. The «Ober» logo still recalls what was once a house of fashion.

6 Schanzengraben

Water flows through Schanzengraben moat from Lake Zurich into the River Sihl. This man-made canal was the outermost moat until the dismantling of the city fortifications in 1830. Because it was thought necessary to have a second exit for water from the lake, it was not filled in. As a result, industry in particular settled along the water, and the Schanzengraben became a canal for factories. It was converted into a pedestrian promenade in 1975 – and since then has been named the Venice of Zurich.

7 Männerbadi (men's bathhouse)

The Männerbadi on the Schanzengraben was built in 1864 and is the oldest preserved bathhouse in Zurich. Under the influence of the Reformation, the bathing culture of the Middle Ages disappeared – public bathhouses were considered a place of vice. Only in the 19th century with the increase in population density in the city did doctors begin to plead for public hygiene. The austere, functional architecture is reminiscent of this epoch when bathing was primarily used for personal hygiene. Even today, this bathhouse is only open to men (free admission). On summer evenings, though, it transforms into the Rimini Bar, which is also open to women. Behind it, simply and in white, is the water tower from 1724. It was the private pumping station for the courtyard fountains of the wealthy merchants who then lived in the newly created baroque quarter near Pelikanplatz.

www.stadt-zuerich.ch/ssd > Sport > Schwimmen > Flussbad Schanzengraben

www.rimini.ch

8 Old Botanical Garden

The Old Botanical Garden is located on a hill created by a moraine. Serving as the corner bastion «zur Katz», this hill was integrated into the star-shaped city fortifications of the 17th century. When the University of Zurich was founded in 1833, construction of the first botanical garden started here in 1833. At the highest point on the hill there is an herb garden from the Middle Ages. Here more than 50 medicinal plants provide insight into old knowledge of healing plants and are a reminder of the Zurich-based nature researcher and physician Conrad Gessner.



Sketch of the old corner bastion from 1834. Source: Archive of Building History, City of Zurich.

Opening hours: April–September 7 a.m.–7 p.m.; October–March 8 a.m.–6 p.m.

9 Selnau neighbourhood

Here the street names remind you of times past: The old District Courthouse from 1857 stands at Selnaustrasse 9 between Gerechtigkeitsgasse (Justice Lane) and Friedensgasse (Peace Lane). Flössergasse (Rafters' Lane) points out that until the middle of the 19th century, wood for Zurich's construction projects was harvested in the Sihl Forest, rafted across the river and brought on shore in Selnau. Below all these streets rest the remains of a large Cistercian convent. The nuns who resided here from 1256 until the Reformation in 1524 apparently didn't live such a cloistered life – time and again they were punished by the Pope and high-ranking monks for disobedience and bad morals.

10 Selnau development

Since 1996, the complex of the former Selnau rail station (today underground) has been home to a municipal housing estate. The construction of 64 apartments, a kindergarten and social centre by the architect Martin Spühler, with its courtyards and its glazed loggias, is considered a model of modern residential housing estates, and not just architecturally.

11 Synagogue

Only with the Emancipation Law of 1862 were Jews allowed to freely settle in the City of Zurich. Since 1924, the synagogue on Freigutstrasse has been the centre of prayer for the Jewish Religious Community of Zurich (IRGZ), one of several in the city. Earlier, the River Sihl made up the actual border between Jews already residing in Zurich and those who fled from Eastern Europe starting in 1880. The «Eastern Jews» took up residence primarily on the other shore of the Sihl, in the «Schtetl on the Sihl».

12 Sihl waterfall

At the end of the 19th century, the city and the operator of the Nordostbahn (Northeast Railway) sought a solution for running tracks from the Main Rail Station to Wollishofen. At the time, the line ran through the residential districts and created traffic backups and anger at a dozen level crossings. The decision was made to build an underpass

and reroute the River Sihl, which until then flowed on the west side of the Sihlhölzli. In 1927 the railway was finally located below ground level, and the former railway tunnel was converted into an auto tunnel. Even today, the tiny, delightful signalman's house hidden between the Sihlhölzlibrücke bridge and the tunnel entrance is evidence of the old rail line. The Sihl waterfall, which arose through this running of tracks below ground level, however, again creates an obstacle – now for the local fish on their way to their spawning grounds.



Construction of railway tunnel and rerouting of the River Sihl around 1919. Photo: Archive of Building History, City of Zurich.

13 Sihlhölzli

An avenue with mighty old plane trees leads past the Sihlhölzli. Earlier, on what was once Sihl Island, there was a park filled with trees, and in the second half of the 19th century the shooting range of the Zurich Rifle Society. This was the location of the Knabenschiessen (boys' shooting tournament) until it was moved to the Albisgütli. Because girls were not allowed to participate, they were admitted at no charge to the market stalls on Monday morning. In 1931 a sports facility was dedicated; it includes a neo-classical gymnasium designed by City Engineer Hermann Herter and a clamshell music pavilion, both of which are protected as historic monuments.



Sihl Island around 1916. Photo: Archive of Building History, City of Zurich.

14 Hürlimann Complex

Wiedikon is connected to the Hürlimann Complex and the Enge neighbourhood via two pedestrian/bicycle bridges, the Hetersteg and the Herterbrücke. For decades, the scent of hops and the clattering of horse carts belonging to the Hürlimann Brewery were part of everyday life in Enge. After the merger with the Feldschlösschen brewery,

the last beer was brewed here in September 1997, and after 160 years the only trace of this company and its rich tradition was just the name on the bottles. Instead of a brewery and bottling plant, the old buildings along with new ones are now home to stores, restaurants, offices and apartments and most recently a thermal spa. What remains is a water fountain where at no charge you can fill bottles with mineral water which is pumped up from a depth of 300 metres.

15 Sihl elevated roadway

It rests on 93 pillars, and spanning 1.5 kilometres it is one of the longest bridges in Switzerland: the Sihl elevated roadway. Opened in 1974, this access road to the A3 motorway and above all its mid-section, which ends high above the river into nothingness, reminds us of the traffic concept from the 1950s and 1960s envisioning a city ring, city motorway and «Express Roads Y» – but which were never completed.

16 Sihlcity

In May 2007, Sihlcity – designed by the architect Theo Hotz – was opened in the southern part of Zurich. Some 100,000 square metres of floor space accommodate restaurants, a multiplex cinema, offices, a hotel, a library, the «Papiersaal» culture centre and around 80 stores. Sihlcity is located on the complex of the former Sihl Papier AG paper factory. From 1837 until production was moved to Zurich-Manegg at the end of the 1970s, this was the largest operating industrial plant in Wiedikon. Parts of the factory were integrated into Sihlcity: the office building at the entrance near the Utobrücke bridge, then the calendar building and the paper warehouse opposite with its glass brick elements, and also the central smokestack – at 60 metres high, one of the tallest remaining smokestacks in Zurich.



The Sihlpapier factory complex around 1967. Photo: Archive of Building History, City of Zurich.

Along the River Sihl on foot

People love water. That makes it even more difficult to understand why cities tend to make their rivers inaccessible. In Zurich, too, this was also the case for a long time with few exceptions. In recent years, though, we have been creating more and more access to the River Sihl and the River Limmat. In the past, the Sihl was very poorly treated, especially with the eyesore of the Sihl elevated roadway. Even so, you'll see that it's quite lovely to stroll along the River Sihl... and exciting, too!

Zurich on foot – always a new discovery

Zurich has countless tales to tell, and «Zurich on foot» brings a few of them to life. In the process, you'll see that our pedestrian infrastructure is already quite good, but we want to make it even better. Walkways should be designed to be direct, safe and attractive and be usable wherever possible with walking aids or baby carriages.

A third of all trips within the city are made on foot, and that provides proof as to which is Zurich's most important «means of transportation»: our feet!

I wish you much enjoyment while out and about.

Leutnegger

City Councillor Filippo Leutnegger
Head of the Civil Engineering and Waste Management Department

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approx. 1 hour

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↻ audio play available

↓ unobstructed path

«Zurich on foot» maps are directly available in the Pavilion at Werdmühleplatz or can be ordered at the City of Zürich Civil Engineering Department: 044 412 50 99, www.stadt-zuerich.ch/stadtverkehr2025

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