



A town apart

Founded by the King of Sardinia, the town of Carouge is a quaint little pocket of tradition, art and culture, a short journey from the bustle of modern life in Geneva, Switzerland

Story by Ava Chisling

Hidden throughout the busy streets of the world's largest cities are neighbourhoods of considerable charm. These small enclaves, such as Le Marais in Paris or Shinjuku in Tokyo, generally have glorious pasts or they are wonderful places that make you feel as though you have been transported somewhere else, somewhere better. Carouge has both these qualities, for this leafy suburb of Geneva, Switzerland has an amazing history filled with Kings, power and jealous rages, but is also proud to be the home of independent thinkers and talented artists.

Usually when we think of the beauty of Switzerland, we probably picture the scenery high up in the Alps, but not all of this country's appeal lies at an altitude of 3,000 metres. Carouge is beautiful because of its unique character. You can almost feel its creative spirit along the tree-lined paths and in the courtyards of the Old Town. Here you will find 18,000 people living simple but extraordinary lives in the shadow of the country's second largest city.

Carouge is only a few kilometres from the centre of Geneva but it might as well be on a separate planet. You can trace the differences between the two cities all the way back to Victor-Amédée III, King of Sardinia. In the mid-18th century, the King decided that instead of trying to conquer Geneva, he would create his own powerful city right next door. His goal was to make his city more important than Geneva. The King brought in architects from Italy to create his vision and he abolished all entry tolls to his land – he believed that once visitors experienced the beauty of Carouge, they wouldn't bother going to Geneva.

The people who migrated to this small village over two centuries ago were creative, and included sculptors, blacksmiths and tailors. And today, it is the same artistic expression that attracts – and keeps – its inhabitants and visitors happy. Back then, Geneva was a strict, Puritan city that did not tolerate the 'sin' of having a good time. Carouge was under totally separate jurisdiction and did not have to follow the

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same rules. As a result, Carouge became the primary escape for those looking for good food and good company. And this holds true even today.

Carouge, which became a part of Geneva in 1815, may not have grown into an economic powerhouse, as per the King's wishes, but it certainly rivals the big city for entertainment and appeal. At the end of any given weekday, you will find a lot of empty streets in Geneva as the city's commuters head out of the centre and back to their homes. In Carouge, the streets are never empty. This is where people head to when they finish their daily grind. There is a spirit here that certainly cannot be found next door in Geneva or hardly anywhere else for that matter.

A HAVEN OF TRANQUILITY WITH A STRONG CULTURAL SPIRIT, CAROUGE HAS FINE RESTAURANTS, FANTASTIC LIVE MUSIC AND STREETS FULL OF GALLERIES AND BOUTIQUES. THE TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE (ABOVE) IS A SIGHT IN ITSELF, AS ARE THE REGULAR MARKETS (BELOW LEFT)



Jean-Marie Rossier, 35, has lived in Carouge for almost a decade. 'I returned to the region after a year in Paris and I needed a home that was close to Geneva. Someone mentioned Carouge and I went to take a look.' Jean-Marie loved what he saw. 'It is a friendly, lively, wonderful place,' he says. 'It is like nowhere else I have ever been. There are winding alleyways filled with unique shops, mostly run by artisans.

'There are artists, painters, glassblowers, leather makers, clockmakers and designers. You can visit workshops to see art-in-progress or drop in to one of their boutiques to see the final product. Crista de Carouge, a well-known fashion designer, was recently named one of Europe's 48 most influential women. She opened her first boutique in Carouge in 1978.'

So far, Carouge has resisted the usual temptations of big business. It is a low-rise town, where you can still see the sky from wherever you stand. You would also be hard pressed to find big chain stores – these are shunned by the citizens who prefer to create and sell their own wares. And if that isn't enough to remind you of earlier

times, try visiting Carouge on a sunny day. Like many four-season locales, the Carougeois flock to bistro terraces the instant the weather permits, and you'll find yourself surrounded by smiling people of all ages, sitting under awnings of all colours, sipping wine and coffee.

Alain Garcia, 20, was born in Geneva but spends much of his leisure time in Carouge. 'The best way to describe Carouge is "authentic". It seems to inspire those who want to create and even in 2005, it maintains a village, community-like

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atmosphere. The biggest difference between Geneva and this neighbourhood is tranquillity – even in the centre of Carouge, it still feels quiet.'

Sitting on a bistro terrace, you would swear you were in small-town France a century ago. Adding to the picturesque quality of the town are beautiful hidden courtyards beyond just about every wall and gate. Take the time to peek around, as most of these green areas are open for the public to enjoy, although you won't know they are there unless you really look! Twice a week, locals set up markets as they have for hundreds of years. And Place du Marché, considered the town's heart, offers a real sense of Carouge's allure as does Rue Saint-Joseph and its long line of artisans.

The Carougeois are fiercely proud people. 'They don't see themselves as a part of Geneva,' says Jean-Marie. 'To them, their way of life has nothing to do with the big city or the attitudes of people living there. The Carougeois identify with Sardinia, Italy, as it was the King of Sardinia who created their city in the first place.' Although there are only 18,000 people living within an area of 2.6 kilometres, people still refer to Carouge as a 'city' and not a town or a village or a suburb. Jean-Marie believes this is because the people are so loyal – for as long as Carouge maintains its identity as a city, no one will think it is a part of Geneva. And as you walk around the gorgeous gardens and sip tea among the sculptors and the jewellery makers, you, too, will understand why Carouge is a place unto itself. ■

General information

- * **Place du Marché 14**, 1227 Carouge GE/CH, telephone: +41-22-307 8987, fax: +41-22-342 5329; email: mairie@carouge.ch; www.carouge.ch
- * **Théâtre de Carouge**, 57 rue Ancienne, telephone: +41-22-343 4343; www.theatredecarouge-geneve.ch/fr-page.0.0.html. Two upcoming shows of interest are David Mamet's *Oleanna* (15 November – 18 December) and Patrick Süskind's *La Contrebasse* (31 January – 5 February 2006).
- * **Musée de Carouge**, Place de Sardaigne 2, telephone: +41-22-342 3383; www.ville-ge.ch/geneve/culture/offre_culturelle/musees/musees_ca/carouge/carouge.html. This museum is housed in a Louis XVI-style building that is more than 200 years old. For a perfect example of Carouge's Old Town delights, go there any afternoon except Monday.
- * **Le Chat Noir**, rue Vautier 13, telephone: +41-22-343 4998; www.chatnoir.ch. Probably the most famous place for live music in Carouge and all of Geneva, as well. For 20 years, the 'Black Cat' has showcased fantastic artists of all genres. See the website for a list of shows.
- * **Parc de la Mairie**, Parc de Carouge-Centre, Place de Sardaigne. In order to understand the spirit of Carouge, you must spend time in the parks. As you stroll, you'll find hidden courtyards, beautiful fountains, and lots of clean, fresh air.