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1 Switzerland's Changing Landscapes

A High Mountain Country

Located in the southeastern corner of Central Europe, midway through the Alps, Switzerland is among the smallest countries of the world, spanning 220 km north-south and 350 km east-west, with a total area of 41'285 km².

Despite its small size, this alpine country harbours many different landscapes, and, due to the presence of the European Alps, has the highest average elevation among Central European countries. Elevations range from 193 m at the Lago Maggiore in southern Switzerland to 4634 m (Mont Dufour of the Monte Rosa massive). Only 15% of Switzerland is 500 below m asl, while 53% is 1000 above m asl.

Switzerland's landscapes have been strongly shaped by the formation of the Alps and the Ice Ages (both the subject of later chapters). The upfolding alpine resulted in the topography and the distribution of various rock types, while the Ice Ages carved valleys, smoothed stones and deposited moraines, leading to significant features of the present landscape.

Biogeographic Regions

Switzerland is divided into three major regions: the Jura, the Midlands ("Mittelland"), and the Alps. The Alps are further divided into the Northern, Western, Central, Eastern Central, and Southern Alps (Fig. 1.1), giving Switzerland six major biogeographical regions.

These six regions not only differ widely in their average elevation and topography, but also in their specific composition of fauna and flora. The plant life of the Midlands is different from that of the Jura or the Alps, and the vegetation of the inner alpine valleys is markedly distinct from that of north or south alpine valleys.