The Reformation was a 16th-century revolution within Christianity, of which Geneva was one of the main centres. It saw individuals as free and responsible for their beliefs. People turned to the Bible for guidance rather than to church authorities. The Reformation was a crucial stage between the Renaissance and the modern era.

This walking tour will take you to 10 places of symbolic importance for the Reformation in Geneva, a period that left a deep mark on the city’s architecture, economy and spirituality.

The Reformation began in Germany in 1517 with Martin Luther. Reformed ideas reached Geneva as early as 1525. It was another 10 years before Geneva officially adopted the new faith, between 1535 and 1536, thanks to the efforts of a French preacher, Guillaume Farel. The movement really began to take off with the arrival of John Calvin, in July 1536. During the 1540s, Geneva became a safe haven for Protestants from across Europe fleeing persecution. These men and women found in Geneva a home where they could freely live their faith.

The influx of refugees began in the mid-16th century and rose sharply following the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in 1572, an attempt to rid France of Protestants by order of the king. The mainly French, but also Italian, English and even Spanish, refugees brought their skills and know-how to Geneva. As pastors, teachers, lawyers, doctors, printers, watchmakers, goldsmiths or merchant bankers, they contributed greatly to the city’s economic growth.

A second wave of refugees arrived in the 17th century, after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685). Geneva once again became a safe haven for Protestants from France. They boosted the industries that Geneva became famous for in the 18th century: watchmaking, banking and the manufacture of a type of printed or painted fabric called “indienne”. They also consolidated the city’s stature as a centre for art and science.

Following the adoption of the Reformation, the intellectual and spiritual influence of the “Protestant Rome”, as Geneva was then called, grew substantially.
Reformation

The Reformation brought about significant changes in the religious and cultural life of Europe. In Switzerland, the Reformation had a profound impact, leading to the establishment of the Swiss Reformed Church and the development of a distinct Swiss national identity. The Reformation was not only a religious movement but also had political and social consequences, leading to the rise of the Swiss cantons and the eventual formation of the Swiss Confederation.

Saint-Pierre Cathedral

Built between 1150 and 1250, St Pierre Cathedral has been restored and rebuilt several times over the centuries, often following damage by fire. After the Reformation was adopted in the mid-16th century, the cathedral was stripped of all its interior decorations and ornaments, and the painted decor was whitewashed. Only the stained-glass windows survived.

It was here that John Calvin preached to hundreds of parishioners twice on Sundays and once on weekdays every other week.

Auditoire Calvin

Built in the 15th century in the Gothic style, this small auditorium with a simple façade stands right next to St Pierre Cathedral. In the mid-16th century, English, Scottish, Dutch and Italian Protestants gathered here to worship in their native tongue. The reformer John Knox preached at the Auditoire after he came to Geneva as a refugee. It was here, too, that he and a group of fellow-countrymen decided to translate the Bible into English. Completed between 1556 and 1559, their famous translation is known as the "Geneva Bible".

The Auditoire is still a Protestant place of worship today.

Lutheran Church

Built between 1762 and 1766, this building was a gift from the city of Geneva to the German-speaking Lutheran community. Although they share the same faith, Protestants, Lutherans and Calvinists differ slightly on points of doctrine and in the way they worship. To allow Lutherans to worship according to their custom, the Republic of Geneva in 1760 gave them permission to build a church—on the condition that it not be identifiable as such from the outside!

The building was therefore designed to look like a traditional three-storey dwelling rather than a Protestant church. The sanctuary occupies the building’s ground and first floors.

Today, the Lutheran Church serves a large and diverse community of believers with services in English, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Finnish.

College Calvin

Protestants believed that the faithful should be able to read the Bible in order to form their own opinion. Education was therefore a central priority. As a result, Protestant Genevans had a much higher literacy rate than their Catholic neighbours.

When the people of Geneva adopted the Reformation, on 21 May 1536, they also decided to build a school, which all children would be required to attend. The plan eventuated only in 1559, however, with the founding of the Collège and Académie (the ancestor of the University of Geneva). The original building is still in use today as a high school, appropriately named Collège Calvin.

In the 16th century, the Collège welcomed boys from the age of 7. The curriculum was essentially literary: subjects included Latin – and later Greek – grammar, logic and rhetoric, followed by the classical authors and Calvin’s catechism. With ten hours of lessons a day, six days a week, pupils did not have it easy!

Reformation Wall

Built between 1909 and 1917, this monument combines ticket. Admission is free with the steps in all!

The Archaeological Site are well worth the long climb – 157 steps resemble those of a henhouse!

Place du Bourg-de-Four

Welcome to Geneva’s oldest square! The Place du Bourg-de-Four is the true heart of the Old Town, the point where all roads to Geneva meet. As such, it became an important marketplace from the 11th century onwards. Notice how some of the houses bordering the square were raised by a storey, in order to create additional housing for the Protestant refugees who poured in from all over Europe, starting in the 16th century.

Hôtel-de-Ville

The Hôtel-de-Ville, or City Hall, has been the political heart of the city for over 500 years. Its construction spanned almost three centuries and it underwent many changes before reaching its present state. In 1526, a new political institution was founded: the Conseil des Deux-Cents, the ancestor of today’s Grand Conseil, or cantonal parliament. In 1535, the new body banned the Catholic Mass in the city, thus heralding Geneva’s transition to the Reformation.

Notice Geneva’s coat of arms above the large door to entrance number 2. It combines a crowned eagle, symbol of the Holy Roman Empire, which Geneva belonged to in the 11th century, and a gold key, symbol of the bishop who in 1237 awarded freedoms and franchises to his subjects.

Temple de la Fusterie

Temple de la Fusterie was the first new place of worship established after the Reformation. Built between 1773 and 1775, it was originally called “Temple Neuf”, or “New Church”.

Before then, Protestant services were held at St Pierre Cathedral and in the former Catholic churches of St Gervais and La Madeleine, which were reconfigured to meet the needs of the Protestant service. It became necessary to build a fourth church following an influx of new refugees after the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685.

The church is open to visitors of all religions and creeds. It regularly hosts exhibitions, celebrations, concerts, performances and lectures.

Rues Basses and Place du Molard

In the past, the lower part of the city was a hub of commercial activity, with a bustling port and several covered and outdoors markets. The first markets were organised as early as the mid-13th century, and their importance boosted the development of this part of the town.

The Place du Molard was for many centuries the centre of Geneva’s political and economic life. It was in here, on 1 January 1537, that Antoine Froment, a disciple of Guillaume Farel, first preached the Reformed ideas in a public sermon.