

## The routes: Rhine, Plateau, Alps and Rhône

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The Geneva fairs took off at the moment when the great commercial system of the Champagne fairs, which had dominated European trade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was entering its decline. The Archives d'État de Genève (Geneva State Archives) point out that the city benefited from this decline, which began in the fourteenth century, and that commercial currents then converged on it from the Rhine, southern Germany and the Danubian lands, across the Swiss Plateau.<sup>1</sup> Several factors explain this shift: the wars that ravaged northern France during the Hundred Years' War, the rise of the Alpine routes, the dynamism of the merchant cities of southern Germany and the development of direct navigation between Italy and Flanders through the Strait of Gibraltar, which reduced the attraction of the Champagne fairs.

The route across the Swiss Plateau played a central role. It linked Geneva to Lausanne, Fribourg, Berne, Solothurn, Basel and, beyond, to the cities of the Rhine and southern Germany: Constance, Ravensburg, Ulm, Augsburg, Nuremberg. The localities situated on this itinerary drew substantial revenues from the tolls that punctuated it, Berne and Fribourg in particular.<sup>2</sup> This detail has considerable political significance. The Swiss cantons had a direct interest in the vitality of the Geneva traffic. When Geneva came under threat, they would intervene, first of all because their own finances depended on it.

To the south, several routes linked Geneva to Italy. The first ran along the south shore of the lake, crossed the Chablais, went up the Rhône valley to Martigny and crossed the Great St Bernard Pass to descend on Aosta, Ivrea and the Po plain. A variant took the Simplon Pass towards Domodossola and Lake Maggiore, in the direction of Milan. Other itineraries crossed Savoy, by way of Annecy or Chambéry, to reach the Mont Cenis and Turin, or the Little St Bernard and the Aosta valley. By these routes came the

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merchants of Milan, Genoa, Florence, Lucca and Venice, with their silks, their velvets, their spices, their arms and their luxury goods.

To the west, the Rhône valley led to Lyon and then to Avignon, Provence and Languedoc. Navigation on the upper Rhône was, however, difficult downstream of Geneva: the river plunged into impassable gorges, and goods had to travel overland to the point where navigation became possible again.<sup>3</sup> This constraint made transport between Geneva and Lyon more expensive, which did not prevent trade from being intense. To the north-west, finally, the passes of the Jura opened the road to the Franche-Comté, Burgundy, Champagne and Paris, and beyond them to Flanders and its cloth.

| Axis                    | Principal destinations                                   | Characteristic goods                       |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Swiss Plateau and Rhine | Fribourg, Berne, Basel, southern Germany, Danubian lands | linens, fustians, metals, cloth, furs      |
| Alpine passes           | Milan, Genoa, Florence, Lucca, Venice                    | silks, velvets, spices, arms, luxury goods |
| Rhône valley            | Lyon, Avignon, Provence, Languedoc, Mediterranean        | salt, spices, oil, hides, cloth            |
| Jura routes             | Franche-Comté, Burgundy, Champagne, Paris, Flanders      | cloth, wool, wines                         |
| Lake Geneva             | Vaud, Chablais, Valais                                   | wine, timber, stone, cheeses, grain        |

The table above simplifies a shifting reality. Itineraries moved according to wars, tolls and agreements between sovereigns. A route could be abandoned within a few years if a lord multiplied the taxes on it or if insecurity there became too great. Medieval merchants made constant trade-offs between cost, duration and risk. This mobility of flows is a fundamental fact for understanding the fragility of the fairs: a centre that lives only on through-traffic can lose that traffic as quickly as it gained it.

The choice of a route depended on distances and, just as much, on the quality of the facilities available on the way. A merchant travelling with goods of great value sought staging posts where he could sleep in safety, store his bales, find pack animals, inform himself about prices and news, obtain credit or change his coins. Geneva offered all of this. Its reputation as a well-equipped and relatively safe city constituted a competitive advantage as important as its geographical position.

## 1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève, thematic page “Économie”, archives-etat-ge.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Archives d'État de Genève, page “Économie”, cited above. ↩
3. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Rhône”: “The Perte du Rhône at Bellegarde-sur-Valserine (submerged beneath the Génissiat dam), which made a break of bulk necessary between Geneva and the port of Seyssel”; the laborious Lyon–Seyssel journey is regularly attested; salt upstream, linens and cloth downstream, Gruyère cheeses from the sixteenth century; “This navigation practically ceased after the construction of the railways”. ↩

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