

SWITZERLAND

This week we experience the whiteness of Switzerland. I spent a great deal of time in Switzerland, when working for the Sydney Olympics, and was fortunate to spend time in Morges, Lausanne and Montreaux. Morning runs along Lac Lemman were a feature as were the views across the lake to Evian-les-Bains and the towering Alps.

Now, nearly 20 years later we are revisiting our favourite places, especially Grindelwald. Back then, we took the train and stayed in a boutique hotel with views across the fields. Now, we drive through the country, in one end (Geneva) and out the other (Basel). Much has changed with Grindelwald, the town is much busier but the magic is still there. Who knew we would time it to get such a dump of snow.

We take the train from Torino to Annecy as the car rental in this part of the world is tricky to negotiate, to say the least. We thought we'd just hire a car in Rome and drop it off in Paris... how wrong was that assumption. Firstly, the rental companies just LOVE to charge extortionate one-way fees in Europe. Secondly, to drive in Switzerland (in April) we had to have 'winterisation' and this particular vehicle option could only be picked up in Annecy after which we had to drop it off, as we exited Switzerland and re-entered France, only to collect another car to continue our trip to Paris (with afore mentioned one way fees). A simple car rental turned into a saga but it's all part of the fun when travelling.

The take outs from this trip in particular were: always read the fine print on the rental document; don't trust the Italian version; insist on a hard copy; and when you say "no" to the mountains of optional extras do not assume you will not be charged for them anyway! We always book our overseas rentals through **Driveaway**, here in Australia and they are fabulous.

MODAY – DAY 1

We arrive in Annecy after 11am and go to the Europcar outlet in case there is an opportunity to collect our car early. The car is ready but, if we want it, we have to pay a further 24hrs rental fee. Thanks, no thanks.

We give it a miss and walk down to the lake where we enjoy the sunshine, along with some cheese (bought at the Saturday markets in Torino). There are people out everywhere - walking, sitting, running and in paddle boats on the lake.



We walk around town and find a cafe on the canal for a coffee. Such a pleasant way to while away the time. Annecy is a spectacular place and well worth spending time there (I have another post for another time about our stay in Annecy and trips in the region).



Back at Europe Car things go from bad to worse. After international phone calls, my best Henry Kissinger efforts and emails flying around the world, we are on our way in a very nice Fiat 500c, which is a small SUV.

We've lost precious time now, so we give up on the scenic route and shoot up the freeway. We veer off and **Morges** and follow the coast to **Grandvaux**, where our accommodation awaits us.

The driveway to **Villa Lavaux** is steep but the views make up for it big time. The most stunning views over the lake and up to Lausanne. The home is very new and beautifully presented.

Our hosts Armand and Lael greet us warmly and our room is on the top floor with equally stunning views. Villa Lavaux is superb.... everything is just beautiful and the views are spectacular. Wow!



Armand recommends the Restaurant **Du Lemman**, in Lutry, which specialise in Bacchus Fondu, a house specialty with skewers of veal, best baked potato, six sauces and pickled vegetables. We enjoy a great night, spurred on by the humour of our Irish waiter.



Retiring for the night we have a panorama out our window, with the lights along Lake Geneva twinkling in the distance.

TUESDAY – DAY 2

A brilliant, bright day dawns. Breakfast is a superb spread and our hosts, Armand and Lael, are thoroughly engaging. The property has interesting art installations as well. We could settle in for days but we head off late morning, bound for Gstaad.



We follow the edge of Lac Lemman. One gorgeous view after the other. We pass through **Vevey** and stop for a quick look at **Montreaux** - as pretty as we remember but now much bigger and bustling. We drive through **Villeneuve** before heading into the mountains.



We stop at **Col du Pillon** - chair lift ride starts at 1500m - with a peak to peak suspension bridge at the top. Tempting but we push on.

We reach Gstaad and check into the **Hotel Christiania**. The room is big, as is the bathroom. We set out for a walk around town and it's like a ghost town. There is no one on the street. We finally come across an outside dining area, attached to the **Hotel Rossli**, with a few people sitting there. We go and ask if we can have lunch and they are very friendly. First Cheese Fondue coming up!

There is a real chill in the air but the warmth of the midday sun is just enough to make the outdoor setting extremely pleasant.

The fondue is exceptional and comes with great potatoes. The waitress suggests a Fendant white wine, which is the best known Swiss wine, and it works well. The fondue may have had gold leaf in it for the cost, €43 pp. It's cheese! And bread. Very enjoyable though.



It's still quiet. We wander the main street, nip up side alleys and explore the town. There are some lovely galleries and trendy (read exxy!) shops. The staff in the shops are super friendly and I suspect super bored at this time of year.



WEDNESDAY – DAY 3

Breakfast is a pleasant and relaxing affair. The Hotel Christiana is a traditional style chalet hotel and has a cosy, personal feel to it.

Onward from Gstaad, next stop to Grindelwald. The drive is beautiful and takes about 90mins. We find **Hotel Gletscherblick** and check in. Our hosts are very friendly and we have yet another big room with a fabulous view down the valley. The hotel is on the outskirts of town and a brisk 10min walk into town.



We go for a drive. The town has grown hugely since we were here 20 years ago. We find the station to take the train to Jungfrau. The weather forecast is for snow , snow, snow so tomorrow is probably a no go. We park and walk through town and call into a cafe for a gluhwein. When in Switzerland! The town is quite busy and has a charming, alpine feel to it. There are lots of skiers about – they must have heard the forecast as well.



We drive into town for dinner at the **Derby**. It has just started snowing lightly. It is more like sleet but getting heavier and we figure it settle.

We have another fondue with Fendant wine which is again a great accompaniment to the Fondue. The staff are friendly and the restaurant is warm and cosy, although fairly large.



The snow continues lightly but consistently on the drive home.

THURSDAY – DAY 4

We wake to a white out and about half a metre of snow. It is snowing heavily still.



The breakfast room is warm and cosy and provides a continental spread. The snow is getting heavier and heavier.

We want to go into town and are contemplating our options. The car is snowed in and we don't have chains (minor detail). We call past reception and the owner offers us a lift... we accept and tell him we'll walk home. We are on the edge of town and it's a very pleasant walk.

We trudge around town and have a gluhwein, to provide warmth and stamina for our further walking expedition. There are lots of interesting shops and we really enjoy wandering in the snow. The walk home is also a lot of fun. The snow is really soft and powdery and easy underfoot.



We enjoyed our earlier walk so much that we decide to walk back into town for early dinner at **Restaurant Alta Post**, in the main street. We have a cosy table, next to the window, where we watch the snow plough make multiple passes during the evening. We enjoy a warming Cream of Celery soup, followed by Schnitzel. We are getting used to the crazy prices in Switzerland and enjoy a really pleasant night.

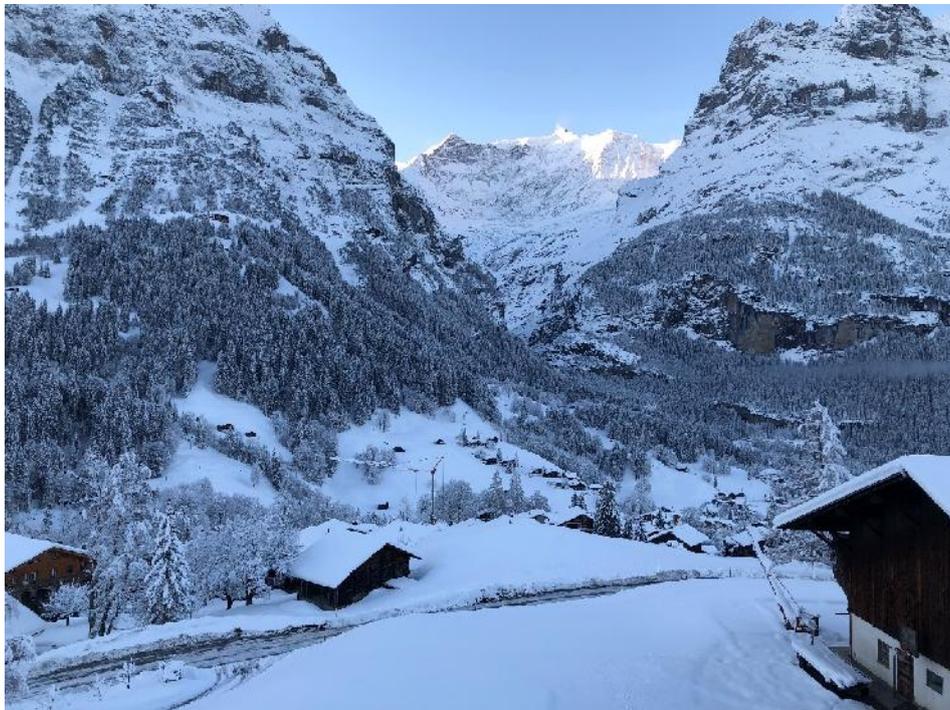
We plod home in the snow. It's still pelting down but the flakes are smaller. We are hoping the snow will stop overnight. The forecast tomorrow is for brilliant sunshine.





FRDAY – DAY 5

And brilliant sunshine it is. Not a cloud in the sky. Cool, clear perfection. We breakfast early and the hotel offers to drop us to the train station for our trip to Jungfrau. The roads are clear of snow but this has been replaced with black ice.



We make the 8:47 from Grindelwald with a few minutes to spare. The train to Jungfrau is far from a bargain but a once in a lifetime (well, twice for us) opportunity. At chf 397 (about AUD \$315pp) you need to see it as something you've just got to do, hang the price.



The trip up the hill is breathtaking. At **Kleine Scheidegg** all the skiers disembark. It is a great day to be a skier in Jungfrau! The lifts are all operating and the hills are littered with people gliding effortlessly downward. I wish I was a skier! Kleine Scheidegg has 100km of slopes and 30km of toboggan runs.

The **Jungfrau** railway was constructed from 1896-1912 and is 9.3km. The railway has its own hydro-electric power station and the downhill train generates electricity (since 1912). The **Lindt** chocolate shop is the highest chocolate shop in Europe and **Tissot** has the highest watch shop in the world.

We change trains and continue upwards arriving at **Jungfraujoch** - 3454m – the top of Europe. The presentation has grown since we were last here. We head up to the **Sphinx** observation deck. It's pretty cool out! We stand on a grid and there is a force ten, bitter wind screaming up through the holes. Mixed with swirling ice that is picked up along the way it's quite the freezing adventure! We get photos and take in the panorama, with spectacular views over the **Aletsch Glacier**.



The **Alpine Sensation** is a 250m corridor with images, lights and music. It is quite exquisite and documents the building of the railway and Guyer-Zeller's incredible genius.



The **Ice Palace** is a cavern covering 1000 sq/m and was created in the 1930s. Crystal like carvings transform the grotto into shimmering works of art.



The **Jungfrau Panorama** is a 360 experience. The snow ice plateau is bitterly cold and is hit with constant ice snow swirls. We venture out for photos and lots of laughs. The wind that hits the exit door is so fierce that many people turn around and don't bother venturing out. It is worth the cold, wind, ice swirls, flurries and crowds though!



On our return journey down the mountain, we disembark at Kleine Scheidegg and take the train to **Lauterbrunnen**, a picture postcard village at the base of another large ski area. At an altitude of between 1650-3000m it is the highest in the Bernese Oberland and has 51km of ski slopes.

From Lauterbrunnen we take the cable car up top and the train across to **Mürren**, which is even prettier than Lauterbrunnen.

The **Hotel Alpenruh** has the most spectacular view and we take a table. The afternoon sun is warm and the vista unbelievable. As we sit, we hear a roar, like there is a plane coming up the valley. On closer inspection it is an avalanche on the cliff face opposite. This is the first of a series while we are sitting here. They are small falls but the noise is frightening. Mesmerising.



We finally tear ourselves away and take two more cable cars back down the valley. The first is mild. The second goes straight over the cliff face - this one has stuck in my memory from 20

years ago but doesn't seem near as exciting this time around. Maybe we've done a lot in the meantime.

Back in Lauterbrunnen we take the train home to Grindelwald. Walking back from the station the cafes are full to the brim with late afternoon revellers, enjoying a drink and the magic view. We decide to take on the view from our hotel where we have spectacular views and none of the crowds. The veranda is still covered in snow but the seats are clear. It is so peaceful. Our own piece of paradise.



This evening we enjoy a final fondue at the Derby. For 20 years I have held memories of fondue in the streets of Morges, at a restaurant with red and white checked tablecloths, always with a pre-dinner pastis. Our return has fulfilled my longings for fondue!

SATURDAY – DAY 6

We depart relatively early, at 9:30am, as we have a long trek in front of us, involving another change of rental car.

Our stay in Grindelwald has been lovely – the hotel is a great location for peace and quiet!



On the way to Basel we take a detour into **Bern** as we are way ahead of schedule. The city centre is a labyrinth of streets and tramlines which is a bit daunting when you are not familiar with the city. We have a quick look and exit stage left to continue our trip to Mulhouse, where we will hand this car in and collect another for our onward trip to Paris, via the champagne region.

Our car drop off and pick up is at Mulhouse, just over the border from Basel. There is a Swiss side and a French side and the airport is split in two with a country dividing line down the middle. Nothing complicated about that! Another adventure, another laugh.