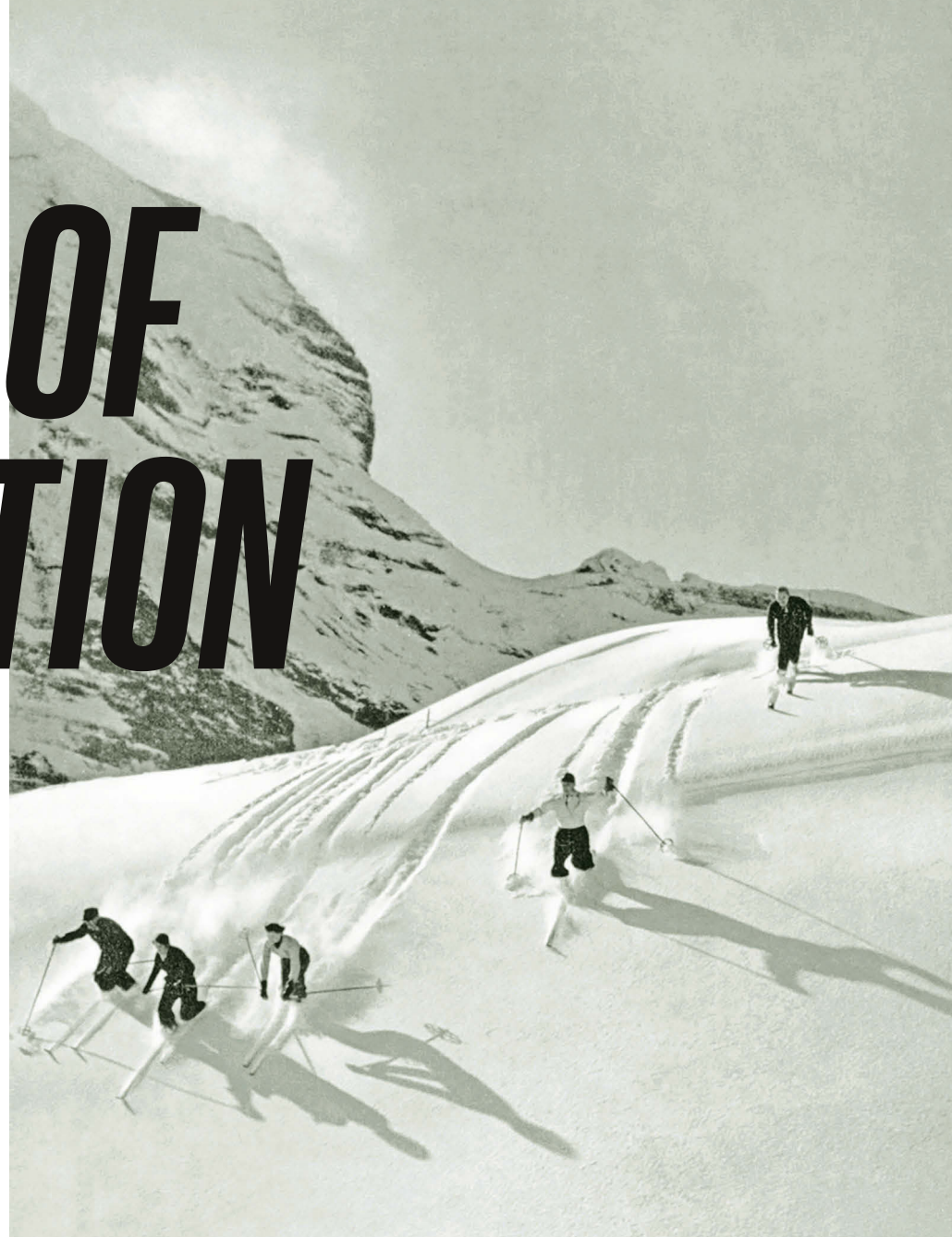


A PISTE OF PERFECTION

When *Josh Hickey* discovered the Hotel Bellevue des Alpes, he made a vow to keep it to himself. Until now

I grew up in Wilmington, Delaware, and two things aroused my early travel imagination: palm trees and snowcapped mountains. Seeing either of them meant I was somewhere very special, exotic even. One of my core childhood memories: a cog railway leading up from Grindelwald, in Switzerland, into the permanently snowcapped peaks of the Bernese Oberland. A yellow and green train that looked very much like a toy train clicked up the steep slope of the mountain like the slow start of a rollercoaster. I still remember the uncontrollable excitement of first visiting Switzerland to ride the train with my parents during a school holiday.

The pull of this memory drew me back to this same place years later, in 2017. I come from a skiing family. My grandparents moved to Switzerland in the 1950s, and my mother, grandfather, aunt and uncle would ski every weekend. My parents met while studying in Fribourg. My uncle moved to a Vermont ski town, and all of my cousins grew up skiing there and across the US. I was a bit older, and my interests were of a more urban-New York nature. So while I was on skis from the age of five, once I left for the city the sum total of my time on the slopes consisted of a few weekends in Vermont and a trip to the Poconos, Pennsylvania, which ended with a broken leg.



THE MOUNTAINS FORM A SUBLIME BACKDROP THAT BORDERS ON THE MENACING

When I left New York for Europe, an incipient compulsion became a promise and a challenge to myself: to dedicate more time to skiing. I kickstarted it in the magnificent French Alps, but realised after a few seasons that I found the organised functionality of the region unappealing. France didn't deliver what I was seeking: an aesthetic, an atmosphere – a place that seemed increasingly of a kind that simply might no longer exist.

So I went back to the source. The Swiss ski region of Jungfrau is accessed through the villages of Grindelwald, Wengen and Mürren. It offers epic skiing on Lauberhorn, Mürren-Schilthorn, Grindelwald-First, Wengen-Männlichen and Kleine Scheidegg. As you arrive in Grindelwald, the traditional chalets that dot the slopes converge on one main street lined with shops and hotels. The scale and proximity of the mountains framing the village are astonishing, forming a sublime backdrop that borders on menacing – no panoramic view, just close-ups of rock and ice.

The train up to Kleine Scheidegg that day was as I remembered: yellow and green with panoramic windows and simple wooden bench seats, filled with a cacophony of skiers; boots clomping, skis, snowboards and sleds all banging into the racks. The charm and cosiness of the valley quickly gave way to more extreme landscapes. The view was dominated by the overwhelming mass of the Jungfrau, the tallest peak (4,158m), the Mönch and the Eiger. Kleine Scheidegg sits directly at the foot of the north face of the Eiger, one of the most desirable and

Above: skiing on Lauberhorn in the 1930s. Left: (from left) the author's mother Kathleen, Aunt Mary, Uncle Sean and grandmother Rita in Zermatt, 1960. Right: the Hotel Bellevue des Alpes in 1926



Above: the Hotel Bellevue des Alpes. Left: looking out onto the Jungfrau mountain from the hotel's dining room



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deadly climbing challenges. The small outpost is the highest train connection in Switzerland, and while it bustles with skiers and tourists, it still exudes a windswept loneliness. At the top, a station recalls a simple shepherd's hut. The only things above it are the chairlift up the Lauberhorn and – even closer to the Eiger – a hotel.

At first sight, the Hotel Bellevue des Alpes could be any basic mountain lodge, its dark-wood structure, green shutters and Swiss flag all common to the region. But pushing through the revolving door, one discovers an alternative reality. To the left, a pool room set for afternoon tea. To the right, a long, wood-panelled dining room with the blinds drawn against the afternoon sun. A foyer with a roaring fire and a sweeping staircase. The corridor leading to the bathrooms ends in a pink and white dining room graced by an oversized floral arrangement and, behind it, a piano.

Chancing upon it for the first time on that trip, I glanced at the animated terrace and stopped to admire the scene: two large sun umbrellas shading a table laden with cakes and a large silver champagne bucket. It recalled a shot by the society photographer Slim Aarons. I resolved immediately to return, and have done so every year since that first stay.

The Bellevue des Alpes's history began in the mid-19th century when its two buildings, now joined by the dining room, were originally constructed as different hotels. Railways followed in 1893 and 1912. After a period of decline in the wake of the first world war, the von

Above: the author's grandmother and Aunt Mary at Crans-Montana, 1959. Right: skiers in front of the Hotel Bellevue des Alpes in 1926. Bottom right: the hotel's terrace, 1941. Bottom left: its tea room and pool table

Almen family acquired it, and their first season of 1925-26 was a Roaring Twenties success. Its unique welcome derives from the warmth of its current owners, Silvia and Andreas von Almen. Many of the staff have worked there for years, and add much to the charm of the place. I exchange messages with some of them throughout the year (one porter, named Pavel, admits to having been mildly traumatised by my book-filled suitcases).

During my stays, I follow a familiar schedule: wake at 6am to observe the sunrise from behind the Schilthorn from the window of my upper-floor room (I stay in this same room every time). Breakfast downstairs in the wood-panelled dining room; a big helping of (possibly the best) bacon, with toast and eggs and perhaps a Bircher muesli, and coffee served in a silver pot. Ski from 9am until just before 2pm, so as to make last call for lunch on the hotel's terrace, or in the Gaststube or tearoom if the weather is bad; Rösti, Bratwurstli, tartare or Gerstensuppe, a perfect after-ski soup of sausage, barley, vegetables and cream.

After lunch, I collect my skis and bring them to the back entrance, where there is a pine-panelled ski room decorated with large vintage tourism posters. Then back to my room for a soak in the giant claw-foot bathtub until 5pm, when I dress and take my book downstairs. The English-style bar is decorated with photographs and memorabilia from various Eiger climbing expeditions. The Italian bartenders in their white jackets (whom I now consider friends) make a top-notch Martini. After two of those and one chapter of my book, I'll move into the dining room, softly lit by brass table lamps with red shades. Every evening a four-course dinner is served: roasted king trumpet mushrooms, trout with a delicate champagne sauce, braised beef shoulder with parsley risotto, basil sorbet to cleanse the palate. After dinner, a brief step out into the bracing air for a bit of stargazing, then to bed.

The Bellevue des Alpes is a quiet hotel, with no televisions, limited WiFi and no swimming pool or other

amenities. It has appeared in a film or two, such as *Phantom Thread*, but its real celebrity guests are the brave mountaineers who have used the hotel as an expedition starting point. There is a natural resistance to the superfluous up here and the impracticality of the place keeps it in the realm of the imagination for many. I hesitated before writing about it, but the singular experience it offers deserves to be shared.

This Christmas, I will return again with my parents. The handful of others who will be there are mostly, like us, wedded to the same gentle schedule. Silvia von Almen, our gracious host, enjoys the repeat guests: "They give us strength to withstand the often difficult conditions up here at 2,071m altitude." We have made great friends here over the years and will soon toast together in the glow of the candlelit Christmas tree, in the pink dining room, as has been the tradition for at least 100 years. ■ **HTSI** scheidegg-hotels.ch, from SFr515 (about £479) half-board

