

Beat: Lifestyle

THE GSTAAD PALACE

A SWISS ICON WITH TRADITION

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USPA NEWS - Gstaad Palace is one of the most recognized symbols of Switzerland today. The hotel towers high over the mountain village overlooking the serene Saanen Valley and delightful wooden chalets. Its history is as spellbinding and fascinating as its fairytale like architecture and opulent appearance.

This luxurious grand hotel in the Bernese mountains opened its doors under the management of Albert Steudler and Hans Pünter on December 8th, 1913. Despite its immediate success in attracting clientele from Europe's upper classes, the economic survival of the exclusive hotel largely relied on the know-how and pioneering spirit of leading hoteliers as economic conditions deteriorated.

After successfully weathering World War I, going through significant growth and multiple changes, the dedicated Ernst and Silvia Scherz-Bezzola family took charge of the Palace in 1938. Initially they joined as managers, after 1947 also as majority shareholders. Under their leadership, the Palace attracted a new and exclusive host of visitors to Gstaad by hosting gala dinners with such stars as Louis Armstrong, Marlene Dietrich and Ella Fitzgerald. Thus the Palace became the epicenter of glamour and entertainment, the crown jewel of the Saanenland.

Being innovators and visionaries of their time, the family showed great flair when they courageously invested in groundbreaking modernizations and conversions, including a public indoor pool and tennis courts. The Scherz family formed a close bond to their new home county, making the Palace an important pacemaker for tourism in the Saanenland.

Five years after hard working Ernst Andrea Scherz took over the management of the hotel from his father in 1969, the share capital of the Palace AG was restructured. In view of Ernst Scherz's succession planning, voting shares were introduced to strengthen the family-owned character of the business. Ernst Andrea Scherz was made president of the alliance of The Leading Hotels of the World. Under his leadership the consortium of leading luxury hotels expanded to include numerous hotels around the world.

The efficaciously run family enterprise could serve as a case study straight out of the École Hôtelière de Lausanne or Harvard Business School (HBS). Many employees of the Palace have weathered ups and downs over the years, remained loyal to management despite some major changes and continue to contribute to the prosperity and growth of the hotel. Despite the fact that control is centralized and influenced largely by tradition, good management practices seem to be in place.

The tales the hotel's staff can tell are beyond fascinating. If walls could talk, the Palace walls sure would have some incredibly captivating anecdotes to tell. As with many other events in their life, the guests at the Palace often know no bounds when it comes to proposing. Special requests which for plebes are considered "out of this world", are for the Palace team "normal". Here the motto rules "anything goes"; the Palace makes dreams come true. One gentleman was determined to surprise his beloved during a Japanese style dinner for two. He had a clear plan in his mind: All that was required was to construct an exact replica of his girlfriend's favorite restaurant in the hotel's main hall. The Palace team immediately got in touch with the interior architect of said restaurant in Geneva. The architect came, set everything up and arranged the lighting. Meanwhile the kitchen team had hired one of the Genevan restaurant's Japanese chefs. The setting was perfect for a romantic one-to-one à la Japonaise.

Another charming story which occurred during the Winter Olympics in Albertville (1992 in Savoy, France). A guest from the US wanted à tout prix to stay in the Palace in Gstaad. For him it was the best place to be. However, the gentleman, who was somewhat short in stature, wished for an unimpeded view over the valley, the beautiful mountains and the village. Moreover, he wanted to enjoy the view while seated, without the railings getting in his way. He therefore

requested nothing less than the floor in his suite be raised by 60 centimeters.

When in doubt, ask the hotel's handymen, said the manager at the time. And, sure enough, they had a few pallets of exactly the right height. The temporary wooden floor was installed, and neatly covered with carpet. Thus the slightly raised suite was soon ready for the distinguished guest. But that was not all. The visitor asked for a transfer to the Olympic Games by helicopter, more precisely, by Superpuma. In the end the flying taxi spent one and a half hours circling in the sky without its passenger "" at a cost of 25,000 Swiss francs an hour. Why? The guest was late!

One of the regular guests only wanted the very best water for washing. Each day she ordered 20 to 25 liters of Evian mineral water, for brushing her teeth and washing her hair.

One winter, the dainty lapdog belonging to a noble Russian lady refused point blank to set a single paw outside the Palace. So why not simply line the shower tray of the penthouse suite with lawn turf? The hotel's handymen quickly procured a roll of turf. From then on the dog was able to do its "business" in the shower, on green grass and in style, while its mistress still had the bathtub.

Yes, you guessed it, the guest list of the Gstaad Palace reads like a who's who of the international jet set. It includes regulars such as the Hollywood stars Roger Moore, Michael Jackson, John Travolta, Julie Andrews, Audrey Hepburn, French presidents and the managing directors of globally operating firms. Amongst many movies, "The Return of the Pink Panther" [2], starring Peter Sellers was partly filmed at the Palace, "Christmas in Love" [2], "The Saint" [2] and "L'autre Versant de Gstaad" [2].

The professionally trained staff certainly adds a very elegant, personal touch to the daily operations. Concierge Andrea and Maitre'D Gildo, are staples of the establishment with employment longevity of over 49 years. They have seen it all, they have heard it all and nothing seems to shake them up; they continue to smile. As in all family run businesses, everybody seems to know everybody's business "" not a surprise.

Today the Gstaad Palace rests in the hands of the third generation of Scherz hoteliers with Andrea Scherz at the helm who joined the team in 2001. Under his capable management, in spite its opulence, the hotel maintained a cozy intimate, feeling- and as the song goes: "Where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came" [2]. Come in and soon you will be amongst friends; this is no ordinary hotel, it's the Palace!

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