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REACHING NEW PEAKS OF ECO-LUXURY

Exquisite Eco-Luxury at *The Alpina Gstaad*, Gstaad

“ *Gstaad has long been an enclave for mega-wealthy outdoorsy types. As Chere Di Boscio discovers, there's a lot more to the Swiss village than helicopter pads and Chanel ski boots.*

It all seemed a bit magical: within seconds of arriving to Gstaad, Switzerland's iconic eco-luxury ski resort by train, a chauffeur whisked us up a snow-powdered mountain to the glittering *The Alpina Gstaad*, where we were warmly greeted by a receptionist who showed us to our room within minutes. We found our luggage was already there waiting for us, laid out in the closet as though it had always been there. In fact, the check in was so seamless and friendly, it almost felt as though *we* had always been there.

But the fact that a glance around our room took my breath away assured me I'd never seen anything like this. Larger than most big London flats, it featured a very realistic gas fireplace, walk-in closet, enormous marble bathroom and a bookshelf packed with fat volumes of Taschen picture books. The best part of all was the 10 metre long picture window with a balcony overlooking the Alps, a hot outdoor pool and a distant, ancient glacier.

A Greener Gstaad

Gstaad has long been a favourite with high society: back in the day it was Elizabeth Taylor, Bardot, Jackie O and Valentino taking to the slopes; today you'll find some Agnellis and Rothschilds and European royals. But ultra high-end luxury and sustainability have never really gone hand in hand: private jets, helicopter transfers and an excess of everything are hardly ecologically friendly. Yet almost everything I loved about *The Alpina Gstaad* in Switzerland's iconic Gstaad ski resort had a green edge.

It started with the hotel's stunning interiors. Like every single structure surrounding it (some of which are hundreds of years old), *The Alpina Gstaad* follows traditional chalet architecture, but it goes a step further. Rather than using new timber for the resorts heavily wooded foundations, only locally reclaimed wood was used, resulting in a charming mishmash of beams sometimes punctuated with insect holes, farmer's brands and even a bit of carved graffiti. All the stone cladding on the resort's walls and fireplaces was also locally sourced (often also reclaimed), and most rooms are fitted out with Swiss antiques. Our mini bar, for example, was housed in a century-old wardrobe, complete with hand-painted countryside motifs.



The beds aren't comprised of just any old mattresses and blankets: these are Ecocert mattresses, free from any nasty chemical fire-retardants, and the blankets are beyond wool: they're pure cashmere. A felled stump serves as a side table to our wool-upholstered fire-front chairs, and the lush cream carpeting beneath them is pure wool too.

Beyond Fondue

As a vegan, I feared what the menu may hold in a country known for its cheese and chocolate, but I was delighted to see that Switzerland too has bought into the 'clean eating' movement. The 'Healthy Corner' at breakfast was a pure delight: freshly made organic juices to order; citrus tinged quinoa salad; plenty of fresh fruit and pure Alpine honey to smear on gluten-free or whole grain breads.

Dinners were even more of a treat: Marcus Lindner, the Michelin starred chef at the Summit restaurant, was happy not only to provide a 5 course vegan meal exploding with creative temptations (pumpkin ribbons with wasabi mousse; hummus with cucumber rolls and caramelized hazelnuts; tender asparagus with delicately jellied lemon slices to name but a few dishes), but also served a shot of custom-blended juices to refresh the palate between courses.

That was for me – my wine-loving husband was completely enchanted by the Alpina's expert Sommalier Pierrefranco Lavra, whose choices of wine to complement each course were not only masterfully selected, but his eloquent descriptions of each bottle verged on poetic.

Service with a Huge Smile

After having lived in Paris for a few years, I'd grown accustomed to hearing 'I'm sorry, it's impossible' to even the most basic requests ("Can you heat the soya milk up for this coffee? *Non, c'est impossible.* Can you made that salad without the cheese and ham? *Non, c'est impossible...*) But here, the immediate response to any request is 'Of course madam. Immediately'. But you almost don't even need to make requests: the staff here seem to intuitively know what you want, and will offer you what you didn't yet know you wanted: sleigh rides into town; skiing trips on the three surrounding mountains; ice skating excursions into Gstaad's centre; the screening of a film in a private cinema...there's certainly plenty to do here.

If outdoor activities aren't your thing, you needn't go far for a little culture at this resort; it houses a collection of modern art that would be the envy of any major collector. Pieces by Tracy Emin, Alex Katz, Roy Nachum, Pamela Stretton and many more major modern artists provide an edgy and subversive touch to the hotel. It's certainly worth wandering down every corridor to ensure you've taken in all there is to see – the collections change regularly to keep guests entertained.

Apres Ski Sanctuary

After a day of hitting the slopes, there are plenty of ways to unwind. *The Alpina Gstaad's* Six Senses Spa offers a range of unique Himalayan inspired treatments such as a relaxing Tibetan Singing Bowls ritual that uses the vibrations of gently tapped brass bowls on the body to realign the chakras and help balance energy. There's also a Tibetan massage targeted to the type of 'humour' that governs your body, be it phlegm, wind or bile: a short quiz is given to you by the resident wellness expert and Tibetan medicine master Antonis Sarris before the treatment to determine what 'type' you are. Crystal therapies, iridology, nutritional analysis and colonic cleansing are all on offer, as well as the usual mani/pedis, facials and massages.

The Himalayan theme continues with the magnificent salt cave, which is said to help with skin conditions such as psoriasis and eczema, as well as a range of respiratory ailments, including colds, asthma, allergies and bronchitis.

Sometimes called halotherapy chambers, the room is designed to provide a healing and unusual experience. The walls and ceilings are salt-coated, and grains are scattered a few inches deep on the floor. You don't feel any immediate change after spending the recommended 30 minutes a day here, but apparently the benefits will be experienced over time.

Of course, there's a wonderful, spacious hammam, ice shower, hot and cold baths and a huge indoor pool, but be sure not to miss the heated outdoor pool too. It may seem counterintuitive to dive into a swimming pool surrounded by snow-laden pines, but this one beckons with its steam heat rising into a gentle mist. The pool is heated to 33 degrees with energy recycled from the heat of the hotel's interior, and after swimming a few laps in this bath-like pool, the scramble to the changing room a few metres away is actually quite refreshing.

There's a lift that can whisk you in your robe directly from the spa directly upstairs, but that's for your convenience, not because the hotel is so stuffy that they'd be horrified by a pair of slippers crossing the lobby. Au contraire: unlike other leading hotels of the world, there's no defined dress code at *The Alpina Gstaad*. Managing Director Eric Favre insists this is a place where guests – be they royals, scions of business or groups of friends on a skiing holiday – can feel at home.

Absolutely no corners are cut here; materials are all the best (and often, the greenest) that money can buy. All staff are friendly and warm, not merely polite in that typically cool, corporate manner. Little personal touches abound – we were delighted to be given a small 'travel bag' complete with bottles of water, chocolates and Alpine treats when we reluctantly departed for the train station.

So in many ways, *The Alpina Gstaad* is just like home – just maybe a bit more magical.

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