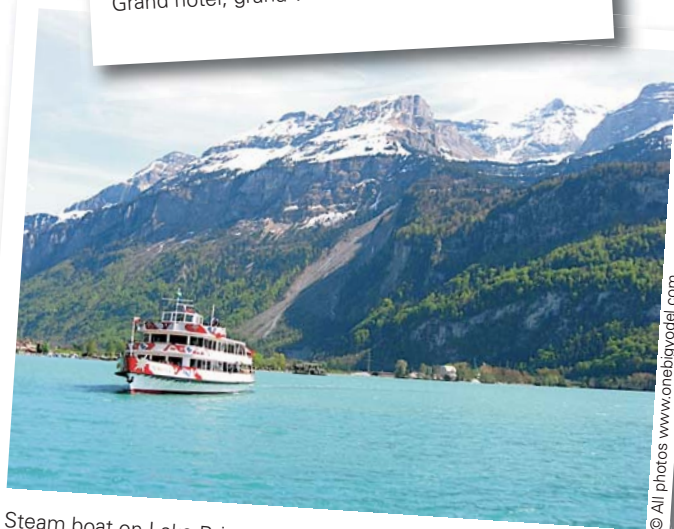


# A night at the Grand Hotel



Grand hotel, grand views



Steam boat on Lake Brienz

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Living the life of luxury

For some people, checking into one of Switzerland's exclusive palatial hotels, for a weekend of indulgence, is the perfect way to forget the cares of the world. For *Swiss News'* Chantal Panozzo, it's a recipe for a panic attack.

By Chantal Panozzo | "I don't know why you always reserve rooms like this," Brian said, when we arrived at our hotel in Paris. He pointed at the constantly blinking, florescent light in the tiny bathroom and to the toilet, which required your feet to be in the shower if you sat on it. But I just gleefully quoted the price, preferring to get my kicks from great deals, rather than great amenities. To me, a hotel was not a destination in itself, but a necessary evil that took up otherwise perfectly good vacation cash meant for better things, like museum entrance fees.

## Not one for the star treatment

Any kind of stars, hotel or Michelin, do not show up on my travel radar, since my main goal is to "see things". I am usually more than happy to eat a few kebabs and sleep in a lumpy bed; that way, I'm not distracted from the main attractions.

So, when a couple of spendthrift Swiss friends asked my husband and me to join them for a weekend at the Grand Hotel Giessbach in Brienz, it took me a while to accept. After all, there was the word "grand" involved and that gave me the creeps. Thirty-two years of budget hotels, economy airplane cabins, and second-class train travel made me sceptical that I could enjoy a weekend get-away that would cost the equivalent of a mortgage payment.

Despite my tightwad tendencies, I decided it was time to indulge anyway – not for me, but for my marriage. Because Brian was forever destined to travel with me, the world's biggest cheap-skate, I knew it would be a welcome change of pace for him to travel in the company of our Swiss friends, Peter and Fritz, who didn't live anything but the life of luxury.

## Room with a view

But when Peter reserved me a room with a lake and waterfall-view, I didn't know what to do. I didn't stay in rooms with views.

"Uh, isn't there anything else available?" I asked him.

"Yes, but this room is the best. Why would you want the forest-view room?" I could almost hear his nose wrinkle, even over the phone.

I didn't tell him that a view of a forest sounded kind of nice, after my last hotel stay, which involved a view of a brick wall and a dirty sock. Plus, the forest-view room was half the price of its waterfall equivalent, and SFr 250 seemed rather first-class anyhow – at least on my second-class terms. So Peter changed my reservation. Reluctantly.

“You can spend time in our room,” he said.

“Thanks,” I replied.

When we arrived in Brienz, we took a spotless Swiss steamboat across the turquoise lake, before continuing our journey on Europe’s oldest funicular. This carried us up the mountain, to the doors of the turn-of-the-century Grand Hotel Giessbach, which – perched on a mountain between a waterfall and a lake – looked every bit as luxurious and elegant as I had feared. It had turrets. It had columns. I had indigestion. I had a headache.

### Hedonism in Helvetia

Peter, however, was not allergic to luxury and plopped right down on the velvet settee in his lake- and waterfall-view room. He immediately picked up the phone and ordered a bottle of champagne. After he hung up, I stood around nervously going between his balcony and the sitting area, only relaxing when he said, “My treat”.

Then I pretended that I always waited around for the room service people to open my mid-afternoon SFr 120 bottle of champagne.

As I drank, the view of Lake Brienz, the Alps, and the waterfall became more and more beautiful. We spent the afternoon in Peter’s room, as he was afraid of us just going back to face our “forest”. Buzzed on the balcony, I waved to the masses down below: a group, to which I had happily belonged, only hours before.

That evening – after surviving our hike to the top of the waterfall and back, while dizzy on champagne – I let myself be convinced to eat in the hotel’s gourmet dining room, *Le Tapis Rouge*, despite my conscience telling me I should really be eating in the less elegant *Park Restaurant*, where I belonged.

### Forking out

A few bottles of wine later, not only did I not care about the cost of each dish, I also didn’t care which fork I used: The waiter was always kind enough to replace them, so I could better my chances of dining correctly with the next course. Key word, *next*.

I even got courses I hadn’t ordered.

“That’s a ‘hello’ from the kitchen,” said Peter, who is so experienced in the art of paying such high prices for meals, that he could actually accomplish what nobody else had managed in Switzerland before – getting something for free.

Six courses, three wines, and zero regret later, we paid a price that could have covered a visit to all the museums in Western Europe. The next morning, I woke up with guilt the size of my pending hotel bill. But then, Brian came out of the bathroom, praising the toilet, which didn’t force him to put his feet in the shower to use. He hugged me in appreciation of such an experience, while I eyed the shoeshine kit on a chair near the door. It was just waiting for me to take it home as a souvenir – along with the stationary set I had already stuffed in my backpack.

So, when Brian released me from his embrace, I walked over to pick up the shoeshine kit. I was wearing a pair of old canvas shoes; however, I felt a rush anyhow as I picked up the shoe polish, turning the container over in my hands, just thinking about the possibilities for future indulgence.



View of the Grand Hotel Giessbach from the waterfall



## All things Swiss

### Switzerland through the ages

**1870:** The Grand Hotel Giessbach, as it appears today with its distinctive turrets and Victorian balconies, is built by the Hauser family. The Giessbach Falls – a natural phenomenon occurring in 14 stages over 500 metres – had been attracting visitors and local artists to the Lake Brienz area as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century wore on, paths leading from the lake to the falls were constructed with benches installed at various lookout points. To capitalise on the falls’ popularity, the original Gasthaus Giessbach was built in 1832, with each subsequent owner tearing down the previous hotel to assemble a grander building, until today’s incarnation. The historic funicular – built in 1879 – continues to bring guests to the hotel to this day.

### Plan your own “grand” weekend

**Grand Hotel Giessbach:** [www.giessbach.ch](http://www.giessbach.ch)

**Ballenberg Museum:** One of the best open-air museums in Europe. Not far from the Grand Hotel Giessbach. [www.ballenberg.ch/en/welcome](http://www.ballenberg.ch/en/welcome)

**Lake Brienz:** [www.myswitzerland.com/en/interests/adventure\\_sports/swiss-waters/lake-brienz.html](http://www.myswitzerland.com/en/interests/adventure_sports/swiss-waters/lake-brienz.html)

### Expat encyclopaedia

**Bathroom freebies:** Things like little soaps, shampoos and lotions that I collect from other hotel stays to bring on my Swiss vacations, since very little in Switzerland is ever free.

**Great deal:** You know you’re Swiss when you think a dinner for two that’s under SFr 60 is a bargain.

**Heart attack:** What happens when you see your Swiss vacation bill.

**Hotels in Switzerland:** On par with Scandinavia, as the most expensive hotels in Europe.

**Relaxing:** Something an American has to be trained to do.