



Alpine Lodge

A dream come true a visit to Engelberg & Mt Titlis

I did not know how to react when I came to realize that I would be in Switzerland for 3 days. My elation knew no boundaries; is it really possible that I would be visiting the country I had only dreamed about? And would I bump into the Indian film stars who seem to be shooting there almost throughout the year? And would I meet Kareena sashaying in the grandeur of the Swiss Alps?

Choosing what I thought would be the best place in Switzerland to be in was quite easy – of course, go to where all the Indians went and stayed. I opened a detailed map of Switzerland and looked for this tiny mountain village of Engelberg that every body was raving about. Go there, they said, and find the real Switzerland!

I was tingling with excitement as the aircraft made a final approach into Zurich airport, with the Alps below in a shade of white, grey and black in the early hours of the day.

Even the touchdown seemed smoother than normal and in thirty minutes after arrival I was already at the airport railway station finding the best

connection to Engelberg which was via the popular city of Lucerne. My flight fatigue soon disappeared as the fresh air invigorated me all the way to my bones and in one hour I arrived to the station of Lucerne from where I changed my train to Engelberg. It seemed that the scenery I encountered on my first leg was only a prelude as soon the rolling hills turned into huge mountains as the little red mountain train snaked its way through the Engelberg valley and willed itself to climb the steep grade before whistling its arrival into the pristine village of Engelberg. It may be noted that this train was full of Indian families excitedly chatting away watched with great amusement by the few local Swiss who seemed to be quite content to be in the mountains in their hiking regalia.

The air was distinctly cooler and fresher, and as I was told later, Engelberg with its pedestrian zone and no through traffic was quite often was touted to be “a fresh air mountain village” and as I discovered its catch line was also “It’s heaven”. I looked around for the Terrace Hotel where I had

booked myself for one night. It was really easy to find, its large sign on top of the largest hotel in Central Switzerland was overlooking the village and a very short walk to the tunnel lift which took me up to the hotel. The lobby was grand and very typical of the way hotels were built over a hundred years back. The lady receptionist, Sandra, made an efficient check-in and offered me a nice room on the fourth floor with an amazing view of the village and Mt Titlis. Not wanting to waste any time I decided to explore this village on foot. My first stop was the Benedictine Monastery where I was just in time for a conducted tour in English. There were a total of six of us in this group and an old gentleman with impeccable English with a strong accent showed and explained to us how this monastery started and how the monks still inhabited it and kept in its glory. The last part of the tour which was in the church was truly amazing as nowhere in the world had I seen so many colours of stone and marble. I was told that it had just completed its refurbishment and indeed it was a marvel to see it in

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its entire splendor. The pipe organ is claimed to be the largest in all of Switzerland. I strongly do recommend a visit this monastery for all who visit Engelberg.

A quick lunch of a nice pepperoni pizza at the pizzeria in the pedestrian part of the village satiated my hunger and I was ready and raring to continue my walk. I stopped over at the Sporting Park and I was wondering why a tiny village with 1500 permanent

inhabitants should have such a large recreational area but when I stepped in I realized why. The Swiss do really take care of their bodies and health. There was a group of children playing ice-hockey under the watchful eyes of their coaches in an indoor rink & some elderly gentlemen playing a game of curling, a sport in which the Swiss excel. The indoor tennis courts were full and there were some people already warming up to have a go. Across the hall was a wall where very young students were being put through a course of rappelling and rock climbing. All I dared to do was play a game of air-hockey with a young teenager who was waiting for his friend who incidentally thrashed me, and until that point I thought I was a good player, seven games to two. I then took a bus to the waterfall at the end of the village and the starting point of the Furenalp excursion. On the way I passed a beautiful golf course and some rugged mountain scenery. Taking the suggestion of a local on the bus I decided to walk to what the locals called the End of the World, a valley surrounded on three sides by mountains. A small children's area called Robinson Park was full of young kids and their parents and grandparents enjoying some rafting on a pond and grilling some sausages. With the smell of the grilling sausages still in my

nostrils I continued to the end of the valley where I sat down in this lovely restaurant aptly named End of the World to have a, guess what, a sausage and an interesting local drink called Rivella which I learnt was made from milk. Understand that children in this part of the world grow up on this drink which actually looks like beer. On my walk back, my weariness did suggest that it had been a long day: yes – it had been too long since I had slept.

My expertise at power napping held me in good stead and soon I was recharged to enjoy some facilities offered by the hotel. As I passed by the lobby a group of Indians were checking in and it was indeed a nice touch seeing that a hot cup of our good old masala chai was being offered as a welcome drink. Needless to say, I managed to get one for myself and believe me, the taste immediately transferred me back home to Punjab.

The lift in the hotel was advertising an Indian meal in a restaurant called "Chandra" and the excellent response that my taste buds had to the masala chai pushed my mind towards deciding for it. The "Chandra" was an open balcony restaurant at the lobby level where I decided to have the table-buffet. I was hooked! The starters of kachoris were amazing, but the best was to follow, tandoori chicken and all. I could not help

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complementing the cooks and that is when I discovered that there were six of them based in the hotel catering to Indians for breakfast and dinner and making lunches for Indian groups on Mt Titlis. No wonder, the green fields of Punjab appeared in front of my eyes with every bite. The waitress informed me when I was savouring my gulab jamuns that the hotel even had an Indian disco. My inquisitiveness got the better of me and I walked into this disco called "Cave" where Indians of all ages were gyrating to the tune of the latest Indian songs. There was no way I could keep off the floor when a Bhangra was being played and when I finally left the floor did I imagine the applause that followed? Wow! That was a long day and off I went to the comfort of my hotel room.

It was probably one of the most comfortable sleeps I have had in my whole life. A breakfast supervised by a smart young lady called Ida made the perfect start to the day. And off I left, to the highlight of my trip – the summit of Mt Titlis. I had my small carry on with me as I had decided to spend the next night at the Alpine Lodge at Truebsee, halfway up the mountain. A short walk took me to the valley station from where I boarded a 6 seater gondola which would take me to the first change at Truebsee. A Swiss couple who were with me in that gondola explained to me the area a little bit and told me how they too felt invigorated every time they hiked in the area around the lake of Truebsee and up to a place called the Jochpass where they dared me to try a trip on the devils bike.

The hotel was only a couple of steps away – a quick check in and bag drop later I continued by ascent to the very top. The last stage of ascent of approximately 5 minutes was by a rotating cable car called the "Titlis Rotair" which incidentally is one of the most well known iconic tourist attractions of Switzerland in India and one of the main reasons I chose Engelberg and Mt Titlis as my first Swiss choice. The view was amazing right from the green fields of the starting point of the excursion to the glacier over which this cable car glides. I was told that on a good weather day the view would extend all the way to the Black Forest in Germany.



Rotair Snow Toy

Stepping out at exactly 10,000 feet above sea level was a thrill. Immediately I went to see the Glacier Cave in which there is a possibility for pre-booked groups to have an aperitif. The nostalgic rendition of the Indian National Anthem tingled me to the bone as it does to many an Indian visitor, I am sure. The 130 meter walk in sub-zero temperatures was indeed an experience and inside I fully realized the meaning to the explanation I received from the inter-active screens at the entry point of the grotto. The lift took me to the nostalgic photo studio where I hired a warm jacket and snow shoes and at very reasonable price. A little bit of research had told me that I need not carry all my warm clothes for the Titlis excursion as they could be hired on the top. Fully clad, I stepped onto the Titlis glacier. A bit unsure of how to handle the ice and snow, since it was my first

visit and also my first step on such a surface, let me say the step was a bit gingerly.

Let me say that my confidence grew with each step, and actually, walking on the ice and snow, felt like walking on the soft beach sand, only crunchier! And then after a hundred steps on the glacier I came onto the Ice-Flyer, an open chair lift which offered me the chance to be transported to the Glacier Park which I was eagerly awaiting. On the short journey of the Ice-Flyer I experienced a strange noise and at moment I realized that that was the sound of silence, something never felt or experienced before. That feeling was overcome by the squeals of delight of scores of people who were enjoying the Glacier Park an area prepared on the glacier with some fun equipment. All my trepidations disappeared when I saw young children, people in their



Terrace Aussen

seventies, ladies in saris hurtling downward on snow tubes at good speed, their yells reverberating across the snowy vista.

Joining the queue as excited as a school kid I asked for instructions from the supervisor, Christoph, who told me that it was as easy as taking candy from a baby and to just make sure that I held on to the handles on the side. The run took approximately 30 seconds, but those were sure bliss and I felt like Schumacher with very cold cheeks at the end of it. Getting back was also easy - a carpet on the snow. Just stand on it and you are pulled up back to the top, snow-tube and all. After a few snow tube runs, I tried my hand at the scooters, the balancers, the disks and then finally joined some teenagers on the snake gliss. Yippee! I was young again! As it was still skiing & snow boarding season up on the

glacier, the mountain was bespeckled with a lot of coloured ski outfits whizzing past at fantastic speeds. Dare I try? Wisely, thought so otherwise.

Back at the main cable car station I had some nice Swiss food, a tender steak and a potato dish, more like a local hash brown and was called "roesti" which was washed down by what was fast becoming my favourite Swiss drink, the rivella. I was told that the catering unit of Titlis has won an award for the best mountain food restaurant and I could see why.

Whilst returning my warm jacket and shoes, I got myself photographed in traditional Swiss clothes just as Celina Jaitley and Virender Sehwaag amongst others had done.

After a quick Ice-Café at the Movenpick ice-cream boutique I was ready to go to my hotel at Truebsee. When I went back to the hotel I realized

that the new refurbished restaurant made of stone and wood was the Mecca for Indian lunches for India groups. There were at least a hundred people having lunch in the 200 seater restaurant. The kind lady at the reception offered me some Gajjar-halwa from the buffet – truly scrumptious.

I was sure that the food was delectable too as the people waking out were all praising it and its authenticity. Kudos to the chefs once again. As there were still some bright hours left in the day, I decided to walk around the lake of Truebsee and enjoy the various flora and fauna on the flower trail. I noticed that various thrill seekers were coming down from the other side called Jochpass on big fat tire bikes called the devils bikes and I remembered by Swiss co-passengers on the gondola talking about them. Looked quite challenging! As a guest of the hotel I was offered a complimentary boat ride on the lake and I took the opportunity to do so. Serene waters and the awe inspiring beauty of the Titlis mountain took my breath away in an hour of solitude. By early evening there were only the hotel guests remaining as the last descent to Engelberg by cable car was done and dusted. To my surprise, a group of Indians checked in around 7 p.m. which was made possible by a special cable car run organized by the hotel. Sitting on the balcony I admired the sunset with a nice glass of rum and coke. Here truly I was amongst nature.

I was thinking of retiring to my room early, but the chance to see "3 Idiots" was too overwhelming and so I joined these 40 other Indians in a large television hall for a screening of the same.

It is now wonder that so many Indians come to Mt Titlis, what with the Terrace Hotel & The Alpine Lodge at Truebsee making it all that more special for them to stay in. I had a nice chat with a couple from Gujarat who were on their honeymoon and they too were amazed by the vegetarian food they got and they had already sworn that they would be back in Engelberg for their anniversary next year.

Me too! My next holiday with my family would be in dreamland – Engelberg with Mt Titlis! And like the honeymoon couple, I promised myself this.