

COMPASS: A New Cure for Wellness: Bürgenstock Welcomes the Waldhotel

At the foothills of the Swiss Alps, a Matteo Thun-designed medical spa is serving up a holistic approach to health.

By **Alicia Brunker** on January 31, 2018



Waldhotel

“Be prepared to escape to another planet,” one woman whispers to her friend on a traditional two-story boat navigating the calm waters of Lake Lucerne. In the distance, views of the Swiss Alps and nondescript villages replete with cows are visible, but as the boat continues to chug along, the cosmic paradise’s identity is revealed. Perching on a cliff more than 1,500 feet above sea level is the newly reopened Bürgenstock Resort, a former Hollywood hangout for actresses like Audrey Hepburn and Sophia Loren during its heyday in the Fifties.

The sprawling 148-acre resort's roots date back to 1873, when founders Franz Josef Bucher and Josef Durrer transformed the barren mountain top into an escape for visitors to take in the fresh alpine air and exercise along the boundless miles of hiking trails, interwoven between three Belle Epoque hotels. After World War II, vacationers flocked to the nearby sanatoriums for a more official form of medicine during the tuberculosis outbreaks that plagued Europe, giving the country its highly regarded reputation in wellness.

“Switzerland’s history is synonymous with nature,” says Bürgenstock’s current managing director, Bruno Schöpfer, who began revamping the resort after a Qatari sovereign wealth fund purchased the property in 2007. “Back in the day, when people came here for conventional medical care, it’s believed that the mountain air had healing powers.” With hopes to capture the landscape’s magic in modern-day, Schöpfer added a health respite to the resort’s \$560 million overhaul. From the structure’s sustainable architecture to its holistic treatments, Waldhotel Health & Medical Excellence, a spa-cum-medical center, is a champion of contemporary Swiss wellness in every regard.



A Waldhotel guest room.

After returning from a trip to Vigilius in Lana, Italy, Schöpfer wanted to bring the mountain resort's contemporary wooden facade to Bürgenstock, tapping the hotel's architect, Matteo Thun, to build a similar version for the Waldhotel. "People don't want to receive treatments in a historic building," explains Schöpfer about his decision to tear down the existing framework. "A sense of liveliness needed to be infused into the forest."

Thun, who grew up in South Tyrol, near the Alps, was more than willing to take on the project. As a child, he would hear stories about American actresses lounging around the kidney-shaped Hollywood pool and international political leaders gathering for the Bilderberg Conference on top of the mountain. "Everyone in Switzerland called it the Saint-Tropez of the mountains," Thun says. "I always thought there must be something special up on that hill."

Thun stripped away the mountain's mystery as he embarked on the low-impact construction of the wellness center, recycling limestone from the excavation site into Gabon baskets and using local larch wood for the center's lattice exterior. Inside, low-slung furnishings in cheery shades of orange, green and crimson atop silver quartzite stone floors create a soothing synthesis. The line between patient and hotel guest is blurred, thanks to a cognitive design decision to promote well-being through physical space. "The Latin word *hospes* translates to guest, so hospitality and hospitals aren't that different," Thun explains. "A sensitive interior enhances our vitality. A combination of natural materials and deliberate use of light and color favor the healing process."



Audrey Hepburn and her husband Mel Ferrer in Bürgenstock, Switzerland, 1961.
Olympia/AP/REX/Shutterstock

Tracking back to the early 20th century, Thun likens the Waldhotel to the fictional International Sanatorium Berghof, a luxurious tuberculosis sanatorium, where a young engineer Hans Castorp's three-week respite turns into seven years of walks in the woods and lavish rest cures, in Thomas Mann's "Magic Mountain." "It was very symbolic when designing the hotel," Thun explains. "Bürgenstock is a place of power and magic. Like the Berghof in Thomas Mann's novel, the Waldhotel offers a separate world to its guests."

The hotel's relationship to uncontaminated nature extends beyond its architecture. Whether guests are visiting for traditional health care, or opt for a customizable retreat, the team of multidisciplinary doctors takes an organic approach to treatment. Dr. Michael Brabetz, Waldhotel's medical director, begins every patient introduction with a physical examination, performing routine blood work, a urinalysis, lung function exam, and an abdominal ultrasound, as well as recording heart rate and biometry.

From there, he will recommend a package that fits your level of wellness along with an IV infusion of herbs from the terrace garden, or a prescription for plant-based teas and supplements in place of a Xanax; prescriptions can be filled at the in-house pharmacy. "Together, Thun and I defined specific herb mixtures for each pillar of wellness," says Brabetz, who is also a certified phytotherapist. "For example, a healthy metabolism requires a combination of anise, cumin and milk thistle." The spa experience itself is equally holistic, with treatments that address common health concerns, such as ear acupuncture for stress management, or cryotherapy to kickstart weight loss.



Sophia Loren in Switzerland, 1962. AP/REX/Shutterstock

Public spa spaces add an extra layer of upscale wellness. A salt grotto, stacked with bricks of pink Himalayan salt, promotes better breathing, while a Kneipp pool that's filled with lake water for hydrotherapy offers pain relief by stimulating blood circulation. And Verbena, the hotel's only restaurant, focuses on low-sodium Mediterranean dishes, including Quail Galantine with rosemary, pistachios and artichoke, which stimulates the liver's metabolism.

Though guests leave the Waldhotel feeling rejuvenated after a week or two, Thun anticipates some visitors may never want to leave. "Thomas Mann describes the sanatorium as a place of abduction in 'Magic Mountain,'" he warns. "It's truly a retreat."



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