



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARCO ARGUELLO

FLIGHT OF FREEDOM

Author **SIDDHARTH DHANVANT SHANGHVI** breaks free from pandemic shackles to soak up the sun in Switzerland.

IN THE BAGGAGE wheel at Geneva Airport, my suitcase dropped out of the carousel mouth, but by the time I'd walked over to it, it was gone. Like a magic trick gone awry, it vanished into thin air.

I arrived at my hotel, the majestic Beau Rivage Genève, on Lake Geneva, with only my carry-on. The building is like the ancestral home of an aristocratic family, discreet salons and dramatic corners, exquisite flooring, arches that lead into rooms with frescoes—a palace in the heart of Geneva. The Beau Rivage's wildly efficient concierge was tracking my missing suitcase—where had it gone? Arriving sans luggage in a foreign country, after months of village life in India, I was frazzled. But the view from my glorious, twin-level suite was calming: the green-blue lake, a manicured shorefront. Swathes of tourists were strolling, as if the pandemic were finished. I questioned my internal class bias: while crowds shopping in Mumbai's Dadar Market annoyed me, I felt relief right now.

Geneva high society is abuzz with the colourful tales of an Indian family quarrelling over a fortune of billions. I overheard this at lunch at Izumi, the Japanese restaurant at Four Seasons Hotel Des Bergues Geneva (fourseasons.com), where a man with what appeared to be his wives sat on the next table. The public row in the Indian family was about two women trying to claim a stake in a family

Beau Rivage Genève overlooks the shimmering water of Lake Geneva.

business controlled by men. All the women on my adjoining table appeared miserable, while the man, checking his phone, was tired and disinterested. Even at a laden table, patriarchy serves no one. The sashimi on my plate made me miss Mumbai's Wasabi by Morimoto. But I was out after months, and splurging. I was lucky to be alive, although the real, electric thrill was to be on Geneva's streets, or by the lake, where a swan tickled its long, sculpted neck. I was free, I thought, briefly, terrifically free. Compared to the Four Seasons, Beau Rivage had an old-world charm, a moon among lesser planets, and when I returned, my baggage had been located. A passenger had taken it thinking it to be his own; the hotel's concierge had done a heroic round of sleuthing to recover it. I was so happy to be at Beau Rivage even without my bag, but ecstatic to be reunited with it. I celebrated with lunch at La Terrasse helmed by Dominique Gauthier, with its perfect wine pairings and lake views.

Bea Dolder had the smart, spry quality of a medicine woman or a former ballerina. She was the gracious manager of Maison Bergdorf, a superb boutique hotel in Interlaken. I'd come to Interlaken years ago, as a student, when I had stood longingly outside the Victoria-Jungfrau Grand Hotel & Spa; this time I invited Dolder to the hotel for dinner. Having spent a decade in Mumbai, Dolder radiated familiar, warm knowledge of India—she missed the pani puri outside Santa Cruz Station, close to where she had lived. As we ate supper at Victoria-Jungfrau, Dolder told me about the understated luxury advocated by Maison Bergdorf founders, the writer Mirko Beetschen and design maestro Stéphane Houlmann; the hotel does not court the sort of client who desires a valet. Maison Bergdorf is a minor, private jewel in Interlaken, an art gallery crossed with an eccentric chalet, rooms overlooking the peaks. The art collection is bold, dazzling, and singular; some of Switzerland's best artists are on its walls. The rooms are warm and elegant, the sort of place to visit in the early days of a love affair. I'd met Beetschen and Houlmann at their home in Bern the previous night; the couple has a light, learned air, and the refined aesthetic of their gorgeous, love-inflected home spills over into the hotel. I wish Maison Bergdorf had a little restaurant—it does not presently, although breakfast served from a cane basket



feels a bit like a picnic, their spray-painted boiled eggs reminiscent of Damien Hirst's butterflies. Interlaken has a deep quietness, a matchless topography, a riverine path, but there's little to recommend for either culture or restaurants (the existing ones have a dismal air, joints that vibrate with carbs and cola). If Maison Bergdorf had a brasserie, one wouldn't have to leave, except to hike or sit by the river—privileges at any time, but especially during a pandemic.

I told Dolder that the second best pani puri—after her Santa Cruz station fave—was at Noumi, the fabulous restaurant at Bern's Hotel Bellevue Palace. Noumi's brilliant Chef Eric Henck could seduce Michelin inspectors with his scallops alone although the entire



Clockwise from above: Beau Rivage Genève has opulent rooms with antique-style furnishing; the view from an Airbnb home in Lauterbrunnen; the entrance to Kunstmuseum in Bern; La Terrasse is the perfect setting for a romantic dinner; the restaurant is helmed by Chef Dominique Gauthier.



menu is spellbinding. Hotel Bellevue Palace is helmed by Urs Buehrer, who is proof that to run a space this magisterial one needs a director who can guide a sprawling team while leading a guest with his infant child into the lift—a modesty and an emotional immersion hard to find, and harder to keep. Bern is a gateway to the Alps; it's a small, bustling town that's also Switzerland's political capital (anti-vaxxers were protesting on the main street one evening). The hotel is located in the main square, around which is a gallery of boutiques and cafes, central and lively. The view from my sumptuous suite was unmatched, the River Aar snaking down from the upper Rhine, a commons on which sunbathers revelled in summer light. The Kunstmuseum (kunstmuseumbern.ch)—one of many museums in Bern—is lit badly, but one can forgive this for the Rothko on show, or the later-life Picasso works.



The 360° Restaurant Piz Gloria in Schilthorn is located at an altitude of almost 3,000 metres and offers a view of over 200 mountain peaks.

▲ Clockwise from above: Maison Bergdorf in Interlaken is a chalet villa built in 1897, recently renovated and furnished; Hotel Bellevue Palace, located in the Old City of Bern, offers views of the Bernese Alps; Noumi Grill & Bar in Hotel Bellevue Palace is a hotspot for lunch and casual dinners.

I was heartened to see schoolchildren led by teachers through its modest rooms, their eyes agape with curiosity. While Bern is not anywhere as glamorous as Geneva or as worldly as Zurich, its compaction and sincerity is enchanting. Do visit the Einstein Museum (bhm.ch).

I was on the peak of Schilthorn—in the Bernese Alps where the James Bond film *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* was shot—when news came that Switzerland had changed its mandate on the Covishield vaccine. I would now be required to take a test every three days—to be able to check in to any resort or visit restaurants, museums, and many other indoor zones. (At the time of going to press, this mandate has been repealed by the Swiss government.) I decided to fly out the very next day to Paris, where my vaccine would suffice. Had it not been for the consoling, considerate company of Alan Ramsay, who heads the South Asia market for Schilthorn, I'd have been in a wild panic. Instead, after a hearty breakfast at the 360° Restaurant Piz Gloria (schilthorn.ch), we set up my flight. I rang the always



The observation deck in Interlaken.

gracious Devmaya Kalvani of Mumbai's Turbo Travels, who expertly engineered my travel plans from start to finish; she got me on a flight to France the following afternoon. As a swan song, Ramsay led me through the town of Mürren, with fairy-tale views of the peaks from Hotel Alpenruh, the best place to hang your hat in the area. On the cable car down, which gives you a feeling of being suspended in space, I felt sad to have to return.

I arrived at dusk in the village of Lauterbrunnen, feted for its necklace of waterfalls. The Airbnb I had rented—a warm, cosy chalet with extraordinary views of the falls—had a window to the sky. Airbnb's marvellous properties give you the distinct advantage of privacy. Want to avoid the crowds? Or cook your own supper? Pick one of the many glorious options. Hauling a blanket and a pillow from my bedroom, I lay on the carpet under the roof window, my last night in Switzerland spent under the stars, quite literally. ✦

GETTING THERE

Turkish Airlines (turkishairlines.com) has flights from Delhi to Geneva via Istanbul.

STAY

Beau Rivage Genève is a 19th-century grand dame hotel overlooking Lake Geneva. *Doubles from ₹42,871; beau-rivage.ch*

Maison Bergdorf is a boutique bed & breakfast with a quiet garden, located near the centre of Interlaken. *Doubles from ₹16,275; maisonbergdorf.ch*

Hotel Bellevue Palace, located in the heart of Bern, occupies an elegant Art Nouveau building. *Doubles from ₹38,585; bellevue-palace.ch* Switzerland is home to numerous **Airbnbs** that let you enjoy views of the Swiss Alps, lakes, rivers, and the countryside. airbnb.co.in