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In the Swiss Alps: From Heidi to Holmes

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From the pastures of Grindelwald to the precipitous Reichenbach Falls, Switzerland is not only a place of picture postcard beauty. It is also a country that nurtures its environment and imaginative stories.

Photos: Bina Agarwal



Idyllic: The village of Grindelwald

I almost did not go. It was a long-planned weekend in the Swiss Alps with two friends from Geneva, but I was nursing a fractured ankle and hobbling. No problem, said Gerry and Janine — we'll drive, take trains, and simply breathe the healing mountain air. So, on a bright June saturday, after a three-hour drive along green valleys, turquoise lakes and aqueducts, we reached Grindelwald village at the foot of the Eiger, where we would stay two nights. It was Heidi country — the grasslands similar to those near Zurich on which Johanna Spyri's young heroine had roamed with the goats over a century ago. These mountain pastures give the Alps their name, for, an alp is not (as often assumed) a peak — it is the grassy slope above the tree line where the cattle can graze unhindered. Switzerland has long regulated its pastures, with strictures on which animals can graze where — the lush lower slopes are for cattle, the higher, less-succulent grass for sheep, and the high peaks for goats. "The creamy milk for breakfast comes straight from the cow", our hotel owner told us proudly when I requested skimmed milk for my cereal.

Our hotel was a charming three-star, with 1940s furniture handcrafted by the owner's grandfather, but having modern conveniences — Internet, elevator, and an ingenious electronic key replacement system which confirmed Swiss mastery over engineering design. My room had a magnificent view of the snow-capped Eiger and chalet-style houses whose balconies, overhung with geraniums and petunias, were ablaze with colour. Warm pizzas in an

outdoor patio brought to a close a perfect start to our weekend.

Railroad high

Next day we decided to take the Jungfrau railway to the spectacular Jungfrauoch site at 3454 metres, the highest train station in Europe and now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Here you can enjoy the Aletsch glacier, the ice palace, short ski rides, a rotating restaurant, or simply the sparkling snow facing the Jungfrau mountain. Grindelwald train station at 8 a.m. was already crowded with Japanese and Indian tourists. The Japanese, in well-organised groups, poured into their reserved compartments in quiet discipline. The Indians came as young families, college students, or children treating parents to a holiday. For a Mumbai couple and their college freshman son, the Swiss Alps crowned their European holiday. India's middle class has indeed entered the global tourist circuit.

The train from Grindelwald took us midway to our destination. A second railway built over a century ago went up to Jungfrauoch. Within two hours we moved from summer heat to freezing point and emerged in winter coats (some even had snow caps and gloves). Jungfrauoch — a part of which (closed to tourists) is also a scientific research station — is designed by the railways to offer many exciting vistas. We began with the ice palace, carved from the glacier and reached through a long tunnel made entirely of ice. A metal railing helped me negotiate it, although the ice floor, surprisingly, was not slippery. The tunnel opened into large niches with ice sculptures — penguins, polar bears, Eskimos ...

Spectacular views



Reichenbach Falls.

Then back through mountain tunnels we headed for the glacier. We emerged from the dark, little prepared for the spectacular view from a wide platform of snow. In front, the Jungfrau rose steeply. Far below on our left was the flowing curve of the glacier. On the right stretched

valleys, partially snow-covered, across which a long line of adventurous tourists were trekking. It was a sparkling day, the snow bathed in brilliant sunlight, almost too bright to take. It was warm enough to shed our coats, explaining how our Bollywood heroines can comfortably dance in the snow in chiffon saris. These were camera moments.

Our next visit was to the slope where sleighs, toboggans and skis were available for short runs. Some visitors were veterans, others tottered unsteadily. At lunchtime we headed for “Bollywood” restaurant, serving Indian food. Finding it full, we chose a more conventional one, but with a panoramic view. Post-lunch, after a mandatory stop at the souvenir shop, we headed back to Grindelwald, to summer warmth and ice creams in an open air café. And the night brought the World Cup excitement, as Spain beat Germany, watched by billions on TV across the globe, including in this little Swiss village.

“What will the weather be like tomorrow?” I asked our hotel manager. “Definitely sunny, as in India”. “Have you been there”, I asked? “Close enough”, he said. “I went overland from Turkey to Sri Lanka. A long time ago of course.” “What took you there?” “Youth,” he said, “and adventure”. His weather forecast proved wrong, however. We awoke to rain and mist, feeling lucky we had had a sunny Sunday at Jungfrauoch, but sorry the dry spell had not lasted. We drove off, nevertheless, to the most exciting part of our trip — the Reichenbach Falls. Here, the world’s most famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, and his archenemy, Professor Moriarty, had their last, fatal encounter in *The Final Problem*, before Arthur Conan Doyle was persuaded by his fans to resurrect Holmes through a hair cliff escape. Luckily, the weather had cleared when, about an hour later, we reached Meiringen village from where Conan Doyle had first seen the waterfall and decided it was the perfect setting for Holmes’ final encounter. Even from a distance the falls were awe-inspiring, cascading 100m straight down the mountain. A small funicular train took us to a viewing platform, about halfway up the falls. From here, steps curved along the mountainside to a little bridge near the top of the falls.

Out of legends

Gerry ventured up while Janine and I enjoyed the more distant view. Even on the platform the spray was so heavy that my umbrella was drenched. It was indeed as Dr. Watson had described, “...a fearful place. The torrent, swollen by the melting snow, plunges into a tremendous abyss, from which the spray rolls up like the smoke from a burning house.” Across the chasm into which the water drops, the sheer cliff on the far side is marked with a large white star by the Sherlock Holmes Society. Here Holmes and Moriarty wrestled and the latter fell to his death. Although the rock face appears vertical, there is a path that can be reached from the village after a two-hour walk. The path ends in a cul-de-sac facing the falls, as Holmes discovered, forcing him to unavoidably face Moriarty. None can emerge alive from that terrifying drop.

To mark our visit, we signed the visitor’s book in a room on the platform, and enjoyed the photo display of Sidney Paget’s 1890s illustrations of Sherlock Holmes’ stories and their many TV dramatisations, including my favourite with Jeremy Brett. We then drove to the impressive Park Hotel du Sauvage (“Englischer Hof” in the story) in Meiringen village, where Holmes and Watson were depicted to have stayed. Next to it, the Sherlock Holmes museum recreates the 221b Baker street rooms, and in the park sits a Bronze statue of Holmes on which the sculptor, John Doubleday, has left clues to all sixty stories. None has found all the clues, but I

did spot a few, including one of the spinechilling *The Speckled Band*.

The Swiss Alps conjure up images of grandeur and postcard beauty. We savoured that of course, but not only. We also saw a Switzerland that protects its gifts of nature and history through its environmentally regulated pastures and imaginatively preserved stories. And we found both Heidi and Holmes as alive today as when their authors had created them.

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Quick facts

Travel: Geneva to Grindelwald village: Three hours by car, Four by train.

Stay: Many hotels. We stayed in Hotel-Restaurant Fiescherblick, Grindelwald.

To see: Jungfrauoch by train; Reichenbach Falls: 1 hour by car; chairlift to see the Bernese Oberland peaks; hiking.

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