



ISOLATED on a mountain side facing the famous peak of the Eiger in Switzerland is a hotel where, throughout history, many famous people have stayed. Byron, Tchaikovsky and Wagner to name but a few. They were certainly not winter sports enthusiasts and, to a large extent, skiing (as we know it today) had not even been invented. But sleeping today in the same beds as some of those famous people of yesteryear are the British — and they are certainly into skiing in a big way.

The Wengernalp Hotel, halfway between the famous village of Wengen and the ski area of the Kleine Scheidegg, was built long before the railway of the same name arrived. In fact when the railway reached the hotel's front door it took its name from the hotel!

The area is better known as the Jungfrau Region, famous throughout the world for its skiing. It was the British who made it famous and Sir Arnold Lunn (pioneer of downhill competition skiing) stayed at the Wengernalp hotel when he was 'discovering' the delightful villages of Wengen, Mürren and Grindelwald.

The hotel itself is a real Aladdin's Cave. Full of antique furniture, priceless paintings, and the original floorboards. Trees from the neighbouring mountainside were felled, split and laid, so one end is wide, the other end narrow and alongside is the next floorboard, its wide end opposite the tapered end of the board next to it. Wooden nails secure them to the huge beams but much of this traditional detail is missed by the British who are staying there, after all, for the skiing.

A rather 'primitive' hotel was first built on the site in 1756 and was a resting place for the people who climbed towards the base of the Eiger. In 1865, the building as it exists today came into being and stands, proudly, at its altitude of 6,000 ft.

It was not until nearly 30 years later that the Wengernalp Railway arrived, in itself a tremendous feat of railway engineering and pure genius on the part of Adolf Guyer-Zeller, its builder.

Every day from mid December until well into April many hundreds of British winter sports enthusiasts travel the railway. How many of them realise that it has the longest

rack-line of all Swiss mountain railways (19.1 km)? Trains run frequently from early in the morning until well into the evening and, designed to move many thousands of skiers of varying nationalities daily, the railway has more than adequate capacity with its 140 units of rolling stock.

Many British skiers stay in the picturesque village of Wengen, perched in a romantic setting, on the edge of the spectacular Lauterbrunnen Gorge. There are no roads, only the Wengernalp Railway, but the private company (of the same name) operating it has thought of this; a few years ago a multi-storey car park was constructed alongside the station at Lauterbrunnen where the Wengernalp Railway begins. Getting baggage and skis up to Wengen and beyond is not a problem as all trains have a 'baggage' truck. At the village of Wengen porters and electric trucks meet every train and take guests and their baggage to their hotels.

Higher up at the Wengernalp Hotel, the railway passes the 'front door' and it is just a short walk from the train into the reception lounge where a huge open log fire welcomes

you in from the cold.

The hotel is run by Mr. Kesper von Almen, his wife and grown-up children. It was Mr. von Almen's mother's family who originally owned the hotel but sold it to a peasants' co-operative in 1865 and it was re-acquired by the von Almens in 1958. It was an appropriate time because that year Queen Juliana stayed at the Wengernalp Hotel for a skiing holiday. As Mr. von Almen put it. "We are very discreet here. We love the British

who provide us with nearly as many guests as the Swiss and Germans."

There are many reasons for staying at the Wengernalp Hotel, not the least being its location to the ski slopes; you can ski from the front door down to the village of Wengen 2,000 ft below. The famous Lauberhorn course passes directly behind the hotel and each January famous skiers from around the world take part in the Lauberhorn Downhill.



From the hotel you can ski to the Wixi chair lift and travel up to the Lauberhorn itself, or to the Eggblatz which is another chair lift towards Eigergletcher. Again from outside the front door you can take the train for a ten-minute journey to Kleine Scheidegg from where lifts take you to the top of the Lauberhorn. You may, of course, wish to ski down the other side of Kleine Scheidegg towards Grindelwald where there are chair lifts such as the Arven, Gummi or Lager; T-bars like Honegg, Tschuggen, Salzegg, Aspen, or the gondelbahn from Grund to Mannlichen. In fact there are so many lifts opening up slopes for different grades of skiers in the Jungfrau region that a skier will never get bored. A Wengen Railway Ski Pass which covers everything that moves (railways, cable cars, gondelbahn, chair lifts, T-bars, etc.) will only cost 164 SF (£54).

Back at the Wengernalp Hotel, Mr. von Almen and his delightful family get ready to meet more guests, many of whom will be British. He has 40 beds and familiar faces return year after year after year. Throughout the season prices remain the same; 120/230 Swiss Francs, half pension per night, with children up to the age of six who share their parents' room staying free.

Strangely enough, the von Almens are not there to make money. He has a staff of 26 to look after the guests. The hotel requires two oil tanks holding 16,000 litres. The special pipe lines for water and to remove polluted waste cost the von Almens 430,000 SF a year! (£143,000). They just like to share their 'Aladdin's Cave' with everyone. And, of course, even if you are staying elsewhere, such as in the village of Wengen, the hotel has an 'open door'.

Lunches are famous. Rosti at the Wengernalp cannot be equalled anywhere else in Switzerland. There are three rooms for lunches and hundreds of skiers take advantage of the huge open log fires, the warm welcome and the famous cuisine every day. In fact it's difficult to get a seat some days. Residents who have their meals in the dining room must take off their ski boots — it would be sacrilege to damage the polished original wooden floor with something as modern as a ski boot!

The hotel is only open during the skiing season. In the spring when the farmers move their cows up to the higher grazing pastures after the long winter, the von Almens move down to their restaurant at the famous Trummelbach Falls; spectacular but exceedingly dangerous for the unwary (the Falls that is — not the restaurant).

Skiing in the Jungfrau region is paradise. Staying in the Wengernalp Hotel is an experience not to be missed.

It seems to me that Byron, Tchaikovsky, Wagner and Queen Juliana knew what they were doing — and so do the Brits who go there!