

GOURMET

AUSTRALIAN

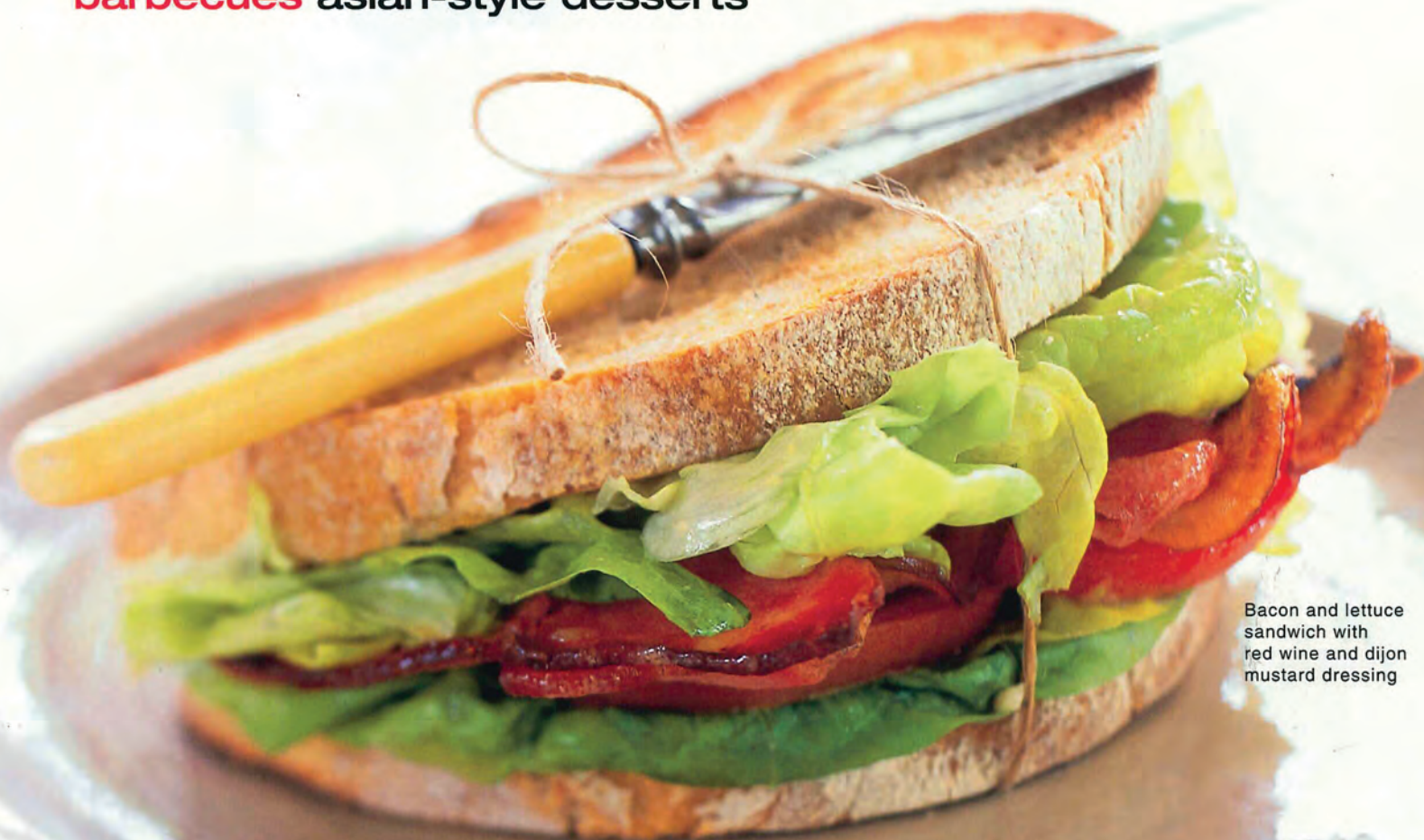
TRAVELLER

JANUARY 2002

holiday eating

twilight supper **lettuce** water ices

barbecues asian-style desserts



Bacon and lettuce sandwich with red wine and dijon mustard dressing

\$6.95
(inc GST)
NZ \$8.25
UK £3.20

ACP



two villages in provence **diane seed's naples**

worlds apart extraordinary places to stay

Below, crystalline alpine scene. Facing page, sunlight illuminates the Eiger's north face



GLACIAL GOOD LOOKS, AN ARISTOCRATIC PEDIGREE AND THE EIGER.
WHERE ELSE BUT HOTEL JUNGFRAU WENGERALP – ALWAYS ON PEAK FORM

HIGH AND MIGHTY

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL PAUL

THE LITTLE MOUNTAIN TRAIN blew its whistle to clear the track ahead. It was snowing hard outside in the silent woods, the boughs of fir trees white and burdened almost to breaking point. "Wengernalp, das ist Wengernalp!" cried the conductor as the train came to a shuddering halt halfway up the mountain.

Grabbing bags, skis and cameras, I clattered from the carriage to find myself on the platform of a tiny station straight out of a toy train set. Suddenly, the evening sun burst through the lifting clouds. Towering behind them was the Eiger – its north face rearing skywards like some massive gothic monument. In the background jutted the lofty peaks of the Jungfrau and the Mönch. I stared in silence, humbled by the sheer scale and majesty of these legendary mountains. "Are these your bags, sir?" The porter from the Hotel Jungfrau Wengernalp snapped me out of my reverie. He was loading the luggage onto a sledge. It was then that I noticed the wooden hotel situated a little way up the slope. Besides the station, it was the only other building in sight.

With only 22 bedrooms, this snug hideaway is a grand but intimate mountain inn with a history to match the spectacular alpine scenery. Hotel Jungfrau Wengernalp is run by Urs von Almen, youngest son of the von Almen family, which has owned the hotel since 1908. His warm yet efficient style ensures a charming, personal touch – family traditions are kept alive, but not with the stiffness so often a part of Swiss establishments. As I overheard one visitor remark, it's more like staying at the von Almens' home than a hotel – which is exactly what you want after a hard day out on the slopes.

The history of Hotel Jungfrau Wengernalp makes great reading. It started life as a simple mountain restaurant in 1837, but after a fire was rebuilt as a hotel in 1841. By the late 19th century, the awakening interest in the Alps was turning Wengernalp and its environs into a fashionable destination for a slew of adventurous European aristocrats, many of whom made Hotel Jungfrau their base. In those days, getting there meant an arduous trip – usually by mule – but despite these rigours, Wengernalp soon became a magnet for the rich and famous.

Tchaikovsky sought stimulus here, as did Richard Wagner. The names of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels also appear in the guest book. And Lord Byron, a regular visitor, was so inspired by the sight of avalanches across the valley that he wrote his dramatic poem, *Manfred*, here. He described the Jungfrau's summit, seen from his hotel room, as "Frozen in a moment – a dead whirlpool's image." But perhaps the most succinct summation came from the climbing pioneer Sir Leslie Stephen, who, in his 1862 classic, *The Playground of Europe*, described Wengernalp as the loveliest place in the world.

The opening of the Wengernalp cog wheel railway in 1893 brought significant change in that it made the

region considerably more accessible – and even more so after the famous Jungfrau Railway opened in 1912 – as the enthusiasm for winter sports, particularly among the English, started to spread.

Today, the hotel's location remains unparalleled for skiers. Simply strap on your skis outside the front door and you're off, with a cleverly planned lift system offering hundreds of kilometres of some of the most exciting slopes to be skied anywhere in Europe.

It's also easy to chill out here. Saunas and roaring log fires await tired skiers returning from an energetic day on the piste. And after all that exertion, you don't feel bad about treating yourself to an indulgent cup of thick hot chocolate and a slice of homemade pear tart. In the evening, having climbed the stairs to your room after a post-dinner schnapps or two by the crackling fire, it's sheer rapture to sink into a sumptuous antique wooden bed made up with snowy linen.

The food at Hotel Jungfrau Wengernalp is a tribute to the skills of Swedish chef Michael Wermelin. For the winter sports bon vivant, hearty mountain fare abounds. Alptopf soup (leek and potato topped with croutons and sprinkled cheese), followed by *St Galler Balleron mit Kartoffelstock* (large slices of sausage on a bed of mashed potato and fried onion) is just what you want if it's snowing hard outside. And when the sun shines, lunch on the terrace is one of the unique experiences of the Swiss Alps. There's something deliciously decadent about gazing at the panorama of peaks and glaciers that inspired Lord Byron, while sipping an ice-cold glass of Champagne chilled in the snow.

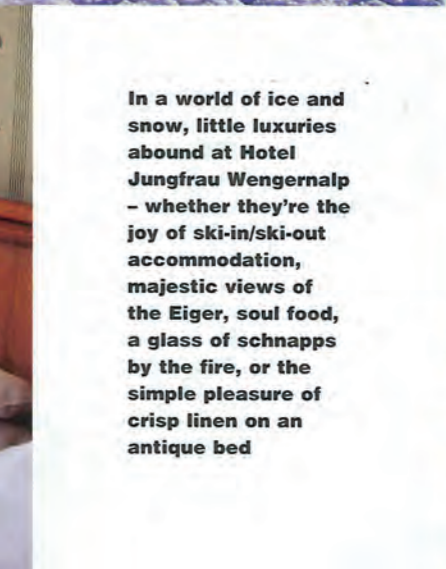
In the evening, the set menu is an enticing mix of modern European, with the emphasis on wholesome, fresh ingredients and organic food – no mean feat for a hotel halfway up a mountain. The food is neither overworked nor over-sauced. At breakfast, you'll find the homemade jams addictive, especially the confit of plums which, often as not, are picked from the owners' orchards. Fragrant chamomile tea made from flowers grown on the hotel's alpine meadows is an unexpected treat, while the more usual range of freshly baked cakes, strudels and tarts nearly always proves too good to resist. The owners also take pride in offering an unrivalled selection of fine Swiss and French cheeses, served after dinner. It's their way of rounding off a thoroughly warming alpine experience. ☺



TRAVELLER'S CHECK

Hotel Jungfrau Wengernalp,
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Orientation: Wengernalp is a 15-minute train journey from Wengen, in the Jungfrau region of central Switzerland, 190km from Zurich. The trip from Zurich takes two-and-a-half hours by car, three-and-a-half hours by train.



In a world of ice and snow, little luxuries abound at Hotel Jungfrau Wengernalp – whether they're the joy of ski-in/ski-out accommodation, majestic views of the Eiger, soul food, a glass of schnapps by the fire, or the simple pleasure of crisp linen on an antique bed