



This program is like a postcard home. It's my contribution to reality television --- somewhere between "Survivor" and "Animal Planet". In theory postcards were designed for someone on vacation to tell their friends and family who were not on their vacation, what they were doing.

At full strength, my immediate family consists of me, my wife, four sons, the wives of my three older sons and five grandchildren. Going out to eat requires a table for fourteen. When I was in the army we could move an entire battalion with less confusion.

However, we also offer a mini version that is made up of me, my wife Natalia and my youngest son Nicholas and that's the team for this program.

I should also address the idea of "vacation". Each year, I spend four months hosting European river cruises to help raise funds for public television. The idea is to take a group of viewers on a trip that is based on one of my programs. We visit the same sites, hangout in the same pubs. And travel the same route that made up one of my programs.

But when one cruise ends there is usually a week or two before the next one starts. And during that time, we try to take a break. I call it a vacation, my wife calls it work with a superior benefits program. And Nicholas wants to know. "Are we there yet?"

## PRAGUE

This time, our first break was in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. Prague is one of Europe's most beautiful cities. It was



originally founded on the banks of a river where an east-west trade route crossed a north-south trade route. Many of the great cities of Europe started as settlements on the banks of a river where two trade routes crossed.

Prague has been a cultural center for over a 1,000 years with a rich heritage in art, architecture and especially music.

Mozart was living in Prague when he wrote his *Prague Symphony*. And it was in Prague that Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* was first performed. Prague was also home to the great Czech composer Antonín Dvořák.

In one way or another, music has always been part of every life. It is a central element in religious rituals. In dance. In theater. In radio, film, and television. And much of music's power comes from its ability to influence mood. The ancient Greeks thought that a person's character was clearly reflected in their choice of music.

A few years ago, I heard about a hotel in Prague that was based on music. When I read that it had received TripAdvisor's award as one of the best Luxury Hotels in Europe, I decided to give it a try.



It's called the ARIA and the musical theme runs throughout the hotel. You see it the moment you enter the lobby. The mural behind the reception desk is made up of caricatures of famous musicians.

There are 52 rooms spread out on four floors with each floor dedicated to a specific type of music. The jazz floor. The opera floor. The classic floor. And the contemporary floor.

They also have one of the best outdoor restaurants in the city. It's called the CODA which is a musical reference to something that is added at the end of a piece of music and gives the audience a chance to "look back" on the main body of the work. A coda allows listeners to "take it all in", and "create a sense of balance." The idea of taking it all in is clearly illustrated by the views from the restaurant. The balance is in the food.

When you check into the hotel they give you an iPod for use during your stay. There's a music and video library with over 3,000 DVDs and CDs which you can borrow, and a private screening room.

The guests also have private access to the Vrtbovska Garden. It dates back to the 19th century and is listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. And in cooperation with the hotel, the garden can be used for weddings.

## ST. MORITZ

From Prague we flew to Zurich in Switzerland, rented a car and headed off to St. Moritz in the Graubunden.



The Swiss call their states "cantons," and Graubunden is the largest. It's located in the southeast corner of the country, and includes many of the most famous mountain passes connecting central Europe to Italy. These were the trade routes that controlled commerce for thousands of years. Mountain passes may no longer be the keys to Europe's commerce, but they are still at the center of Graubunden culture, and very important to tourists.

Many people think of St. Moritz as the ultimate winter resort for the rich and famous. And that's probably true. It was built on the south side of an Alpine mountain and it gets 322 days of sun each year. As a matter of fact, it's the sunniest city in Switzerland.

Its fame as a resort goes back for over a thousand years. During the middle ages, people came here to sit in the healing waters of the mineral springs. And in 1519, Pope Leo X offered complete absolution to anybody who came to the spa in St. Moritz. An early example of cleanliness is next to godliness.

During the middle of the 1800s, the English upper class decided that it was time to return to nature and St. Moritz was the spot. They rode mules into the forests. They took tea on the porch. They rowed boats on the lake. They played golf.

But Johannes Badrutt, the man who owned the Kulm Hotel thought that his guests were missing half the fun by not being there during the winter. So he made a bet with one of his English visitors. He invited them for the winter season, and promised to cover all their costs if they didn't love it. They loved it and St. Moritz has never been the same.



Guests would ride through the village on a sledge. Early bobsled teams showed up. People began skiing. Some people on skis got towed around by horses. Ice hockey teams were formed. Curling was introduced.

Curling goes back at least to the 1500s, when the Dutch and Germans played a similar game. On the surface it appears rather simple.

Before the game begins, a pebbler sprinkles water on the ice, which freezes and produces a fine layer of pebbles for the stone to ride on. The stone is made from a round, flat slab of polished granite that weighs 42 to 44 pounds, and there's a handle on top. Not really my sport, but I keep trying.

Each winter, St. Moritz becomes the social center for the most important people in Europe. Years ago the local newspaper listed who was in town for the winter season. In 1914 the list included the Grand Duke of Russia, Princess Stephanie of Belgium, Prince (formally known as Prince) of Hungary, and, most surprising lots of Americans.

And all this got started and took place in and around the The Kulm Hotel. The Kulm was actually the first real hotel in St. Moritz. And Johannes Badrutt became the father of winter tourism in Switzerland.

His hotel is still here and more interesting than ever. Kulm is a Swiss German word that is used to describe the highest point of a mountain – its peak.

The hotel has a number of unusual architectural features. Many of the walls in the public areas are covered with sheets of raw silk that have been hand stamped with a pattern. This was a popular decorative element during the 1800s, but



virtually disappeared when printed wall papers arrived.

Most of the public rooms and many of the guest rooms are filled with inlaid wood work an extraordinarily complicated technique where each piece of wood must be cut, finished and placed into the pattern.

Hans Nussbaumer is the head chef and oversees the hotels three restaurants. The Grand Restaurant is serious about its international gourmet menu. It has a six-course menu with two selections in each course and a second menu that is all vegetarian. This is the biggest room in St. Moritz and the first public room in Switzerland to have electric lights. The lights were first turned on to celebrate Christmas on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December 1878.

The Al Par is about 200 yards down the road and specializes in traditional Swiss dishes.

The nearby pizzeria is described as a traditional trattoria-style Italian restaurant. But the cooking is closer to what you would find in a top-notch Italian restaurant in the U.S. The interior decoration is mountain Swiss.

The hotel has a giant heated swimming pool that looks out on the mountains. And of course, a classic Swiss wellness and beauty spa. I did quite well in the wellness program, but they told me I'd have to come back next year for a remedial class in beauty.

#### **PONTRESINA**

Next we drove over to the Swiss town of Pontresina. In 1848 Andreas Gredig purchased a small guest house in Pontresina for his son Lawrence. Nice parental gesture.



Lawrence renovated the building and called it Guest House sur Krone. Krone means Crown. And the crown in this family was worn by Lawrence's wife Anna. Also known as The Decider. Then he opened up a wine shop in the cellar. The wine cellar is still there, primarily because the old barrels are considered valuable antiques. And nobody can figure out how to move them without first taking down the hotel. In fact, many of the original buildings have been preserved.

They've even preserved the cast iron staircase from the 1800's. Cast iron was a major breakthrough in building materials. It was very thin, but it would support a great deal of weight. The result was a much more open area with lots of light. The old wooden skating pavilion with its sun terrace was built in 1933 and is considered to be a classic example of the Swiss architecture of the period. Today's it's an excellent informal restaurant.

In many European cities you will see windows that jut out into the street. The idea was to give the inhabitants a better view of the street, so you could see if trouble was coming your way.



But this one was used to see if money was coming. Grandma would sit in the window and look out as the guests arrived and if they were well dressed and had expensive luggage she would yell down and the desk staff would give them the best room at the highest price.

During the late 1800's this part of Switzerland, the Upper Engadine, became a playground for the rich and

famous. In 1928 and again in 1948, Pontresina and the nearby town of St. Moritz hosted the Winter Olympics. And the area became even more famous.

Today the hotel is an interesting mixture of old and new. The owners have preserved and renovated the old billiard room. They have a small bowling alley where you can learn to play a form of local bowling. You use as many balls as you need to knock down all the pins. And the one who uses the fewest balls wins. There's a reading room, a card room, a bar with a turn of the century feeling – that's 1899 to 1900.

The main dining room still has its original decoration which is in a style called NeoBaroque. You may recall that the model of the original Baroque architects was flaunt it while you've got it. And they tried to express that idea throughout their designs.

The guest rooms have lots of wood. Which gives you the feeling that you are in a classic Swiss mountain cottage. But then there's a modern approach to many other things. Up-to-date bathrooms. And one of Switzerland's great spas.

The area began as a summer resort primarily for the English upper class. And it still maintains much of that atmosphere. In the early 1900's they added a series of winter events that has given it a world wide reputation as a winter resort.

#### **AROSA**

Having just spent two weeks in the land of the wealthy and the well known, I thought it might be interesting to see where the Swiss go. Which is why we headed to Arosa.



Arosa is a small town deep in the Swiss Alps. It's located in one of the most beautiful valleys in Switzerland. Green meadows, crystal clear alpine lakes, and bubbling mountain streams. Everything the Swiss tourist office could have hoped for.

It's well known as a great spot for a summer vacation or a winter holiday or a few days at a top of the line spa. But to a great extent it's only known among the Swiss. During the last 150 years most of the idyllic holiday locations in Switzerland were discovered by travelers from other countries. The first to arrive were the English who showed up during the middle of the 1800's. They were followed by the Americans and the Germans and the Italians and the Russians. If you had the time and the money the top resorts

in Switzerland were the places to go.

During the second half of the 1800's when the nearby town of St. Moritz was being invaded by the English upper class, Arosa was on the verge of disappearing. It was a mountain farm community faced with a difficult environment. But if you gave up your spade for a spa, things got better. During the 1920's Arosa was transformed into a mountain spa resort and the Swiss discovered a magnificently beautiful spot. Almost unknown to the international traveler.

And because most of the best stuff was put there by Mother Nature it got there for free. And because in general the Swiss are interested in value, the town has added an assortment of additional free things. You can ride the buses all over town and it's free. You can climb around the high wire park and it's free. You can take the cable cars to the top of the nearby mountains and it's free. And so are about 15 other attractions.

The town maintains a network of over 125 miles of hiking trails that go from "I think I'll take a short walk and stop for an espresso" to "Clint Eastwood in the Eiger Sanction." And just incase you're not as energetic as you thought, the town has placed a series of benches along many of the routes. Thoughtful gesture.

We also paid a visit to a church that was built in 1492. At the same time that Columbus was setting sale for the Americas. It was used as a Catholic Church until the reformation passed through the neighborhood, at which point it became the location for the town meetings organized by the newly reformed community.

Arosa is very interested in maintaining its quiet atmosphere. Accordingly the town does not allow any automobile traffic between midnight and six am.

They also want you to keep your speed down when you travel through town. And they have an unusual sign to express their opinion. Radar picks up your speed and displays it. If you are under the speed limit you get an electric smile. And if you're going too fast you get a frown. And every September the town hosts the Arosa International Classic Car Race, which has been described as Monte Carlo in the mountains.



While we were in Arosa we stayed at the Arosa Kulm Hotel. Originally it opened in 1882 and it was a big deal because it had electric lights, a telephone, and a porter than came down the hill to the stage coach station to help



guests with their luggage. In 1920 the hotel was bought by Beat Stoffel who had made a small fortune in the

textile business and wanted to do something different. He upgraded the facilities and bought up all the land around the hotel so nothing would interfere with the views or immediate access to the ski lifts.

Today the Arosa Kulm is listed as one of the deluxe hotels of Switzerland. It has a grand entrance area, an elegant bar, and many wonderful restaurants. In the spa, holistic attempts are made at restoring one's youth. The pool water temperature is 30 degrees centigrade, nice and warm. There is a children's area, play room, and the kids even have their own swimming pool. And every where you look there are great views.

**TO LEARN MORE . . .**

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