



Grandhotel Giessbach

**a journey
into the past...**

THE GIESSBACH FALLS AND THE GRANDHOTEL

We owe the "discovery" of the Giessbach to a number of painters who are today included in the group of Swiss Kleinmeister ("Little Masters"), such as Zehender, Rieter, König and others (see three collections in the "Kunstverlag Brienz" art museum). The fact that the visitors who came in the 19th century as part of the blossoming tourist trade could get to the famous waterfalls at all, and later do so with relative ease, is down to the efforts of two men from Brienz: the priest Daniel Wyss and the school master Johann Kehrli (1774-1854). Kehrli single-handedly created a footpath from the shore of the lake up to the second lowest waterfall and built a bench there, whilst Wyss opened up the way to the higher falls and in poetic style named the 14 cascades after worthy Bernese heroes.

The next structural developments were the work of Kehrli: the bench was followed by a simple shelter (1822), then by a small restaurant and finally by an inn: the "Gasthaus Giessbach" (1832). Kehrli entertained his guests on the alphorn and with Lieder and other songs, which his children would perform (cf "Elisabetha, die schöne Schifferin vom Brienersee" - Elisabeth, the Beautiful Boatwoman of Lake Brienz - by F.A. Volmar, published by the "Kulturelle Vereinigung Brienz"). From 1840 onwards the falls were bathed in a fiery light when the weather was good - Kehrli illuminated the individual levels with simple wooden torches, known as "wedelen". Later Johann Rudolf Hamberger improved the illuminations with the use of flares (he was the founder of the pyrotechnics factory in Oberried).

In 1855 the Giessbach estate changed hands. Konrad Gerhard von Rappard purchased the hotel and the forest from Kehrli's children for 70,000 Swiss francs. Together with his brother Hermann, Rappard replaced the old inn, building a hotel with 60 beds. They installed the Stuttgart landscape gardener Schmiedlin to manage it, and it was he who created the gardens.

In 1858 the hotel and land were sold for 300,000 francs to the steamboat company belonging to the Knechthofer family. Schmiedlin remained as manager, expanded the hotel to 175 beds and had a chalet built for his own use.

In 1870 the Giessbach estate was taken over by the well-known hoteliers, the Hauser family. The price of 900.000 francs was considered by most to be excessive. The purchase by Karl Hauser marked the beginning of a particularly eventful period in the history of the Giessbach. Hauser commissioned Horace Edouard Davinet, the most renowned hotel builder of the time, to design a new building. A palace hotel was planned. After two years of building work it opened its doors in 1875, five storeys high, with domed towers "à la Louvre" and a sweeping flight of stairs leading up to it. For passers-by there was the "Sommerwirtschaft" (Summer Restaurant); in 1879 the funicular railway was added. The hotel's clientele was made up of royalty from Russia, India, Africa and Europe, business tycoons, captains of industry and the landed gentry of Poland, Hungary and the Balkans.

In 1883 the upper floors of the grand building were destroyed in a major fire. Almost in no time the hotel was rebuilt, again under Davinet's watchful eye, this time the Louvre style being replaced by the "Swiss chalet look" - with pointed towers and a newly designed roof. The new Giessbach Grandhotel had everything its pampered

guests could wish for: modern lighting, water closets, bathing cabinets, pavilions, playgrounds, a covered walkway to the old hotel, three concerts a day, rowing boats, fishing tackle, tennis and croquet for the sports fans, even a dark room for photographers, a Flobert room for amateur shooting enthusiasts, and so on.

A third, smaller hotel to accommodate the servants of the high-ranking guests was built up on what today is the forest car park: the "Beau Site" with 16 rooms and its own skittle alley. In 1885 a hydrotherapy unit was set up on the ground floor of the back hotel, providing carbon dioxide, peat and hydro-electric bath treatments, not to mention massage, gymnastics and special diets, in particular those featuring "fresh milk and whey straight from the alpine dairy, and excellent spring water".

A short time before the First World War Hauser sold the entire Giessbach property. Afterwards there followed several changes of owner, and the years during and after the war were a time of hardship and suffering when the hotel went into decline and the "Beau Site" was demolished. Things did not improve in the Second World War.

Finally, in 1947, a new saviour emerged for the Giessbach in the shape of Fritz Frey-Fürst, owner of the Bürgenstock hotel, who forked out 190,000 francs for it and reopened it, completely renovated, in 1949. The property became even more prestigious when the governing council of the canton of Bern placed a conservation order on the Giessbach area. Frey-Fürst died in 1953. His son Fritz and his brother Erwin Frey took over the hotel, running it as a general partnership – a Kollektivgesellschaft, under Swiss law. The existing generating station on the shore of the lake was now renewed, allowing the supply of electricity to the buildings to proceed apace. Other features were also renovated and modernised (the roof, façade, indoor areas, new Chalet, etc), but others were unfortunately destroyed in the process.

In 1978 the existence of the "Dream Castle on Lake Brienz" once again came under threat, when the owner planned to demolish it and replace it with a new "jumbo chalet" style building. On 24 February 1979 a working group got together, spearheaded by Rudolf von Fischer, the former president of Bern council, and consisting of friends of the hotel and experts who set themselves the task of rescuing the Hotel Giessbach. With objections coming from many sides, the demolition plans were thwarted.

After contacts with various Swiss industrialists came to nothing, in 1982 a saviour for the hotel was finally found in the form of Franz Weber and his national environmental organisation "Helvetica Nostra", a dynamic figure, driven by his ideals, who was willing to team up with his wife Judith and daughter Vera and put all his efforts into saving the hotel.

He set up the "Giessbach for the Swiss" foundation and acquired the whole estate (excluding the generating station) from the Freys for three million francs, with the foundation raising two million through a national fund-raising campaign and the canton of Bern and the town of Brienz each contributing half a million.

In 1984 Franz Weber established the public limited company "Parkhotel Giessbach AG", which by 1988 had amassed the sum of 10 million francs in the form of shares

for the purpose of completely renovating the hotel in several stages. In 1990 there was a final increase of capital of two million to 12 million francs to finance the last major building phase.

In the first stage of the rebuilding the restaurant and kitchen were replaced, and further phases in the renovation process took place during the closed seasons from the end of October to the middle of April. In this way it was possible to restore the entire hotel to its original Davinet style. The magnificent entrance hall, the reception area with bar and fireplace, and the large dining room regained the generous sense of space and stylish solemn atmosphere they once had, as the ugly 1940s fixtures were removed and Italian specialists restored the stucco work. All the rooms were fitted with aesthetically pleasing bath/shower and WC. The lift, which had been installed in the 40s, was taken out of the elegantly conceived stairwell and moved to a discrete position at the side. The top floor was returned to its original appearance of 1883 with historical spire lights and decorated gables.

In June 1984 the grand opening of the "nostalgic palace of pomp and splendour on Lake Brienz" took place. Since then the hotel has enjoyed increasing popularity throughout Switzerland and beyond.

An important building development took place in the winter of 1988-89, with the backing of Bern's heritage conservation: the laundry was moved out of the hotel and into the "Kurhaus" (the old hotel), and the Bel-Etage rooms were renovated, including the stairway. For reasons that are obvious, these rooms are known as Davinet rooms, and contain 19th century paintings owned by the Bern museum of art, from the so-called Davinet collection (pictures which had been collected by the architect in his capacity as curator of the museum). One particularly monumental piece is "Schwingfest in den Alpen" (Wrestling Festival in the Alps), a superb painting by Giron which hangs in the billiard room on the west side.

Another significant building development was the construction of an underground passageway linking the East and West wings, which made it possible to connect the main kitchen and the hotel residents' dining rooms.

The final major building phase, financed in full by the foundation and the plc, took place in winter 1989-90, and mainly consisted of constructing a satellite kitchen next to the dining rooms in the West wing and blasting a vast cavern in the cliffs to the east of the hotel to be converted into a store room, and also extending the main kitchen in the East wing.

And so the Giessbach estate with its "Belle Epoque palace" has become a tourist attraction of the first order, especially with its beautifully tended idyllic park with footpaths, its decorative flowerbeds and its magnificent stock of mature trees.

Moreover, the hotel is in itself a cultural monument of historical significance, and with its interesting architectural features is a fitting host to a wide range of cultural events such as balls, exhibitions and concerts.

Let's hope the efforts of everyone who has worked with Franz Weber to save the Grandhotel Giessbach and keep it going will continue to be crowned with success.

For the GRANDHOTEL GIESSBACH: Dr. U. Ammann 1990

History is written every day at the Giessbach...

From 1984 to 2002 the Giessbach was in the steady hands of Fritz Kreis, who put his heart and soul into running the hotel. Since his retirement in 2003 the business has been run by a young, dynamic and successful figure from Schaffhausen, Matthias Kögl, with the backing of Franz Weber and, especially, Vera Weber, delegate of the supervisory board of Parkhotel Giessbach AG.

Gastronomy high above Lake Brienz

In 2002 the "Chez Florent" gourmet restaurant opened its doors (its name has now changed to "Le Tapis Rouge"), with breathtaking views over the lake and mountains and a unique panoramic terrace, serving Mediterranean cuisine with French and Swiss touches and the finest gourmet vegetarian dishes.

A year of superlatives: 2004

- The GRANDHOTEL GIESSBACH wins award: "Historic Hotel of 2004"
- 20 year anniversary of reopening
- 125 year anniversary of Giessbach railway: a major anniversary of Europe's oldest funicular railway, which brings the guests up to the hotel from the lakeside landing stage and from the hotel back to the lake.
- First commendation in the Gault Milau restaurant guide for gourmets.
- First winter opening of the hotel's own exclusive banqueting rooms.

Weddings at the Giessbach

A dream setting for a dream wedding, not just for a spectacular reception party but, since 2005, for civil ceremonies too. The Giessbach really can offer the perfect location for the couple's big day and an experience not to be found anywhere else in the world.

Restoration of the former "Kurhaus"

The first hotel by the Giessbach stream, which later became the spa rooms (and is now the staff quarters) was renovated in 2006-2007. The Kurhaus regained its original historic charm, with three decorated gables and balcony gallery, adding to the overall appeal and attractiveness of the Giessbach estate's appearance.

Grandhotel Giessbach, April 2007

"There is opportunity for the Giessbach, it lies in its historic building and in its historic grounds. It lies in caring for and improving the interior fixtures and furnishings in the original style. We can rightly claim that at no point in its existence has the Giessbach hotel looked as superb as it does today.

And: every new guest returns. Returns again and again and then once more to the Giessbach. And returns home that bit more culturally aware.

This is the effect of the Giessbach: its message inscribed in the soul of its guests. The message that without culture and beauty life is hollow, that beauty and culture are the essential cornerstones of life."

Franz Weber

On the next page: The history of Giessbach: a summary

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Priest Wyss, Schoolmaster Kehrli

1822 Simple shelter

1832 Giessbach inn

1840 Firework illumination of waterfall

1855 New owner: Konrad Gerhard von Rappard. Purchased for 70,000 Swiss francs from Johann Kehrli.

Hotel with 60 beds.

1858 Hotel and grounds sold for 300,000 francs to the steamboat company belonging to Knechthofer family.

Expansion to 175 beds and private chalet.

1870 Hauser family buys Giessbach estate for 900,000 francs. Horace Edouard Davinet commissioned to build five-storey palace hotel.

1875 Work completed after two years.

1879 Opening of funicular railway.

Giessbach the resort of industrialists, landowners and royalty from Russia, India, Africa and Europe.

1883 Building destroyed by fire.

Immediate rebuilding with new roof design and every imaginable luxury: the Grandhotel of today.

Construction of a smaller hotel (Beau Site) with 16 rooms

1885 Establishment of a hydrotherapy unit in the back hotel (carbon dioxide, peat and hydro-electric bath treatments, massage, gymnastics and diet with Alpen milk, whey and spring water).

Several changes of owner prior to First World War.

Hotel in decline, demolition of Beau Site.

1947 New saviour for Giessbach: Bürgenstock owner Fritz Frey-Fürst buys the estate for 190,000 francs.

1949 Reopening after complete renovation

1950 Governing council of canton of Bern places conservation order on Giessbach

1953 Fritz and Erwin Frey take over the hotel, running it as a general partnership (Kollektivgesellschaft), construction of lakeside generating station. Electrification of entire building, new chalet

1978 Threat of closure, demolition and new building planned

1979 Working group to save the Giessbach set up on 24 February

1982 Rescue operation by Franz Weber and his "Helvetica Nostra" environmental organisation

- 1983 Franz Weber sets up the "Giessbach for the Swiss" foundation, estate (minus generating station) purchased from the Freys for three million francs.
½ million from the canton of Bern.
½ million from the town of Brienz.
2 million from a national fund-raising campaign.
Franz Weber sets up Parkhotel Giessbach AG, a public limited company to finance and run the hotel.
1st building phase: replacement of kitchen and restaurant.
- 1984 Restaurant opened.
- 1985 1st floor.
- 1986 2nd floor.
- 1987 3rd floor.
- 1988 East Room, Davinet Salon, foyer, stairwell.
- 2004 ICOMOS award: "Historic Hotel of the Year".
First opening of some rooms for winter events.
- 2006 Renovation / reconstruction of Kurhaus (first hotel on Giessbach site 1855).

Read the gripping story of the resurrection of the Grandhotel Giessbach in the richly illustrated book "Märchenschloss Giessbach" - Giessbach: a Fairy-Tale Castle (available from reception at CHF 20.-).

... come and visit us in the
present



Grandhotel Giessbach

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