

Hotel Belvédère – an iconic hotel that simply ran out of luck...

Written by Andy Owen



Hotel Belvédère is a Swiss hotel on the edge of the Rhone Glacier, situated in the snowy mountains of Switzerland - at an altitude of almost 8,000 feet.

The hotel, in grander times, was simply unique – and one of the most recognisable in the world.

It boasted the best views of the Valais and Bernese Alps and was situated in the immediate vicinity of the Rhone Glacier, a main attraction of the area.

Belvédère was built in 1882 by young hotelier - Josef Seiler - on a stunning hairpin bend in the Furka Pass, one of the snowiest regions in Switzerland.

The hotel was designed to provide guests with panoramic views of the Valais and Bernese Alps – and a breathtaking view of the Rhone Glacier.

The historical road was built in 1867.

It's Switzerland's fourth-highest mountain pass - and its top is 7,922 feet above sea level.

The Furka Pass is about halfway between Milan and Zürich, close to the Swiss-Italian border and attracts many tourists from both countries.

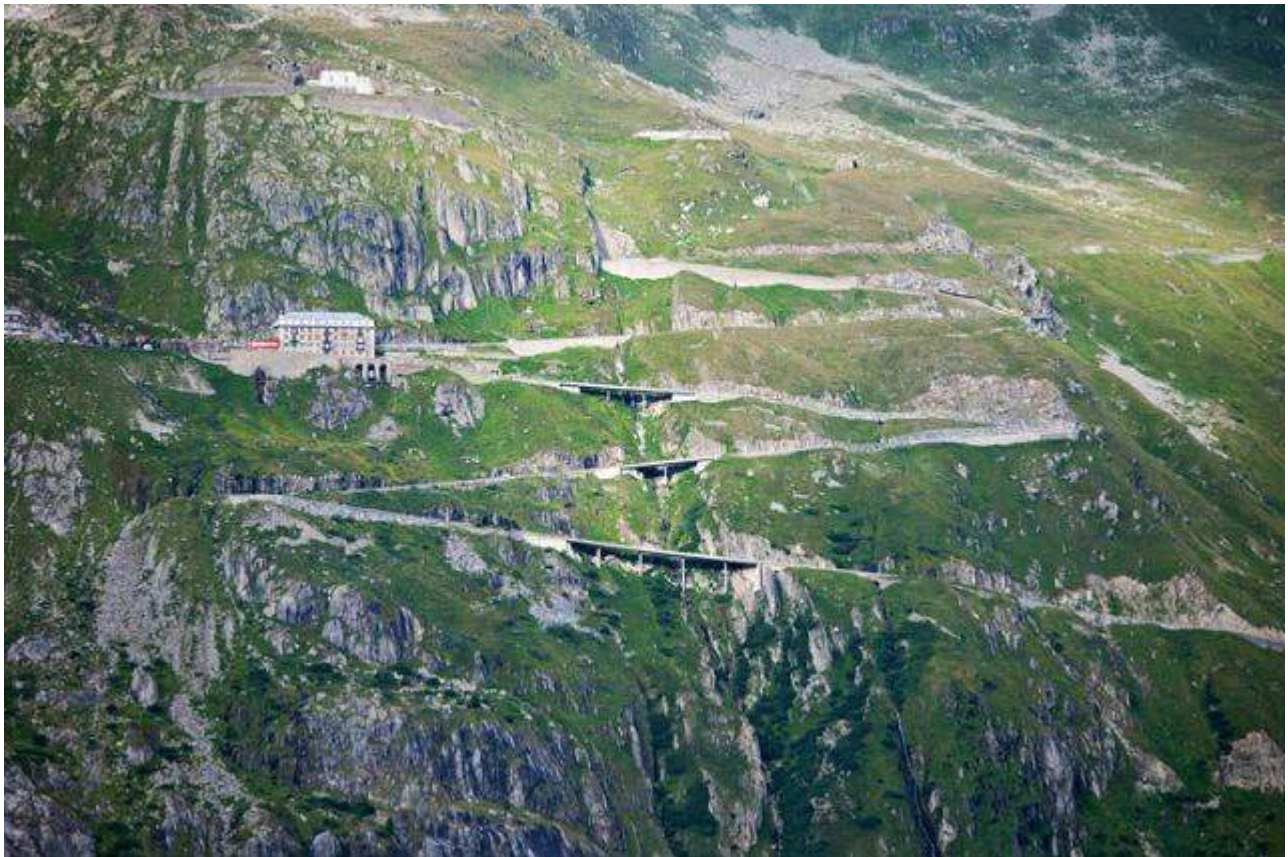
The road itself is pretty steep, which is not a problem for a car, but it's a challenge for bikers.

The climb has an average percentage of 7.3 - with a maximum rise of 11%.

To get to the hotel, it's an 82-mile drive from Zürich, which takes roughly two hours.

From Milan, it's a little further, with a journey of 127 miles taking just over 3 hours.

No matter which direction you're coming from, the alpine road is a heaven for lovers of such things, with picture-perfect twisty roads and incredible views.



The Furka Pass, with The Belvedere Hotel in the top left part of the image.

Some say the road to the hotel is the scariest they've ever driven, with steep cliff drop-offs on every corner.

And then, there is the Rhône glacier right next to it.

Hotel Belvédère was a stunning property, that offered a spectacular close-up view of icy scenery like no other place on Earth.

The hotel was in a raised position on a rock, sitting practically over the top of the glacier, so the view enjoyed by guests from their balconies whilst taking their breakfasts, was extraordinary.



Not only that, but from the 1890's onward, an ice chamber inside the glacier had been carved out, re-drilled and maintained as a walkable tunnel, which glowed with an aqua tint.



During the day, when the sun was up, guests and visitors alike could experience its incredible beauty – and at night, the sound of the glacier and the howling of the winds, was both mesmeric and very moving.

Towards the end of the 19th century, because of its popularity, Joseph Seiler had the hotel expanded several times.

There was continual investment in the hotel to make the experience even more memorable for guests.

In the years prior to the First World War, up to 90 guests arrived daily during the high season.

It became THE place to visit. And it was easy to why...

The panoramic location attracted a pampered clientele who sometimes stayed for weeks during the summers.

To stay there must have been a memorable experience. I would have loved to have been a guest at that time.

The Belvédère had become the most famous pass hotel in the world.



At the turn of the 20th century, the hotel's popularity increased even more, with the opening of new railway lines in the area.

It was the golden age of the hotel industry.

And Swiss tourism was at its peak.

Within three decades, the number of hotels in Valais alone, quadrupled from 79 in 1880 to 321 hotels shortly before the First World War.



But dark clouds were gathering - and this period was to be the last great wave of hotel construction and growth.

World War I changed everything...

Suddenly, no one was travelling. Lively places became deserted.

The hoteliers, mountain guides and farmers, struggled to survive, as the hotels remained empty.

But, once the Great War was over and the devastation from it started to ease, then tourism started to slowly improve again.

In the 1920's, new means of transportation such as the Postbus and the railways, brought an increasing number of guests to the Rhone Glacier.

Trips to the area were designed as multi-day trips with an overnight stay.

Hotel Belvédère was back on top again.

Her smile returned.



Unfortunately, it didn't last. Just as things started to get back to the good old days, the clouds of war started to roll in again.

Then, World War II started...

Another downward spiral was set in motion.

The hotels hardly had any guests, money was scarce, the buildings fell into disrepair - and, predictably, the guests stayed away even more.

And, in truth, they never came back in real terms.

After the war in Europe was over, there was hope that the great times would come back again.

The Belvédère was restored to its immaculate best and the glitterati started to return, to enjoy its unique charm.

The positivity of the 1960's, delivered a short but inspirational boost to the Belvédère, when Sean Connery, who adored the hotel, apparently insisted that the location was used for a scene in Goldfinger.



The glacier is visible at the beginning of a scene when Goldfinger passes the Belvédère Hotel in his Rolls Royce, on his way up the mountain.

It was the film's final scene to be shot, which ended on July 11th 1964. How proud the Belvédère must have been.

I'd like to think she was smiling once again...

In theory, James Bond should have brought about a turnaround.

But it was not to be.

The hotel's run of bad luck kicked in again.

The whole area started to suffer badly as the number of guests at The Belvédère and other Alpine hotels, decreased, due to faster and more powerful cars.

The two or three-day trip through the Pass, became a one-day round trip and guests no longer stayed overnight.



And, as a final kick in the teeth, the 11,000-year-old glacier started to retreat.

This meant that the icy scenery beneath the hotel terrace – one of its main selling points - was quickly disappearing.

What's more, due to increased temperatures during the summers, it lost a lot of its thickness, so the ice cave that used to be at the bottom of the glacier, many meters under the ice, became just an outcrop above, preserved by canvas sheets covering the ice.

What was a blue magical under-glacier tunnel, became just plain ordinary and wet.



The Belvédère was taking another kicking.

And it wasn't going to stop.

At the end of the 1970's, mass tourism brought about the second great death of hotels in this area.

Package tours suddenly made it possible for everyone to spend their vacations in faraway destinations for the first time – and they went for it, big time.

Those who still chose Switzerland, slept at campsites, in vacation apartments - or in a modern, well-equipped hotel.

Not in an old-fashioned grand hotel, badly in need of renovation.

And, in 1982, the Furka Base Tunnel opened.

From now on, the Matterhorn-Gotthard railway line no longer stopped in nearby Gletsch - and cars no longer had to cross the pass either.

The end of the popularity of the region, was pretty much sealed.



Because of the unique location of the hotel, one of its main problems, was the road to it.

This was completely inaccessible during harsh winter days - and had to be closed for almost six months each year.

Rosemarie Carlen, manager of Hotel Belvédère for ten years, told of the huge difficulties of running a business in the high Alps.

"People have a completely wrong idea of what it's like to run a hotel up here." she said.

"It's like a circus, tear it down, build it up, tear it down, build it up."

Every autumn, the Carlens would move everything that could not withstand the winter, into the house, board up the windows and doors, let the water flow out of the pipes and turn off the electricity.

This beautiful hotel had to sit there – all alone – and brave the harsh Swiss winters and everything the elements could throw at her.

In the spring, when the pass was still closed, the Carlens would fly up by helicopter to repair the winter's damage and get the hotel ready again for the season.

"It was a great time", she said.

"But only for the first five years."

In 2000, another new tunnel was built, bypassing the route to The Belvédère, which only made things harder for business.

The rooms inside had not changed much since the 1880's and little attention had been paid to them, so they were soon regarded as no longer vintage delights, but tired, old and poorly maintained.



More and more people came to see the hotel, but less and less of them wanted to stay in it.

Clearly, it was losing money.

Significantly.

Let's face it. The hotel industry is tough to begin with.

But how this marvellous hotel kept going, with its appalling run of bad luck, the gradual loss of customers and the much-needed income to maintain itself at the very least, is simply amazing.

It has to be said, that Philipp and Rosmarie Carlen tried incredibly hard to save the hotel.

They both made their living as lawyers - and did not rely on the income from the hotel.

But they refused to let it die – and showed amazing commitment over many years, to try and restore it to its former glory.

They started renovating the hotel in stages. Philipp Carlen spent two years fixing up the hotel on weekends. They planned to renovate every room.



Rosemarie Carlen



Philipp Carlen in the Rose Hall

He brought the 150-year-old piano back into the salon, equipped the rooms with shower stalls and imitation marble.

He tried to give the hotel back some of the glamour of its golden years – even if it was only a glimmer.

Then they decided to lease it out. Positivity was in the air and the hotel once again started to bet her mojo back..

A grand re-opening took place in 1990.

With this new beginning, the story should have had a happy ending, but the hotel's appalling luck struck again.

The tenant was extremely unreliable and soon disappeared.

Philipp Carlen decided to run the hotel himself. He juggled his work at the law firm, the hotel and the glacier cave.

But he then made a big mistake. He decided to no longer focus on prestige business.

He went cheap and cheerful. They were chasing business...

He set prices for single rooms with a shared bathroom, at about 50 francs a night, a double room with a bathroom costing around 180 francs per night.



Guests came. But they weren't the profile the hotel was used to - and badly needed.

They were mountain hikers, cyclists and passers-by, not well-heeled individuals.

The Carlens had unfortunately become busy fools – and it soon became increasingly difficult to make it work.

Then, the new breed of inspectors and pen-pushers started to appear.

The hotel was consistently targeted by the newly-formed hygiene control departments, who started to set new criteria - and the requirements for fire protection also become more stringent year after year.

In addition, there were serious staff problems.

Rosmarie Carlen explained the situation:

"In a hotel where the season lasts five months at most, it is difficult to find good staff, because good people are usually looking for jobs with a year-round contract. And if not, people want to go to Zermatt or Crans-Montana, but not to a remote place like this."

On multiple occasions, she had to take over the kitchen at the last minute.

Once, when the cook said he was going to the hairdresser – he never returned. Another time, a different cook disappeared in the middle of the night, just as a group of a hundred people were expected at the hotel the next day.

Soon, the menu only included dishes that Rosemarie could cook herself.

After five summers, everyday life at the hotel started to catch up with Rosmarie Carlen. Her health was starting to suffer badly - and she needed to stop.

The pressure was severe and never seemed to ease.

There was a constant need for renovations, long working days were the norm - and many other unforeseen things kept cropping up.

For ten years, the couple had spent every weekend on the Furka – until Rosmarie Carlen simply couldn't do it anymore.

Her husband wanted to continue. *"He's worse at letting go than I am."* Rosemarie said.

The couple admirably tried to stay positive. They decided to try once again to lease out the hotel. They made two further attempts.

In both cases, the tenants once again let them down.

The pressure involved in preserving the old building was now getting simply too much for them.

Their relationship started to suffer.

As Paul Simon so wisely said in 1971, *"Everything put together, sooner or later falls apart."*

And those words proved to be prophetic for The Carlens.

In 2015, Phillipp and Rosemarie's marriage broke up.

Soon after, in 2016 - after 35 years - Hotel Belvédère closed her doors, almost certainly for the last time.



She is unlikely to re-open.

It is so sad to have to write that. She deserves so much better.

I suppose it will be said that the hotel was one of the first Swiss victims of climate change.

The 11,000-year-old glacier that used to be right at the building entrance had been receding 10 centimetres each day, retracting farther and farther away into the distance.

But, although that was a big part, it wasn't the only reason.

This wondrous hotel had no luck at all.

Every time she tried to turn a corner, she hit a brick wall.

Today, this once-majestic hotel where Pope John XXIII, Sean Connery and many, many other 'A' Listers, were said to be frequent visitors, is such a tragic sight.



Hotel Belvédère has stood tall and proud for 140 years. But when you look at her now, she appears to have given up.

She is completely empty, with her windows boarded up, to protect her from squatters and looters.

Locals say that lately, they have heard strange eerie sounds coming from inside on many occasions.

Those aren't eerie sounds. Belvédère is crying...

This once proud lady is now sad and unloved - and she desperately wants to return to those glorious, long-gone past times.

I doubt very much that she will get her wish.

After all, not even James Bond could save her.

