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History Comes Alive at Locarno's Belvedere Hotel

by Sandy Bornstein / Oct 14, 2019 /



When I first entered the stylish and graceful **Hotel Belvedere in Locarno, Switzerland**, I was unaware of the structure's history. A 2017 renovation instilled modernity into the hotel, so the historical value of the property was not readily apparent. My visit to this 4-star hotel, commanding lovely views of Lake Maggiore and the surrounding mountains, was made in conjunction with an early September Hiking in Style media trip to Switzerland. A tour of the hotel opened my eyes to the building's historical value and its incredible art collection. By sharing what I learned, one can fully appreciate how history comes alive at the Hotel Belvedere.



Traveling from Zurich to Locarno

After arriving in Zurich, I took advantage of my Swiss Rail Pass. While I rarely take a train in the United States, I found the railway system to be an efficient way to travel between the airport and Locarno. I have to admit that I was a bit apprehensive about the small number of minutes allotted to transferring between one train and the next while toting luggage. But after I successfully handled the first one, I felt like a pro for the remaining two train rides. After arriving at the Locarno train station, I had the option to take the free shuttle service, ride the funicular to the station near the hotel, or walk uphill. My commute time from the airport to the hotel was approximately three hours. I was later told that Milan Malpensa airport was a bit closer. It is only 115 kilometers or 71 miles away.



Locarno Funicular near Belvedere Hotel

Convenient Location and Amenities

Inside and out, the hotel offers guests a beautiful space to unwind from the day-to-day pressures of daily life while simultaneously enjoying the proximity to many local attractions. The Piazza Grande (city center) and the Lake Maggiore shoreline are a short walk downhill or by cable car. Traveling uphill onboard the funicular leads to a plethora of hiking opportunities, as well. Public transportation or a private vehicle opens the door to further exploration of the surrounding area. The hotel's impeccable grounds and interior boast an indoor/outdoor pool, terraced area with outdoor garden and grotto, library, spacious meeting rooms with oversized windows, spa facilities including a small fitness area, and an onsite dining room and bar.



Belvedere Garden with Madonna del Sasso in background, courtesy of Belvedere Hotel

Locarno Film Festival

Walking to my guestroom, one of 90, I was made acutely aware of the Locarno International Film Festival. More than 60 posters dating back decades decorated some segments of the hallways. As the official partner for the festival, the hotel has the most extensive collection of Locarno Film Festival posters. During my media tour, I visited the bar. Photographs on the walls draw attention to celebrities who have visited the hotel in the past. For more than 70 years, Locarno has been the capital for cinema lovers and performers in August.



Photos from film festival in bar

The posters are only a small part of the hotel's extensive art collection. Original oil and tempera paintings and sculptures, created by European artists from the 19th and 20 centuries, add a sophisticated element to the common areas and hallways. To provide a sampling of the art, I am sharing some photos that I took of the images.

Art Collection



An early 20th-century oil on canvas painting simply signed R.D. of a lady in a kimono holding a fan.



A 20th century Robert Van Cleef oil on canvas painting depicting a fortuneteller in a red dress.



A Luis Vidal Molné mid-20th-century painting with lady next to a horse.

Accommodations

My comfortable, south-facing hotel room had a small veranda offering a partial glimpse of the town below. Furniture with sleek lines and a bathroom with oversized tile and a full shower provided no hints of the hotel's historic past.

On the room's desk, I found a book titled, *Il Belvedere di Locarno ieri e oggi*, or *The Belvedere in Locarno Past and Present*. Unfortunately, the book is only available in Italian.



View from my guest room

Onsite Restaurant— La Fontana Ristorante & Bar

For my first meal, I was treated to a three-course meal that introduced me to Chef Carlo Ponti Greppi's skills. Greppi grew up near the Italian-Swiss border. After years of training and cooking in several locations, he started as the Sous Chef for La Fontana Ristorante & Bar located inside the hotel. Shortly after that, he took over full responsibility for running a kitchen with 17 team members. Our preplanned menu accommodated our small group's particular needs—vegetarian, pescatarian, and gluten-free.

In a Mediterranean environment, it was not surprising to find a menu filled with locally sourced produce and regional dishes. One product found on the regular menu is *farina bona*, a traditional finely ground cornmeal from the Canton of Ticino. This native food fell out of favor in the 1960s. A resurgence of interest has occurred in recent years.

For the starter, most of my colleagues ordered beef Carpaccio; I was content with the lighter, vegetarian appetizer, a beef heart tomato salad garnished with red onions and basil. Knowing that I was in the Italian part of Switzerland where risotto is king, I tasted the risotto first course followed by gnocchi Roman style. To complement the meal, we shared a bottle of Aperol from Vitivincola Chiappini. The meal concluded with a summer tiramisu that was uniquely topped with seasonal fruit.



Belvedere Summer Tiramisu

Large breakfast buffets offer a hearty start to a full day of activities. The hotel's Swiss-Italian version was comprehensive with a full assortment of freshly baked bread and cakes, including traditional sourdough bread from the Maggia Valley, local cheeses, freshly made jams, cooked pork products, sliced cold meats, smoked salmon, pancakes and waffles, fresh fruit, fruit juices, and yogurt. While most of the items were self-explanatory, it should be noted that all of the food and beverage items were labeled in Italian.



Incredible Freshly Baked Breads at Breakfast Buffet

400 Years of History

The majority of the hotel's furnishings will appeal to people who love modern décor. Unless visitors walk through the hotel with a critical eye, they will miss bits and pieces of the building's 400 years of history. Participating in a media tour revealed a few important facts.



Belvedere's modern lobby. Photo courtesy of the hotel

Having just returned from my short downhill walk from the Madonna del Sasso pilgrimage church, dating back to the 15th century, I could relate to the close proximity of the two structures. According to historical records, the mayor and the benefactor of the church, Baldassare Luchsinger, was responsible for commissioning the construction of the building in the 16th century for a Locarno noble family connected to the Duke of Milan.

Centuries later, in the late 19th century, the Franzoni family turned the building into a hotel. During the three generations of their ownership, affluent German and English speaking tourists who were looking for the latest amenities, a temperate climate, and health treatments booked rooms at the Belvedere.



Belvedere Hotel. Photo courtesy of the hotel

On one of the common area hallways, I found a framed advertisement from 1914 illustrating how times have changed. Back then, a room cost as little as two francs, and the full price for board was between 6.5 and 9 francs. After the Franzoni family sold the hotel, a renovation process commenced. When the Lissi family found out that the building was being converted into an apartment building, they purchased the property in 2000.



Belvedere Hotel Advertisement from 1914

When our small group was escorted into the banquet hall, I observed the efforts to maintain the room. A Renaissance fireplace dating from the 16th century immediately caught everyone's attention. It was flanked by two Michelangelo-style stone figures. Our focus was also directed upward to a colorful ceiling fresco surrounded by a few layers of ornate molding. This artistic scene retells the mythical story of Persephone, who was kidnapped by Hades, the god of the underworld.



Belvedere Hotel fresco. Photo courtesy of the Hotel

Outside, on the terrace of the La Fontana Ristorante & Bar, we stood before an octagonal fountain with three figures. Etched into the granite is the date 1815. This fountain was moved from its original location to the restaurant area in 2003.



Belvedere's 19th century fountain

When I stepped into the driveway, I was told to look at the balconies. Some of the railings were constructed of metal, while others were made of stone. The metal railings are in newer sections of the hotel. The original barriers are a reminder of the building's evolving history.

Nearby Historical Attractions

Visitors who want to acquaint themselves with local history can walk up the steps to the Madonna del Sasso, walk down to the city center, or visit the Museo Castello, the town's archaeological museum. Since the museum is not open on Mondays, I was unable to view its exhibits. However, while visiting the church, I learned about the 1925 peace conference held in Locarno with Germany, France, Belgium, England, Italy, Poland, and Czechoslovakia as participants. After that, Locarno was known as "The Town of Peace." In 1936, Germany renounced this agreement.



Steps leading to Madonna del Sasso

Final Reflection

I am happy that the owners of Hotel Belvedere chose to preserve some of the property's historic charm and display a noteworthy collection of art. This eclectic mix of both modern and historic features adds to the hotel experience and makes it possible for history to come alive at the Hotel Belvedere in the resort town of Locarno, Switzerland.



View of Locarno from Cardada

Sandy Bornstein, the History Comes Alive Through Travel Editor for Wandering Educators, has visited more than 40 countries and lived as an international teacher in Bangalore, India. Sandy's award-winning book, [May This Be the Best Year of Your Life](#), is a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. Sandy writes about Jewish culture and history, historical sites, family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences.

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Switzerland Tourism hosted Sandy Bornstein's 3-night visit to Locarno and her stay at the Belvedere Hotel. All of the opinions expressed in this story are based on the author's experience.

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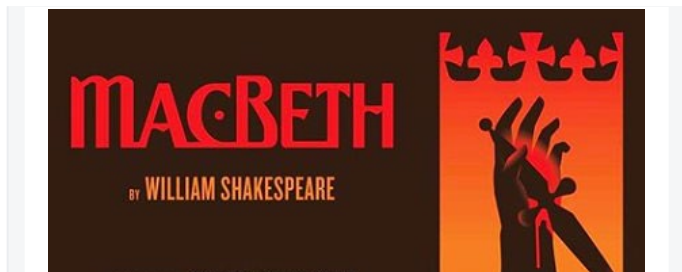


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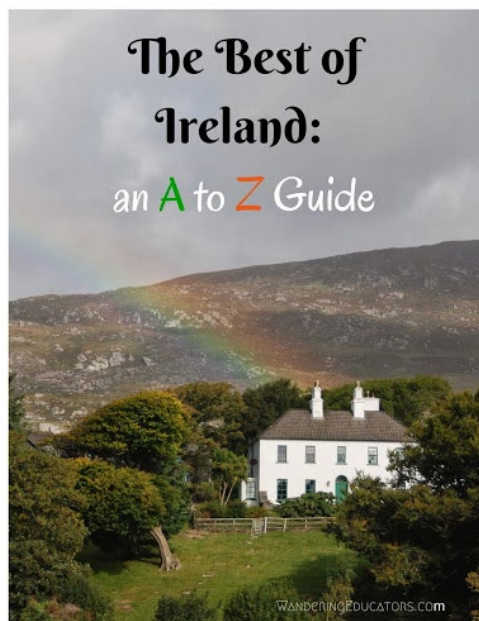
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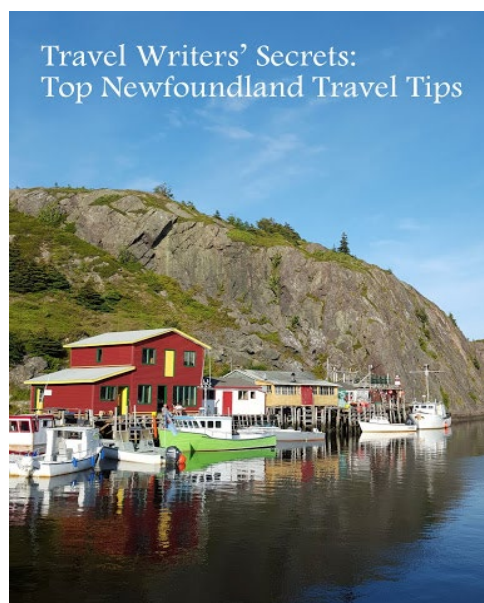
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