

Qataris build a CHF 550 million luxury resort on the Bürgenstock Alpine palace fit for a sheik

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The Emirate of Qatar is suspected of financing terrorist militias in Syria and Libya. In Switzerland, the sheiks have found a better use for their natural-gas billions: they buy old hotels and transform them into palaces. The bill so far amounts to over a billion Swiss francs.

The Schweizerhof in Bern and Royal Savoy in Lausanne are theirs. The undisputed showpiece of the collection, however, is the Bürgenstock. This mountain ridge above Lake Lucerne at alt. 1100 metres is an icon of Swiss tourism. The first prestige hotel opened here 143 years ago. Half of Hollywood threw parties on the Bürgenstock in the 1950s and 60s.

Now the sheiks have discovered it. On this kilometre-long strip of land that's only a few dozen metres in width, they are investing CHF 550 in erecting residence suites, a spa, two luxury hotels, a clinic disguised as a hotel, and a golf course.

Anyone making the ascent up the ridge from Obbürgen, Canton Nidwalden first sees the luxury residence suites. The dearest and largest are cut into the rock face on the left and offer views of the deep-blue lake. The views from the cheaper ones still take in the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau to the south-west. This is where Bruno Schöpfer (60) has his office: he is the Managing Director of Katara Hospitality Switzerland AG and the sheiks' representative in Switzerland.

Schöpfer has been around. Having grown up in Switzerland's Entlebuch region, he spent most of his career abroad. For 20 years he managed the establishments of global chains such as Mandarin Oriental and Radisson. Most recently he was at the helm of Mövenpick. But it was on the Bürgenstock that he found his true vocation. He is able to bring all his experience to bear on the project. He needs to, as any errors committed during the planning stages will come back to bite with a vengeance. If the specifications miss out the water hose in the toilets, the Arab guests turn their noses up. If the flows of goods and guests are not properly managed in and around the hotel complex, things will quickly fall apart.

"We don't have a general contractor," reveals Schöpfer. They only look at their margins before making themselves scarce. Schöpfer assumes personal charge of everything. He concludes nothing but individual contracts with construction companies and suppliers, then checks that everything is done the way he wants it. He may be found storming around the huge site in a golf cart, foot on the floor.

Schöpfer knows every stone, every plant, every little corner. He is full of anecdotes. "I had to give way to the cantonal director of construction here," he says, pointing to a corner of the edgeless outdoor infinity pool. Guests will be swimming here way up high above Lake Lucerne. The pool is one of the highlights of the massive spa, a "wow experience" says Schöpfer, proudly.

Yet the right-hand front corner of the pool had to be re-aligned to safeguard a tree with a preservation order. Schöpfer complains in no uncertain terms about interfering politicians and officials hemming him in with conditions and stipulations. "They think only of themselves and covering their backs with as much red tape as possible. But no one's thinking of the overall scheme."

Envious nay-sayers and nostalgics with a longing for the past accuse him of gigantism and of betraying the historical heritage. Schöpfer, though, is far too wise not to realise the true value of the Bürgenstock's past. The natural environment and preservation orders added an extra CHF 43 million to the bill. "But we don't

let that get us down. It's an excellent investment in marketing." It means that the Bürgenstock can differentiate itself effectively from the lake-less glass-and-steel architecture in the cities.

Another misunderstanding: the Bürgenstock is only for the rich. Sure, only the super-wealthy can afford the CHF 30 000 monthly rent for a luxury residence suite or treatment in the clinic. "But we can't live off the rich alone. The resort is too big to rely entirely on exclusiveness."

The spa will be available to day visitors. Among the 15 restaurants will be reasonably priced eateries for day-trippers. And a three-star hotel will cater for those on a budget. The business plan is painstakingly balanced: the idea is that around 100 000 day-trippers per annum should supply the critical mass element. If the Swiss travel abroad at the height of summer, they are replaced by the Arabs. In the low season, people will convalesce after their operations while companies and organisations hold their conferences and congresses.

The resort is due to open next August. Schöpfer says all is going to plan: the watertight shell of the new five-star Bürgenstock Hotel is complete, while the scaffolding of the Palace Hotel was taken down a few weeks ago. The latter's stucco ceilings are now being reinstated after removal before the building was gutted.

That said, Schöpfer still has a few battles on his hands with the authorities between now and the grand opening. He needs 800 workers working full-time, but Canton Nidwalden has just 13 registered as unemployed. "For our restaurants, we need specialists from countries outside the EU. Otherwise we're not being authentic." However the authorities have really turned the screw on issuing work permits.

Another unresolved problem is transport into the resort. Schöpfer is willing to spend 15 million on having the vintage funicular railway renovated: it would bring visitors and guests from lakeside Kehrsiten directly into the new Bürgenstock Hotel. But this would only work if there are connecting boat services from Lucerne – and the canton and federation contribute funds. "Virtually nothing happens in Switzerland without subsidies – apart, it seems, from us," says Schöpfer.

He is handicapped by the fact that the Qatari sovereign wealth fund is underwriting the project, which puts him at a disadvantage when asking for public money. Unfairly, thinks Schöpfer: "Like everyone, the Qataris are entitled to equal treatment. If they don't get it, they'll take their investments elsewhere."

Quote:

"We can't live off the rich alone. The Bürgenstock is too big to rely entirely on exclusiveness."
Bruno Schöpfer, Managing Director

Caption:

- How the new Bürgenstock Hotel will look. The train terminus is inside the hotel itself.
- The Palace Hotel, already minus scaffolding. The original stucco ceilings are being reinstated.
- The plans stem from renowned architect Matteo Thun.
- Luxury clinic-cum-hotel: building site of the Waldhotel.
- The renovated storehouse houses a nightclub.
- Visualisation of the lounge in the Bürgenstock Hotel.