CRUISING THROUGH SWITZERLAND

BBT Online on the Switzerland Meeting Trophy

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On 27 June a group of ten Belgian meeting planners led by Myriam Winnepenninckx headed off to Switzerland. Invited by the Switzerland Convention and Incentive Bureau, they would compete against a whole lot of other national teams to try and win the 2019 edition of the Switzerland Meeting Trophy. Doing so, they would pass through some of the best sights and sites the country had to offer. Would they prevail, crush all competitors and take their fifth trophy home? No they would not. Not by longshot. But is winning really that important?
Remember the end of June, where we had a whole week of 35+ °C weather in Belgium? A nice trip to mountainous Switzerland would surely make for a welcome break from the heat. Wrong! When the Belgian team arrived in Zurich on 27 June, it was even hotter than in Brussels. The whole city was out and about, and generally scarcely dressed. Sadly this was also the case for the two team members whose luggage was still in Zaventem due to a problem with the conveyer belt – where have we heard that one before?

All wardrobe malfunctions aside, Zurich looked like a joyful, colourful affair. Everyone seemed to be having fun in or around the city’s famous lake, and that’s exactly where we were headed as well. The opening party – where every team had to present itself with improvised introductions showcasing various levels of cringiness – was hosted at Seebad Enge: a floating restaurant/bar on the lake shore offering a unique view on the city, the water and the surrounding mountains.

Dinner was served in a BBQ/buffet style and drinks were amply poured. This made a lot of guests change into their swimwear for a refreshing sunset dive in the lake. A fantastic start to what promised to be a very interesting couple of days. www.seebademge.ch

After a last drink we headed back towards our hotel for the night: the colourful and playful 25hours Hotel Langstrasse. Just a stone’s throw away from the Central Station, it’s truly a lovely place. Everything is designed following an original concept and the staff was superbly friendly. A good night’s rest was had, and we were all up and about in the morning to compete for what we naturally deemed already ours: ultimate victory. www.25hours-hotels.com

Discovering Zurich in turbo time

Early rise, early shine! Our first morning in Switzerland started with attaching a special tag to our luggage. This would make it travel all the way to our next hotel on its own by train: very neat, but slightly stressful with the average service of the Belgian rail system in mind (no worries, in Switzerland they can actually be trusted).

Breakfast was served in Restaurant zum Rüden’s Gothic Hall. This old guild house is a great setting for events in need of a historic atmosphere. www.hauszumrueden.ch

After stuffing ourselves in preparation for the day ahead, it was finally time for the serious part of the trip: the first competitive stage of the actual Meeting Trophy. The teams would run all over Zurich’s old city centre, and participate in all sorts of (sorry, top secret) tests to earn points and win the game. We were motivated, we were ready to rumble and we were already trailing the leaders by a considerable margin before the afternoon was even done.

Not a good start for the Belgian team, but no worries. Zurich itself was clearly a winner. It’s a cosmopolitan city with a lot of unique assets. There’s of course the marvellous lake with the surrounding alpine views, but it also offers a myriad of cultural and business options. It’s exceptionally clean and safe and offers a shopping and nightlife scene lots of other cities would be jealous of. This – in addition to all of the first-class venues it can offer – makes it a perfect place for international meetings and conventions, especially because it’s linked directly to more than 150 other destinations all over the world.

Our visit to Zurich ended with a relaxing boat tour on a historic ship, followed by lunch on a beautiful old train (The Red Arrow Churchill) headed to Andermatt: the second stop on our triumphant tour of Switzerland. Surely us Belgians would set the record straight once high up in the Alps? Our bodies were ready for whatever was to come!

Bread and games in the mountains

Andermatt is a traditional mountain village in the heart of the Swiss Alps, located in a high valley at over 1,400
For more info on the Meeting Trophy and on Switzerland as a MICE Destination, check out: www.MySwitzerland.com/meetings.

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Click here for a beautiful video of this year’s Meeting Trophy
metres above sea level. The Andermatt Holiday Region is currently being developed into an attractive year-round destination with a golf course, extensive ski area, hotels and holiday apartments. A lot on offer for sporty people here, and we were about to find out in person.

The next meeting trophy stage was all about physical prowess: perfect a team like ours; exclusively made up out of well-sculpted human specimens. We discovered the town on foot and by bike and we went all in to take the victory home, but sadly by the end of the day the margin with the leaders had grown even wider.

Luckily there was a cosy dinner set up to ease our pain. In the evening, we went up the mountain by cable car for a lovely traditional Swiss dinner – including the inevitable but oh so tasty cheese fondue – in Restaurant Nätschen: a rustic country restaurant with a beautiful sun terrace offering incredible views on the surrounding Alps and valleys. It was here we would try and come up with a cunning plan to turn the tables on our competitors at the morrow.

www.skiarena.ch

Our hotel for the night was the four-star Radisson Blu Hotel Reussen, just opened this December. Designed as a modern interpretation of a Swiss chalet, a lot of local fabrics, natural wooden floors and soft furnishings were used in the design – all to give it a warm and inviting atmosphere. It comes with 244 rooms, six meeting rooms and a large conference hall.

After one last drink at the bar we were headed for bed, until we saw the cars for next day’s activity intriguingly standing outside. All of them had magnetic stickers with the team’s national flags on the doors, showing which ones were meant for which groups. All of the nicest and fastest looking ones were already reserved for other countries. Would anyone find out if we were to – theoretically of course – replace one or two stickers? Was this our chance to turn it all around? I’ve always wanted to drive a BMW convertible.

www.radissonblu.com/hotel-andermatt

Racing through the Alps

Sadly our wicked little plan did not succeed. As we finished breakfast and headed outside, the same three cars were waiting for us in the parking lot. The drive itself was absolutely glorious though. Cruising through snow-topped mountains and along half frozen lakes in the middle of a blistering summer, every new vista
even better than the one before, with our own music blasting through the speakers: does it get any better? I wish it could have taken longer.

Lunch was served in Interlaken. Located between Lake Thun and Lake Brienz and surrounded by a number of the country’s most iconic mountain tops, this town offers a dramatic backdrop to every visitor. There are lots of meeting rooms available: both hypermodern and historic, and the city offers more than 3,500 beds in total.

Food was served in the garden of the beautiful Congress Centre Kursaal Interlaken: a massive classic venue that also includes a contemporary auditorium, which makes it an attractive option for a number of different events. There is a total space of 5,000m² available, and it can seat over 1,500 people. One more test was held during lunch which – of course – we did not win. All we can do is try. www.congress-interlaken.ch

Party in a castle
The last stop of our trip was the city of Thun, about 30 minutes away from Interlaken by car. It’s a picturesque town, with a variety of attractive venues and original possibilities for incentive programmes. The city centre sports a couple of magnificent buildings, squares and streets. Looking out over the old town is a castle dating back to the 12th century. To me, this was the prettiest of all the places we visited: lovely centre, lots of cute bars and restaurants, little streets to get lost in and a river meandering through all of it. I could have stayed a little longer.

After valiantly losing the last couple of tests in the afternoon, we had some time off to spend in and around our last hotel. Congress Hotel Seepark (www.seepark.ch) is a lovely place housing 91 rooms and suites and 17 meeting and seminar rooms. It’s located right on the shore of Lake Thun. This came in handy, because it allowed us to have a refreshing swim before heading to the closing party. In this case “refreshing” was a bit of an understatement. The lake is filled with mountain water, which keeps it quite chilly indeed.

After warming back up in the sun, we put on our best outfits and headed for the closing ceremony at beautiful Castle Schadau. In this magical setting, watching the sun set over the lake, we finally got confirmation of what everyone already knew. Belgium – still the proud record holder – would not take the Swiss Meeting Trophy home in 2019. That honour went to our Nordic friends. Were we in the top three at least? Nope. Were we even slightly close? Not at all. Did we have a blast of a time while discovering some of Switzerland’s best assets? We sure did! As I – this is how I always do it – headed back to the hotel early so I could be the first one at the breakfast table, the rest of the team partied through the night to celebrate our well-earned fifth place. Next time, we’ll take back our trophy, Nordics. You’ll see!

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