

The Perils of Paradise Lost

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got til its gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot...*

Joni Mitchell, Big Yellow Taxi 1970.

The story goes that Mitchell was inspired to write this tune on a trip to Hawaii. She threw open the hotel curtains to take in a mountain vista and was confronted by acres of concrete car park. We will come back to Joni later.

This month's dispatch comes to you from various locations in Switzerland and Italy where the managing director and I are taking in the so called holiday of a life time. I suspect the MD thinks that being on holiday in a foreign land with me feels like a life time but I digress.

Situated in a valley in the Bernese Alps region of Switzerland is a place called Grindelwald. It's pretty much the quintessential Swiss village of childhood story books. Towering over the village are a variety of impressive snow capped mountains including the infamous Eiger north face. This imposing granite and ice monolith has been a source of fascination for me since seeing a photo of it in National Geographic in my teens. It's a unique climbing challenge for mountaineers insofar as not being at sufficient altitude to require oxygen while having claimed at least 64 lives since 1935. If you plan to visit, the face can be observed from your lodgings in the village and indeed it was once considered quite the thing for the rich and famous to sip their drinks and, via telescopes, observe the life and death struggles taking place above.

Winding its way from the village to the top of this part of the Alps is the Jungfrau railway service which terminates at Jungfrauoch railway station, the highest in Europe. Incredibly the railway includes a section which passes, via tunnels, behind the Eiger north face. In fact, it is possible to get off the train in the tunnel and step out on to the north face via an access door. Such a strategy has been used in various rescues over the years, the stories of which are well worth a Google search. The tragic tale of Toni Kurz and his climbing companions fate in 1936 makes for a particularly riveting read.

Sitting atop the Jungfrauoch at 11,700 ft is the Sphinx Observatory, one of the highest astronomical observatories in the world. While the observatory itself is not open to the public the complex houses numerous viewing platforms, eateries and souvenir shops. For the more adventurous there is also access to the various mountains and walks in the immediate vicinity. While the views are remarkable a brief walk outside confirmed that Noosa is not an appropriate place to acclimatise for such altitude.

While there is no denying the incredible natural beauty of this place there's something else going on that's worth thinking about, particularly in the context of our own national tourism economy.



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fresh ideas...



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In 2008 an agreement was struck to establish twin mountain status for Jungfrauoch and the Huangshan mountains in China's Anhui province. The occasion was also used to twin the towns of Interlaken and Huangshan. I have not visited China so the impact of this arrangement in the UNESCO recognised Huangshan mountains is something I can't comment on. I can however make some observations about the impact in the Grindelwald region. It is clear that the twin city strategy has worked and Chinese tourism is flourishing in the area. However, it is also clear that the Swiss are falling into a trap. In their efforts to make the location even more appealing to a specific tourist demographic they are compromising an authentic experience.

I firmly believe that the Chinese are not travelling to Switzerland to experience this magnificent country through the prism of Chinese culture. I suspect in attempting to create a more "user friendly" demographic specific environment the Swiss are creating a less appealing experience for all visitors.

The fine balance between enticing international tourism and maintaining an authentic local experience is one I suspect we in Oz are yet to get right. In this world of globalisation holding strong to a national tourism identity will be the key to future prosperity. Joni had it right, *you don't know what you've got til it's gone*.

No one travels to Switzerland for the Peking duck fondue.

Footnote:

A few days in Lake Como Italy is a case in point. Magnificent scenery, very little signage in English, the wonderful Italian accent in cafes and bars, crazy drivers, narrow roads, pasta and good local wine. Did we get lost? Yes. Did we have many frights on the roads? Yes. Did we have trouble understanding the language? Yes. Are we having a sensational time? Oh yeh. It's Italy, get used to it seems to be the idea. I like it.



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