

REVIEW

Inside hotly anticipated Hotel Grace La Margna, the first hotel to open in St Moritz in 50 years

The arrival of this new kid on the block is like a fresh breeze of glacial air blowing away the fustiness in this well-established resort city

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Reviewed by **MATT CHARLTON**

Is there any way of selling St Moritz anew? Since the Victorians, this exclusive location in the Swiss Alps has been the go to for extravagant Brits and ritzy Americans, intent on supplementing a hard/ complacent day of skiing with a level of *après* where the bill at the end of the evening would make Elton John's florist do a double-take. *St Moritz* doesn't just scream 'expensive' though, it has always had a certain way of *doing* things. Possibly inherited from the just-so Brits who effectively founded the *ski resort* city, it has always possessed a level of stuffiness at odds with the clear mountain air and sparkling lakes – dark, old-fashioned bars; smoke-filled clubs; grand old dames of hotel rooms overlooking the ridiculously picture-book views... some may have thought that it was time for a change, but why change when people keep coming back year after year expecting, nay, demanding, the same experience?

The backstory

What then does the *Hotel Grace St Moritz* think it's doing? Though not exactly an aggressive Grime MC gesticulating in the middle of the Blackpool Tower Ballroom, to the horror of the bejewelled aged onlookers, this snappily dressed young pretender is the first opening in St Moritz in 50 years – *50 years* – and is planning to shake things up a bit... a revolution of sorts, but masked by a level of subtlety and poise only the Swiss can manage.

Firstly, it is one of the only year-round hotels. This may be commonplace in the likes of *London* or even Zurich, but here it's akin to waving an anarchy flag at the Last Night of

the Proms. But what to do in St Moritz if not careering down a cold hill on some kind of smooth implement, or lazing by, in, or somehow flying over one of the many impossibly blue lakes on a summer's day?



The view from the restaurant at Grace La Margna, St Moritz

Set the scene

I arrive on – admittedly – an unsettlingly sunny and warm October afternoon, after roughly a three hour train journey – with two changes – from Zurich, but this isn't exactly the Charing Cross to Hastings line. The alps introduce themselves as soon as I leave the city – glistening lakes, snow peaked mountains, swaying bright green fields, and tiny wooden villages race by, as my comfortable, punctual **train** negotiates bends, tunnels and grand viaducts.

I am met at the station by a Grace minibus in order to help me negotiate the difficult five-minute walk on a 6 per cent gradient. Greeted in reception by a refreshing herbal tea and hot flannel, I'm already starting to forget the questionable Americano I had at Heathrow.

Their welcome here is the shop window to their USP – subtle, informal, but still utterly considered and luxurious. This, of course, flows seamlessly into my accommodation. The new Grace wing of the hotel chooses not to parody the ‘mature’ classical swiss architecture of the old Hotel Margna building it is now an extension of; rather pay homage and look to the future, with a striking modern take on the classic St Moritz palace-style hotel – a building of quiet elegance. The original La Margna was built at the beginning of the 20th Century in an Art Nouveau style, and, after years of this landmark property lying empty, this unique historical building was painstakingly brought back to life, led by the acclaimed London-based architecture firm Divercity Architects in collaboration with French interior designer Carole Topin.



A bedroom at Grace La Margna, St Moritz

The rooms

I arrive at my deluxe fourth-floor bedroom; even the elevator somehow seems high-end and considered, right down to not having to wait a second for the doors to open on

reaching my floor. Full height windows overlook the imaginatively-named Lake St Moritz, and the section of the Alps which essentially divides Switzerland from Italy – the Albula Alps below the Piz Nair – framing a view that’s better than a mere painting – this moves and changes with the gorgeous Alpine light. The huge bed is angled just right to drink in this panorama, the dark blue of the plush headboard an eye-drawing feature in an airy space full of muted tones and relaxing hues, all making way for that main event – that view.

Tearing myself away from the window, I explore the hotel. The penthouse suite next door to my room (it’s okay – I asked) has a sprawling outdoor terrace surrounded by the same view, only this time you can take it all in from a private hot tub if you so wish. Downstairs, the three main spaces – the living room, bar, and restaurant – really double down on that subtle, elegant luxury. All the spaces, though I’m now in the older part of the hotel, are filled with light, possess a modern, individual character, and are thoughtfully furnished with local materials and original features.

The living room – with homemade pastries and candies so beautiful that they display them in a glass case – has a roaring fire, plush furniture, and its own tea station for you to pair your palette with a blend of your choice. The bar itself is made from a single piece of marble so heavy that they had to reinforce the floor underneath, and the room surrounding it retains an Art Nouveau sensibility but with a thoroughly contemporary twist. There is also a stage for live music, though my suggestion of a karaoke machine goes unheeded. At the end of the building is the main restaurant, The View, which feels as if it’s floating over the scenery. It’s also used for their fantastic à la carte breakfast, and retains echoes of an old alpine resort in as much that it’s wood-clad, but that’s where the similarities end. Wooden beams fan out of a centrepiece chandelier on a lofty feature ceiling, and enormous windows frame *those* views, encouraging guests to get outside.

The area

Ah yes – outside. The mountains echo with a million ski-trips gone by, but with the snow just on the very tips of them in this balmy October, there are so many other options other than chucking yourself down a mountain on two giant sticks. I hop on an e-bike, easily rented from The Grace’s ski/gift/e-bike renting shop on the ground floor, and go for a fairly easy peddle – especially when assisted by the ‘e’ bit – around the foothills of the local mountains, and the periphery of the town itself. It’s much easier to take in the views when your peddling is assisted. You can also kitesurf, wild-swim, or if you want to be

really old fashioned, place one foot in front of the other. It's all right here on your doorstep.

The Grace collaborate with **The Outdoors** to provide an impossibly beautiful lakeside lunch – fur blankets, seasonal flowers, cushions, complete with an amazing hazelnut cake, and, of course, fondue. Back at Grace, there are, of course, extraordinary food and beverage offerings, which we will come to, but there are also little extras such as a cocktail making masterclass at the aforementioned marble bar, or a pizza making workshop with the head chef, basically, if you can think of it, with some notice, The Grace can arrange it, and then you can ingest it. If you're that way inclined, make sure you order an Old Fashioned.



The Bar at Grace La Margna, St Moritz

The food and drink

Needless to say, it's stunning and comes in many different iterations, from a beautiful afternoon tea to the aforementioned pizza making masterclass. In the bar, you can indulge

in the aperitivo menu, and if nothing else, you need to try the cheese eclairs, a food item which could and should become the calling card of this hotel – people would queue for miles. The à la carte menu in the restaurant takes advantage of the talents of Italian executive chef Andrea Bonini, with dishes such as mussel risotto, octopus, and a tiramisu like you've never tasted before, and made right in front of you. Downstairs, the more informal Max's serves hearty après fare with a twist, and when I say a twist, I mean be sure to order the mac and cheese with shaved truffle, and the mille feuille as long as your arm.



The pool at Grace La Margna, St Moritz

The spa

Thankfully you don't have to leave the hotel to burn this off – there's a well-equipped gym and an amazing pool with metal panelling instead of tiles. These are both part of a comprehensive and beautifully considered spa, featuring a Finnish sauna, steam room, whirlpool with massage loungers, and an emotional shower, which is apparently a real thing and not something I thrust upon my therapist once a week. The treatments are

second to none, with a comprehensive offering making use of **Bellefontaine** products. I can safely say that I received the best massage I've ever had there.

The service

The professionalism, friendliness, informality, and attentiveness of the staff underpin all of this – it makes for a luxurious experience without making you feel that you have to keep up appearances or behave in a certain way. The arrival of The Grace in this well-established resort city is like a fresh breeze of glacial air blowing away the fustiness, challenging the rest of the city to up its game, and to let a little bit of light in.

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