



# BATHING LIKE A ROMAN IN LEUKERBAD, SWITZERLAND

*by Suzanne Morphet*

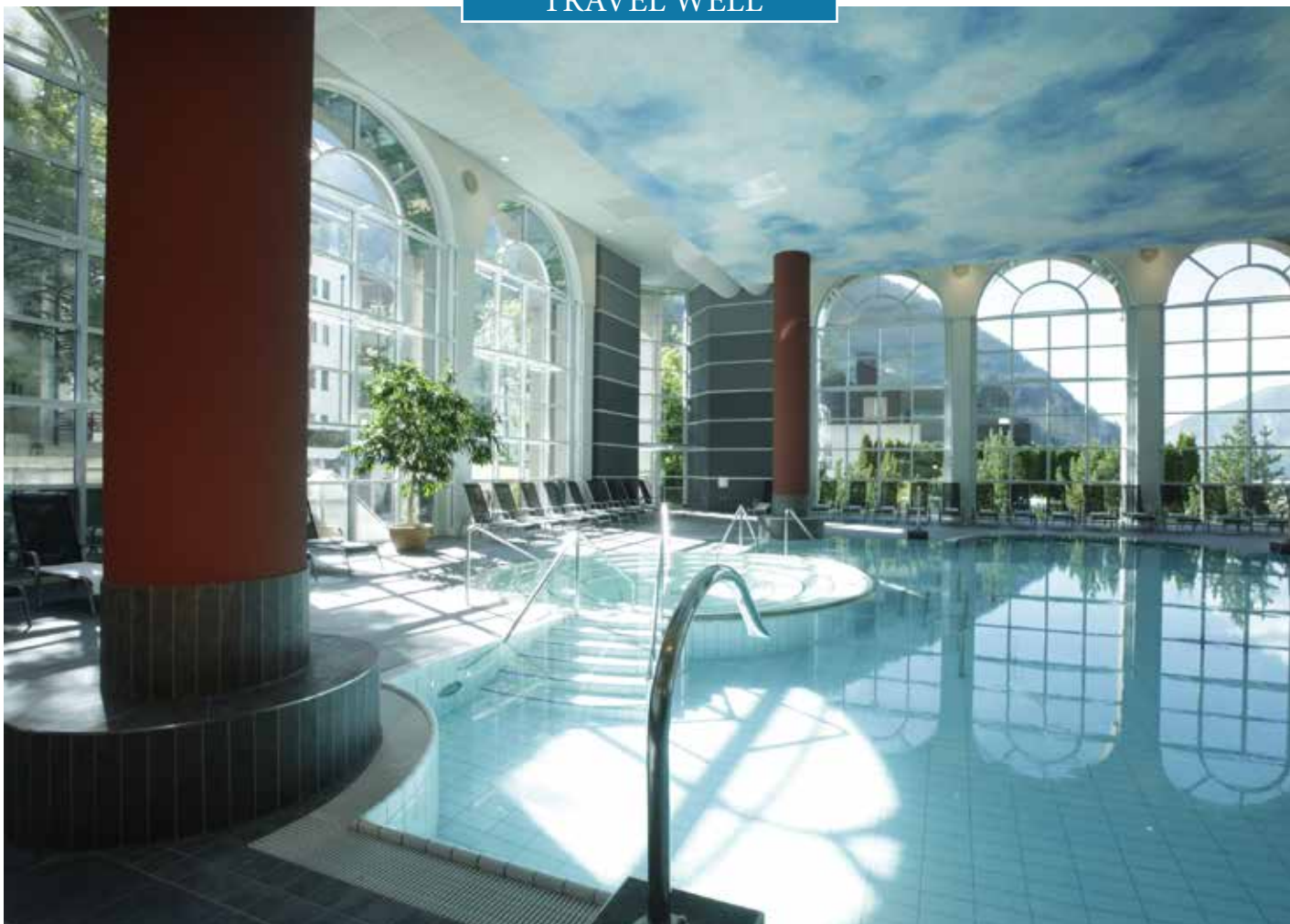


IMAGE: © LEUKERBAD TOURISMUS

“Nudity is obligatory,” said the man from Leukerbad’s tourism office when I enquired about one of the most intriguing hydrotherapy options in this Swiss spa town.

I had never bathed nude in public before—not unless you count some occasional skinny-dipping in my youth—but that was among friends. Leukerbad’s Roman-Irish Bath would be with strangers, men and women.

For centuries, spa enthusiasts have been enjoying this town’s biggest asset: thermal water. Every day, more than 100,000 gallons gush to the surface, the largest volume in all Europe.

Four public facilities and five hotels offer access to these mineral-rich waters. At Leukerbad Therme alone, 10 pools of various shapes and sizes beckon, including a stone grotto with blistering hot 111° F (44° C) water, another

designed specifically for your feet, and a leisure pool with underwater seats and possibly more jets than an airport.

I try them all before heading to Walliser Alpentherme, where I’ve worked up my courage to try the Roman-Irish Bath. The name isn’t a stretch since Roman coins from the time of Vespasian have been found in Leukerbad, so Romans were here before me, no doubt naked as well. (The name also references 19th century Irish bathhouses.)

The main bathing area is meant to resemble the inner courtyard of a Roman senator’s villa with two interlocking pools. Saunas, steam baths and a massage room are tucked out of sight behind crimson red walls. Upon arrival, I enter the women’s changing room, shed my clothes and have a shower—the first step in the Roman-Irish bathing ritual.



IMAGE: © LEUKERBAD TOURISMUS

This process involves warming, cooling and cleansing the body in 11 stages, each for a prescribed time and temperature. Because visits are scheduled, you see only a few other people. Still, when I arrive at stage five's soap-brush massage, two naked men are right behind me.

I quickly flop face-down onto the table, hoping to cover as much of my private anatomy as possible. The attendant shakes her head. 'Onto your back' she motions.

Reluctantly, I roll over. Within seconds I don't care who sees what. Being brushed all over with hot soapy water feels divine. When she's finished, I'm Miss Bliss, as slippery as a seal and compliant as a puppet.

Soon it's all over except for the 'contemplation room' where I'm wrapped in a blanket and left to doze like a babe in a nursery; clean, coddled and carefree.



Suzanne Morphet writes mostly about adventure, from swimming with whale sharks to having a baby in a foreign country. She contributes to a variety of publications including *The Globe and Mail*, *Luxury Travel Magazine*, *Canadian Geographic Travel*, *Westworld* and *Ensemble Vacations Magazine*. She's based in Victoria, BC. @SecretsSuitcase

