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FAMILY VALUES

Marc Stebler on life in Saanenland

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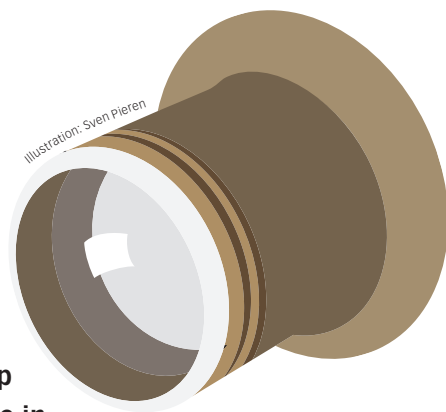
Beethoven is back

ONE BIG BEACH PARTY

25.000 guests for the volley ball

FAMILY VALUES

Marc Stebler knows a thing or two about watches. He is a fourth-generation Stebler-Iff, a family with a long watchmaking and jewellery industry tradition. Following the family's acquisition of Villiger Gstaad in 2019, Marc now heads up the boutique, renamed Stebler Gstaad. GstaadLife met with Marc to discuss life in the Saanenland, his respect for tradition and, of course, his passion for watches.



Your family has a long tradition in the Bernese watch industry. Why the decision to expand to Gstaad?

It's an interesting question because until a few years ago, we would never have imagined opening a second boutique, much less in Gstaad. But it all happened quite naturally.

Many factors contributed to the decision: our existing business is not far from Gstaad; we have personal connections to the Saanenland; a long relationship with Patek Philippe and Rolex, the brands Villiger represented; and we would continue to run the store as a family business. Ultimately, we decided the Gstaad boutique would be an exciting project for the future generations of our family.

The Villiger boutique has a long tradition in Gstaad. Were there any challenges in taking it over?

We have huge respect for what the Villiger and Schaffer families have built. We must continue to uphold the traditional values of a family-run business in the village.

It was a challenging time when we acquired the store because we did not just assume responsibility for a new boutique. We also had to move to a temporary location while the main building was completely rebuilt! I am

incredibly grateful to Beat Schaffer, the previous owner, for helping us organise the temporary store, showing us the ropes during the busy Christmas period and introducing us to the clients.

It was a challenging time, but I'm really proud of everything our small team achieved. Working through such upheaval together has made us stronger.

You decided to change the name of the boutique to Stebler Gstaad. Why was that?

At first, there was no talk of changing the Villiger name. However, as construction got underway, we realised we were developing a new store with a unique design in a totally new building. If we were ever going to make the change, the time was now.

Of course, the name alone is not the

most essential part for many people. Whether 'the Villigerhuus', 'the Rolex boutique' or 'Stebler Gstaad', what matters most is how our staff treats our clients and that they feel the familiar and personal atmosphere. But as the store in Gstaad is a project for the next generation of our family, calling it Stebler reinforces that this is still a family-run business. We're not just another international single-brand store. It's the Stebler family business with a Stebler inside actually serving clients.

You are more than a sales outlet?

Yes, we also have a workshop over two floors. As an official Rolex service centre, we are authorised to perform Rolex overhaul services on site, which is very convenient for our clients. Although we send Patek Philippe watches to Geneva for full servicing, we can offer services like battery changes or bracelet adjustments for other brands too. Where we can help, we will.

Was it always your plan to join the family business?

My brother and I were lucky. Neither of us was put under any pressure to enter the business. It was a natural evolution because we both developed a passion for watches. I always planned to work elsewhere in the industry first to gain international experience, but then the Gstaad project came along. Setting up and run-

Marc Stebler
and sales director
Varinja Giger work
side by side in
Stebler Gstaad



Photograph: Sven Pieren

ning the boutique in Gstaad offered the perfect opportunity to stay inside the family business while creating something new simultaneously.

With my brother at our store in Bern and me in Gstaad, my grandfather sometimes can't quite believe that both his grandsons are now working in the family business. Of course, he wouldn't have minded if we had chosen a different path, but he tells us he couldn't imagine a better situation.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

The most fun part is working with our team. We spend more time with work colleagues than friends or family, so it's essential to have a good team spirit. I love how we work together to welcome clients from all over the world. We serve people from many different backgrounds, which keeps things interesting, and I value the friendly relations we establish with them.



Left: Always with a friendly smile, Rachel Bacher provides expert advice to the customers in Gstaad.

Overall my day-to-day work deals with positive emotions. Clients visit our boutique to celebrate weddings, births and anniversaries and can get quite emotional when they receive their watches or jewellery pieces. I'm also fortunate that I really have a passion for the products we sell. While the ultimate goal, of course, is to sell the watches or jewellery, it's still great to be able to handle them on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, there's the landscape when I step out of the store. Gstaad is a lovely place, and I know how lucky I am to live where many people dream of going on holiday.

How do you find life in the Saanenland?

I've always enjoyed the mountains, but I'm also fond of the beach and warm weather. My original plan was to move abroad. I wanted to experience a bigger city somewhere in the south – perhaps in South America. But then the Gstaad project came along and was too good to pass up. So I now live in a town that's smaller and colder than Bern. That's how life turns out sometimes, but I love it here.

What is the outlook for business in the Saanenland?

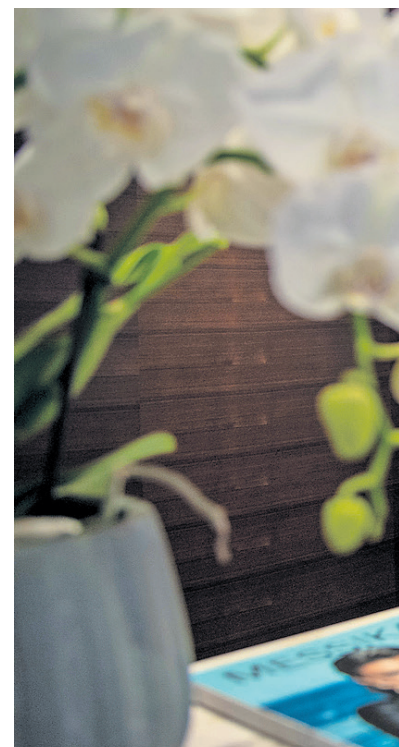
I think Gstaad is a fantastic place for our clients, with its boutiques and international brands. I often wonder why other watch brands aren't represented here because, for sure, it's the place to be.

While we are very happy to run a business in Gstaad, I also see a big problem in attracting young people to the region. Talk to any business owner here, and they will tell you the same thing: finding new or young people to work here is a struggle. Applicants like the work we offer and are enthusiastic about serving our clientele, but ask where will they go out at night if they're young and single and want to meet people?

For me, it's a bit sad to see how Gstaad has changed over the past ten years. The place is growing, more housing is being built, and the village is welcoming more international clients with fantastic hotels, but we also need to attract staff. We need accommodation and bars and things for our employees to do when they're not at work. I'm worried about the impact of this on the future.



Right: Watchmaker Stefan Eggimann takes a closer look inside a Rolex.



It would definitely be easier to attract young people to the village if there were more things to do, as in Zermatt. But then there's the problem of nightlife noise for the people who live in the village. I realise it's a complex problem to solve, but I think it's a challenge we must face.

How do you see the future of the watch industry?

Demand in the watch market right now is crazy, especially for the brands Patek Philippe and Rolex. It's the first time we've seen such hype, driven on one side by the influence of social media and the current situation with banks and inflation, and on the other by the amazing product releases and quality, these two brands offer. Although the market will eventually readjust to more normal levels, the outlook is still positive. If you see, for example, how many new millionaires China brings out every day, there will also be demand in the future. In addition to all this hype, I like much more that I also see many young people with enormous specialist knowledge and great enthusiasm for mechanical watches.

Classic watches last. I still wear my great-grandfather's watch. It works perfectly and looks great, even though it was bought in the 1940s.

It's truly timeless, keeps its value and is the kind of item you can pass down to the next generation. I'm confident young people will still want mechanical watches in the future. I know many who are passionate about learning how mechanical watches work. They may own an Apple watch but also want a Rolex or Patek Philippe because they serve different purposes.

I love it when teenagers come to our boutique and tell us: "See you in ten years when I buy my first Rolex." The interest in classic watches is definitely there. It's very encouraging.

*Right:
Marc Stebler feels
right at home in
Gstaad.*

*Bottom left: Rachel
Bacher and Varinja
Giger in the new
shop on the
Promenade in
Gstaad.*



What are your goals for 2022 and beyond?

Before we can think about developing the business further, my primary goal is to build our team. We are lucky to have our sales director Varinja Giger as a leader in our boutique. After ten years' experience at Villiger and now almost three with us, Varinja has a lot of responsibility in our company. With a more extensive boutique, we want to ensure that we have enough staff to continue offering our clients excellent service in the face of great demand. An additional goal too is to strengthen our jewellery brands.

I also want to encourage local people to visit our boutique. Don't be scared to come and see us. We're a young and dynamic team, and our doormen are very friendly too. While our products have a certain price level, that doesn't mean that if your Swatch needs a new battery, you can't come into the boutique. Everyone is welcome.

ANNA CHARLES

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Photograph: Sven Pieren