

GUARDIAN ANGEL FOR THE RICH

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What does an Indian billionaire have to do to become lord of the manor in Switzerland? Nothing. Real estate agent Robert Ferfecki will take care of everything. BY MARGRIT SPRECHER

One week prior to the scheduled showing, Robert Ferfecki reaches for the phone: “Turn the heat on!” Further instructions are not necessary. The caretakers at Gorgier Castle know what to do. That same day, they begin by vacuuming and airing out the rooms on the uppermost floor. This is the only way of ensuring that the ground floor, the castle’s tower and the ancillary buildings will all be freshly and cleanly presented in seven days’ time.

“A castle is as sluggish as a supertanker,” says Robert Ferfecki. He’s sitting behind the wheel of his Mini and driving through the defoliated vineyards; far below in the mist lies Lake Neuchâtel. He doesn’t mean the comparison to be derogatory. Indeed, quite the opposite. Owning a castle is not like driving a paddleboat, and it’s not something for the faint of heart or for those of an unfortified nature either: “Buying a castle comes with responsibility,” he says. In return for this responsibility, however, the owner receives a background for a selfie that overshadows all other status symbols in terms of its uniqueness and, of course, in terms of style. Compared to a castle, the villas of the French Riviera appear as flotsam washed ashore, and bloated alpine chalets, three times as big, look as though they were made of rubber.

The Mini is just as much a part of Ferfecki’s business principles as his outfit is. The luxury real estate agent is wearing an all-purpose coat with a pronounced country look and a nondescript sweater, presumably made from wool and not cashmere. Twenty years of experience dealing with the ultra rich has taught him one thing: “The client must never think that I am in the same league financially.” He knows some real estate agents who arrive at showings in Porsches and riding boots or – he conceals his disapproval beneath a most polite tone – who have manners that would be more suited to a cattle market. They welcome men before their wives; answer their mobiles in the client’s presence; lay their arm across the table and shovel their food into their mouths, emptying their plates as though they had just arrived from a camp in the jungle; and other such catastrophes. “In our business, nothing is as helpful as good manners. Preferably English manners.”

From the autobahn, we turn onto a small street; villa gables

and treetops peek out from behind high stone walls. The distances between houses become larger, and eventually only forested areas and fields remain. Robert Ferfecki dashes around a bend and through an open gate; the gravel crunches beneath his tyres like in a Rosamunde Pilcher film. He parks beneath a defoliated plane tree, climbs out and looks up at the castle with a sense of delight as though his boldest dream has just come true. The castle is daunting due to its sheer size, its ancillary buildings spreading like tentacles into the greenery. The battlements and the top of the tower are blurred by the fog. The façade is part Gothic, part Moorish, and the dungeon dates from the thirteenth century. At first sight, it becomes clear: He who does not preside over this castle is presided over by the castle.

As purposeful as a toreador approaches a bull, Robert Ferfecki walks up to the gate. He has known Gorgier since 2002. Back then, an American family had bought it. “It sparked their interest right away,” he remembers. “Firstly, Americans are impressed by everything that’s older than their own country. Secondly, the only castles there are at Disneyland.” And thirdly, as the new castle owner Laura added: “Gorgier is evidence of my husband’s success.”

Twelve years later and Laura’s husband, an international financial expert, had become even more successful, which is why he found it increasingly difficult to find time to visit the castle where the Internet connection was also less than perfect. The children had long since left for boarding school, and the fourteen guestrooms also stood empty. All of his friends had bumped their foreheads on some of the low doorways, felt their flesh crawl in the three prison cells, and tried in vain to manipulate the antique fixtures in the bathrooms. Today the family lives back in Florida. “Even a paradise can be too big,” comments Robert Ferfecki empathetically.

Last month Ferfecki showed the castle to a Texan who, above all else, was looking for enough space to house his fifty Ferraris. Today an Indian called who is coming to the castle straight from the airport. With the friendly, relaxed manner of a man unfamiliar with office life and the pressure of time, the visitor



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from India allows his eyes to roam over the towers, battlements, orangery and servants' quarters to the forest and fields that stretch as far as the eye can see.

This is not the first Indian client Ferfecki has had: New millionaires from India and other emerging countries in the East have discovered Switzerland's charms, one of which is its 41,285 square kilometres of land. This is the only raw material in Switzerland that is guaranteed to appreciate in value. "There will never be more," says Robert Ferfecki. "And once it's gone, it's gone." Whoever buys Gorgier Castle will own 40,000 square metres of Switzerland for at a cost of approx. 20 million Swiss Francs.

The affable Indian man allows himself to be initiated into the secrets of Gorgier. It's haunted, says Robert Ferfecki as he kneels to push aside the large stone of the drawbridge, adding: "Putting on a bit of an act is all part of it." Just then, the wooden footbridge lifts majestically to reveal the 25-metre-deep castle moat. "You won't be needing an alarm system here," says Ferfecki. The Indian man's eyes have a look of mild irony. It is the look of a rich man who has had many people try to sell him things he doesn't need.

Robert Ferfecki learned everything a luxury real estate agent needs to know about the nature and habits of the seriously rich from Henley & Partners. This UK-based global leader in residence and citizenship planning doesn't just act as a broker for luxury real estate: It also finds a new homeland for those looking to emigrate. By the time the clients set foot in their new home in a foreign land, their favourite coffee machine will be waiting for them in the kitchen, their desired fleet of cars will be in the garage, and all the papers they could possibly need, such as insurance papers and work contracts for the chef, chauffeur or gardener, will be gathered on the desk...

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...as well as a maid; applications for boarding schools; and a membership at the local golf course. And, in some cases, new passports. "Unfortunately, certain countries have quite an unfavourable tax regime," says Robert Ferfecki, explaining why many Western Europeans want to change locations. Clients from Eastern Europe and from Third World countries, on the other hand, seek to avoid terrorists and criminal groups rather than the taxman. They are looking for a safe haven for their money and for themselves. Both of these things are most often to be found in Switzerland, along with excellent medical centres and easily accessible airports. Around the turn of the century, Henley & Partners was doing so well that it opened a

branch in Zurich, Henley Estates. And the person in charge? Robert Ferfecki.

In truth, nobody else can solve the clients' problems in such a relaxed, empathetic and helpful manner. He catches their desires in flight as swiftly as a ball boy, conjuring thousands of blooming rosebushes in a garden or arranging for a private carwash in St. Moritz's villa district, a task that is much more challenging. "What it took to secure the licences for the wastewater!" he recalls, with the look of a climber remembering a particularly difficult ascent. Yet, he fully understood his client's wish: Who wants to coast along the Via Maistra or show up at snow polo in a dirty Rolls Royce, after all? This professional met his match, however, in a private helicopter pad to be located on the Zürichberg hill.

The Swiss luxury real estate boom reached its "absolute peak," says Robert Ferfecki, in 2008. "Nobody was really even looking at the properties, and the prices were absurd." The daughter of the President of Kazakhstan bought a villa on Lake Geneva for 74 million Swiss francs, for example, whilst a house in Engadine sold for 80 million. Russian buyers in particular were snatching up properties as indiscriminately as fur coats in a boutique, explaining: "We'll transfer the money tomorrow." Sure enough, the money did not arrive the next day. Russian enthusiasm had found a new object of desire.

In autumn 2008, however, the Swiss luxury real estate business began to take a turn downhill. Henley Estates was dissolved and even Sotheby's International Realty, which Robert Ferfecki had headed for a year, retreated from German-speaking Switzerland. In 2012, he went into business for himself in Herrliberg, founding Fine Swiss Properties with architect George R. Spoerli. "We did it at the worst possible time," he adds. And he speaks the truth. Because of the financial crisis, the price of Swiss luxury real estate fell swiftly: The Arabs barely bought anything - Swiss culture was too foreign for them - and the Greeks, who had previously called Ferfecki every day, stopped calling. "They had no more money." The Russians still had money but no receipts. "Without proof of the money's origin, the Swiss banks will no longer handle a transaction."

So it wasn't enough. The ultra rich are finding increasingly fewer reasons to move to Switzerland. Swiss banking secrecy has been pulverized, and lump-sum taxation for wealthy foreigners has been abolished in some Cantons. Even municipalities, which were known for being flexible with Lex Koller (= restrictions on the acquisition of Swiss real estate by foreign persons), dictate that Switzerland must be a person's main place of residence. "It used to be enough to have three briefcases as plausible proof of relocation; four barstools in a 300-square-metre villa were enough to prove one's main place of residence," says Robert Ferfecki. Today he has to present the Lake Zurich municipality with the receipt from the moving company for the cubic metres transported. The municipality also requires a copy of his Swedish client's new work contract, as well as a certificate from the school to say that his three

children are actually attending class here in the country. Despite the extra work, Robert Ferfecki accomplishes it with a certain satisfaction that money can not buy everything in Switzerland.

The married couple who are the caretakers of Gorgier have turned on all the chandeliers that can be turned on but nevertheless, the castle seems reluctant to wake from its deep sleep. Determined, Robert Ferfecki turns on a few more light switches. Now the canopy over the double bed shows all its faded splendour. "Fully heated?" the Indian man asks. Robert Ferfecki is happy to confirm that it is. Castle owner Laura spent a total of 10 million Swiss Francs on renovations.

In the corridors, suits of armour gleam in the twilight and antlers protrude from the darkness. The Indian man points to a mighty leverage: Included in the price? "What you see is what you get," says Robert Ferfecki. Also included are a Gothic chapel with a red brocade wall covering, complete with Bible and music stand; a lavish Moorish throne decorated with tassels; and an ancestral hall. The rulers on the walls peer harshly at the foreign figures at their feet. The only part of the castle Laura did not get to renovate was the kitchen. In the kitchen fireplace, where once oxen were roasted, stands a small, forsaken oven with black, chipped edges. On the servants' table, coffee and croissants have been laid out by the caretakers. The Indian man prefers tea.

Sometimes the residences of Ferfecki's clients find their way into the popular press. Oh no – this isn't due to any leaks on Ferfecki's part! Other coincidences came into play there. For example, Switzerland learned in the popular press that Kimi Räikkönen was planning to demolish the heritage-protected mansion on Lake Zug. The Formula-One race driver ended up thinking of something slightly less drastic. There was also the German general manager who wanted parquet in his garage and an air-conditioned fur room in his Lake Zurich villa. Even more likely to cause commotion among the people is when "everything is made of gold," as it was in Oberwangen. Even the toilet paper holder was gold, a fact which people never tire of sharing.

In contrast to his clientele, Robert Ferfecki feels that he himself is "comfortably poor": "I have always rented." But he doesn't feel that he has suffered because of this. Quite the opposite, in fact: His youthfully smooth face looks as though it's never experienced hardship. Appearances can be deceiving, however, for this escape agent knows just how refugees feel. In 1968 his parents fled with their small son and three suitcases from Prague to Switzerland. He spent the first three years in a Zurich day nursery. "It was dark when my parents dropped me off in the mornings and it was dark again by the time they picked me up in the evenings. So I used to think that Switzerland is always dark." In an effort to measure up to the native children, he gradually acquired "language fitness."

This fitness helps him in his profession today, as it does with

the patina of his divorce: "He who himself has boils and warts is better able to imagine himself in the shoes of his clients." He follows the tragic relationships of his clientele with empathy and understanding, whilst remaining strictly neutral: "There are a few for whom I have wished inner peace." Today he is convinced that any serious luxury real estate agent needs to have the maturity of a forty-year-old at least.

The Indian man doesn't let on whether or not he likes Gorgier. He watches with indifference as Robert Ferfecki tries in vain to open the frail window with a purposeful swing. He even observes the peeling house wall out of interest rather than alarm. "It's the north side," says Ferfecki happily, as though he's explaining a miracle of nature. An experienced real estate agent knows that although the Indian man requests further documents following his tour, the time has not yet come to celebrate: "That was just a light nod..."

In addition, the biggest killjoys are still waiting for their turn: The prospective buyer's accountant and bank. They frequently deem the purposeless gazebos and pointy little towers as unworthy of serious investment and give warnings about the horrendous sums of money that are devoured by garden maintenance alone. These are followed by warnings about the endless hassle of heritage protection. In cases such as these, there's only one thing that Robert Ferfecki can do: "The fewer rational arguments there are for buying a property, the more I have to emphasise the emotional arguments."

And that can be done. But it's a job that, unfortunately, is becoming increasingly difficult. Today the seriously wealthy are most interested in having Fine Swiss Properties find them luxury apartments close to airports. They aren't looking for a home anymore, much less a homeland or even responsibility. As fleeting and erratic as their money, they avoid all commitment. "Today the ultra rich live in airplanes. They only need a residence so that they have somewhere to air out their coat," states Robert Ferfecki, ever the impartial behavioural scientist. He is speaking from experience: For two years he was employed by a Russian oligarch.

He also uses this new trend to explain the boom in five-star boutique hotels. "In these hotels, the seriously wealthy simply have to turn the key - and then it's good-bye!" It is here that they can obtain respite from burdensome personnel troubles and leaking roofs. But only a true paradise can offer total freedom from such troubles and the ticket for such a paradise can't be obtained from a Robert Ferfecki: You have to find that for yourself.

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