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Social impact, Negroni Sbagliato and unexpected cliffhangers

Interview by Timo Albiez
with Verena Kern and Anja Kramarz



Verena (centre) and Anja (right) run accommodation businesses that offer space, work and new opportunities to women in difficult life situations.

Dear Verena, dear Anja, let's start with what sounds like a simple question: who are you?

Verena: I'm someone who's always trying something new. Baking bread, foraging for mushrooms – my hobbies often come with an expiry date. I'm your classic whirlwind; I need variety. But there are constants too: for almost 13 years I've been a director – now co-director – at Sinn & Gewinn Hotels.

Anja: I'm also a bit of an all-rounder – always on the go professionally. I like to use the term work-work balance: my main job is here at the hotel, my second at my mother's wine business. Two completely different worlds that complement each other perfectly. And at Sinn & Gewinn, I'm co-director in charge of operations.

We're sitting in Hotel Marta – a place full of charm, history and a social heart. What does this hotel mean to you?

Verena: For me, the Marta is the calm anchor in our portfolio. If it were a woman, she'd know exactly what she wants. Reliable. Grounded. Yet despite all its calm, Hotel Marta is also a place where you can easily try new things. In this sense of calm, there's strength – and plenty of potential.

Anja: The house itself has something very harmonious about it. The location is excellent, the size ideal: not too small, not too big – scalable, yet still personal. And the simplicity of the concept is a real success factor. Everything is deliberately streamlined, and you can feel that.

Verena: We consistently communicate this clarity externally. Our room categories, for instance, are simply called «the small room» or «the room facing the street». No fuss, no unnecessary frills. What you see is what you get. Especially in a city like Zurich – where many things are expensive and complicated – that's a genuine USP. Our guests, often international city travellers, really value that.

Beyond location and concept, your social model is also crucial. What's behind it?

Verena: We employ women in very different life situations – young women completing a solid initial training through our Supported Education programme, and we offer jobs to especially vulnerable women, such as former undocumented migrants or women leaving prostitution. In the past, our focus was on integrating women with mental health issues – many of whom were receiving disability pensions. We ended that model at the end of 2024, as demand for those integration roles had dropped significantly. This purpose-driven aspect runs through everything we do. Even if we don't plaster it everywhere – many guests only notice during their stay, if at all. But internally it makes a huge difference – to our culture, appreciation and teamwork.

How often do you wake up in the morning thinking: we're doing far more than just selling beds?

Verena: Every single day. And that's what keeps us going. Our colleagues aren't just interchangeable names on the duty ros-

ter. They're individuals with stories. Many have been with us for years, often in different roles and working patterns. I came here because I wanted to do something meaningful. After years of five-star hospitality, it felt like the next natural step.

Anja: Exactly the same for me. That sense of purpose is my daily motivation – whether it's about small things or bigger structural changes. We've revised the whole concept: we now focus on Supported Education and Supported Employment. We train young women on disability insurance – properly, in the employment market. It works because our environment is supportive and truly helps them. Many other businesses simply aren't open enough for this.

You're co-directors. What works well and what's challenging?

Verena: I think it works really well. Of course, it took time. Anja has been here over five years, so we already knew each other. But a co-leadership has to be prepared – and given space to grow. We discussed it openly and early on, also with the Board. With the growth of our organisation it became clear the previous model was reaching its limits. We're now more than just two Zurich hotels – there's Alma, Marta, Josephine's, the guesthouse in Lausanne... It was time to adjust the organisational chart. And I noticed I was having to prioritise too much. Always fire-fighting, always making compromises. It was clear: it couldn't go on like that. Co-leadership was the next logical step. Now

my dance floor is clear – and so is Anja's. I don't think about her to-dos anymore. That's trust. And part of why it works.

Anja: For the teams, it was almost a bigger shift. Whilst restructuring we also swapped departments – including team members. That brought a lot of clarity. And at the same time, we've gained more appreciation for each other: you see what the other is actually doing. What's still a bit bumpy? Sometimes staff still don't know exactly who's responsible for what. Or it takes time for our empowerment approach to fully filter through. But that's normal – the model is still young and we're growing into it.

On innovation: how do new ideas come about? A tsunami of Excel sheets or gut feeling with a dash of anarchy?

Verena: My head and gut are pretty well connected! (laughs) Of course, we do our calculations – but we don't drown in data. We don't need 15 presentations to test something. We're quick, we try things out. We're brave, but not naïve.

Anja: I like to call it «feminine smart». It's not about finger-wagging feminism, but about clever, sensitive decision-making with real impact. We look at what an idea will mean in practice – and if it doesn't fit, then we simply change course.

You both come from luxury hospitality. What's different now?

Verena: Almost everything! (laughs)

Anja: I loved my time in the five-star world – it was important. But now I can really shape things with what I learned. And we have the freedom to simply try things out. Without worrying about critical media coverage or bruised egos. And you can truly be yourself. You meet guests at eye level, personally. No need for a triple somersault in the lobby to surprise people. It's pure joy.

If your company were a cocktail, what would it be?

Anja: I'd pick the Negroni Sbagliato. Sparkling, with depth – and created by accident. Yet somehow: just right.

What film set would Hotel Marta be?

Verena: For me, it would be a Netflix series with amusing plot twists and surprising cliffhangers. And each episode ends differently from what you'd expect.

You're sitting in a time machine: past or future?

Verena: Future! But with a return ticket.

Anja: The future too, really. But with a «slow down» button – so good moments last longer and the boring bits – *ZAP* – pass quickly.

You're writing a book. What would the title be?

Verena: «Always Look on the Bright Side of Life» – a cheerful guide to resilience.

And where are the two of you headed – even without a time machine?

Verena: Two new projects are driving me forward: our Maison Emilie project in Lausanne, which is soon to become reality – and a new strategic partnership in the pipeline. Both are big opportunities.

Anja: For me, the new training concept is a huge step. It brings fresh energy and new perspectives – for us and for the trainees. And I love this balance of familiar ground and new challenges. That's exactly why I'm here.

Many thanks for this warm and inspiring conversation! And dear readers, you can learn more about this wonderful and meaningful enterprise here: (...)