

## Waldhaus Sils – Hotel report

If the snow leaves you no choice and pushes itself in front of the mountains like a white chiffon curtain, then there can't be a nicer place to listen to stories from another time and to let the grand hotel, bulging with old luxury, work its magic on you. Visiting the Waldhaus Sils in the Upper Engadine.



Sils-Maria in the Upper Engadine in Switzerland is often referred to as the quiet antithesis to the sophisticated St. Moritz. Sils-Maria stands for deceleration and serenity at an altitude of around 1,800 meters. The Waldhaus has belonged to one and the same family since 1908. *A Family Affair since 1908* is the motto of the house and is not just a pretty subline in the logo. It is definitely lived. In the Waldhaus there is no check-in, in the Waldhaus there is a handshake. Each guest is personally greeted and said goodbye by a member of the Dietrich family.



The founding couple Amalie Giger-Nigg and Josef Nigg chose the location for the castle-like house from three possible options with care and foresight. A one-year measurement had shown that the rock on which the forest house has stood since 1908 has the most hours of sunshine. When we arrived, there was meter-high fresh snow in front of the main entrance. The light in the lobby is warm and inviting. It's nice to know that you can immediately drop into one of the velvet armchairs in the Salon-Bleu.

## Carousel ride on one of the most beautiful railway lines

Your own journey to the Waldhaus Sils can still be charged with a maximum of historical atmosphere. All you need is the Rhaetian Railway. The Albula Line, one of the most spectacular railway lines in the world and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has existed since 1903. In the canton of Graubünden, it runs over 60 kilometers from Chur to St. Moritz. The railway line is a masterpiece of engineering and a beautiful carousel ride. Train lovers can even book a ticket for a ride in the driver's cab with the Rhaetian Railway.



Stone viaducts line up. On the way, the trains of the Rhaetian Railway cross more than 140 bridges and drive through 42 tunnels. This is another reason why the Albula Railway is one of the most impressive narrow-gauge railways in the world. The train climbs 700 meters in altitude using loop and spiral tunnels. The Albula Line crosses itself several times. The train changes sides of the mountain four times. Arriving at the St. Moritz train station, you can reach the Waldhaus with the hotel's shuttle service. Automobiles were forbidden in Graubünden until 1925. The horse-drawn carriage was the means of transport without choice. Because the coachmen had a strong lobby and were able to prevent their own displacement by progress for a long time. So it happened that the guests in the Waldhaus literally felt "tired" for a long time when they arrived. A condition,



The train ride in a driver's cab of the Rhaetian Railway is a very special experience and can be booked in advance.



*If your feet still carry you and you appreciate the charm of the old days, you should always use the staircase to get to your room. At the same time a good altitude training for guests from the lowlands*



*The library: Who might have read or written at these tables? In this room, Elke Heidenreich thought: how big is the world and how quiet it is here". In general, the issue of silence. Martin Mosebach wrote "The end of the world could take place, and one would only find out about it in the Walhaus a week later, through an unexcited information from the porter".*

## Waldhaus Sils – a place of thought



The Nietzsche House is located in the center of Sils

The Waldhaus Sils is a nostalgic place and full of stories from its illustrious guests. They often stayed a long time and returned regularly. Stays of one or even two months in the summer resort were common. Marc Chagall stayed at the Waldhaus Sils five times, Hermann Hesse met his publisher Samuel Fischer here, Gerhard Richter was often a guest and left two small pictures, Friedrich Dürrenmatt wrote in the guest book and it is said of Thomas Mann that he had a lot to complain about. Many personalities from contemporary history, literature and art could still be added. Friedrich Nietzsche was one of those people who had never been here, but who made tranquil Sils Maria a place of thought through

his stays there.

## Nostalgia and gentle renewal



It's snowing all the time. Maria Dietrich leads us into the bar, the original since 1908. In front of the large window, the larches bend under the weight of the snow. Maria Dietrich talks about her childhood in the hotel. About the months without guests, when the corridors belonged to the children and badminton was played in the entrance hall. She also tells how long it took to heat up the house after the winter. The pipes often burst and people were glad if it didn't happen again on one of the upper floors and the water damage was a little less. The old, which is so valued today, could be preserved through the continuity of a family business.

In times of crisis there was often no money for innovations, but just enough for what was necessary. The old telephone booth in the Waldhaus is now a mobile phone retreat for the benefit of all guests who want to use the salons and many other places in the house to read, play, talk or think. Good times when the phone was in its own cubicle and not in everyone's pocket.

Lack of money, it is said, is the best way to protect monuments. Maria Dietrich shows the currency in which a hotel measures success. The number of overnight stays per year on Maria Dietrich's diagram over the past century is as sensitive as a share price reacts to events in world politics. The decline in overnight stays due to the two world wars and the global economic crisis from 1929 is dramatic. By 1914, the house had around 15,000 overnight stays. In the summer of 1914, however, there was not a single guest at the Waldhaus Sils. In the war years that followed, the hotel remained open and was almost exclusively frequented by Swiss people. Then as now there are 140 rooms.



The bar with a view of the snow flurry

## Measured modernization – swimming pool and spa

In 1908 when it opened there were 40 bathrooms. Thomas Mann once complained about *water calamities*, today he would certainly have nothing to complain about, but would rather lie relaxed in the pine pool and look at the sky and the larch peaks. Since 2017, the Waldhaus has had a modern spa, some of which was daringly blasted into the rock. Similar to the construction of the swimming pool in 1970, which represented a courageous investment for the hotelier family. A hotel with its own swimming pool was almost a unique selling point in 1970 and made the hotel attractive for families with children.



The new facilities did not displace the swimming pool from 1970, but incorporated it generously / © Photo: Georg Berg

## Daily Tea Concert and Chef's Table

In keeping with the tradition of old grand hotels, the Waldhaus has its own orchestra. Throughout the season, musicians play tea concerts in the hall and evening dances in the bar. A third of the area of the Waldhaus is public space for all guests. Even when the house is full, it is said, every guest will find a cozy spot in the salons, the bar, the library or the hall.



In the bar, couples can also dance in the evening. For 70 years the waiters had to carry the food through the dancing couples. After the renovation of the kitchen, waiters and musicians no longer get in each other's way.

The chef's table in the Waldhaus Sils always begins with an aperitif in the wine cellar. Here sommelier Oscar Comalli pours and provides information about the wine stocks of the house. Up to 40 percent of the wines in the Waldhaus Sils come from Switzerland. Followed by wines from Italy, France and Portugal. He deliberately chooses European wines. Then it's off to the spacious kitchen. Recently extensively renovated, the room looks like a cathedral. Head chef Gero Porstein and his team prepare a multi-course dinner for the chef's table, during which the guests can look over his shoulder.



A kitchen like a cathedral. A chef's table is also held here every Monday for external guests / © Photo: Georg Berg

## Farewell to snow and forest house

The curtain of flurries was blown aside for breakfast before we left. As if a member of the family had decided that it would be a shame if a guest never got to enjoy the view during their entire stay. A view of the mountains is just as important as a personal farewell greeting. The mountains build up massively in front of the large windows. Breakfast becomes secondary, the guests at the other tables are no longer interested. What a pity that there is no longer any time for a walk into the Fex Valley or to Lake Tscheppa. Fortunately, the anticipation of a return trip on the Albula Railway remains. Another carousel ride through the Swiss mountains with powdered sugar glaze.

## The English nobility and the Swiss mountains

From the 19th century onwards, the English aristocracy also had their enthusiasm for the Alpine region implemented in their own gardens. At that time, the first wealthy Englishmen traveled the Alps and had rocky passages, the so-called "rockery", built in their gardens as a reminder of the mountains. A fine example of this is the [gardens of Hotel Endsleigh](#) . The Duke of Bedford even had a Swiss Cottage built here.

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