

Centenary celebrations

On his one hundredth birthday, an old man was asked how he felt. 'How do I know what to say today? I've never been a hundred years old before.' Urs Kienberger of the Waldhaus Hotel explains how the management faced the same dilemma



A full century has passed since that day – 15 June 1908 – when Josef and Amalia Giger welcomed the first guests to their brand-new hotel, which sits like a mighty castle above the pretty mountain village of Sils-Maria, a few miles from bustling St Moritz. To this day, the Waldhaus continues to be owned and personally managed by their descendants whose task it was to decide just how to celebrate a centennial birthday.

The Waldhaus had no idea at first. It had never been a hundred years old before. To host a grand and splendid party? With a few hundred guests at most, and everybody else pressing their noses against the window and looking on? This lively old hotel has thousands

of faithful guests, and its future depends on so many people – family and friends, good neighbours, reliable suppliers, competent builders and specialists of many trades, government officials and other colleagues. And, in any case, the Waldhaus is better known for its intimacy and peaceful comfort than for grand events.

Year-long events

The Gigers' great-grandchildren (the Kienberger and Dietrich families) quickly realised that a single party would never do. Instead, they decided on a wide array of ideas and events, spread out over the period between 10 June 2008, the first day of the 101st summer season and 19 April 2009, the

last day of the following winter season. Each project was inspired by particular Waldhaus strengths and qualities and was aimed to appeal to one or more of its many faithful groups of friends. Most importantly, each was designed to prepare for the future as much as to celebrate the past. ►

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To begin with, any birthday calls for presents. There were surprises from many guests and friends; one even went as far as to have a new star named for the Waldhaus. But if you want to make quite sure that you get what you want, it is also wise to buy some presents of your own, and the Waldhaus did just that. For the tidy sum of CHF 9 million, it received a major overhaul, which took place between the seasons to cause no disruption to guests. The renovations were to the imposing kitchen and staff



quarters. That all this was behind-the-scenes may seem rather eccentric, but it actually reflected the owners' long-standing philosophy that a hotel's smooth and efficient operations are a better draw for its guests than a lot of window dressing.

Dramatic decision

Seeking a second present for itself, one which would reflect the many Waldhaus guests both past and present who have left their mark in the world of arts and letters, the hotel decided to commission a major play to be performed on its own premises. A long-time Waldhaus regular, Christoph Marthaler, is a Swiss avant-garde theatre and opera director who is very prominent in German-speaking Europe. He and a troupe of a dozen star actors and musicians long associated with his productions agreed to create a special, whimsical birthday play. Marthaler and his crew spent time at the Waldhaus



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from April to May 2008, during the downtime between the seasons, to create and rehearse the piece.

The play starts in the great lounge and proceeds to various parts of the hotel, interrupted by a splendid table d'hôte dinner in the main dining room and ending up in the indoor tennis court. The drama incorporates a kaleidoscope of scenes both serious and humorous, in turns hauntingly beautiful and irritatingly absurd, reflecting on the life of the hotel and its guests. It was a daunting project, which took everyone to the limit (including the hotel staff), but it became a tremendous success.

With a total of 12 performances that took place in June and September 2008 as well as in March this year, the reaction of the Waldhaus guests and the media has been tremendous.





The play was even chosen as one of 2008's ten most notable productions in the German-speaking theatre by the 2009 Berliner Theatertreffen, a sort of German-speaking Tony awards. Swiss and German TV networks have combined to commission a one-hour documentary by Swiss filmmaker Sarah Derendinger about the making of the play, with Waldhaus scion Jürg Kienberger (an actor and musician who has performed in many Marthaler productions but was unable to participate in this one) acting as a narrator. The documentary premièred at the hotel in March and will be aired on SF1 (May 3) and 3sat (May 16).

Mementoes and memories

Then there is 'the museum'. The Waldhaus has long had a modest display in its basement (actually, the former bakery) with objects and appliances and other mementoes from its long history. It was, and is, a very private display, shown occasionally to visitors and friends. But now, in another centennial project, it has been adroitly and wittily reinterpreted by Swiss artist



Giuseppe Reichmuth, making it more of a 'real' museum but without taking itself or the hotel too seriously.

Every visitor during the centennial year received the gift of a special Waldhaus anniversary book – *A family affair since 1908* – full of enticing stories, in English as well as in German, and including splendid photographs of those who work in and with the Waldhaus. This is a true memento, without a single page of glossy advertisements.

If you were a child, you received a pillow with 'Bravin', the Waldhaus mascot. Speaking of children, another centennial project was an illustrated children's book, *Gian and Gianna*, based on a story from the turn-of-the-(previous) century Sils-Maria. It was written by Claudia Carigiet, another member of the owners' family, who, together with her husband Jürg Kienberger, also told and performed the story 'live' at the hotel on several occasions.

In July 2008, the Waldhaus held an open house – and over 1,200 people came to have a look. Not bad in a village with just 700 inhabitants! They not only saw the public areas, but were also granted a look behind the scenes, from the laundry and the carpenter's shop to the kitchen and staff restaurant as well as the guest rooms. Throughout, visitors were greeted by Waldhaus employees, who were pleased to have an opportunity to show and explain what they were doing. Of course, snacks and desserts and drinks were also on offer and the tours were accompanied by live music. Visitors could also talk to the hotel architects and the owners and their families.

Throughout the summer, a number of family days were also held. Guests hiked, biked or rode to a lovely picnic spot, where they enjoyed a wonderful buffet as well as activities and entertainment, including a circus. A great big staff party ended the summer season, with more than 200 present and former employees attending. To allow the current staff to fully participate in



the festivities, former apprentices and other 'alumni' came back to cook and serve the food and clean up at the end, and there was entertainment and a dance band. Another grand and old-fashioned ball – this time for paying guests – got the winter season off to a good start.

Time to reflect

So that is how the Waldhaus celebrated its first one hundred years. It has been a fantastic time, with so much to be happy and grateful for. And now? The world, and life as we know it, are sure to take us back to earth. Limits and constraints have always been a constant during the Waldhaus' long, proud, but hardly ever easy history. You might go so far as to say that, in its history, the Waldhaus has been more at home in cold headwinds than when it was carried along by stormily impatient tailwinds. Yet the hotel is now ready to begin its next century with enthusiasm and energy. ■

Further information

For more information about staying at the Waldhaus Hotel, call 00+1 (0)81 838 51 00, email mail@waldhaus-sils.ch or visit www.waldhaus-sils.ch