



BOTTOM, FROM LEFT: HOTEL WALDHAUS SILS (2)

‘The Waldhaus is like a jewel that’s been preserved,’ says the French director Olivier Assayas. ‘It’s the kind of hotel you read about in novels.’

The atmosphere is relaxed but cultivated. Over lunch one day, I sat down at a table in the darkened Waldhaus bar with a group of men discussing the latest Alzheimer’s research, before realizing that I had stumbled upon an international brain symposium.

The hotel’s mostly European clientele (generally the kind of guest who prefers hiking to skiing and the stairs to the elevator) are often of an intellectual or artistic caste. Einstein and Jung visited in the 1920s, and regulars since have included the conductors Otto Klemperer and Bruno Walter, the writers Hermann Hesse and Thomas Bernhard, and film directors such as Claude Chabrol and Alexander Kluge. More recent devotees are the German artists Andreas Gursky and Gerhard Richter, who in the 1990s made a series of small painted-over landscape photographs entitled “Sils.” The hotel’s well-known visitors tend to keep possessively quiet about the place. Compared to the Kulm Hotel St. Moritz 15 minutes away, the Waldhaus is the anti-scene, and they would like to keep it that way.

What the Waldhaus provides that plusher hotels lack is personalized service. At full capacity, 240 guests are looked after by a staff of 145 — some of whom, according to the bedside circular Waldhaus News, have been there for decades. Such attention is reciprocated by exceptional loyalty: Parents bring their children, who eventually bring their children. Two families, one Swiss and another German, have been coming for seven generations, since the 1920s. The Austrian diplomat Maximilian Maria Joseph von Löwenthal-Chlumecky was so enamored of the place that he cumulatively spent more than six years here in the 1970s and 1980s.

The French director Olivier Assayas (“Summer Hours”) — first urged to visit the hotel a decade ago by his friends Serge Toubiana, director of the Cinémathèque Française, and his partner, the novelist Emmanuèle Bernheim — is among the latest to be bewitched by the hotel’s Helvetic charm. “The Waldhaus is like a jewel that’s been preserved,” he says. “It exists in some kind of time warp. It’s the kind of hotel you read about in novels.”

In his new film, “Clouds of Sils Maria,” an aging actress, Maria (Juliette Binoche), agrees to perform the part of an older character in a revival of the play that made her famous. Between rehearsals, she and her assistant (Kristen Stewart, who won a César for the role) ramble along the Swiss Alpine paths, one morning setting out to catch a glimpse of the “Maloja snake,” a rare meteorological event that occurs when a thick column of clouds eerily slides over the Maloja mountain pass and

down the Engadine Valley. (Assayas had marveled at this phenomenon from his bedroom window at the Waldhaus and then again on viewing a 1924 silent film by the German director Arnold Fanck.) In another scene, Maria meets the American starlet who will take over her former role late at night in the Waldhaus’s cavernous lounge, private as only a huge public space can be.

Most family-owned establishments don’t make it to a second generation, much less a fifth. But at the Waldhaus, each has watched the previous one make sacrifices to continue the business, which has survived the Great Depression and two world wars. Felix Dietrich, one of the hotel’s genial fourth-generation patriarchs, is the son of a baker who married into what he quickly realized would be a lifetime commitment. As he explained to me over a beer in



**ANTI-SCENE**  
Clockwise from top left: the Waldhaus lounge, with original walnut paneling; the wrought-iron staircase and chandelier; a cooking class for children; a private salon in the tower with Empire and Biedermeier furniture in 1908, the hotel’s opening year.