



THE HEIGHT OF TRADITION

In Switzerland, it's not uncommon for a hotel to stay in the same family for more than a century. At these four classic properties, the latest generations are upholding old-world standards of graciousness and comfort.

BY ALEXANDRA MARSHALL

SWISS HOSPITALITY almost sounds like a paradox," Urs Kienberger told me over tea at the Waldhaus Sils, a historic hotel in the tiny village of Sils-Maria owned by his family for five generations. "We don't exactly have a reputation for being people of open arms." He comes off as a perfect example of his country's storied restraint, but at the Waldhaus, a family member is always present to

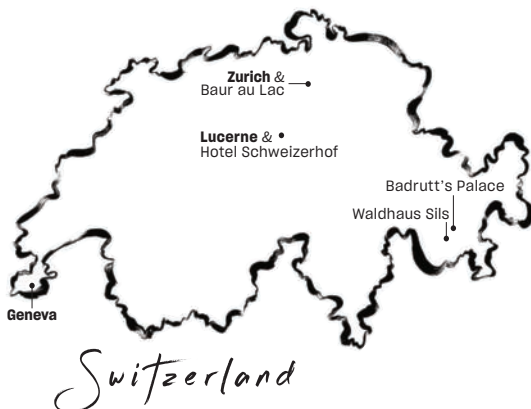
▲ *Waldhaus Sils, a grand hotel in eastern Switzerland's Engadine Valley, has been run by the same family since it opened in 1908.*



warmly greet anyone who crosses the threshold. When I showed up on a cold February night, just as most everyone was sitting down to a light Italian dinner, Henri, a guest's poodle mix, sang out a greeting. The receptionist was dog-sitting.

In fact, Swiss hospitality, with its high standards and fanatical attention to detail, has been a glorious tradition since the Middle Ages. Located at the midpoint of Europe, Switzerland was once a natural rest point for travelers. In the 19th century, Swiss hotels were among the first to have electric lighting and elevators. Tourism became crucial to a country that had few natural resources to export, and the Swiss emerged as the leading hoteliers of Europe.

Many of the original families are still running their properties more than 100 years later. Stem-to-stern makeovers may be infrequent, but none of these five-star hotels skimp on the goodies. We live at a time when luxury is easy to find. But in Switzerland, heritage and authenticity add up to a kind of opulence that's hard to come by.



BAUR AU LAC, ZURICH

One of the first things I noticed upon checking in was the wall of keys behind the concierge. "You have to drop them off and have an interaction," says sixth-generation owner Andrea Kracht.

Opposite is a tidy newsstand selling local papers, magazines, gum, and cigarettes, manned full-time. This lobby institution will never disappear, explains Kracht. "It's an investment that provides human contact." At breakfast, returning guests asked after longtime waitstaff who had retired. "We miss seeing her face," I overheard one of them say.

Baur au Lac's 119 rooms and suites are appointed with gilt-edged lacquer furniture, jewel-toned upholstery, pillow-topped mattresses, and macassar ebony minibars stocked with free tiny bottles of Chivas Regal and Absolut. Founding owner Johannes Baur was a gourmand who incorporated an on-site wine shop when he opened the inn in 1844. Pavillon, the hotel's Michelin two-starred restaurant, is headed by Laurent Éperon, who started in Baur au Lac's kitchens 28 years ago. It was truffle season when I visited, and Éperon's spaghetti with black truffle and veal jus was both refined and fortifying. High tea at the salon-like Le Hall sees the highest

Hotel Schweizerhof, which has stood on the banks of Lake Lucerne since 1845. Left: A member of the staff at Zurich's Baur au Lac.

concentration of locals, who like to stop in for tiered towers of finger sandwiches after a hard day of shopping on the Bahnhofstrasse. bauraulac.ch; doubles from \$903.

HOTEL SCHWEIZERHOF, LUCERNE

I was gazing out a 12-foot-high picture window onto glassy Lake Lucerne, in the very room where Richard Wagner completed *Tristan and Isolde*, when I heard bagpipes. I had been warned that it was whisky night at the Schweizerhof's hopping lobby bar, but when I opened the door to the first-floor hallway, I almost knocked the piper down. Patrick Hauser, who owns the hotel with his brother Michael, is a local member of parliament and did not strike me as the type to green-light a wandering piper, but he explained that when he and Michael took over the hotel's operations in the late 1990s, they wanted to let down their hair.

Hauser's family acquired the Schweizerhof, the first

grand hotel in the storybook medieval town, in 1861; a massive renovation in 2013 and 2014 stripped some of the historic detail upstairs, but the entire ground floor, with elaborate mosaic floors and pink marble columns, has protected-monument status. Hauser likes to bring guests into the ballroom, where he and his brother raced remote-controlled cars as boys, and point out the window his father once cracked with a soccer ball. The family's lakeside mansion, a few minutes away by hotel shuttle, is now a sumptuous fine-dining restaurant called Villa, with subdued silk walls and a menu of seasonal local food. The list of Swiss wines is exceptional. *schweizerhof-luzern.ch; doubles from \$346.*

BADRUTT'S PALACE, ST. MORITZ

At first, I wasn't sure what to make of the forest of upholstered armchairs in the neo-Tudor lobby of

Badrutt's Palace. The effect isn't the most chic, but these plush encumbrances serve a purpose: the hotel has acted as St. Moritz's living room since Caspar Badrutt opened it in 1896. The chair's number, placement, and, in some cases, fabrics are original. Keeping things as they were has been the philosophy of five generations of Badrutts. (Hansjürg Badrutt, who recently passed away, had no children; in 2008, his shares were transferred to general manager emeritus Hans Wiedemann, whose descendants will take over upon his retirement.)

But the reason Badrutt's Palace is ground zero for socializing isn't that it's preserved in amber. The restaurant La Coupole Matsuhisa, in the former tennis court, is by world-renowned chef Nobu Matsuhisa; one floor below is King's Social House, a newly renovated disco-slash-supper club where people like Kate Moss and Robert De Niro have been known to

while away the winter hours.

Rooms are lavish, with staggering views and massive marble bathrooms. Turndown includes a hot-water bottle and the activation of a portable humidifier. In winter, 560 staffers serve 157 rooms and suites—including one named after Alfred Hitchcock, who was once a frequent guest. Of the exceptionally indulgent service, general manager Richard Leuenberger simply said, "We take longer to say no than the others." The staff is able to host virtually any event, including the Indian wedding for 800 that took place a week after I left, without missing a trick. Your car will usually be returned to you after a stay not just washed but gassed up. At checkout, one of the concierges told me there was no dining car on my afternoon train; the next thing I knew, the staff had packed me a picnic lunch. *badruttpalace.com; doubles from \$500.*

WALDHAUS SILS, SILS-MARIA

There is a wholesomeness to the Waldhaus, with its lobby bulletin board displaying the daily menu and a map of local hiking trails, plus tables loaded with complimentary bottles of water and tangerines. The carpet may be a bit worn and some of the upholstery outdated, but once you've soaked up the place's lack of pretension, you won't want them to change a thing.

Actually, the family has changed plenty in its time—they've just done it with restraint. The spa, added two years ago, is all light wood and extraordinary Alpine views, with a welcome absence of music. "We're not trying to imitate the past," said Urs Kienberger, the hotel's director emeritus. "But we've found our place by being oriented to what we've always been."

Before the family opened the Waldhaus in 1908, they erected scaffolding in what was then virgin forest to test the views and the path of the sun. They chose well. The hotel is situated hundreds of feet above sleepy Sils-Maria, and the view is museum-quality: the front rooms face the mountains that Gerhard Richter captured in *Sils*, a series of painted-over photographs. Other Waldhaus guests have included Hermann Hesse, David Bowie, and Olivier Assayas, who found inspiration there for his film *Clouds of Sils Maria*. *The hotel is open from June to October and December to April. waldhaus-sils.ch; doubles from \$556.*



◀ The glass-enclosed pool at Badrutt's Palace looks out over the mountains above St. Moritz.