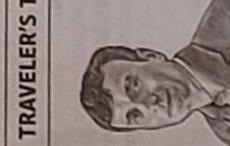


ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

GO AHEAD AND STARE Sils
Maria's vibe is understated—even
if the views of Lake Silvaplana
and the Engadin are not.



TRAVELER'S TALE / RUCHIR SHARMA ON A SERENDIPITOUS SWISS DETOUR—AND DISCOVERY

How to Disappear In Switzerland

LATE LAST SUMMER my friends and I pedaled out of St. Moritz with a guide who, in the understated style of the region, did not say too much, even about where we were headed. The result was the most surprising day I have enjoyed in three decades wandering the globe, and in the country where I least expect surprises: sturdy Switzerland. Heading into the mountains, our first planned stop was an old castle. But as we pulled up, I caught sight of a village in the distance, cradled in a wide green valley with crystalline lakes at either end and

white wooden house where, our guide said, Friedrich Nietzsche worked often in the mid-1880s, at the height of his creativity. Now a museum, the home sits near the shores of Lake Silvaplana, where the inspiration for "Thus Spake Zarathustra" struck Nietzsche one day—"here where my muses live."

Nietzsche's reviews would attract his contemporaries: Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Boris Pasternak, Carl Jung, William Faulkner. Herman Hesse called Sils Maria "paradise on earth."

Many of these luminaries

was also shot in Sils. The movie disappeared quickly but got rave reviews...for its settings.

Close family ties partly, but not fully, explain the cloud of discretion around Sils Maria. Long before Hollywood arrived, the town bought all the surrounding undeveloped land, leaving to locals the question of how loudly to promote its pristine beauty. Ironically, their quiet approach only made Sils more attractive to location scouts.

Above town we could see the 16th Century hamlet of Grevasalvas, a cluster of 20 stone houses that was once a spring settlement for farmers grazing their cattle and later used in the 1798 remake of "Heidi." The surrounding meadows are still alive with the bluebells, yellow rock roses and other wildflowers that served as backdrop for Heidi's hometown, Dorfli.

Stayed at the Waldhaus, "the house in the woods," a 140-room hotel perched on a forested rise.

As we rode up, its upper windows peered at us like curious eyes peeking over the surrounding larch trees. Drawn in, we hiked to lunch on the hotel's terrace.

We were greeted by one of the owners, Patrick Dietrich, and a manager, Flurina Caviezel. On hearing our wonderment that so little a village drew so many literary

giants, they noted that Sils' star-studded guest list also counts composers (Richard Strauss), Nobel winners (Albert Einstein), actors (Charlie Chaplin) and artists (Marc Chagall, Alberto Giacometti).

Showing us around, they pointed to a grand piano that

knows the finger tips of David Bowie, among others. Many celebrities come, they suggested, because others don't. Sils Maria is St. Moritz without the glitz.

At its core, Sils is an enclave not of fame but of old families, mostly Swiss and German. Eighty percent of Waldhaus clients are returning guests, often from families that have been coming for generations, ever since relatives of the Dietrichs opened the hotel back in 1908. Patrick and his brother Claudio are the latest in the unbroken line. Their sister Carla runs the Waldhaus Spa.

We dined on goat cheese salad with figs, pumpkin soup and water from the Waldhaus's mountain spring. Flurina confided that local locals were happy to host the star-studded cast of "Clouds" during filming, but were unimpressed by the movie's drifting plot.

Later we learned that "Coda," a 2019 film in which Patrick Stewart plays an aging pianist revived by a chaste romance with a young writer played by Katie Holmes,

Sils Maria is St. Moritz without the glitz.

Celebrities come here precisely because others don't, I was told.

As we left town, our guide pointed out that Anne Frank and her German-Dutch family vacationed in a home near the Waldhaus in the 1930s, before the horrors described in her World War II diary. While the property is not open to visitors, it added to this day of serial surprises.

We rode off as sunset fell on the slopes of the Engadin peaks and bathed the flowers and stone walls in a deep orange glow—an other superlative sight that explains why those who discover Sils often return.

Some little towns coast forever on an association with one historic guest. A study in Swiss discretion, Sils is the opposite. So many names to drop, but, it seems, in no rush to drop any.

Ruchir Sharma is the Chairman of Rockefeller International and the author of four books including, most recently, "*The 10 Rules of Successful Nations*."