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The Swiss hotel where cellphone calls are restricted to old booths

Waldhaus Sils, a turn-of-the-century establishment in the Alps once favored by Herman Hesse, Luchino Visconti and David Bowie, has found a new use for these long-unused spaces



One of the old telephone booths at the Hotel Waldhaus in Sils Maria, Switzerland.
GEORG BERG (ALAMY)



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Toward the end of the 19th century, [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) took his thinking to another level and predicted the chaos of modernity: the desire for power, the weakness of truth, the death of God, the reversal of values... between 1880 and 1888 he spent many summers in Sils Maria, a picturesque location near St. Moritz in the Swiss Alps that held him hopelessly. "Sils is really wonderful: availing myself of adventurous Latin, I would describe it as *perla perlissima*," the philosopher once wrote to his friend Peter Gast.

Shortly after Nietzsche definitively abandoned Sils, and just a few meters from the house where he had lived (and which still preserves his bedroom intact), the Hotel Waldhaus was constructed. As soon as it was inaugurated in 1908, it [gained a reputation](#) that remains as intact as Nietzsche's former quarters. It was the dawn of the age of communication, and the Waldhaus was one of the first hotels to install telephone booths. It also had a dedicated room for writing postcards, where guests would line up to use one of the desks. From those booths and writing desks the likes of Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Luchino Visconti, Vivien Leigh, Elsa Morante, Joseph Beuys and [David Bowie](#) have communicated, among many others. In 2003, when the cellphone was becoming a must-have item, the coin-operated telephones fell silent.

Before leaving Sils, and having composed the outline of his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche was strolling one evening in 1881 by the nearby Lake Silvaplana, when he paused in front of an "enormous rock, erect like a pyramid." Observing this, he came to the conclusion that everything in life is condemned to repeat itself endlessly, thus initiating his revealing theory of eternal return.

I pondered that coincidence when, in the middle of the same corridor as Nietzsche once walked along, I received a call and, upon answering out loud, a friendly hand took my arm while another pointed to a row of booths with a cellphone symbol on them. I was invited to speak therein, seated and bathed in a soft, red light that indicated the booth was in use. It was a warm emptiness like no other.

The large windows, the art deco ceiling and the soft murmur of conversation led me to the reflection that here is a hotel that, to be perfectly sincere, it is better not to stay at. An Austrian baron once spent 2,247 nights as a guest. It retains a chamber music quartet who perform Handel as beautifully as in the Olivier Assayas movie *Clouds of Sils Maria*, a masterpiece on the passage of returning time that was filmed in the town.

Urs Kienberger is a cultured and refined former member of the board of administration at the hotel, whose idea it was to return the booths to their original purpose. Kienberger describes the Waldhaus thus: "This is not a place where everything has to be in order: you can read, use your computer, but a telephone changes the atmosphere in a room like this. People don't talk in the same way. We love interaction, spontaneity, children playing and even people arguing, but a cellphone is another matter, it changes the way people relate to each other, one person speaking alone into the void... it's too distracting. Whoever needs to talk can do so in the booth."

In the old correspondence room, only one of the six desks is occupied, by a woman writing postcards. Nietzsche was right when he said one cannot want anything other than necessity. A writing desk is a writing desk and a telephone booth is a telephone booth, in 1908 and in 2022. Here, everything is what it seems.

Use Lahoz is a Spanish award-winning novelist who currently teaches at the Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po).