



TO THE MANOR BARN

Caroline Phillips shacks up in the rustic annex of an über-posh hotel in the Swiss Alps where guests pay through the nose to be treated like cattle

Switzerland presents the tourist with two competing visions: getting back to nature as you glide effortlessly — or tumble gracelessly — down a black run, and avoiding nature entirely in some of its best hotels, tapping away on your BlackBerry as you ignore your family. The two rarely collide, so when one of those five-star hotels offers a stay in the most expensive rustic hut on the planet, something uniquely, oddly Swiss is happening.

The Walig Hut was built in 1786 as a summer home for farmers bringing their cattle up the mountain for new pastures. It's a simple but charming shack with an outside lavatory, and it belongs to the Palace Hotel, better known for its luxurious suites and the mirrored GreenGo nightclub. Most of the hut's guests are from the hotel and go just for a night or meal, but you don't have to be a Palace resident to stay

there: you have simply to stump up £1,150 a night for up to two adults and two children, dinner and drinks included.

The hut is only getting more expensive, thanks to the devaluation of the pound by 40 per cent against the Swiss franc. For that price you could have a deluxe suite in London's Ritz — with Louis XVI-style interior, gold-leaf antiques and a view over Green Park.

So what is peculiarly palatial about the Walig Hut? It's most likely that Andrea Scherz, the savvy director and owner of the Palace and third generation of his family to run it, has alighted upon something zeitgeisty. There's a trend for wealthy holidaymakers to seek authentic experiences, to get back to basics, and the Walig Hut fulfils that need for an exclusive experience, plus an escape from mobile phones, texts and internet connection. The hut pro-

Above: The Walig Hut offers unbeatable views and, despite its remote location, retains a taste of luxury within

vides a refuge from modern madness and, like most authentic experiences, it's a status symbol to boot.

I'm not saying that a few barbecued steaks or a picnic or an overnight stay with dinner in the hut can be dubbed a 'truly authentic experience' — it's not exactly six weeks in the Borneo jungle or trekking solo in Antarctica. But I will settle for authenticity-lite, nature with help from the Palace.

My teenage daughter Anya and I set off to the Walig Hut in a Mercedes — it's a mere 30 minutes from the Palace. There's a mountain road up to the hut that I'm told is normally only accessible by pony-trap or hiking and mostly seems to be used by cattle being herded along it at a proper bovine pace, behind whose ambling we got stuck. Did you know that in Switzerland only police cars are allowed to overtake cows?

The Walig Hut is set above Gsteig, a few miles from Gstaad, at 5,600 feet, where the Alps rise dramatically. Mountain highs are the big lure. There are views over the Saanenland which seem to stretch as far as the Himalayas, and the hikes are stunning. We wandered along paths finding chamomile and flowers in vivid pinks and purples, and through lush pastures in which cattle bells fill the air with harmonious clankings. We foraged for mushrooms, took photographs and watched the setting sun turn the mountains a rose-petal pink. Such peace, solitude and calm — it's enough to make a teenager crazy.

The hut has an authentic kitchen, a separate dining room with sheepskins strewn over the chairs, a twin bedroom in

the eaves and a double bedroom, plus a few add-ons such as the most luxe of feather-filled duvets, pillows fit for a king, snug animal skins on the beds and a master bedroom the décor of which is more Harrods than herdsman. There are also some ceilings so low that I have to stoop and delightful decorative artefacts such as old skis, toboggans and antique farm implements.

But now for the really authentic bit. The Walig Hut offers only intermittent solar-powered lighting — and when the lights go out there are torches, candles and gasoline lamps. Rather than a jacuzzi, there's an outside toilet, and there's neither a shower nor a bath. Instead there's a basic sink with running cold water — and if some like it hot, they can boil *eau de la montagne* on the wood-burning stove.

Additionally, despite my daughter's best attempts, there's no internet or phone reception. There is a log fire, and outside a mountain stream trickles into an animal trough, which doubles as a fridge and has bottles bobbing in it. There's also a cow barn attached to the hut and scented with genuine bovine perfume. Normally these four-legged folk are donging their bells and mooing all night, but thankfully they were having a sleepover with friends during our visit.

One of the special things about the Palace is its extraordinarily attentive staff, some of whom have worked there for over 40 years. Maurizio, the charming head waiter, has been there a mere 28 years but still manages to offer multiple-star hotel service. The magical touch of the Palace staff was transported up the mountain — and that really made the experience unique. Maurizio oversees guests at the Walig Hut, offering exclusive attention along with top nosh. In the name of authenticity, he wears a traditional Swiss shirt with embroidery round the neck, rather than his habitual tuxedo.

Maurizio showed us how everything worked in the hut, then with a light touch and friendly manner served a delicious three-course dinner: mountain cheese, smoked hams and dried beef and salami on a wooden board. Then Emmental and Vacherin fondue, followed by a feast of flans, cakes and crème de gruyère and petits fours. Afterwards Maurizio beelined off down the mountain, leaving us to have time alone to listen to the sound of silence under a million stars. Obliging, even Anya's portable DVD player gave up the ghost.

In the morning, it was chilly inside because there was no fire — and we proved pathetic at Girl Guide skills. It was cold going outside to the odiferous loo, but these are minor inconveniences. The location, peace and natural beauty surrounding the hut are little rivalled. The light was clean, clear. The snowcapped mountains were blue and the red geraniums on our window sills moved gently in the breeze. The farmers were bringing their cows down the mountain: a cacophony of 25 different bells. And there was the gurgling of spring water as it trickled down the mountain. What's not to like? *J*

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Alpine night for two adults, including three-course dinner, from £1,150