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Appenzell: Aescher-Wildkirchli

A childhood dream come true

When I was a little girl I collected postcards and received an old one from this amazing hut, which was impressively built into the cliffs. I could never remember where it was, but the picture stuck in my mind ever since and I always dreamed of one day visiting that amazing place.

A few months before my last trip to Switzerland and by pure chance (through Facebook that is!) I stumbled across a photograph of this hut! I was delighted to find out it was a place in Switzerland – even though looking at the architecture and ingenuity, this wasn't much of a surprise. That special place in the postcard was in fact the "Berggasthaus Aescher-Wildkirchli" – and so I started planning my first trip to Appenzell.

The 170-year-old guesthouse, located at 1,454 meters above sea level, is in the most precarious position, clinging to the foot of a vertical cliff face. It can only be accessed by a combination of cable car and hiking. My boys loved the cable car that took us from Wasserauen to the Ebenalp Mountain, one of the most beautiful areas of the Alpstein Range. On the high plateau defined by rich Alpine flora you have amazing views of Appenzell, the hills skirting St. Gallen, the region around Lake Constance and the impressive panorama of the Alpstein mountain chain.

A 20 minute steep walk lead us from the Ebenalp through the Wildkirchli caves. The three caves are notable for the traces of paleolithic (Neanderthal) habitation dating to 50,000 to 30,000 BC. There's a hermit hut that houses a large bear skeleton found in one of the caves, which dates back to 90,000 BC.

Once you've gone through the slippery and dimly lit caves you get to the 400-year-old Wildkirchli cave church, a tiny chapel built into the cliff face. Hermit monks lived and worshipped here from 1658 to 1853. Walking down that tiny and steep path makes you wonder who would ever get the idea to live up here, not to mention building a chapel – hundreds of years ago!

We had a few hundred metres to walk further down the steep side of the mountain and finally we arrived at our breathtaking destination. Tucked into the side of the cliff face is the Berggasthaus Aescher, our long anticipated accommodation for the night. Originally a hut housing farmers, goats, and cows, Berggasthaus Aescher evolved into a guesthouse for pilgrims coming to the monks for spiritual guidance.

What makes this building truly unique are its walls: It is built with only 3 walls, the fourth wall is actually the mountain's natural rock face! (you can see it clearly in the photograph of the bathroom)

We had arranged to spend the night at the hut, which made our little adventure even more special. We were playing cards on the large terrace, enjoyed tasty Appenzeller specialties (Schwaatemage, Berewegge mit Schmalz & Holderwii) and treasured the stunning views – all the while making sure our 3-year old wasn't falling off the side of the mountain. Eeek!

We followed a childhood dream of mine that turned out to be one of the most special experiences in my life.

Tanja Latham-Zurbrugg

