



TRAVEL Going off track



Heididorf, Heidi's original home

PLAYING HEIDI AND SEEK

Johanna Spyri's classic tale of Heidi comes alive in Switzerland, where a magical trail leads you to her house

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There she sits. A blithe spirit. Not yet 10. Her raven-black hair bristly like coarse hay. The ruffles of her blouse neat. A twinkle sparkling off her black eye. She wears a grin which could have been a wide smile. On the wooden table lies an open book. But her gaze is distracted. She almost looks at me, curious why I have walked into her home in the Swiss Alps. She is Heidi, the girl that author Johanna Spyri strung a two-part story around in 1881: *Heidi's Years of Learning & Travel*, and *Heidi Makes Use of What She has Learned*.

Heidi is not alone in the room. There's Peter, her best friend, in a blue felt cap and a red scarf snaked hastily around his neck. The goatherd looks bouncy, the kind who'd rather roll down the slope than read a book. Above the table is a lamp, lit even in daytime. Heidi's attic-bedroom has a small bed and a doll rocks in a cradle. The closet door is ajar and her Bundner Tracht (a traditional village dress of skirt, apron and jacket) flutters in the crisp August breeze. The kitchen is sparse but the lower room has a cheese hanger and a cold-storage room. This is the 300-year-old Heididorf, Heidi's original home, the biggest attraction of the utterly touristy Heidi Trail in Switzerland.

I take a train from Lausanne to Bad Ragaz where a 1948-poppy red bus which carried mail, once upon a time, waits for me. The driver manoeuvres the vehicle through vineyards and green landscape as it sputters and groans at every incline.

I am accompanied by Petra Fausch of Graubuden Tourism, who talks of the Heidi Trail that opened in 2001 to mark the 100th death anniversary of Spyri and comprises landmarks from the book. A few minutes later, the bus screeches into a parking lot. "Carry water. And the backpack. It's a long

walk up to Heidi's home," warns Nuot Lietha of Davos Klosters Tourism.

I obey him and begin trudging up. Questions, however, run through my head like a faulty diskette. Heidi is fictional. How come there is an original Heidi home? And that too, a real home? Was I walking up to a historical abstract? I don't arrive at a conclusion — instead, I pant furiously up the cruel incline that has several arrows marking the way to Heididorf.

Suddenly, at a bend, a white house rises on a mound, as if washed up. Little children giggle by the petting zoo that had ibex (mountain goats), the kind Peter herded. Under the shade of a tree sits two cows and a calf. Sculpted and painted to near-reality. And finally, I see Heidi's House.

The scene replicates Heidi's life who, as an orphan, was raised by a cruel aunt after the premature death of her parents, before being shipped off to her paternal grandfather's, who spent his time being vexed with God. This is where Heidi first came to live with her grandfather and where, as Spyri puts it so eloquently, "Every day, her cheeks grew rosier and her

eyes more sparkly."

"Heidi is fictional. So, how is this her original home?" I blurt out. The guide, who is in the middle of narrating Heidi's story to those unfamiliar with the story and the book, stops mid-sentence. "If you look at Johanna Spyri's notes, there's a drawing of a house. This house is based on that," she explains.

Apparently, Spyri was inspired to write Heidi after learning about a girl called Marie who lived in 'Ober Rofels' (now the Heidi village). The author also probably took cues from an 1830 story by Hermann Adam von Kamp. Fans of the book will remember the pastoral settings of the book and its no wonder that Spyri gets her landscape right. After all, the author, born in Hirzel in June 1827, had spent many a summer around Graubunden area.

I spot a picture of Spyri in the museum above the souvenir shop. The sepia-toned picture, surrounded by an oval, wooden frame, captures the hint of a smile, as she leans over a well cushioned chair. The museum is relatively empty although the souvenir shop is crowded with tourists shopping for Heidi pencils, Heidi

wine, Heidi miniatures, Heidi posters, Heidi clocks, Heidi tees, Heidi hoodies... the choice is endless.

A small pathway leads to the Heidi Alp (Ochsenberg) which is almost a two-hour trek to 3,645 ft above sea level. The 12 illustrated markers on the trail break the monotony of a tedious trek. The longer Heidi Trail starts at Mainefield railway station. Signs lead visitors through the town, past Brandis Castle and then to Heidibrunnen (Heidi fountain) which was designed by artist Hans Walt in honour of Spyri.

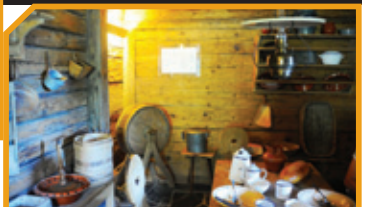
The road to Heidi Alps seems daunting and my aching legs are not ready for the two-hour trek. In Heididorf, I sit on a wooden bench and think of Heidi. Not Shirley Temple's version of Heidi in the 1937 Hollywood film. Or, the Japanese blonde Heidi. The real Heidi from Spyri's pages who "lay under the heavy coverlid, her cheeks rosy with sleep, her head peacefully resting on her little round arm...as if dreaming of something pleasant". I am not sure what Heidi dreamt of. But that August afternoon in Switzerland, I know that Heidi and I shared a beautiful, blue sky.



A portrait of Johanna Spyri



A board at the entrance to the home



The period kitchen in Heididorf



Sculpted cows in the Heidi Village



Heidi and Peter in Heididorf



Heidi in Heididorf