

The sacristan couple from the Salvenkirchlein.

With the gondola to the church. About a special place of power and its guardians

They look like happy hikers looking forward to the mountain experience. She in light-coloured functional trousers and checked blouse, he in a loose polo shirt, both with sturdy shoes, sharing the sporty rucksack. When Hans and Thea Neuschwendter float up to the Hohe Salve in the gondola, their hearts are laughing - even though they already know every angle. Because now they are on their way to work, the place of action: the Salvenkirchlein, the little church which rises to the sky at an altitude of 1829 metres. It is dedicated to St John the Baptist and is Austria's highest pilgrimage church. Up here, Hans is a sacristan - and Thea helps. The two of them only come in a pair.

Though the couple would never speak of “work” and “assignment” – rather of “opportunity” and “task”. When Hans was asked 17 years ago, he didn’t hesitate for one second and happily took on the sacristan’s responsibility. “This was an honour for me”, says the 83-year old and his wife, three years younger, adds “A special power emanates from this place and we are lucky to work here”.

A friendly “Servus” to the lift staff and to the waiters of the Gipfelalm Hohe Salve restaurant (they know each other), then a few more steps further to the Salvenkirchlein. The key is hidden in the depths of the rucksack – 25 cm long, heavy as cast iron and quickly found. “This is like coming home”, says Hans as he opens the massive, wooden door. And Thea notes, “We have to clean”. Depending on the weather and wind direction dust is driven through the cracks inside the church, onto the floor, the pews and the saints in the sanctuary.

The most prominent place right at the front belongs to St. John the Baptist – to his head, to be precise, which rests life-size on a plate in the shrine. At peak times, there were more than 100 heads of various styles and epochs in and around the Salvenkirchlein. Pilgrims brought them with them when they asked for relief from their pains. They hoped to be cured from headaches, depression and back pain. Some women also begged to find the right man. Later the heads were taken to the archives in Brixen im Thale, one is now at the Folklore Museum in Innsbruck.

For more than 400 years, the Salvenkirchlein has defied the rigours of the weather at this exposed location. Lightning struck several times, it burned down and was rebuilt. The friars and guardians of the Salvenkirchlein were first mentioned in a document in 1617. “They had more to do back then than we do today,” muses Thea. In addition to classic sacristan services, they ran a bar for thirsty pilgrims and warned the population of approaching thunderstorms - with large white linen cloths that they waved on the cone-shaped mountain and which were visible from everywhere. As an acoustic signal, they also rang the “Salvenhund”, a weather bell with a resounding sound.

There are a total of three bells in the tower, all of which now work at the push of a button. “That really makes it easier,” says Hans, who appreciates the electric operation just as much as “his” sacristy, which is lovingly carpentered with pine wood.

What are the classic duties of a sacristan? Keeping the church in good shape, initiating and accompanying renovation and restoration work - this year it's the turn of the chancel, and the windows will also have to be replaced soon. “The main task is to prepare the masses - everything has to be there and in order”, says Hans. Thea adds the candle sales: “After all, we need income.” Every first Wednesday of the month, the two even hold devotions themselves.

Highlights, however, are the pilgrimages which have endured over the centuries. In the past, the aristocratic gentlemen rode up, the ladies had themselves carried. The hub of the travel logistics was the area where the Salvenbahn middle station is located today. Here there were horses, donkeys and sedan chairs. Today, most people hike up. Thea knows: “That clears the head – and fills the heart”.

Very poignant for both of them are St. John’s Day (June 24th) and St. Anne’s Day (July 26th) when hundreds of people flock to the Salvenkirchlein. And weddings, of course, about half a dozen a year. “Recently a couple came and wanted to show their child where they had tied the knot – a special moment” the sacristan couple remembers and adds “When people stand devoutly in front of the altar and you feel how they can feel the power of this place, it makes us happy”. Already the Celts had discovered the Hohe Salve as a place of worship. A true place of power. Those, who think they are up here in an inn, unpacking drinks and talking loudly, are sometimes put in their place by Thea. Hans, meanwhile, keeps a low profile.

The guardians of the Salvenkirchlein themselves celebrated their golden wedding anniversary here in 2014 – and they already look forward to their diamond wedding anniversary in two years. Until then, everything runs as usual. Hans has everything firmly under control, Thea exudes her natural warmth and acts wonderfully pragmatic. For the start of the next season, she will probably go for wonderful peonies again, made of plastic. Because when they both are not there, only the vestibule of the Salvenkirchlein is open and no one notes that the splendour of flowers at the front is not real. By the way, the season is linked to the summer operating times of the cable car, in winter the Salvenkirchlein is closed.

Tip: The Hohe Salve is considered the most beautiful panoramic mountain in the Kitzbühel Alps. Numerous hiking trails with amazing panoramic views lead around it. At the top, at the Gipfelalm Hohe Salve – directly next to the Salvenkirchlein – there is the “Umadum Stub’n” restaurant with its revolving terrace: just take a seat and enjoy the 360-degree view with Kaiserschmarrn and dumplings.

Holiday Region Hohe Salve

The Holiday Region Hohe Salve combines town and country. Wörgl with 14,000 inhabitants, shopping facilities, restaurants and cafés is considered the gateway to the Kitzbühel Alps. The villages of Hopfgarten, Itter, Kelchsau, Angath, Angerberg, Mariastein and Kirchbichl each have their own charm - with village structures and a lot of romance in intact nature, beautiful inns and churches.

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