

An Unforgettable Weekend in a 325-year-old Austrian House

Meisenberg: The last word for a perfect getaway.

I'm writing this on a bus on my way to German class. It's a Monday, and the hustle has just begun. The bus is standing at the signal; cars are lined up behind. An old man on the pavement knit his eyebrows at the cyclist who simply disappeared in a flash, nearly throwing him into the fence. A drama was being staged. On a normal day, I would have been an active audience to it. But today, it's just my body on the bus.

My mind, on the other hand, is still hovering over the yellowing hills, the grazing cows in the meadows, the red mushrooms carpeting the woods, the church bells echoing from the valley, and the 325-year-old house that my mind has since weekend taken for lease.

Meisenberg is a beautiful Dorf/village situated 1000m above sea level. Its curvy bends and the breathtaking panorama of the valley hidden between the trees are enough to turn any common man into a poet. For all good reasons, the 21st century seems not to have reached Meisenberg yet. It's a place where the TV is not the centre of the house and radios still blare through windows. It's not yet a full-fledged tourist destination per se. So we didn't feel 'touristy', except for the occasional gawks of the residents who, as Dr Topf said, have not seen an Indian till the day before.

We stayed at Meisenberg 1, a particularly famous Hof on the hill with a history to tell. It's a Carinthian farmhouse from 1690 with a closed courtyard near Deutsch Griffen and Sirnitz in the Gurktal. The Hof was bought by Dr Cornelia Topf's father after World War 2. Following his death, the Hof came into the care of Dr Topf.



Before we get into the house, you should meet our hostess. Dr Cornelia Topf is a young woman at heart bubbling with energy who lives in Meisenberg 1, manages the farmhouse, hosts its

guests, and maintains its surroundings all by herself. She worked as a professional counsellor based in Augsburg, now she is stretching out in retirement when she could “finally be her own boss”. When a smile pursued her lips after quoting it, for a brief moment, I thought about all the housewives in India who can never understand its meaning. Here, she does what she wants as free as the wind blowing wherever it wills. As she rolls up her sleeves and puts on garden shoes, she exhumes a kind of infectious enthusiasm and determination I wish I had in my twenties.



Day 1: Exploration Mode

The Bauernhof is three-storied, of which the uppermost and the ground floor are for private use. The guests are hosted on the middle floor with two large bedrooms, a bathroom, a super-large dining-cum-kitchen and long balconies with a sweeping view of the overlapping mountains hanging from the clouds. Besides, the Hof stands in an enormous courtyard. There is a barn, a pond with a fountain, a wooden house near the vegetable garden and a place to grill in the backyard during Summer. Believe it or not, the Hof itself took us half a day to tour it.

Now let's step out of the Hof. The closest neighbour lives about 10 minutes walk away. We wanted to buy some groceries for the next two days. The nearest grocery shop was downhill in Deutsch-Griffen, about 15 minutes by car.

You see, business is personal there. Shortly after we billed for pasta, pesto, sausage, bread and butter, an old man walked into the shop after 12. The supermarkets in Deutsch-Griffen normally close at 12 noon on Saturdays and reopen only on Mondays. He was welcomed with the same cheerful smile that we received us. Had it been Munich or anywhere in Germany, no one gets into the shop after the closing hour. No matter if the King of Britain is at the door, the shop remains closed (okay, that's an exaggeration). The ground for the difference is that the shopkeeper in Deutsch-Griffen had fewer customers (lesser population) and knew everyone by his or her name. He instantly noticed we were tourists, which is impossible in a city. To be honest, I was more than impressed: I wanted to live there in a place where my name is known.

Cornelia said we could get milk and eggs from her neighbour. In the city, you would have added the adjective 'organic' to it. She didn't have to. It was nothing out of the ordinary there.



Nicky sold milk and eggs. She had an animal farm with cows, hens, ducks, geese and pigs, in addition to Daisy, the dog, and two cute cats. She lived a few houses away from us. When Dr Topf asked us if we had the right shoes for the walk, I pondered over its implication instead of a reply. Of course, I didn't know it meant 3 km on foot then. So we walked for about 45 minutes through the woods, crossed meadows, again the woods and yet again up the meadows, and reached the famous Nicky's

farm. There it was, on the hilltop, a cluster of four buildings: a long cowshed, a 100-year-old Bauernhof/Farmhouse, another house for the poultry, and a new building.

Nicky was tall, well-built and fast-talking. Her husband, Alex, and two of her four sons were placing the roof for their new building. We met with two of her other sons in the woods on our way to Nicky's. One had a plough in hand, and the other was watching him. They were making a channel on the ground. I couldn't imagine these kids existed today for real. They were a stark contrast to the kids whose fingers dig into smartphones and their eyes stuck on television.

Nicky showed her farm around. She introduced us to her 14 days old calves and other growing-up and grownup cows in the barn. Then she took us to the room where she was raising newly born ducklings and placed one on my palm. I had never before held a small living thing in my palm. Its tiny feet prickled my skin, and I was afraid it might fall off and hurt itself. Jay looked more comfortable and friendly with the duckling. After buying milk, eggs and marmalade from her makeshift shop, we bade her adieu.

It drizzled in the evening. We had a cup of coffee on the balcony overseeing the waves of mountains dressed in grey clouds. Later, we had pasta and read



books by the window side under the light warm table light. And that was our first day where no thoughts from far away echoed in our world. We could've been in Neptune as well.

Day 2: Sunday – Becoming them.

The cows were bathing in the sun when we woke up. The tree that stood close to our room had its leaves washed in dew. There was nothing for us to do. We had planned slow and easy holidays. So we gave a lazy start to the day. Locally made bread loaf with sunflower seeds in the crust went well with the handmade apple marmalade. Our breakfast was complete with hot milk and scrambled eggs from Nicky's. Jay liked the eggs so much that I think he would go the 400 km just to get them. They had thick egg white and bouncy yolk that make the best half-boiled egg to serve on a plate.

Later that day, Jay went for a solitary, reflective walk in the woods while I stayed back home to finish Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*. By the time he got back, I had finished the book, and the lunch was ready. It was a simple lunch with minimal cooking. We didn't make anything Indian. For these three days, we tried to eat, think and live like *Deutsche*/Germans sharing the same roof with our *Deutsche Gastgeberin*/ German hostess.

I learned more about Cornelia over lunch. The more I knew about her, the further my respect for her went. She is a prolific writer on personality development. All her books are available on Amazon. Some of them have been translated into other languages as well. Thanks to her, she presented us with one of her books called *Small Talk* as a parting gift.

Every city has a different story to tell, but all villages have the same content. Be it in India or Austria, village life is similar. You see, in a highly multicultural city like Munich, you will never have an unannounced visitor, be it your next-door neighbour or your parents. I thought it was a universal rule all over Europe until Cornelia's neighbour, 10 minutes away, rang the bell at the least expected moment and gave us all a fright. She had come with her three children for a casual talk at noon. This pretty much sums up a typical scene in an Indian village.

Later that evening, we went for a two-and-a-half-hour hike. Autumn had reached the forest early. The trees were yellowing from the top. It appeared as if they wore a golden crown. This walk was a watershed moment in my life where my perspectives took an irreversible turn. As an Indian, I had never experienced the typical European definition of Autumn till that day. For me, Autumn was the hopeless season of all. It was senility, decay and descent. After all, all the poets that I had read said so! Jay said Autumn wasn't even at its prime, but I found my heart speedily moving away from Spring.

"No, dear poets, Autumn isn't Despair anymore;
it's the freedom to fall and to be reborn.
How did you not fall for the Fall
when nature wore the golden Crown?"

On our return to Meisenberg, we stopped by a brook running across a stretch of houses along the road. It looked surreal, like a fairy tale within a fairy tale- only more beautiful than a fairy tale ever written down.

“I envy them,” said I. “They get to wake up to this sound of water, and this priceless view, don’t they?”

Jay looked at me, then sent a long view at the houses and smiled. “True, but isn’t it ironic that...” He narrated a story about beauty. A foreigner visits a picturesque land and marvelled at its beauty to a native. The native replied, “Sahib, but one can’t eat beauty.” It echoed deep.

Day 3: The Other Side of Joy

Jay was packing when I woke up. You know that feeling when the alarm goes off, you wish you could grab another five minutes’ sleep? I wished I could grab another day in Meisenberg. I know it might sound so filmy, but if you should know, we both took a stroll buying us more time by the pond in the courtyard. It was a sunny morning, and we sat there until noon.

As much as I enjoyed being in Meisenberg, I enjoyed writing about it in retrospect. But if I thought I could ease my nostalgia at the end of this travel writing, I’m wrong. I still long for the calmness, fresh air and chilly evenings all the more. Though we have travelled far from it, as we went down the curves and hairpin bends, we knew we would come back again, whenever as soon as is.



The signal has turned green, and the vehicles are scattered in different ways. The Sun is going back home, and so is everyone on the bus. Somehow I feel a tug in the corner of my heart. I still hoped I had snoozed the alarm and got to spend another day at Meisenberg.

If you wish to spend a day in Meisenberg or know more about it, [follow this link](#).