

A Girl Guide in the Swiss Alps

By Chelsey Gould

Have you ever seen the magnificent mountains stretch as far as the sky? Felt the ground only ever at an angle of upwards or downwards? Immersed yourself in a totally different culture, while making international friends from all over?

I got the chance to do just that this past summer with Girl Guides of Canada. Every year the organization offers domestic and international trips for older Girl Guides to take advantage of. This year, for the second time, I was one of eight girls across Canada selected to go on an adventure, this time to Switzerland (last year having gone to Churchill, Manitoba).

Switzerland is a special place to Girl Guides and Girl Scouts all over the world, because this is where the first WAGGGS (World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts) World Centre was built, in 1932. From across the valley facing the town of Adelboden, surrounded by humongous rolling mountains and waterfalls, is where Helen Storrow and Falk (two very famous figures in our association's history) built Our Chalet. Here lies the grand heritage of an organization that is currently represented by 10 million members all over the world.

Our Chalet, like the other current five World Centres, is a gathering place for all members of WAGGGS, although technically any person is welcome to stay here. This kind of place sees girls regularly travelling from all corners of the earth, and creates opportunities for international friendships as well as discovering more about other Guide and Scout organizations. Here, your passion as one in 10 million intensifies.

Our Chalet is all about adventure and challenging yourself past your boundaries. Since the centre is in the perfect place for recreation, there are endless amounts of ways to do just that. The everyday hiking in itself is intense, with the constant changes in elevation. When I was there in July, we had the opportunity to go to an adventure park where there were ziplines, high ropes courses, rock face climbing, and bungee jumping off of a high bridge. Another day, we journeyed to a deep gorge where we abseiled over rushing water; truly one of the most terrifying and exciting times in my life.

As Helen Storrow said, here you can truly find "peace for the soul". Everywhere you look is a postcard! It was impossible to memorize all the names of the beautiful mountains around you. Some remain snow capped all year round. When just a few clouds roll in, it is quite a sight to see them surrounding the tops of the mountains. The towns are also very quaint and a delight to tour. Every house is built in the chalet style and they are often decorated with flowers and gardens. As well, each chalet usually has a special phrase engraved on the house as well as the year it was built. These chalets are not just clustered in towns, as several of them also dot all across the landscape.

There was a day when we travelled out of our valley into the Lauterbrunnen Valley, also known as "The Valley of 72 waterfalls". This place is said to have inspired J.R.R. Tolkien's Misty Mountains in *The Hobbit*, after his long hike through the Swiss Alps. Hidden within these mountains is a special gem- the Trummelbach Falls. This thunderous stream of water winds and twists in and out of the mountain with amazing motion. The most astounding part of this is that these falls used to be invisible; it wasn't until tunnels were dug in 1877 that tourists like us were able to go *inside* the mountain to view this amazing phenomenon.

At Our Chalet, there is a famous overnight hike up the Bunderspitz Mountain that only the most fit hikers can sign up for. This hike involves departure in the evening, a sleep on straw in the Cheesemaker's Hut, and then a very early morning departure from there in the dark, which leads you up to the peak to see the sun rise. As an avid hiker, I was super stoked to have a chance to do this; however, it was not to be. With severe thunderstorm warnings in the forecast, it had to be cancelled. However, on our last day during the program, I did make the challenging hike to and up to the peak of the Elshorn Mountain, which is 2,341 meters high above sea level. I did not hike up from the very bottom, however the hike was indeed very strenuous- but well worth it! The view was surreal, and you could see the entire valley and beyond, the various towns, Lake Thun, *more* mountains, and the faraway flat part of the Swiss country, all from overhead. That was a moment that absolutely took my breath away.

At Our Chalet, we got the chance to meet staff members and participants from all over. Surprisingly most of the participants were American; however we had a group from Denmark and another from Australia. The superb volunteer staff members were the ones who were the most diverse; Africa, Sweden, Finland, England, Hong Kong, South Korea, the U.S.A., and Brazil are just some countries to name. Everyone was so kind and welcoming there, and you were easily able to have fun and talk about where you were from. As well, we heard wonderful stories to pass on from adults who had been there numerous times before. Not only did I love the people at Our Chalet, but I loved my fellow Canadian girl guides as well. We came from all over Canada, and prior to departing for our trip had never met each other before. We quickly formed friendships that I know will last a lifetime.

The World Centres are legendary places for us in Girl Guides. All are unique and desirable to visit. In addition to Our Chalet, we have Pax Lodge in England, Sangam in India, Our Cabana in Mexico, and our recent pride and joy, Kusafiri in Africa. This latest world centre actually started out as a pilot project four years ago, as a world centre that would move its location all over Africa, so that girls there would have a better chance to get a world experience. Now, it is an established moving centre, whose name was actually just released on October 5th! This World Centre is a major accomplishment in WAGGGS, and this is why I absolutely love being a member of Girl Guides of Canada and WAGGGS. Extraordinary things happen within this organization that I love, and I will always cherish that. Our Chalet was such a surreal place to travel to, and I know that I will return once more, at least in the winter time to try the winter activities available. As well, I would most absolutely love the chance to visit all of the other World Centres. These places truly are extraordinary in what they have to offer and the values they carry through in representing WAGGGS. The opportunity to travel to one of these places as a seventeen year old was an honour, and it is something that I will never forget.