



The Observer

High on a hill stood a weary cowherd...

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Kate Winslet seeks enlightenment at the Ananda Spa, high in the Himalayas. Oprah unwinds at the Ashram in California. Me? I've saved the \$4,000 a week that these posh lifestyle retreats charge for their tree-bark tea and horrid hill runs and decided to go to a very different sort of zen hideaway. I'm not going just because I need to destress, detox and drop a dress size. It's also because I'm cheap.

You see, my holiday is free. By signing up for a working farm 'holiday' with Wwoof (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) I get food, accommodation in an enchanting mountain hut in the Austrian Alps, and as much fresh milk as I can squeeze. All this in exchange for a load of calorie-melting, back-breaking exercise which, rather charmingly, the locals refer to as 'work'. They've obviously never done Pilates.

I've signed up for the whole 12-week summer season working as a milkmaid in Maria Alm, an hour south of Salzburg beneath the craggy Steinerne Meer mountains, although you can come to a farm like this one for as little as two or three days, and Wwoof operates similar placements around the world. I'll be asked to do a few hours' work a day (milking, cleaning, herding and whatever else is needed) and will be staying in a wooden hut, 1,500m up on the mountainside, which is inhabited only in the summer when farmers bring the cows up to graze the high pastures.

I'll be sharing it with one other person - the farmer or his son, who alternate shifts. My bedroom is in what used to be the goat stable - with four bunk beds, a fluffy featherbed, and a wall that vibrates when the cows scratch their heads against the other side. There is no hot water, though I have use of the shower in the next-door hut. On arrival, I immediately start breathing in the clean mountain air, and relishing the idyllic Sound of Music scenery, but I'm aware there will be a steep learning curve and a very different lifestyle to get to grips with.

'Zee cows can be naughty,' explains Toni Hirschbichler, the farmer's son, who is teaching me the animal husbandry ropes. A ski instructor in winter, 23-year-old Toni has been lifting 30-litre milk cans since the age of 12. 'You von't get funktionation from zem unless you hit zem. Hardt.'

For a city girl, hard is the key word. I soon learn you've got to get up mighty early to catch cows, lose weight and feed the world all at the same time. As in 4:30am early. Much to my surprise, in the pink of dawn I find myself schlumping hither and yon over a buttercup-filled meadow as fast as two wellies allow, ineffectually shooing my free-range herd downhill toward the hut for milking. Our herd boasts 18 Fleckviehs, a popular breed in Austria, each weighing in at around 600 kilos, slightly lighter than a Smart car, with double the acceleration. Toni is right. The harder I whack them, the more funktionation I get. The more funktionation I get, the more I like it. Kick-boxing, be damned - I'm burning calories like never before!

Cows safely in barn, Toni gets on with the milking and I turn to my other twice-daily duties. Slicing kindling with - get a load of this, Nigella - the bread knife. Wheedling the 50-year-old wood-burning stove to life. Heaving and heating big pots of water and using it to wash the milking equipment. Finally, after sweeping, mopping, and cracking open an occasional beer for assorted passers-by, I have the rest of the day free to explore local hiking paths, eat strudel at the excellent Mooserwirt restaurant in Maria Alm, and take serious naps. I may be a milkmaid, but I still need my beauty sleep.

'It's always the same with women,' announces Toni Hirschbichler Sr rather archly, as he surveys me searing through enough matches to burn Rome in an attempt to boil water

for a much-needed post-snooze coffee. Called into action from June through September, the Sennerin - translated loosely as milkmaid - is a centuries-old, highly regarded occupation, traditionally held by young maidens and old spinsters.

Crescencia Hirschbichler, 85-year-old dowager to my 16th-century hut, began work here as a Sennerin in 1938 at the age of 16. In those days the girls got up at 2am to make cheese and churn butter, transporting 15-litre wooden milk cans from the distant huts the old-fashioned way - on their backs.

'We worked hard, but had a lot of fun,' says Frau Hirschbichler. After a break to raise her family in the valley, she returned to the alm with her husband, only stopping five years ago. 'At the age of 80, I had no more strength left,' she offers ruefully.

My few days with the cows have me scratched, singed, and looking like a refugee, but in Austria, the young Sennerin is viewed as a seriously sexy icon - the lonely maiden high on a hill glistening with healthy perspiration, slathered in cream, ample Aryan cleavage spilling from her dirndl. Unfortunately, the only heavy breathing I'm party to is from the nine calves in the top pasture, who push and shove to get at my pail of salt. They may look like cuddly toys, but they have horns and are coming straight for me. I drop the pail and run for my life.

Back at the hut that evening, I look down the valley as the Baroque church spire of Maria Alm pierces a magenta sky while the low vibrato of cow bells sounds across the meadow. My bovine experience has fulfilled nearly every promise of the most exotic eco-retreat. I have drunk water cold and clean from the source, and milk warm and organic from the teat. Three spindly-legged calves were born in front of me in one week. I have fallen asleep in a mountainous featherbed before sunset and awoken to more sunrises than a monk.

Essentials

Leslie Woit's Heidi experience was organised through Wwoof - Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (01273 476286; www.wwoof.org) - which offers board and lodging in return for farm work. Contact the national branch for the country you want to visit; for Austria it's 00 43 316 464951; www.wwoof.welcome.at.tf. To contact the Austrian national tourist board call 0845 101 1818 or see www.austria.info

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