

A night under no stars at all

Some vacationers will accept nothing less than the luxury of a five-star hotel. Others, however, are willing to sacrifice extravagance in the name of prudence. Join *Swiss News* for a night at the Zero-Star Hotel – a revamped bunker – in Canton St. Gallen to find out just how comfortable no stars can be.



Journalist Matthew Beattie enjoying a Luxus bed at the *Null-Stern Hotel*, a converted bunker

By Matthew Beattie | Shortly after midnight on September 26, 1983, a blip appeared on the screen of the Soviet early warning system near Moscow. More followed, activating alarms warning of an imminent U.S. Intercontinental Missile attack. Commanding officer Colonel Stanislav Petrov had only minutes to de-

cide whether to pass the information onto his superiors, thus triggering immediate nuclear retaliation against NATO; or to follow his instinct and treat the warning as a computer malfunction.

Thankfully, he followed his instinct and World War III was averted.

Some 10 years previously, the then

Swiss Civil Defence Director Hans Mumenthaler, saw Switzerland – its neutrality and lack of nuclear weapons – as vulnerable to nuclear blackmail. His solution was to amend civil defence: Switzerland could not be blackmailed if its citizens could be protected. What followed was the most comprehensive civil defence



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Times have changed

Now, with the Cold War over and the threat of nuclear attack reduced, domestic bunkers have found other uses – mine, for example, is a graveyard of broken appliances and home to a few dusty bottles of wine – hardly the best use of space, but it's serving a purpose. The same cannot be said for the municipal bomb shelters in almost every town, which apart from hosting occasional military training exercises, stand idle.

One exception is the municipal bunker in the town of Sevelen in Canton St. Gallen. Community leaders recently called on the services of their resident artists, twin brothers Frank and Patrik Riklin, 35, and founders of the *Atelier für Sonderaufgaben* (Studio for Special Projects), to find a peacetime use for their civil defence facility. Completed in 1996, long after the Cold War threat that drove its inception, the bunker's maintenance had become a burden on the town's financial resources. Sevelen needed to find a way to help pay for the facility's upkeep.

The result is the *Null-Stern Hotel* (Zero-Star Hotel); a unique makeover project that has captured the imagination of residents and catapulted this small Swiss town into the world media spotlight.

"Hoteliers compete for ever more stars by offering ever more individual treatment to guests; our idea was to rebel against this system of excess and have as few stars as possible. This was why we chose the name," explains Frank Riklin.

"The Zero-Star Hotel principle is one based on social interaction and shared experiences, rather than individualism. Zero-star doesn't mean zero stars in comfort. It takes the hotel grading concept and turns it on its head."

Packing for paradise

I was lucky enough to be among 14 volunteer guests, selected for a 'test sleep' at the bunker hotel, and the only press journalist of the group. As the day loomed closer, the challenge was in deciding what to take. After all, a night in a nuclear bunker is not something for which I have ever packed.

For clues, I checked the emergency civil defence instructions posted in my apartment building. They urged me to pack cold food for five to 10 days, 20 to 40 litres of water, warm clothes, a sleeping bag, valuables, personal papers and

no pets; a tad excessive for an overnight stay. In the end, I stuffed some clothes into a suitcase, left the cats at home and hoped for the best.

Sevelen sits close to the Lichtenstein border. The *Null-Stern Hotel* is easy to find, thanks to the *Zivilschutz* (civil defence) sign helpfully pointing the way. There is little to see of the bunker aside from some gloomy concrete steps leading underground and a gravel car park on the roof. Two illuminated signs are the only indication of its adaptation to a hotel.

Roulette for bed

Stepping through the reinforced concrete door into the bunker, I was immediately struck by its scale. Even the smallest room – the bathroom, which boasts about 30 square metres – dwarfed the average domestic bunker. With only around 180 square metres of the Sevelen civil defence facility in use for the hotel (the remainder remains sealed for national security reasons), the scale of the building is impressive.

The creative genius of the Riklin brothers, combined with furniture on loan from local residents and the owners of a former hotel, transformed the dreary and utilitarian bunker into a welcoming oasis.

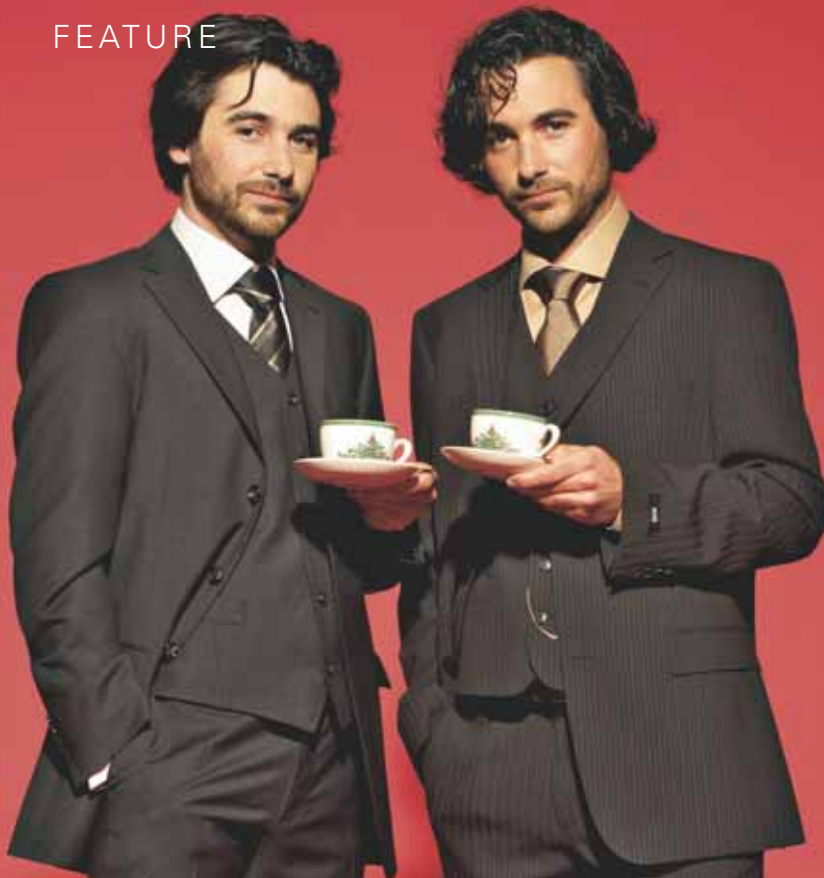
"The idea came to us the first time we visited the bunker. We looked at the space and thought how we could create the biggest contrast to the surroundings. The bunker was designed for people to sleep in, so it wasn't hard to see the potential in offering accommodation; we decided to build on this and offer a unique hotel," Frank says of the inspiration behind the project.

Two guest bedrooms offer sleeping accommodations ranging from standard bunks to more luxurious single and double beds. There is a third room, which so far has not received the 'Riklin touch', that provides additional accommodations for those willing to 'rough it'. The hotel can accommodate around 42 guests.

The lounge boasts as its centrepiece a circular pedestal washstand decorated with fresh flowers. A uniformed butler completes the hotel's ambience, as he dispenses drinks to thirsty guests.

Following a wonderful three-course meal laid out at the former schoolhouse nearby, guests adjourned to the bunker for the bed allocation procedure.

project ever undertaken. Existing bunkers were upgraded and new fallout shelters were built in a construction programme that would last more than 20 years. There are now estimated to be over 250,000 bunkers dotting the confederation, offering protection to around 95 per cent of the population. In fact, you may well have one in your basement.



Frank and Patrik Riklin, innovators of the *Null-Stern Hotel*

The *Null-Stern Hotel* employs an egalitarian system for assigning beds. Names are placed on a 'wheel of fortune' and assignments are made on the basis of where the wheel stops.

I hit the jackpot with a Luxus bed; a supremely comfortable craftsman-built sleigh bed, complete with the added bonus of a miniature bottle of Fernet Branca. The evening concludes with many drinks, conversations and photos before we finally turn in.

Rates are yet to be officially announced, but the Riklins estimate a night will cost between SFr 10 and SFr 30 per guest, including breakfast.

'Morning, virtual sunshine!

I am awoken by the butler, as he brings me a piping-hot cup of coffee the next morning. My slight hangover is not helped by the TV cameraman following closely on his heels.

"How did you sleep?" he asks for the benefit of his French-speaking viewers, shining his camera light in my eyes.

I don't recall my response, but in fact I slept surprisingly well, despite the unusual surroundings. Far from keeping me awake, the drone of the air circulation system helped me to drift off; unfortunately

for my fellow guests, the dry air it dispensed was also the reason for the symphony of snoring to which I treated them. Earplugs are provided for such contingencies, and they come highly recommended.

Besides the fresh air issue, the absence of natural light is the other noticeable drawback of a windowless bunker. This can be a little disorientating, but the hotel's generous proportions helped me from feeling claustrophobic. And, the hotel boasts a 'virtual window' – a web cam displayed via a television – in the lounge. It proves a useful aid in selecting appropriate attire for the coming day, and also provides an opportunity to enjoy Sevelen's spectacular natural scenery.

A welcome challenge

The Riklins had quite a task in finding a viable use for the bunker. Any transformation was to be cost-neutral to the community, and it has to be possible to dismantle any changes within 24 hours in case the bunker is suddenly called into wartime service.

Rather than balk at the challenge, their artistic imaginations recognised the potential of the space and quickly hit on the idea of a hotel. Equipped with beds and hot running water, the bunker had

the necessary facilities already, even if the one bathroom is communal and shower times are rotated between male and female guests.

As a non-profit enterprise, costs have so far been covered by the Riklins themselves and the generosity of the townspeople. However, a loan totalling SFr 80,000 has recently been approved for continuation of the project. Of this, SFr 35,000 will come from the canton, and the remainder from town authorities.

Sevelen also plans to build a musician's cultural centre for SFr 2 million. The thus-far low price tag of the *Null-Stern Hotel* makeover will help to make that possible. Town leaders also recognise the obvious tourist appeal of the hotel and are optimistic about the additional revenue it could bring to local businesses. Thus, the loan will help secure the future of both ventures.

Guest appeal

The next challenge was to make the hotel appealing to guests. In this, the Riklin brothers have succeeded spectacularly. The juxtaposition of hotel fineries such as rugs and antiques against utilitarian concrete is striking. However, it is surely the novelty and low-cost that will prove the greatest attractions.

Subject to the continued approval and support of the local community, the official opening of the hotel is planned for March, yet this is also somewhat dependent upon potential bookings.

"One day I would like it to be possible to travel across Switzerland staying in only Zero-Star Hotels," says Frank, of the brothers' vision to build a countrywide franchise of *Null-Stern Hotels*.

"Think how many unused civil defence buildings there are across Switzerland. Many of them are located centrally, where land is at a premium. By using them to provide affordable accommodation, Switzerland becomes an affordable destination for tourists previously discouraged by cost, and towns are relieved of the financial burden of bunker maintenance," he explains.

And in the meantime, if someone accidentally spills coffee on that fabled 'red button', residents of Sevelen have a comfortable, fully functioning nuclear fallout shelter at their disposal.

More information:

www.null-stern-hotel.ch