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Autor: Rohner, Markus
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Last post for Juf

BY MARKUS ROHNER

"JUF WITHOUT A POST OFFICE? Our village would not be the same," says Josef Hasler. The host of the "Edelweiss" boarding house appreciates the advantages of having this small post office located right behind his house. Even if he can get in touch with the rest of world easily via Internet and fax, the 48-year-old values the personal touch of this mini post office run by the Menn family. Many of the village's residents are convinced that the Juf stamp, much sought after by tourists, would be sorely missed were the post office to close down.

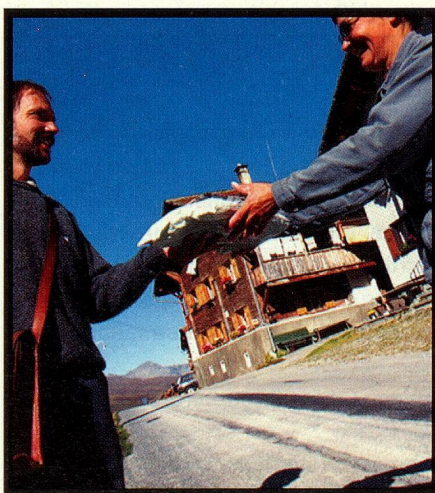
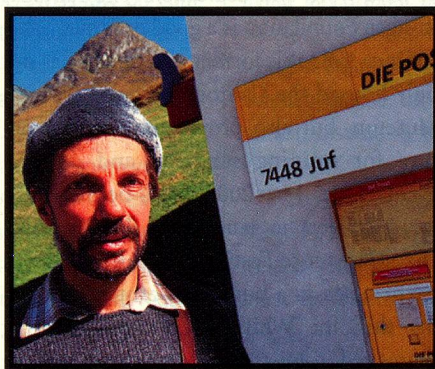
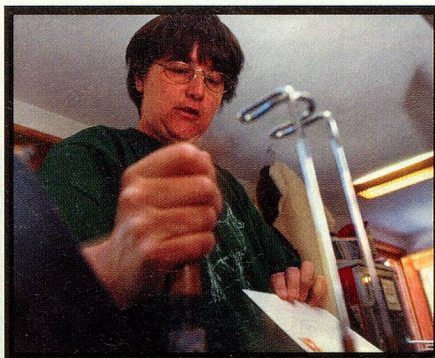
After all, the small alpine village in the Grisons is unique. Not many people in Europe breathe such thin air all year round, living as they do at 2000 meters above sea level. While many a lowlander has struggled with the low oxygen level, it presents no problems to residents of the Avers valley, many of whom cannot imagine living anywhere else. "Walsers," as they are called, have lived in this 15-kilometer long alpine valley for over 700 years. Their forefathers migrated there from the Valais, arriving over the mountains at the south end of the valley. Nowadays Avers is home to around 190 nature-loving individualists scattered around various small settlements. With a shop, bank, school for 10 students, municipal administration and church, Cresta is the valley capital.

The post office – a meeting place

At the very end of the valley lies Juf – at 2126 meters altitude the highest settlement in Europe with year-round occupants. Thirty people live in this secluded spot. The birth of a child, as occurred in October 1999, constitutes a rare occasion for celebration in which the entire village takes part.

Corina and Markus Menn have been running the post office in Juf for eleven years. Measuring just four square meters, the tiny post office (postal code "7448 Juf") sits in a

Markus Rohner is a free-lance journalist resident in Altstätten/SG.



small corner of the couple's grocery store. In the same room as customers can purchase local soups, soaps and socks, they can also make cash deposits, buy postage stamps and hand in their letters and parcels. Officially Markus Menn is employed by Swiss Post for 90 minutes a day, during which time he keeps the post office open for business, handles paperwork and processes letters and parcels.

"We're staying put"

The multi-purpose post/kiosk/shop in Juf is in a constant state of change. A few years ago the Menns lost their agency contract with the Cantonal Bank of Grisons and the Raiffeisenkasse bank, and now the future of the mini post office is threatened. There are repeated rumours of a mobile office or even the post office's definitive closure. The consequences for the village shop are unclear.

The Menns have learned to live with this uncertainty. The residents of Juf have long been aware of the important role their little post office plays in the village's identity. "But will such arguments cut any ice with Swiss Post HQ in far-off Berne?," asks a long-term resident of Juf, expressing regret at the potential loss of the local post office.

Whatever Swiss Post (which is currently on a cost-cutting drive) decides to do with its branch in remote Juf, the family of four (two adults, two small children) who run the post office have no immediate plans to leave the village. "We all have our roots firmly in Juf," says a defiant Corinna Menn, "we're staying put."

Post offices in small villages are fighting for their existence: Juf seeks sustainable solutions.