

Wallis' white elephant

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YOUNG TALENT

They call themselves the "Sörenberger Alpentrio" and wherever they appear, they take the audience by storm.

Manuela Wicki (13), Marianne (13) and Barbara (11) Schneider (from left to right), three farm girls from the Entlebuch who love to play and sing traditional Swiss songs are already in great demand to perform at weddings and birthday parties. It probably will not be long before they will appear on TV and in bigger concerts.

HÖLLOCH

Although you may not be a speleologist, you certainly must have heard of the Hölloch in the Muotathal (SZ), the largest cave structure in Europe which extends over 170 km underneath the Alps.

Last year over 8500 people visited the caves and for this year some 12,000 entries are expected.

In the face of this increasing popularity, the locals are getting concerned that the over-commercialisation of the caves could endanger them as well as the 50 odd living species which inhabit the caves.

A move is now under way to try to legally limit the number of people allowed to visit the Hölloch to some 12,000 per year. So it may well be that in future you will have to put your name on a waiting list several years ahead if you want to visit the famous Hölloch of Muotathal.

WALLIS' WHITE ELEPHANT

In 1984 the canton of Wallis bought from the famous hotelier family Seiler the company Immobilien Gletsch AG (IGAG) for 4.5 million SFR. By this it acquired an area of 37 million square meters of land which includes the Rhone Glacier with its ice cave and the Gletsch area together with the hotels "Rhone-gletscher" and "Belvedere" on the Furka pass road.

The canton made the purchase at that time mainly on patriotic grounds to preserve an area which is dear to all Wallisians. The aim was also to protect the canton's water rights and to prevent the whole area from perhaps falling into foreign hands.

However, the canton soon found out that it had bought a white elephant. The two hotels were in such need of repair that IGAG was forced to sell the Belvedere and to ask the canton for a loan to renovate the Rhonegletscher. Up to now IGAG owes the canton some 4.4 million SFR on which it has never been able to pay any interest either. These outstanding interests alone amount by now to over one million SFR.

The canton of Wallis is now in a real quandary. By law it is not allowed to invest any more interest free money into its own company, but if it does not, the company has to go into receivership.

So the authorities of Wallis have decided to make an "advance" (Vorschuss) of funds to IGAG equivalent to the money it owes. Although this may solve the problem (on paper at least) for a short while, it is hard to see

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how this move will in the long run change anything to the financial situation of IGAG. But by then, local elections may well have taken place and so the present concillors probably hope to be able to off-load this tricky problem onto the shoulders of the next local government.

What is quite certain is that in the end, it will be the taxpayers who will have to carry the burden.

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