
THE INTERNATIONAL



WOMEN'S CLUB OF VIENNA

Highlights!

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By Virginia Sheridan

I arrive at Haus am Hart and immediately want to stay. Forever. Nestled in the rolling hills of the Wienerwald, on a property ripe with vines and gardens and endless lawns, the home is awash in pastels and past history and flower boxes. I wish I could check in to this homey inn. But alas, Haus am Hart is for the dogs.

Owner Lilly Koch calls her unique pet-care concept a “lovely luxury dog hotel.” But that doesn’t mean private rooms with flat-screen televisions. “That’s not luxury for a dog, is it?” Lilly says to both me and Blacky, the chihuahua guest, who has settled onto my lap. “Dogs are pack animals and need their families. I’m offering the luxury of cuddles and kisses and playmates and freedom from cages.”

All day, Lilly’s canine clients have the run of the grounds, which includes a barn playroom with tunnels and teepees and squeaky toys aplenty. (The law requires only three hours of outside time.) They’re also allowed in the house, into rooms filled with beautiful, breakable items atop antique furniture dog-tail high. And yet everything is in perfect order. “If I expect a dog to behave, it will,” explains Lilly, pulling a tray of mini-muffin dog treats from the oven as her guests look on attentively. She also takes her pack for daily walks, and sometimes for day trips to scenic, open spaces like Lunz Am See.

Deeply empathetic, Lilly speaks fluent ‘dog’ and ‘owner.’ She records messages for new pet visitors to build voice familiarity before a visit, and sends frequent multimedia updates to their human families throughout the stay. Having travelled extensively herself, Lilly understands the worries associated with leaving loved ones at home. “It’s such a lovely thing that I can give my clients peace of mind when they travel. I respect that they are trusting me with something so precious.”

Not long ago, Lilly’s work focused on precious luxury goods as the Head of Worldwide Retail for various designer brands. Does she miss her former lifestyle? Brushing fur from her black leggings, Lilly guides me through a labyrinth of halls to a custom-designed, walk-in dressing room/closet, featuring lighted displays for her designer bag collection, a centre island, and a chandelier. It’s like a window into her past, quite incongruous with her current ensemble. “Yesterday it was pouring rain, and I was picking up dog poo in the

garden and thinking, for a moment, how it would be nice to put on makeup and nail lacquer and a suit... But, honestly, I love that I can just stay at home and be loved by my dogs all day long.”

Her former career required 80-hour work weeks, and she slept on aeroplanes more than in her own bed. She had little time to enjoy the 18th-district home she shared with her Austrian husband and two children. But the chance discovery of the 19th-century Altlenbach property changed everything. After renovating and moving in, she decided to build a second career surrounding herself with the things she most loved.

“I am so lucky to be able to follow my heart,” Lilly reflects. “We should be thinking about priorities in our midlife, even if the choices require some sacrifice. We only live once!”

Her own three dogs were able to start life anew when she adopted them from shelters. Mimosa (a 14-year-old mongrel) and Betsy (an 8-year-old Bearded Collie) were both rescued from Hungary by Animal Care Austria. “Mimo grew up in a big cage with other dogs who were constantly attacking him. After five minutes, he was taking food from my hand.” Her third dog and “personal guard,” Nelson (an 11-year-old Labrador), almost never leaves her side. “I had a worker here and he bent down to pick up a pipe and Nelson just calmly sat on him until he was sure I was not threatened.” The house dogs welcome guest dogs (five at a time, max) and easily share their toys and space.

At the cubby room, it’s time for the welcome ceremony. All the dogs sit as Lilly unpacks the personal items that will help ground them during their stay – their bed, their own food (to maintain consistent diets), and a t-shirt worn by the owner to be placed in a snuggle pillow. “Amy has brought you all a special snack!” Lilly sings, introducing the Rhodesian Ridgeback puppy and addressing each guest as she gives out Amy’s “share treats.” All items then go into individual cubbies marked with a name on a heart-shaped tag. “That’s when they all understand that they’ve come to stay.” *Oh to be a dog for a day!*

Lilly has lived in Austria since 1990 and first joined AWA 20 years ago. For more details on Haus Am Hart/Hart Hills, visit www.harthills.at

