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100 Years of Winter Sports in Switzerland

Everybody on Skis

The first winter tourists appeared in Switzerland in the second half of the 19th century. Today, Switzerland is a winter sports country «par excellence». Theo Wyler of the Swiss National Tourist Office in Zurich recalls its history.

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Cover: Holidays in Switzerland for Talli Gablinger who speaks only hebrew (Photo: Claude Huber)

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In Switzerland, tourism has a long tradition. In the late Middle Ages, pilgrims to holy places and those in search of health at spas were the first real holiday visitors. The people were however still afraid of the Alps and the crossing of passes was usually the troublesome part of the journey, often even frightening. The mountains were the domain of the spirits. The Pilatus, for instance, did not have its pleasant name in the 16th century. It was the «fractus mons» or the «Brochen Birg» (the broken mountain). Only the praise of the Alpine scenery sung by Gessner, J.J. Rousseau and Haller managed to dispel the fear of the rugged mountain giants. The euphoric descriptions of life in the Alps intrigued above all the travel-minded British. At the beginning of the 19th century, the conquering of the high peaks began, and the first tourist in the present sense of the word spent the summer in our mountain villages. In order to welcome the streams of visitors in a suitable manner, comfortable hotels were erected. In the long run, hotel-keeping for just three or four months a year could not be profitable. In addition, winter in the higher regions meant much sunshine, clear and healthy air and beautiful scenery, which the inhabitants of the lower regions and the town-dwellers could only dream about – they often experienced long weeks of fog at that time of the year.

Hotel-keepers, pioneers of the winter season

Johannes Badrutt, owner of the Kulm Hotel in St.Moritz, could

convince two English visitors for the first time to spend a winter holiday there. Already one year later, Dr Spengler put up lung patients during winter in Davos, and they got great benefit from the snow climate. With that, the curse was broken and the gruesome stories that the snow masses were supposed to harm human beings, were dispelled. Healthy man and woman, too, would not wait any longer for the much praised Swiss winter, for the sunny days when one could stay outside in shirt-sleeves in the middle of winter inspite of snow lying a couple of meters deep.

Visitors arrived in great numbers. Ingenious hoteliers offered them entertainment and variety. They organized sleigh rides and constructed ice-rinks to amuse them. As early as 1877, the first Swiss toboggan championship took place in Davos, and a few years later, the British guests took the first places. Skating was no alien pleasure to the visitors from the North. The above-mentioned Badrutt introduced the first curling stones from Scotland on the ice-rink of St.Moritz. That was in 1880. The ice-rink became the playground of the winter visitors. At the same time, tobogganing developed into adventurous racing, and necessitated the construction of special runs. In the winter of 1884/85, the legendary Cresta Run in St.Moritz became operational. The technique of tobogganing improved and refined quite rapidly. One reached undreamt-of speeds by lying flat on one's tummy on steel skeletons. Next, the bobsleigh for several riders was introduced. The win-