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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-

tersport country Switzerland was born.

Discovery of the ski

At that time, nothing was known about skiing. Although the long laths had been used for moving on snowed-up and icy countryside in the northern countries, one could not imagine them in use on the steep slopes of the Alps.

Fridtjof Nansen published his book «On Snow Shoes through Greenland» (1889). That was the spark which set alight the enthusiasm of young Christoph Iselin from Glarus. With his home-made skis, he practised at night so as to avoid the ridicule of his neighbours. His talents, however, could not convince even his best friends. So he fetched Kjelsberg, an engineer working in Winterthur and an experienced skier from Norway. This northerner demonstrated a descent and a jump on his Norwegian skis in front of a large number of spectators. With this, the spell was broken. Iselin collected a number of young people to prove to himself and others the suitability of the skis in mountainous terrain, and, together with snow-shoes, the crossing of the Prigel Pass was attempted. The ascent showed no special advantages of the skis, but the descent to the Muotha Valley took over a whole hour longer for the snow-shoe runners – the nets of their gear did not glide on the snow. Thus the proof of the usefulness of skis in mountainous terrain was given, and by 1893, Iselin had found enough fans of the new sport to form the first Swiss ski club. He later advanced to Colonel and he is acknowledged today as father of the ski sport in Switzerland. Wilhelm Paulcke, who had made his first attempts to walk on skis in the Grisons in the 'eighties, became the pioneer of the first mountain ascents and the crossing on skis

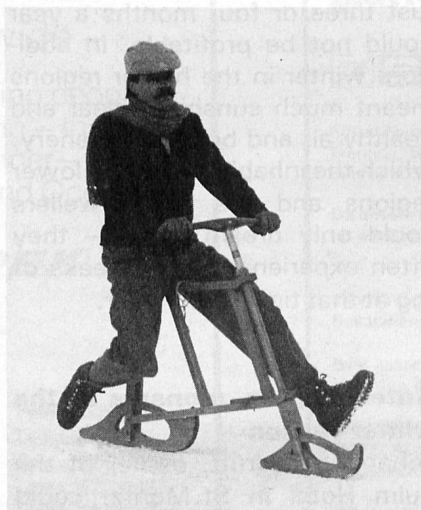
of the Bernese Oberland. This was in 1897.

Women skiers and games on ice

It was at the turn of the century that the first woman plucked up courage and went skiing. The indispensable hat was tied with a very fine scarf, and one wore ankle-length dresses or skirts. In deep snow or when falling frequently in the beginning, this unpractical attire obviously did little to make the skiers comfortable. So one tried to tie the skirts around the ankles and one wore long socks or half-hose. In 1904, the ski pioneer Hoek appeared in Grindelwald with his wife wearing trousers. The British women present were shocked, and Hoek was quite surprised that, after all the remarks made, he and his wife were not fined. A member of the Swiss Alpine Club even expressed his opinion by stating: «A woman in trousers is an unaesthetic horror».

The ever more numerous visitors to the winter resorts had to be occupied, for not nearly all of them were plucky enough to try the new skis. It was once again the British who had ideas. Gymkhanas and games on ice were organized. There the

«Velogemel» is still on the streets at Grindelwald. (Photo: SNTÖ)



elegance of the clothes of that time was properly on show: skating in pairs, rolling wooden hoops, pushing shovels of snow, sleigh rides on ice, banana catching, Gretna Green races, ice kJoring, egg-blowing or races on skates and skis – on each foot one of the two appliances! In addition, there was ski-joring in which one was on skis and pulled along by a horse which one guided oneself. Probably the most difficult of the amusing pastimes was figure skating on stilts.

Ski schools and ski-races

Back to skiing: The first systematic instructions for skiing were published. The recommended techniques did not find favour with everyone. One talked of using one stick only, of braking by squatting low on the skis, of stopping by throwing oneself sideways in the snow. The elegant telemark swing was taken on from the Norwegians. Then followed the first stem-christiana. The military mountain troops were issued with some skis, and in 1917, regulations were published regarding military skiing, drill, attention, change of direction on command and marching on skis.

Civil skiing instruction became more systematic too. The first ski schools were founded in the twenties. Regular races had taken place since 1902. Yet in the Swiss Ski Association (SSV) founded soon afterwards, women were not accepted as skiers for many years. 1928 was the year in which the Swiss Women's Ski Club was founded – the members of the SSV minuted that they would have nothing to do with the women («Mir wei mit de Wyber nüt z'tüe ha.») In spite of that, a year later, the ladies, too, were members of the SSV. Their participation in racing was, however, not fully accepted.

But then the scene changed. With



the introduction of the slalom and the Kandahar race in Muerren – its initiator was again an Englishman, Sir Arnold Lunn – skiing was accepted all over Europe with enthusiasm. The first Lauberhorn races go back to that time, in which even the winner did not succeed without a fall. A new era and with it a significant change in skiing began with the installation of the first ski lift in Davos in 1935. Aerial cableways and further

methods of transport followed, and soon one could hear the call «The whole nation is on skis».

The Olympic Winter Games in St. Moritz in 1948 stimulated the enthusiasm for the ski, and our ace skiers became idols. For decades, Switzerland was *the* winter sports country in the Alps. It has contributed significantly to the propagation of these sports. The example was eagerly followed, and all the surrounding Alpine countries built their own sports stations. Other continents followed, and today it is possible to devote oneself to winter sports practically in all parts of the world.

In the coming winter, Switzerland wants to commemorate once more the development of winter sports. In all the planned events, special emphasis will be put on more variety, on the enjoyment of snow and on opportunities for the whole family to have winter leisure. ●

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