

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 41 (2014)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Every year, the first run generates a bit of fear
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907319>

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Tobogganing makes a comeback

Less expensive than skiing, great fun and easy to do, tobogganing is an activity that is enjoying great success at Swiss resorts.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

In a famous scene from *The Fearless Vampire Killers* by Roman Polanski, the visitors to a castle inhabited by undead escape on a sledge. The group hurtle across the winter landscape at full speed in a spray of snow, unaware that their beautiful companion Sarah has already been turned into a vampire... It is a cinematographic moment that deliciously combines joy and fear and it springs to mind every time I have the chance to do some tobogganing in the Alps.

"Tobogganing is fantastic," confirms Edith Zweifel, Head of Communications at Zermatt Tourism. The resort showcases the Gornergrat run, a ten-minute descent that takes tobogganists back down into the valley with a stunning view of the Matterhorn en route. "It's very beautiful at sunset, in the shadow and the cold," remarks the native of Valais, finding the words to describe this activity originally intended for work purposes – the transport of wood – and which has developed into a leisure pursuit. "The wooden toboggan, which is very simple, is rooted in tradition and reminds us of our childhood. You can go down the run as a family or with friends, and the rides offer a great opportunity to have a laugh together. You can also use toboggans as a bench to admire the view or to enjoy a picnic," sums up Edith Zweifel.

In the adjacent valley of Saas Fee, Chantal Imseng, the resort's Head of Marketing, recounts her descents on the run linking Kreuzboden and Saas-Grund. This time it is an 11-kilometre descent! "It's near to

where I live. I often go there alone with my dog, who runs in front. When we are in a group, we wait for each other after the big turns. There are falls, and when you brake with your feet, snow sprays everywhere. It is this element of fun and relaxation that appeals to people about this sport," explains this tobogganing enthusiast.

The decline in the use of ski lifts is also forcing resorts to diversify the activities they offer. "People love winter but not everybody skis," points out Chantal Imseng. The toboggan runs are part of the efforts being made to attract visitors to the mountains. Tobogganing is also much less expensive than skiing, with daily hire costing from 6 to 15 francs, plus the cost of the train or ski lift. Some runs can also be reached by foot and are therefore free. In Kreuzboden, for example, the ski lift costs 12 francs (with a half-fare card) and toboggan hire half of that. Sledging on a Davos-type toboggan is within everyone's reach.

In Zermatt, the customers are mainly Europeans and Scandinavians (Father Christmas does not come from China after all!), but according to Edith Zweifel, Indian tourists – for example – are starting to take up the sport. The simplicity of tobogganing is attracting more and more day visitors, observes Luc Pignat, Director of Tourism at La Tzoumaz, a resort located in the Verbier ski area. General demand is increasing explains Martin Hannart, Director of Marketing in Sierr-Anniviers. "In Chandolin, for example, there are around sixty toboggans available for hire compared with just ten around ten years

ago." There are now enough tobogganists to divide the run according to styles. "Tourists often toboggan after a morning or a long half-day of skiing," explains Martin Hannart. "The pros practice in the morning when the snow is quite hard. Finally, the families mainly come in the afternoon." Even those who enjoy freeride skiing are accommodated here. "When the conditions for powder snow are poor, they are often good for tobogganing and vice-versa," explains the Sierr-Anniviers Marketing Director. In Zermatt, the Gornergrat tobogganing run alone generated 3,000 train tickets last season, according to Edith Zweifel. With night-time runs (after a fondue), family descents and sporting events, the toboggan's days are far from over. Happy Christmas!

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Luge, "Rodel", Skeleton

Sliding along an icy path or track, alone or in twos, with your head facing forwards or backwards on a fixed or dynamic toboggan – the world of tobogganing is vast!



Tobogganing as a fun pursuit for young and old is being heavily promoted by winter sports resorts and mountain railways

In German-speaking Switzerland, the toboggan has two names: "Schlitten" or "Rodel", which is not the case in French. The first is a basic version, the Davos model, which costs around 200 Swiss francs. It is the toboggan of our memories. You sit or lie on it and off you go. Anyone who has used this timeless classic will testify to its annoying tendency to go straight on despite the bends in the run.

A "Rodel" requires greater finesse and allows more manoeuvrability. Its two runners are movable enabling the toboggan to be steered with a push of the feet. A kind of hand-held rein allows tobogganists to hold on securely and to accentuate the gyratory movement. In the bends, tobogganists use one arm for balance and the other to pull on the rein. To brake, they place their feet flat on the snow. "You don't use your heels," explains Albert Steffen, a tobogganing instructor in Grindelwald in the canton of Berne, in a video. This top-of-the-range toboggan, which can reach speeds of up to 50 km/h, can cost as much as 1,000 Swiss francs, explains Martin Hannart, Director at Sierr-Anniviers. "Tobogganing is very 'German Swiss' and they make up 75 % of those registered for competitions," he remarks.

"But French-speaking Swiss and foreigners use them for fun."

He also points out that toboggans are travelling increasingly fast. "Even the Davos models are faster because all of the wooden runner is now covered in steel, whereas before only part of it was," concludes the expert.

STÉPHANE HERZOG IS AN EDITOR WITH THE "SWISS REVIEW"

Every year, the first run generates a bit of fear

Ronald Auderset, 24 years old, from Fribourg is the Swiss number one in the skeleton.



track. The luge is slightly faster than the skeleton. Lugers set off on the same track but from the top of a tower. In the skeleton, we run for about 30 metres before jumping on and the starting point is 10 metres lower than in the luge.

What emotions do you feel during a skeleton run?

It's high-octane stuff. It's extremely enjoyable.

Isn't racing at this speed with your head in front dangerous?

On my first descent, I wanted to put my feet in front to protect my head. But the skeleton is actually less

dangerous than the luge. This is because if you lose control, you can't hit the wall at a right angle. I've done around 450 runs and I've only injured myself twice, in St. Moritz. I've had a broken collar bone and once hit my head.

What attributes does a good skeleton racer need?

It is easier to learn how to steer well than to push well which explains why quite a few sprint athletes participate in this sport. You have to work hard at the start. Once you are on the track, you quickly have to gain composure to retain precision. Mental strength matters because the more

nervous a competitor is, the more they move and the more time is lost.

Is the skeleton a Swiss invention?

It was British tourists who attempted to descend head first in Grisons, which means it is part of our history.

How does Switzerland fare in competition?

It remains a minor sport but we have had some great athletes. First of all, there was Gregor Stähli. The luger Gregory Carigiet (editor's note: he announced his retirement in April 2014

citing a lack of funds to compete at the top level as his reason) and Maya Pedersen-Bieri, gold medallist in the skeleton in Turin in 2006, have achieved a great deal. Unfortunately, there is a major lack of sponsorship.

What is your supreme goal in this sport?

The Olympic Games in South Korea in 2018. In order to participate, I have to remain number one here to get into the World Cup. There is only one place in the skeleton to go to the Olympics.

INTERVIEW BY STÉPHANE HERZOG



The skeleton at the Olympic Games in Sochi: Gold medal winner Elizabeth Yarnold (GB)