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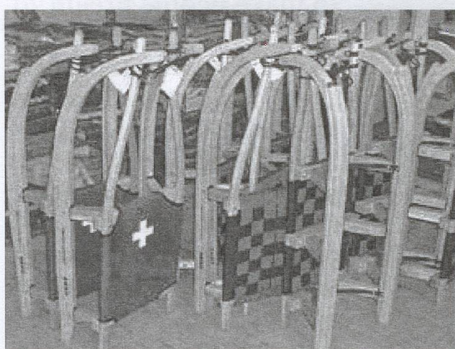
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New models help revive popularity of sledging

Christmas will bring a brand new sledge under the tree in many Swiss homes. And then it is the time that families will be heading to the mountains to try them out.

Sledging has become popular again in Switzerland over the past few years and there are a number of reasons to explain this, says sledge maker Erwin Dreier, whose company, Graf, produces up to 5,000 a year.



The Swiss racer is sporty... and fast

"Sledging took a back seat in the 1980s and 1990s but I find that it's become very popular in recent years. It's cheaper than taking the whole family skiing." Another reason why sledging has become trendy is the advent of new models that offer clear advantages over the more traditional versions, including improved safety, comfort and handling.

Graf has been making sledges since 1978 but was active long before that, making carts, wheels, agricultural products, skis and ice hockey sticks.

Sledging now accounts for 90 per cent of the firm's turnover, with the remainder taken up by the production of wood for the furniture industry.

Making sledges is no great art, but a visit to the workshop reveals that it's not that easy either. There seem to be a number of tricks to the trade. One of the skills that is mastered with pride is bending the wood using steam, a tradition that is not used much these days elsewhere.

The raw material is also an important factor when it comes to quality and the price of the sledge.

"We, for example, use ash, which is very elastic but tough... It's the best. Some are made from beech, which is a cheaper alternative but it breaks more easily than ash," Dreier explained. "We have a very good ash quality here in canton Thurgau and the entire Lake Constance region."

At a time when there are ecological concerns over wood, Dreier takes satisfaction in his company's responsible use of the material.

He points out that the ash is sustainable, there are short transport distances, all the wood is Swiss and comes certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, a body that promotes environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management of the world's forests.

The company makes traditional sledges, including the celebrated Swiss Davoser and Grindelwalder versions, made from wood with iron runners, as well as up and coming sports and leisure models. The modern sledges are growing in popularity: They're faster, more comfortable, easier to handle, safer to ride and you can have a lot more fun. They're safer because you ride with the runners at an angle, it's a geometrical construction, you can steer them with body movements and they don't slide about so much on the ice.

Graf sledges come at the top end of the market, with some models costing twice the price of similar models sold in supermarkets and department stores.

Dreier smiles at the price difference, arguing that anyone can spot the differences between one of his sledges and the cheaper competition.

"Ours last for generations with normal use. Looking at it economically, it's a big disadvantage

[for us] but that's our sales argument - the good quality justifies the price."

He is a little concerned that with global warming on the march, the zenith of sledge production has been reached. That's why he and his staff are examining projects for other areas of business.

"They will certainly involve the special technique of bending wood with steam. We'd like to continue with this kind of know-how because it's a technique that's seldom used."

from swissinfo

Picassos found at Zurich airport

A sketchbook containing 14 original Picasso drawings has been found in a spot check by customs officers at Zurich airport.

The Federal Culture Office said that the total market value of the sketches, dated May and June 1971, had been put at between SFr1.2 and 1.7 million.

Since there were no papers accompanying the sketchbook, it was sent to an auction house for valuation.

No details were given about the nationality of the passenger, or where he had come from. He was passing through the Nothing to Declare channel when he was asked to open his bags. The passenger faces fines for trying to avoid paying customs duty and VAT, and he also broke the law on the international transfer of cultural property, under which cultural items must be declared even when they are in the possession of their rightful owner.

Meanwhile, the book has been returned to the passenger.

swissinfo