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Off-piste face fines for causing avalanches

Avalanches onto marked ski runs in canton Valais, triggered by off-piste skiers, have provoked a debate about liability and sanctions for those who flout warnings.

Last winter, six people were reported to the cantonal prosecutor for allegedly setting off avalanches that swept onto pistes in Anzère and Zermatt where people were skiing, the Valais police reported.

Tragedy was narrowly avoided in Anzère, near Crans-Montana, when three off-piste skiers triggered a 200-metre-wide avalanche that crossed a marked piste, injuring two people. In total, 130 people were involved in the rescue operation.

Every year around 130 avalanches are caused by skiers and snowboarders in Switzerland.

In Switzerland off-piste skiing is not illegal. Ski runs and off-piste zones are both part of the public domain. But reckless acts like ignoring avalanche warning signs and then setting off an avalanche that hits a marked run can lead to a conviction, even if there are no victims.

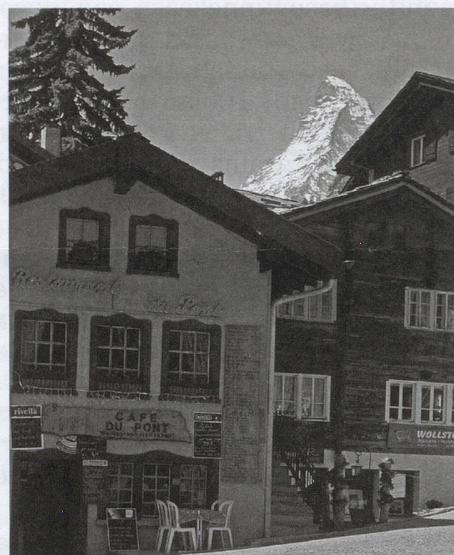
Freeriders responsible for incidents like those in Anzère and Zermatt have been given fines of SFr1,000 and asked to pay for damages and to meet the cost of the rescue operation – often tens of thousands of Swiss francs. Irresponsible skiers have also had their ski passes taken away and been put on resort blacklists. Switzerland, like France, Spain, Austria and Germany, rejects the preventive presence of police on the slopes. The European exceptions are Italy and Slovenia, where officers on and off the slopes can fine wild boarders and skiers for endangering others.

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To a cat, you are staff.

Zermatt visitors demand snowy streets

While many Swiss residents hate to slide around on icy paths and roads, tourists and locals in Zermatt have been complaining about the opposite problem.



Zermatt

For the first winter ever Zermatt's local authorities cleared snow and ice from paths and roads throughout the picturesque mountain resort in 2009 to help prevent accidents. But they were met by an avalanche of complaints.

Many tourists and local residents complained about their dirty shoes, dog paws damaged by salt and ruined tobogganing runs, and said Zermatt lost some of its winter wonderland appeal.

In recent years frequent weather changes in winter – thawing followed by cold snaps – turned the slippery snowy streets into dangerous ice rinks and led to a number of accidents. The decision was therefore taken last summer for a radical clear-up.

However, the resort had underestimated people's reactions.

Zermatt might consider to follow Grindelwald, whose local authorities rejected calls to clear snow from the ski resort's streets, and Davos, which bans road salting for aesthetic reasons.



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