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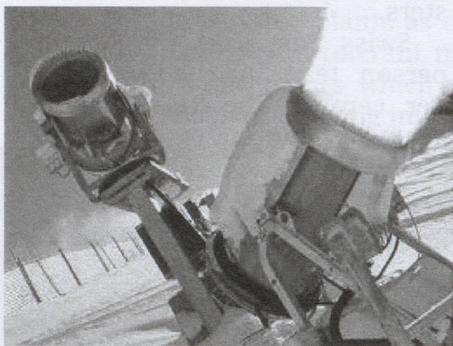
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Snowmaking

Special vehicles transport snow cannon and snow lances onto the green alpine meadows where they are assembled. People want to ski in December. There is no way to survive in winter tour-



ism any more without artificial snow. Winter is increasingly being brought forward and some would even like the season to start in October. The reverse side of the coin is that in March, when there are often superb skiing conditions, people no longer want to ski.

Competition in winter tourism has become fierce across Europe. Added to that, cheap deals for seaside holidays in the Caribbean entice customers out of winter.

Laying down manmade snow in great quantities only began in the early 1990s. Technology has improved to the extent that artificial snow covers large areas, using mobile snow cannons and fixed snow lances.

Making snow requires a sophisticated infrastructure including computer-programmed equipment and a huge demand for electricity and water. Water is pumped from the valley up the mountain and it comes from sources, reservoirs and the local water company.

About 60 per cent of the main slopes are prepared with man-made snow, as it says in some promotional flyers of ski resorts.

Spring comes about two weeks later because the artificial snow is wetter and heavier, and therefore melts more slowly. But since there are no chemicals in it, the ground does not suffer... on

the contrary. Before the widespread use of cannon and lances, there was erosion and damage to the ground. The number of people on the slopes has increased tremendously and the material that goes into carving skis and snowboards has become more aggressive. The edges cut everything down and damage the slopes a lot more than they once did.

from swissinfo

Providing warmth and company for the homeless

Many large Swiss cities provide overnight shelters for the homeless, which offer not only a warm bed, but also company – particularly precious at Christmas time.

"In winter we have more guests than usual," said Brigitte, who has been working in the Sleeper, an emergency shelter in Bern, for nearly ten years. Brigitte has to see to breakfast and to the cleaning. It is also her duty to make sure that all the guests are out by 10am at the latest, since they are only allowed inside the building between 10 at night and 10 in the morning.

The 20 beds are divided between three rooms. One is reserved for women, one for Swiss and one for foreigners. This separation has paid off, because sometimes there used to be friction between the Swiss and the foreigners. Beds are allocated on the principle of first come, first served.

When the beds are full, extra mattresses can be put on the floor. If there really isn't enough room, they send people to another institution, such as the Salvation Army's night hostel.

The Sleeper is a private association. It is financed by donations and by social services. A team of about 20 oversees the running of the hostel. It has no paid employees; everyone is a volunteer. The guests range in age from a 20-year-old youth to a woman who could be a grandmother.

Sometimes the police bring in people for whom they can't find anywhere else to stay. Some stay for just one night. But the shelter has also a lot of long-term guests, who are allowed to stay for a maximum of three months. After that they are supposed to find somewhere else.

from swissinfo

Swiss text in the New Year

The Swiss sent more than 55 million text messages on their mobile phones on New Year's Eve 2009.

Swisscom reported 25.7 million text and multimedia messages sent on 31 December, a three per cent increase compared with 31 December 2008.

Orange counted around 14.8 million messages – half a million more text messages than in the previous year. Another 14.7 million messages were sent on the other major provider Sunrise. But there were still more greetings sent via mobile phones over Christmas. A record 68 million messages were sent – 2.5 million more than on December 25, 2008.

from swissinfo

Bankruptcies reach new record high

The number of bankruptcies reached an all-time high in Switzerland during the first half of 2010 according to figures published by Creditreform, the Swiss association of creditors.

Northwestern Switzerland, including Basel, was worst affected, with a third more bankruptcies than in the first six months of 2009. Central and eastern Switzerland were also particularly affected.

from swissinfo