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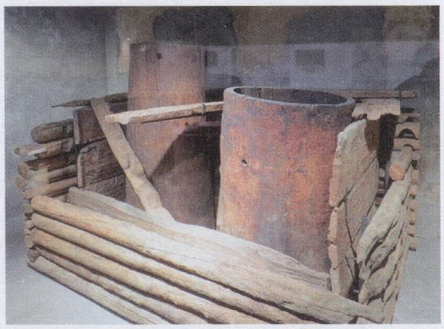
St. Moritz: The Engadin's Tourism Metropolis

As it once was: St. Moritz and the Kulm Hotel in 1870

For a small and remote valley like the Engadin, a buzzing, touristy place like St. Moritz does come as a surprise. As recently as 1830, the village only had 200 inhabitants! It seemed like a little detective work was in order to find some of the reasons for this..

Reason No. 1: Thermal Springs of St. Mauritius

St. Moritz has famous carbon and iron rich thermal springs named after St. Mauritius – a saint hailing from Nubia in Africa. Surprisingly, these springs were already used by the Celts during the Bronze age – excavations of the springs revealed sacrificial goods such as swords and needles. Later the springs were formally encased with larch timber to capture the water – tests confirmed that this was in place as early as 1411 B.C. In 1519, Pope Leo promised anyone who made a pilgrimage to the St. Mauritius springs complete absolution of all sins.



Original larch casing of the St Mauritius thermal spring dating to 1411 B.C.

The natural medic Paracelsus travelled to St. Moritz in 1535 and praised the health-bringing qualities of the springs.

Reason No.2: Champagne Climate

A few alpine valleys in Switzerland are sheltered both from the north and south, thus enjoying plenty of sunshine and little rain. The Engadin is one of these. For example, the Diavolezza in the upper Engadin gets between 2000 to 2500 sunshine hours per year. St. Moritz has on average 804 mm of rain per year – and quite a bit of that would be in the form of lovely snow. By comparison, Auckland also has 2000 hours of sunshine per year but 1300 mm of rain per year.

Reason No. 3: Natural Beauty

St. Moritz lies nestled among mountains and lakes – a place of great natural beauty, offering many opportunities to withdraw to nature from the hustle and bustle of the township. Who would not want to dangle his or her toes into one of those lakes – admitting that swimming might be a bit challenging given the alpine temperatures?

Reason No. 4: Clever Hoteliers

St. Moritz is known as the birthplace of winter tourism. In September 1864, Johannes Badrutt, the founder of what was to become the famous Kulm Hotel, made a bet with four of his British summer guests to get them to return to St. Moritz in winter. If they did not like it, he was going to reimburse any travel costs to them. If they liked it, he would invite them to stay as long as they wanted to. Averse to reneging on any kind of bet, his British visitors of course came back. He then spoilt them with winter fun such as ice skating, winter tennis, tobogganing, ice hockey and horse-drawn sledge rides. Of course, they wholeheartedly enjoyed their stay and returned to London with their winter sun tans and stories. Later, they and their friends came back in their droves for their fashionable white holidays. In 1928 and 1948 , St. Moritz held the Winter Olympics: testament that winter tourism and sports had succeeded. The Cresta Run, a slegding track re-built annually for those who like to sledge head-first was created by bored and adventure-hungry British chaps visiting the Kulm Hotel in the early 1870ies. It is still owned by a curious English (all male) club inspired by odd rites such as "Firework", the "Shuttlecock Club" and a dedicated drink, the "Bullshot" – whatever these may be!

Reason No. 5: Trademark protection

Innovation did not stop with Johannes Badrutt: In 1987, the St. Moritz Tourist Board had the ingenious idea to register the name of St Moritz as a trademark. Heads were shaken in incomprehension in the tourist industry and throughout the business world. But this helped to raise the image and recognition of St Moritz as a tourist destination. Of course, such trademarks are commonplace today. Today, 70% of tourists staying in St. Moritz come from outside of Switzerland.

Well – the above must be just a fraction of the noteworty things about St. Moritz to explain its phenomenal growth over the years. It's a fascinating story and no doubt some of you would be able to add to it.

Susie Wood

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The lakes of the Upper Engadin and the town of St. Moritz