

# The rush for white gold

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# THE RUSH FOR WHITE GOLD

## The rise of a new sport

Ski-ing was apparently known as far back as 6000 BC. The oldest records of the use of skis are to be found on the wall paintings of Rødøy, a fjord in Norway. The descendants of the hunters who dwelled in these icy reaches many thousands of years ago, the modern Norwegians, have known the ski for a long time as a simple transport utility, but it was in the Alps that ski-ing as a sport was discovered.

Many people still alive today can remember the glorious days when skiers, sliding awkwardly on their edgeless laths of dry wood, covered by a thick cap, a warm scarf and baggy trousers, used to halt their dizzy motion with the help of their unique stick.

There's been plenty of improvement in ski-ing equipment as well as in ski-ing techniques since then. Even a beginner spurns wooden skis today. Technology has favoured his costly exigencies and offered him skis of metal, plastic and glass fibre, glossy silicon-leather boots, velvety wind-cheaters, sleek champion trousers, intricate and foolproof ski-bindings. All this costly attire has helped him to ski better and faster. Ten years ago, ski instructors used to begin "snow-plough", then teach the "stem" and finally, for the expert, the "christiana". For heavy snow, the "télémart" was recommended. Nowadays, these words have passed out of the vocabulary and everybody speaks of, and attempts to achieve the "godille" or (in German) the "Wedeln", which consists in hopping from one direction to the other with the help of ski-ing-sticks, a determined push with the haunches and supple legs.

## The expansion of winter resorts

Before the British had contributed to the discovery of ski-ing, they had discovered the charms of the mountain. In increasing numbers, they came to enjoy the purity of alpine air and the splendour of mountain scenery. Out-

of-the way villages, their inhabitants peacefully living on the milk of their cows, found themselves neighbouring stately palazzos and visited yearly by a leisurely alien clientèle.

With the increasing prosperity of the Swiss, which allowed them to enjoy the accomodation of hotels just as well as foreigners, the alpine resorts began to flourish. This increase in prosperity not only led to more hotel-nights per season, but to a growing construction of holiday homes and family chalets. But the tremendous expansion of alpine resorts in recent years has really been triggered by an invasive passion for ski-ing and winter sports.

This time, it was not only the traditional resorts, discovered and launched by foreigners in the 19th century, which found themselves surrounded by a sprawl of chalets and a gaggle of hotels of all sizes, but scores of unknown villages which happened to lie next to some ski-able slopes improvised themselves as resorts and began fighting for the clientèle of the towns.

## Growth defects

This development has not been spared of a few blunders and miscarriages. Like anything which springs to life spontaneously, the new resorts were at first unplanned. Land was sold in a haphazard way and chalets built where the view was the best. Many new constructions broke with the setting and have irremediably uglified the villages and pastures where they lay. Thirty years ago, Verbier was a quaint and delightful village. Twenty years ago, it was already thickly surrounded by hotels of a definitely non-alpine style and all those who had known the original Verbier were lamenting at the change. Today, it is but one great mountain suburb, to which people have, of course, had to be resigned. Sometimes, the number of new buildings is too great for the electricity, the water and sanitation equipment (paid

for by the commune) to catch up. Some years ago, when chalets began to sprout up at La Barbolesaz (near Gryon, Vd) at an increasing rate, it was impossible to get the soup to boil at noon: every family on the hill was preparing its meal at the same time and there was just not enough current to get the electric plates anything better than warm! The typhus epidemic at Zermatt, due to a sanitary equipment that had lagged behind the erection of chalets and hotels, was a rather more dramatic example.

The most recent development has been to build new resorts from scratch. In this case, it is possible to plan and optimize the layout of hotels and chalets, so that the new creation has an innate harmony and operates in a functional way. Tignes and Avoriaz, in France, are examples. Anzères will be the first "prefabricated" Swiss resort. It is planned to accomodate 6000 tourists. The architects have tried to give the new resort a warm and alpine atmosphere, and on the other hand, to make it as practical as possible. For these reasons, the resort will have a central square (the necessary "centre") surrounded by large multi-storeyed chalets, and not by ordinary brick or concrete buildings. Aminona 1500, to be built near to Crans, will consist of a series of tower blocks, in harmony with the surroundings. These blocks will be joined by a series of glass-covered alleyways, along which holiday-makers will be able to stroll and window-shop in a lukewarm atmosphere.

## How peasants can make money

Naturally, this general rush towards the snowy slopes of the Alps has had a profound influence on the life of its indwellers. Traditionally, peasants used to leave their villages for the better paid jobs offered in the towns. The success of Winter sports have put a brake on their emigration and offered them plenty of lucrative opportunities. For a start, their

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fields have acquired the value of residential land. In many cases, it is advantageous for them to abandon their cattle (or maybe just keep one or two cows), sell their land and live on the product of their new-found fortunes. Many peasants had made good pay-packets by acting as mountain guides in Summer. Now they can make far easier money in giving ski lessons at the ski-school. They can transform their chalets and rent them at a good price, or turn them into restaurants. Any business-minded peasant who lives near to a resort can be assured of a generous income. One other way in which he can productively invest his money is by pooling it with other landowners into mechanical means of ascent: ski-lifts and teleferics.

These machines, which conveniently settle the problem of "climbing up" a slope involve considerable investments and it is reckoned that they must make a 20% profit to be economical. Every peasant in Gryon contributed to the Barboleusaz-Les Chaux *télécabine*. As it hadn't been doing too well for the first two or three years of operation, the only dividends received by shareholders were free rides! Due to the fact that mechanical means of ascent are costly to install and that they are only used for part of the year, the price for being hauled up a hill is incredibly high. One would pay one franc sixty for a typical kilometre long and 300-metre high climb. Considering that the descent can be achieved in about five minutes by a medium skier, it is very easy to do about twelve climbs in an afternoon, even if there are queues at departure. In this way one can spend considerable money, but this doesn't seem to upset the average skier who is prepared to spend over 1,000 francs on his equipment anyway.

### The prospect of ski-jams

A new, and for the skiers, a highly rewarding development is the laying of ski-circuits. Instead of climbing up and sliding down the same mountain ten times in a day, the skier will successively be hauled up several different hills, all along a geographical circuit which may be as much as ten miles long. On the Parsenn, at Davos, there is a run which is about fifteen kilometres long and which can be accomplished by the most tumbling skiers in a leisurely afternoon. There is an even longer run starting at the 3,800 m "Aiguille du Midi" summit, near Chamonix. But these descents resemble, and are more akin to hiking than to sportive ski-ing. In order to have interesting ski-ing, as well as the hiking and rambling-in-nature element, it is necessary to connect several mountains together along an exciting and varied circuit. This is actually being done, in the Champéry area. It will soon be possible to go from Col des Gets in France, to Champéry

in the Valais, passing through Avoriaz and Planachaux, without taking off one's skis.

Every year, the number of skiers increases by 20%, which shows how popular the sport must be. Soon, everybody just about able to run will be seen on skis. This is already posing an unexpected problem: the over-burdening of available ski-able slopes. A third of the ski-able slopes of the Valais are already serviced by mechanical means of ascent. The domestication of another third is already under project and, on present trends, every none-too-dangerous slope in the Canton will be scarred by a ski-lift track or another muscle-saving means of ascent. Considering that new slopes and new mountains can't practically be created, it will be necessary to double the capacity of ski-lifts on the existing ones. One day, every slope will be as congested with skiers as the streets of our cities are with cars today. There is already evidence of this and in a number of particularly popular runs, where it is very difficult to ski at one's own pace because of innumerable fellow-skiers of all ages who move about in the way.

Each year, collisions between skiers provoke one or two deaths and a much greater number of injuries. The bone-repairing industry has been making resort-doctors thrive: they make more money in a short, icy and treacherous season than in a long year of tending to native measles and flu. One way of diminishing the number of ski-ing accidents has been to signal the ski-runs properly. In this way, a lonely skier can't get lost or run into an avalanche unknowingly. Ski-resorts are acting responsibly in seeing that ski-runs are "closed" at sunset and that rescue operations can be promptly carried out. More recently, the caterpillar "track-flattener" has been making its appearance. Thanks to this machine, it is no longer left to the skier to plough himself a way into fresh snow: the ski-run is already traced. Ski-runs

have been improved, stumble-bumps scraped flat and collision-prone trees felled. Nowadays, when a new ski-lift is constructed, it is always laid according to the prospective runs. In the past, a ski-lift got built and the various itineraries of descent picked up by insufficiently supervised skiers. But in spite of these worthy efforts in making slopes more amenable and secure, there is an increasing danger of collisions due to the increasing number of ski-addicts. The only solution to the problem will lie in "highway code" for skiers in, rules on overtaking, on speeding and on bearing off.

### Entertaining the tourist

Not everybody going to a winter resort necessarily skis. There are other more relaxing sports, such as skating and curling. Bobsleigh, the most hair-raising sport of all, is only practised by the daring few. For those who do not find the courage to master ski-ing, a new sport has recently been invented. It is called "ski-bob," the implement consisting of a unique ski affixed to a frame holding a saddle. The ski-bobber sits astride this contraption as he would on a motor-cycle, holds on to a handbar governing a pivotable guiding-ski and scuttles down the slopes. He has mini-skis with crampons strapped to his feet. This keeps him in balance and permits him to brake. Ski-bobbers don't go as fast as skiers. They are to skiers what erratic scooterists are to car-drivers, that is, a nuisance. It may well be necessary, in future ski legislation, to prevent skiers and ski-bobbers from using the same runs.

Many do not take to sport at all and are quite satisfied in sun-basking on the cable railway's top station, or in parading with the most fancy winter sports outfit.

Whether there is a fad for it or not, sport cannot be practised during the whole day. Six hours of ski-ing is enough for most. Assuming that ten

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hours are devoted to restful recuperation, that leaves another eight hours of the day to be filled. Resorts, and especially their hotels, are now faced with the task of entertaining innumerable customers. They must therefore be equipped with "après-ski-ing" facilities. These consist primarily in agreeable "Kellers", "chieras" and "carnotzets" where one may enjoy wine and fondue. Naturally, night-clubs and shows by well known entertainers must also be included in the picture. Most resorts also have cinemas, although the films that are shown have usually passed through the cities long ago. Resort-hoppers just want to find the pleasures of the town when they go on a ski-ing holiday. The ideal of breaking from

the throng of humanity, the rush of affairs and relaxing in unspoilt and natural surroundings appeals to a minority of those who can afford a hotel or a bingle at the "Club Méditerranée".

### Big Money

Those villages that have become rich thanks to the fancy for winter sports, ski-ing, après-ski-ing and plenty of spare money know this well and are already providing for these increasingly exacting tastes. So are investors from the towns. About eight billion francs are actually tied up in tourist investments in Switzerland. The turnover from tourism is estimated at

five billion annually, well over half of it coming from winter tourism. Resorts have indeed been relying increasingly on the winter season. In summer, most Swiss like to go abroad, especially, to the sunny beaches of the Mediterranean. This means that snow is big money. The French have invented a new metaphor to describe it they call it "white gold", a sure hint of the profits to be reaped from Alpine investments. Gold is said to be an unalterable and undepreciating metal. White gold will exist as long as snow falls from the sky. With the rush for the slopes, there's no risk that the new metal will depreciate in the near future. The fact that it is not inexhaustible will even enhance its value. (PMB)

## BASELLAND AND BASELSTADT REMAIN INDEPENDENT by MM

At the week-end of 6th December, the people of the two Half-Cantons Baselstadt and Baselland (men and women) went to the poll and rejected the draft Constitution of a re-united Canton Basle. To be exact, the electors of the town accepted it with 44,000 for and 22,000 against (44% voting participation). The voters of the country opposed it with 33,222 for and 48,183 against (voting participation 76%—in the Upper Baselbiet between 80 and 100%); only the Arlesheim District showed a majority in favour.

The campaign preceding the plebiscite was carried out with tremendous vigour by the opponents of the WV (re-unification). This was considered by many an uninitiated outsider as petty and ridiculous — why should there be two administrations; surely one Canton would be simpler and certainly more logical at a time when Switzerland is ready to renounce part of her independence in order to become European. Others were inclined to say why change something which has worked not too badly? But like with most problems, the roots go far deeper, and in order to understand the pros and cons, it is necessary to go back into the past.

### Unrest Rebellion, Uprising

Up to the year 1400, Baselland as it is today, was divided into several larger and smaller domains. Episcopal nobility, but also churches and monasteries owned land and people, usually with patriarchal relationship. During the following 134 years, the town of Basle bought all the domains in one way or another, and the whole region was called "Baselbiet", i.e. land and people subordinate to Basle. From then onwards, the citizens of Basle were the lords, and on their behalf the *Rat zu Basle* ruled the Baselbiet

which was subdivided into seven districts ruled by bailiffs. In 1525, in connection with the Reformation, the farmer subjects rebelled and demanded back old rights and privileges. Under the threat of the rebellion, the Council in Basle issued freedom charters, but soon enough, they withdrew most of them again. Before the end of the sixteenth century, there was more revolutionary unrest on account of increased indirect taxes.

In 1653, more rebellion like in other parts of the Switzerland of that time. Basle occupied the countryside, the leaders were beheaded or hanged, Liestal humiliated and the people disarmed. The next uprising took place under the influence of the French Revolution, but the threatening civil war was stopped in general friendship and freedom festivities. Serfdom and bondage of the Baselbiet were lifted in 1790 and vassalage eight years later. Formally, the Baselbieter had equality of rights. Baselland became an administrative district (Canton) of the Swiss Helvetic Unity State which did not prove successful. From 1804 to 1813 and in the wake of the Mediation Acts, Baselland became an independent Canton, and democratisation took over: vassalage was virtually ended, and freedom of traffic, commerce and trade was introduced.

The French "Freedom Armies" broke down, and the patricians reacted strongly. Their aim was to re-introduce the rule of the townships and the guilds. In Basle, this restoration remained moderate.

The Congress of Vienna in 1815 divided up the former Sovereign Episcopate of Basle. That was when the Jura came under Berne. The Baselbiet became the property of the State of Basle (*Stand*). Fifteen years later, the Liberals and Radicals of the Baselbiet demanded restitution of equal-

ity of rights, freedom of trade and commerce, and representation according to the number of inhabitants, dissolution of the guilds' rule. The conservative citizens of Basle opposed this vigorously. And their tough resistance led to the founding of an

### Independent Canton Basel-Landschaft

on 17th March 1832. The Council of Basle had withdrawn the administrative officers from 45 Communes by way of punishment. These Communes installed their own authorities (*Landrat*, = Parliament, *Regierungsrat* = Government and Tribunals). They made their own Constitution. The new Canton constituted itself as representative democracy. On 3rd August 1833, the town of Basle tried to use military force, to subjugate the rural Canton, but their action miscarried deplorably on account of the determined resistance of the Baselbiet. The Federal Diet declared complete separation and independence, with the proviso for a *voluntary* re-unification. Basle hoped in vain that the Baselbiet would not be able to manage and that it would voluntarily ask for a return to the town. But Baselland and Baselstadt have remained independent Half-Cantons (so-called because each has only one representative in the Council of States, where other Cantons have two each; the other Half-Cantons are Appenzell and Unterwalden). The two parts have had their own Parliaments, Governments, Tribunals, Constitution, electorate, legislation and coats of arms; Baselstadt has the black crozier facing left, Baselland the red one facing right with seven red dots representing the seven districts along the rounded top. One of the characteristics of Baselland has been Commune autonomy and decentralised administration.