

It's a happy race to hell

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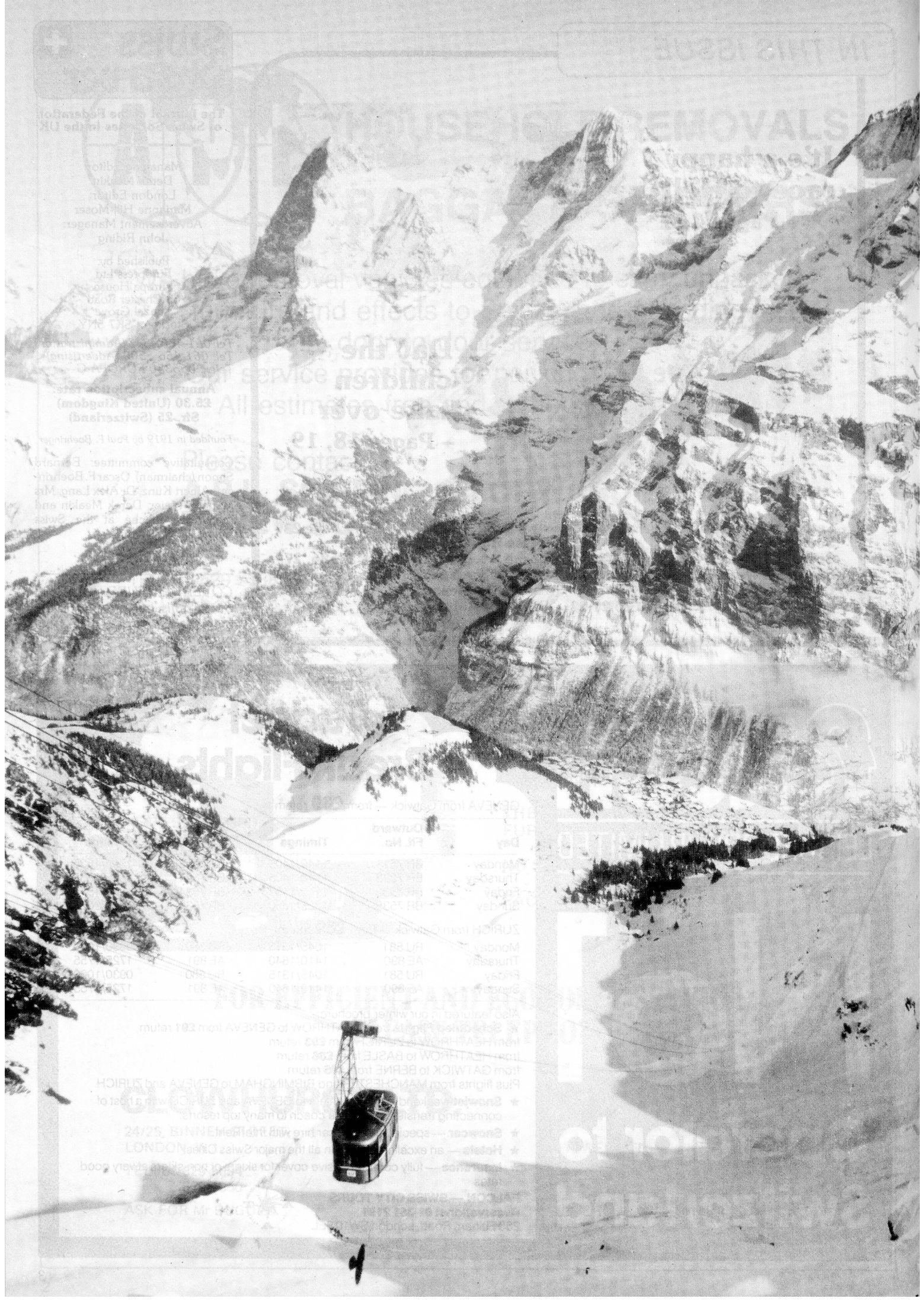
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It's a happy race to Hell



The Gap, where each skier must pass through the gate, is the easiest point for spectators to reach.

EVERY winter at Mürren in the Bernese Oberland more than 1,000 skiers both young and old set out from just below the 9,650 feet peak of the Schilthorn on a nine-mile run to the finish in Lauterbrunnen, almost 7,000 feet below in the valley. The piste is neither marked nor prepared.

This "Race to Hell" began in

1928 through the efforts of an Englishman, Sir Arnold Lunn. Together with the Arlberg Kandahar, it is the world's oldest open ski race still held.

Until the mid-'70s sportsmen faced a five hour climb up the mountain before the race began. Today an aerial cableway carries them up the Schilthorn. Only the experts measured themselves against the Devil in the early days, but today anyone can give it a try.

The contest is not meant to be dog-eat-dog but essentially good fun, as is every popular race open to all. Swiss participants are joined by

numerous skiers from all over the world, who take part either as individuals or as teams. A group of American soldiers stationed in Europe compete every year, for example.

All the officials have purely honorary positions. They are at the start, where two skiers set off every 30 seconds, at the judging positions, at the finish, and in the main office.

"Hellish" is the right description for the run: steep slopes worthy of World Cup competition alternating with endless traverses, humped, undulating trails followed by strenuous upward slopes, and, at the end, a

level stretch through the forest provoking one into a crouched position for almost 10 minutes right up to the finish. The race is against oneself — a real alpine adventure.

The successful racers have to wait patiently for an entire year for prizes to be awarded. On the eve of the following year's Race to Hell — after the Devil has been ceremoniously burned at the stake — gold, silver and bronze "Devilkins", as well as diplomas for all who successfully completed the race, are presented. For last year's Hell-skier it's a matter of honour to race once again the next day.

◀

With Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau mountains the focal points of this panorama, the Schilthorn cable car carries racers to the peak.



Out of the forest and on down the mountain. No time to rest!



On the eve of the race prizes from the previous year are awarded.