



ST. MORITZ WINTER PLAYGROUND

Nestled in the far southeast of Switzerland, this natural playground is a winter wonderland for outdoor enthusiasts, with 322 days of sunshine a year. Considering the town's transient population of well-dressed global citizens, and streets filled with luxury brand boutiques, it's no wonder St. Moritz has been the jet-set's winter destination of choice for the past 150 years.

St. Moritz's famous Cresta Run – a 1.2-kilometre toboggan track, built from scratch each year from snow that is then iced, just as it has been since the first run in the winter of 1884/85.

FROM AN INVITATION BY A ST MORITZ HOTELIER TO A GROUP OF ENGLISH GUESTS OVER 150 YEARS AGO, ST MORITZ HAS GROWN INTO A GLISTENING WHITE PLAYGROUND FOR WINTER SPORTS. FROM SKIING AND TOBOGGANING, TO HORSE RACING AND POLO ON THE SNOW, AS WELL AS MORE ECCENTRIC ACTIVITIES, ST MORITZ IS AS FAMOUS FOR ITS WINTER SEASON AS IT IS FOR ITS THERAPEUTIC SPRINGS.



::: A snow-covered haven for winter sports fans :::

By Joe Mortimer

The world of Alpine sports has its fair share of private members' clubs, many of which have strict membership criteria. But few demand as much from their initiates as the Shuttlecock Club in St. Moritz: an elite group of fearless thrill-seekers who have all suffered an inglorious fate while attempting the town's oldest downhill challenge.

The Cresta Run is a rite of passage for any budding winter sports enthusiast. The 1.2 kilometre toboggan track is carved from the ice, down which amateur riders launch themselves headfirst on a flat toboggan.

Membership to the club is automatically bestowed upon anyone unfortunate enough to careen off the course at the infamous Shuttlecock Corner. This left-hand bank tests the steel of every rider: slow down too much and you'll never break the course record. Don't slow down enough, and you'll end up in a bed of snow and straw – an essential failsafe that has cushioned the fall of hapless competitors for the past 134 years.

The story of how St. Moritz came to be Switzerland's leading winter resort is, by now, the stuff of legend. In a bid to replicate the success of the summer holiday season during the winter months, hotelier Johannes Badrutt invited some of his British guests to return at Christmas. He wanted them to see for themselves what an agreeable climate the Engadin Valley had to offer. If they did not

find it to their liking, he claimed, he would cover their travel expenses and let the matter rest.

Needless to say, the challenge was accepted. So, while the rest of Europe wallowed in a merciless winter, the small group of Brits spent the season sipping Champagne on the terraces of St. Moritz's most noble hotels. They returned to the UK the following Easter with suntans and smiles on their faces.

That challenge, in the winter of 1864/65, was perhaps the most significant event in the history of Alpine winter tourism. It was an experiment that would turn the Swiss summer resort into one of the most well-known winter destinations in Europe, and give birth to a plethora of winter sports unique to St. Moritz.

There are four ski areas in the vicinity of St. Moritz – Corviglia, Corvatsch, Diavolezza/Lagalb, and Zuoz. Between them they offer 87 descents, including Switzerland's longest illuminated night slope. There are freeride areas for the adventurous, snow parks for kids, half-pipes for snowboarders, and some 230-kilometres of cross-country skiing trails.

Huge swathes of slope have been set aside for activities like tobogganing and snow kiting, and 150-kilometres of walking trails provide scenic opportunities for those who prefer to enjoy the destination at a slightly slower pace.

The first winter tourists didn't have quite so many

An integral part of St Moritz's winter magic, Grand Hotel des Bains Kempinski St Moritz provides a warm welcome for winter sports enthusiasts.



activities at their disposal, so they imported and adapted several British pastimes to enjoy in the frosty landscape. Cricket, curling, and ice-skating became popular pursuits in the early years of winter tourism, and the frozen expanse of Lake St. Moritz provided a white stage upon which heated tournaments were contested. After seeing the sledges used by delivery boys to haul their goods from businesses to homes, visitors quickly put them to better use for human cargo. Daredevils would clatter down ice-covered lanes on specially adapted sleds, giving birth to the earliest form of bobsleigh. It wasn't long before enthusiasts demanded their own track, and the Cresta Run was born. As the destination's winter sports infrastructure grew, so did its fame. In February 1928, the Winter Olympic Games were held in St. Moritz, attracting athletes from 25 countries and around 40,000 visitors. Although the Swiss athletes didn't perform well in the Games overall, they made up for it with a display of skijoring. In this sport, which is unique to St. Moritz, men on skis are pulled by galloping horses around a track at speeds of up to 80 kph. The event is still enjoyed today at the annual White Turf horseraces,

which draws tens of thousands of well-heeled locals and visitors to St. Moritz each February. In the mid-80s, local polo player Reto Gaudenzi, had the bright idea of holding polo matches on the ice, and the Snow Polo World Cup was born. The tournament is now a key event on St. Moritz's sporting calendar. And yet another excuse for fur-clad spectators to see and be seen under the bright winter sun.

Grand Hotel des Bains Kempinski St. Moritz

Built in 1864, directly next to the famous therapeutic springs, Grand Hotel des Bains Kempinski St. Moritz, has been an integral part of the winter season from the beginning. It is a much-loved landmark, intertwined with the resort's history.

This majestic ski-in/ski-out hotel has direct access to the Corviglia ski area via the St. Moritz Bad gondola station. Beginners and experienced skiers alike can hone their skills at the hotel's ski school before venturing out alone, while the in-house sports shop has everything they need to enjoy St. Moritz's winter wonders.

And, after a long day skiing or trekking in the mountains, the hotel's 2,800 sq m spa offers welcome respite. |

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