

A SURE BET

STORY BY DAVID K. GIBSON

HOW **ST. MORITZ** INVENTED
WINTER TOURISM, AND HOW
IT KEEPS **REINVENTING** IT.



STOCKSHOT/ALAMY



In St. Moritz, they tell the story of The Bet. The basic facts are not

disputed (even myths are standardized in Switzerland). In September 1864, hotelier Johannes Badrutt — perhaps already sensing the loss of jovial laughter and steady income that the end of the summer tourism season would bring — approached four guests huddled around the fireplace of his Kulm hotel. They were some of the last of his British upper-class clientele to flee the rain at the end of the too-brief Alpine summer.

Badrutt then began to explain the joys of an Alpine winter to his dubious guests. The sun shone every day, he told them, and people went about in shirtsleeves. He said the mountains were full of adventures for the robust and vigorous, and hearty local cuisine warmed the bellies of the more sedentary. He probably pointed out that the key to his wine cellar worked equally well in the winter months. And then, he made them a wager.

Come here this winter, he said. Stay at my hotel as my personal guests. If you do not have a sunny, warm, wonderful time, I will reimburse you all of your travel expenses. The Englishmen figured this was a bet they could not lose.

Sixteen guests came from England that winter, arriving by sleigh from Chur,* swaddled in furs. Badrutt came out to greet them, as he'd predicted, in shirtsleeves. The Englishmen left five months later, tanned and fit from a winter in the Engadin sun, and told all of fashionable London their tale.

Cynics might note that just about any place is sunnier than London in the winter, and that Badrutt had only lucked into the next vacation fad of the well heeled. But by the time a much larger crop of British aristocracy arrived the following winter, St. Moritz had set up Switzerland's first tourist office.

THE KULM BECAME THE CENTER OF AN ENTIRELY NEW INDUSTRY. WINTER TOURISM, previously, took place in warm places. That the weather at the top of the Alps could be bearable, even pleasant, was easily demonstrated. Less obvious was that there was anything to do in that fabulous weather. Badrutt had a plan for that too. He had long been importing Scotch whisky and pickles for his British guests; he began importing their sports. The Scottish game of curling and ice skating — which included the proto-hockey game of bandy — soon had their own St. Moritz clubs, and sledding hills were groomed for the Kulm's guests. By a few decades later, horse racing became a regular occurrence on the “white turf” of the frozen lake.

The curling and skating clubs exist to this day, and the horse races have become legendary, drawing the international horsey set for three consecutive Sundays in February. A tent city of 1.4 million square feet is constructed on the lake, and 30,000 spectators are there to be seen. But that isn't all the racing that goes on in town. Aston Martin runs a winter driving school each winter, training new owners of the boutique sports cars and a few other interested parties that the company hopes to move into the former category.

And the sledding took on a life of its own. The Kulm became the world capital of tobogganing, with its Cresta run the most famous in the sport and the St. Moritz Tobogganing Club the most infamous.* The bobsled owes its existence to St. Mortiz as well: Adventure-seeking British tourists figured out a way to hook together two toboggans (interestingly, the sleds were called “Americans” at the time, and are now sometimes called “crestas”), and the resulting sled formed a new, faster sport. It also formed a dedicated racing course through St. Moritz, since the

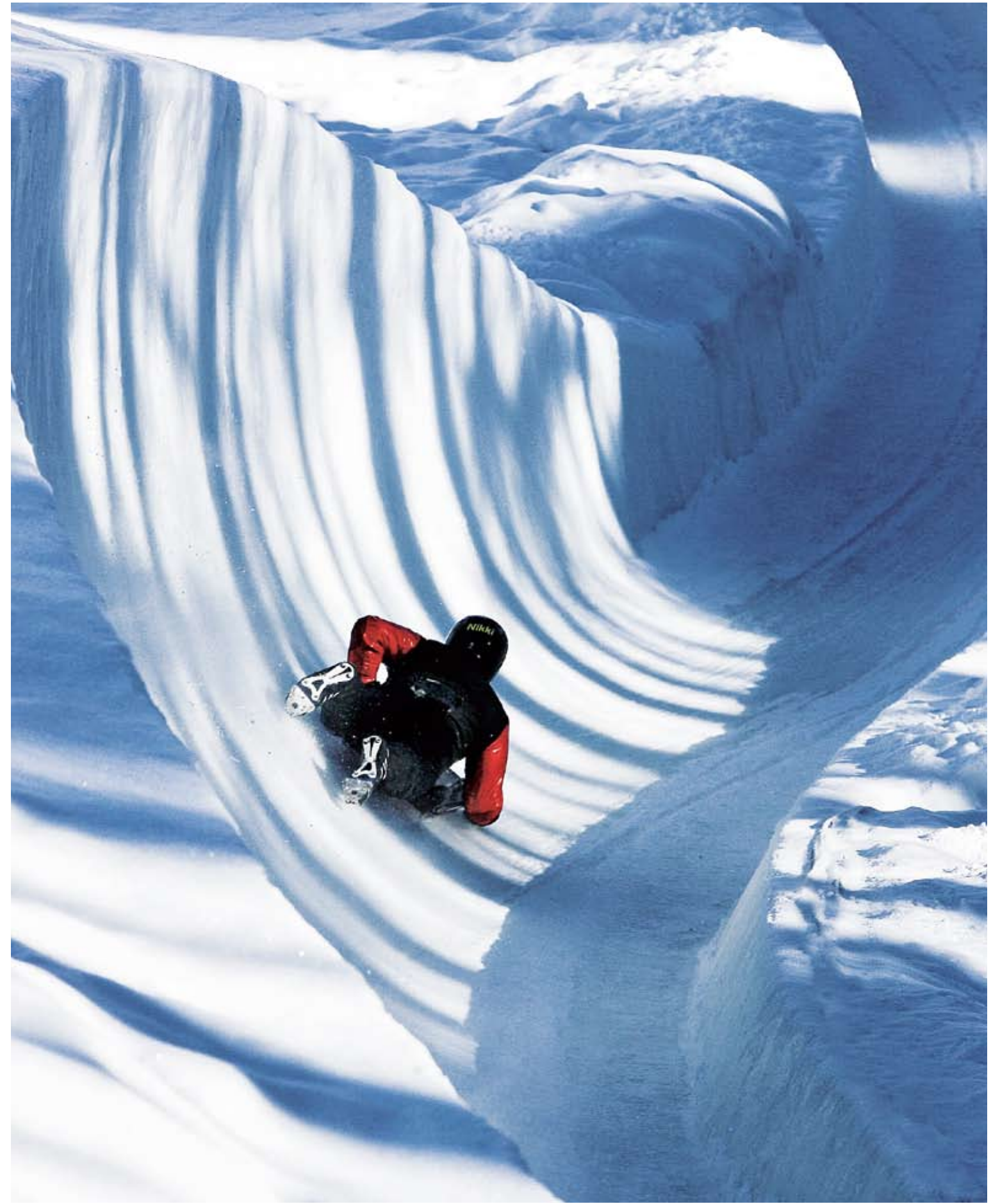


We know it as Switzerland's most famous ski resort, but there's much more to St. Moritz, from the accessible sport of curling to the cloisters of high society at the famous Badrutt's Palace.





LEO MASON/CORBIS; OPPOSITE: GAVIN HELLIER/JAI/CORBIS



city fathers were not happy about the English racing down the streets. That run still exists today as the Olympic Bobrun St. Moritz-Celerina.* If you’ve got 80 seconds to spare, some of the town’s best bob racers will take you down the mile-long course.

Skiing is rather far down on this list, since it’s not as popular as you might expect it to be in the king of winter resorts. It’s not that the skiing isn’t good — the snow and terrain are as good as anything in the Alps, and the views are unbelievable — it’s just that there’s so much else to do.

Badrutt had not only revolutionized tourism but also hotels, introducing such fantastic technology as flush toilets, hydraulic elevators, warm-air heating, and even Switzerland’s first electric light — but the social classes were getting tired of the Kulm. They needed something spectacular to bring them together. Caspar Badrutt, one of Johannes’ nine children reared at the Kulm, knew what that should be. At 35, he bought the Beau-Rivage hotel, reimagining it as a great baronial lodge, complete with a grand hall more appropriately sized for a cathedral. Someone looked at the plans for the expansion, pronounced them more suitable for a palace than a hotel, and suddenly the place had a name.

Badrutt’s Palace was the toast of society from the moment it opened in 1896. The soon-to-be Queen Mary (then Princess May of Teck) danced at the inaugural ball, and the wealthy of the world lined up behind her. Kings and shahs, singers and actors, magnates and moguls came to call the Palace their home in the Alps,* and the grand hall became Europe’s catwalk. In the early years, families would spend the entire winter at the Palace, so they brought not only entire domestic staffs and wardrobe after wardrobe, but often their own favorite furniture. A cardinal who was a frequent guest brought religious icons from the Vatican to decorate its walls; they are still on unofficial loan.

In 1904, Caspar Badrutt passed away, leaving the hotel in the hands of 26-year-old Hans Badrutt, who had trained in Paris with César Ritz and Auguste Escoffier and at London’s Savoy. He knew that his guests could afford anything, and were not impressed by the latest fads. He put his effort into catering to the individual, presenting guests with personalized napkins at dinner, monogrammed (and royal-crested) robes, and individualized silver patterns. Each year, he upgraded the exterior of the hotel, building a tower when neighboring buildings seemed to be stealing the spotlight. He pushed for the creation of an airstrip in the valley to allow his guests to arrive more quickly. He even rescued a 17th-century farmhouse just up the hill, converting it into St. Moritz’s most popular restaurant, Chesa Veglia. And he maintained a classical orchestra for the benefit of his guests.*

The orchestra didn’t have a lot of down time. Badrutt (and his heirs) threw balls and parties one after the other, each more lavish or outlandish. Opera was performed, and literal circuses filled the ballrooms. Dance floors were flooded for Venice Night, in which guests were poled around by singing gondoliers. Every night’s dinner was an event, with each dining couple pausing at the maitre d’ station — cleverly positioned steps above the main dining floor — so their outfits could be observed and judged.* The guests also learned to entertain themselves: Rabbits were released into the great hall, and an attempt on the same was made with an elephant, though it refused to squeeze through the lobby doors. In the bars at night, romance and fisticuffs served as entertainment, and in the bedrooms there was enough material for a lifetime of French sex comedies.

Today the town is full of parties, fundraisers, gala dinners, and secret club events — too many to possibly attend, even if one were to be invited. The Kulm has surpassed its former glory, and three other five-star hotels now welcome discerning guests.* St. Moritz never fails to impress, offering around every corner some sliver of hospitality that wouldn’t have occurred to a rational thinker but, in the grand hall of a grand hotel, seems perfectly natural.

As the Kulm had invented winter tourism, and the Palace elevated it, so the entire town of St. Moritz now works endlessly to perfect it. No one can say for sure if they’ll drag the rest of the ski-resort industry along with them. But if you had to wager ... ❸



From its picturesque train station to its iconic Cresta run — and with diversions equestrian, automotive, and retail — the town is still about escaping from the real world into the Alpine sunshine.



TOP: COURTESY SWISS-IMAGE.CH/ANDY METTLER; LEFT: COURTESY SWISS-IMAGE.CH/DANIEL MARTINEK; RIGHT: COURTESY SWISS-IMAGE.CH/ANDREA BADRUTT

