

By the grace of the saints

ST MORITZ'S FIVE STAR HOTELS ARE ROYAL RESIDENCES WITH LABYRINTHINE BUILDINGS AND CLANDESTINE COURTYARDS. LIKE IMPERIAL MANSIONS FOR HEADS OF STATE OR HIGH-RANKING DIGNITARIES, THEY ARE SUMMER PALACES FOR THE SERIOUS CONNOISSEUR – AND PLACES WHERE LUXURY IS TREATED WITH RELIGIOUS VIRTUE

WORDS | MIKE MACEACHERAN

There is a black bible sitting on top of a vintage dresser. Etched across its front cover is a gold insignia of a *fleur de lis* inlaid with a cross as its centrepiece. The hand-stitched cover feels like the skin of a black serpent. "Thou shalt do good things for thyself," reads one of its commandments. But this isn't the Old or New Testament; it is an unorthodox testament to luxury and a different way of living. This is the St Moritz bible, a doctrine for dream fulfilment and the genesis to a life full of diamonds, priceless watches and ankle-length fur coats. Outside on the streets, they come and go in fur. In the cobbled alleyways, it is not unknown for a local housewife to pay for a loaf of bread with a 1,000 franc note at the local market. The joke is that the call of the lone yodeller in the upper valleys is a melancholic one – because the Swiss haven't made a penny out of it yet.

Named after Saint Maurice, a Coptic Orthodox and Roman Catholic saint, St Moritz and the Engadin region of southern Switzerland are still praising the virtues of the good life decades after the resort caught the world's attention like the world's most expensive cold. Despite the harsh economic winds blowing through its lush valleys like the Germanic föhn, hoteliers and guests toast the likes of their former residents and compatriots. Recent years may have seen stars like Claudia Schiffer, Liz Hurley, Kate Moss and Robert De Niro saunter through the shopping arcades of Via Serlas but Friedrich Nietzsche, Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann, Richard Wagner, Giovanni Segantini and Rainer Maria Rilke were also once part of this exclusive club. Yes, St Moritz likes to drop names but is a tradition that weighs on its shoulders like its heaviest crystal chandeliers. Hard won reputations must be lived up to after all.

And as for the credit crisis? The local residents' response is a Gallic-style shrug, the influence of the Swiss-French no doubt. Switzerland has one of the highest per capita incomes in the world "so there's no need to worry darling" a local tells me. But take consolation; the Swiss don't enjoy it one bit. ⇒



Today, a UBS banker would rather be seen without his trousers than his mobile phone. There is even a very Swiss phrase about money: you don't talk about it, you just have it. The government may argue that Switzerland's neutrality and its impressive army is the reason behind its dearth of wars but the truth of the matter is this: why would any power crazed dictator or one-eyed James Bond villain attack the country he has his secret millions stashed away in?

Of course, its ongoing success is cheered and chinked with a magnum of champagne the size of a church steeple. But despite St Moritz's fondness for recounting its effervescent history, its summer palaces – home to more aristocrats than a PG Wodehouse novel ("hotel" would not do them justice) – are undergoing a renaissance. More stately than Buckingham Palace, more regal than the Palace of Versailles and conceivably more luxuriant than the great Venetian

palaces, the hoteliers have plans to take their high society offerings to an even higher level, pitched somewhere between the clouds and seventh heaven.

But it was not always so. One autumn evening in 1864, Johannes Badrutt made a bet with the last of his summer visitors, confidently telling his guests that winters in the Engadin were sunny and pleasant enough to go out without a hat and a coat. The English visitors could not believe this at first as – accustomed to the cold and wet winters of London – they could only imagine that it would be colder and wetter in the mountains. To convince them to the contrary, Badrutt promised they could stay free of charge until spring if they didn't like the winter in St Moritz. They stayed for the season.

It was therefore going to take more than a few thousand feet of near-impenetrable rock to keep the tourist franc away from the delights

of the Engadin. Tunnels have been blasted, mountains have been tamed and seemingly impregnable valley walls have been taught to bow to the mercy of Swiss engineering and the powers of the automobile. The Swiss own more Ferraris per head than any other country in the world and keen to show them off at top speeds whilst crossing the near 3,000 metre Julier Pass, which meanders down to the lakes of Silvaplana, St Moritz and Pontresina. My assault on the road was in something slightly more understated: a bright yellow Volkswagon Beetle named Eva.

Considered to be the world's cradle of winter tourism, the Kulm Hotel opened in 1856. If Captain Edward Smith had decided to cruise *The Titanic* down the Corvatsch Glacier into a Swiss mountainside rather than an iceberg floating in the north Atlantic, the result would be the Kulm. "The summertime here has always attracted lots of artists and people from the aristocratic classes who have been attracted by the serenity and beauty of the landscape," explains Dominique Godat, the director of the hotel, the oldest residence in St Moritz. "Just look for the mountain peaks covered in snow, the forests in the sun and the Alpine flora. There is a special light here in the Engadin because of the altitude – the light has a special brilliance. It has been called the Olympic sky and it has become a very special place for painters."



Like Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, the daily breakfast buffet is perhaps the Kulm's showiest moment. Waiters pirouette between tables and snap out fresh cups of espresso, cappuccino and macchiato like switchblades. With a curt "Bonjourno Senor" or courteous "Prego Senor" they have the ruthless efficiency of the Sopranos but the charm and good humour of Tony Bennett. Having walked the boards of the hotel for decades, they return year after year and are artisans of the fork and spoon. Luigi knows where family Heidelberg prefer to sit and the silver-tongued Guiseppa has always been a hit with the older ladies.

"I have had to settle invoices on behalf of French countesses, hire entire trains for one single family and arrange to have their favourite sausages delivered straight from Germany," says Silvio Martocchi, the grand concierge. One season he had an encounter with the head of the Ismaelites, Karim Aga Khan. "In the 1990s, the requirements were less extravagant, but for a few years now, glamour has been returning again."

If Captain Edward Smith had cruised *The Titanic* down the Corvatsch Glacier into a Swiss mountainside rather than an iceberg floating in the North Atlantic, the result would have been the Kulm Hotel

Redesigned in 1994 by Italian architect Renzo Mongiardino, an Academy Award-nominated stage and screen set designer, the opulent corridors and lounges are cinematic in scope and presence; they could be a backdrop for Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* or Charles Foster Kane's mansion on the hill in *Citizen Kane*. An old colonel sits reading the daily paper in the Altitude Bar whilst Her Majesty's secret agent straightens his bow tie. Paintings of mandarin oranges, quinces and pomegranates – the symbolic fruit of luxury in the time of the Old Masters – frame the walls and act as points of provocation.

Eve's red apple isn't on show, however. It was eaten years ago.

The bells clang outside and the Schiefer Turm, St Moritz's own leaning tower, tilts at an angle of 5.5 degrees. It is a Sunday and like the day before when the bells rang through the streets to let the local villagers and farmers know that tomorrow would be a Sunday and time to worship they are ringing again – in case they had somehow forgotten and ended up in Monday instead. That's just the way they do things in Switzerland.

What the Avenue des Champs-Élysées is to Paris and Rodeo Drive is to Los Angeles, Via



PREVIOUS PAGE: A view over St Moritz Lake
LEFT: The Kronenhof Hotel, with its Rolls Royce ready and waiting; the hotel's Salon Rosen
ABOVE: The grandeur of the Grand Hotel des Bains; the concierge taking care of a four-legged customer



Serlas is to St Moritz. From Chanel to Gucci, Louis Vuitton to Cartier, the entire international fashion world is on show. Newcomers Roberto Cavalli and Ermenegildo Zegna are the latest to hit the Alpine catwalk. In the elegant reception hall of the Kempinski's Grand Hotel Des Bains, Kacy Crown, Bucherer, Van Cleef & Arpels, Versace and Faber Castell are paraded. But the superlatives don't end there. The Engadin has its own haute couture bacon – yes, really – the highest altitude coffee roaster in Europe, Europe's highest altitude open air jacuzzi and its own truffle and champagne flavoured cheese; a glacier fondue of sorts. =>



“St Moritz will always be one of the world’s most fashionable hotspots, but Pontresina is the insider’s tip.”

The Kulm may be the grand duchess of the summer palaces but the Grand Hotel Des Bains is the young pretender to the throne. The Kempinski’s walls display some of the most sought after contemporary paintings and photographs in the country. The Galerie Peter Vann, which houses works by Didier Hagege, Michel Scarp and Vann himself, gives the hotel the air of the Palais du Louvre. The menu at Enoteca, one of the palace’s gourmet à la carte restaurants, also reads like a hymn to the connoisseur’s palate: there is a confit of South Africa spiny lobster with pea mint panna cotta; dice of French foie gras and smoked eel and breast of French quail on morel risotto with Madeira jus. Asking whether it is washed down with the finest of champagnes is, of course, a silly question. St Moritz’s champagne climate doesn’t just refer to its 322 days of sunshine.

In nearby Pontresina, a 20-minute scenic drive along the curvaceous valley, Heinz Hunkeler is not worried by the shadow cast from his more famous neighbour. “St Moritz

was taken to the world as a brand,” says the general manager of the five star Grand Hotel Kronenhof. “It was all about the jet set, high society and champagne lifestyles. But we have a certain understatement and people do not need to be seen here. The attraction of the village is that it is more subtle, more remote and even more authentic. St Moritz will always be one of the world’s most fashionable resorts but Pontresina is the insider’s tip.”

Famous for spas and wellbeing, the Engadin region is home to iron-rich mineral springs. In 1519, Pope Leo X promised total absolution to anyone who made a pilgrimage to the springs of Holy Mauritius. Continuing this tradition, the Kronenhof has recently opened its brand new 1,000 square metre wellness spa, which has been expertly added so as not to disturb any of the original buildings’ grace. Sir Norman Foster, a regular visitor, has given the hotel and its iconic spa his benediction. High praise indeed.

Like a Swiss *Sleeping Beauty* chateau, the Kronenhof was left to sleep from 1948

through to the early 1970s, but as the current Swiss Hotel of the Year, it is a testament to the enduring romance of the Engadin. “The family left it behind closed doors and it sat like a perfectly preserved antique,” continues Heinz. “Everything on display is original, so it is now Switzerland’s most protected hotel because of its heritage.”

Maybe what makes the summer palaces of the Engadin so enduring is the Swiss themselves: and they can be summed up with their approach to their neighbours. The Germans are disliked for being so confident, not to mention speaking German so well. They may bear the guilt of starting two world wars but the Swiss bear the guilt of not starting a war or anything else for that matter – and they have one of the largest armies per head in the world. The French take the collective Swiss breath away with their certain *je ne sais quoi* charm. Geneva, perhaps the country’s most important political and diplomatic machine, has a reputation confusingly of being not really Swiss. It can all get rather complicated. Thankfully, any frictions are quickly oiled away by the best lubricant known to mankind: money. It wasn’t until 1994 that the Swiss army dispensed with carrier pigeons. Apparently, in St Moritz, they had Cartier pigeons. ☺



**LEFT: The dramatic landscape of the Engadin mountains
ABOVE: The Kulm Hotel’s Kellner Hall; the hotel’s scenic swimming pool; a dish from the Kulm’s luxurious restaurant**



EXPERIENCE SWITZERLAND:

FOR PAINTING

The inaugural St Moritz Art Masters will be held from 21 August until 30 August. A high class art and cultural event with contemporary art, classical concerts, art happenings and glamorous galas, the village’s four five star hotels are joint partners. The Kempinski’s Grand Hotel Des Bains will act as the focal point. WWW.STMORITZARTMASTERS.COM

FOR EATING

Where “angels meet devils”, the Chesa Chantarella is an exclusive Swiss chalet high up in the mountains above St Moritz’s lake ideal for sun-worshippers. It is the valley’s ultimate Alpine idyll where a restorative lunch or afternoon flute of champagne can turn into a four-hour social event. A carriage ride from the Chesa Chantarella down to the valley will make the perfect end to a perfect day. WWW.CHESACHANTARELLA.CH

FOR THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE

Time is everything in Switzerland – and that’s not just because of the watch shops and cuckoo clock stalls everywhere; the country runs on *uberpunktlich* time, where being early is a good quality. A cornucopia of exclusive timepieces and wristwatches can, unsurprisingly, be found across the Engadin region and Cartier, Chopard, Bulgari and Bucherer each have boutiques lined up along Via Serlas. WWW.LESAMBASSADEURS.CH

WITH ETIHAD AIRWAYS

Enjoy Switzerland with return Coral Economy flights to Geneva with three nights twin accommodation at Le Warwick from AED 3,745 per person. Or get out and about with our Fly and Drive package with return flights plus one week car rental from AED 2,730 per person based on two people sharing a car. Conditions apply. WWW.ETIHADHOLIDAYS.COM