

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1934)
Heft: 638

Artikel: Europe's most celebrated hostel
Autor: Ryan, R.J.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686019>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 14.03.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE WINTER SUN-GIVER OF STRENGTH AND HEALTH.

"Lowlands: fog, heights: clear!" For days, for weeks during the winter these four words are hammered into the ears of the city-dwellers, be it by the radio, by weather reports on the meteorological pillars, or by the newspapers. The lover of winter sports knows what that means. He becomes restless and wants to flee from the damp, foggy sea of houses, from the cold, grey walls, out and upward to the sun, which has now taken its winter command in the mountains. It is just in winter, when in the lowlands the sun shows itself for the fewest hours of the entire year that the Alps revel in warm sunshine.

The Swiss winter of the mountains bestows much upon modern men, but the sun is and remains the most beautiful of all gifts, and it is the only power that will every year draw thousands and thousands away from their warm hearths. To be sure, it is alluring to whiz down thousands of meters on skis, feeling as light as a feather, into the valleys where comfortable hotels and well-heated railways are awaiting the tired skiers. But the wonderful development which winter sport has made during the last few years is due, in great part, not to factors of pure sport, but rather hygiene. The diminished air-pressure of high altitudes is favourable for the regeneration of the blood. The hunger for oxygen which always sets in upon the heights, demands an energetic increase of red blood-corpuscles, these valuable supporters of life. The whole circulation is stimulated and with sport activities this is particularly true. The heart, lungs and digestive organs have to do more work, the whole body thereby experiences a thorough physiological purification, so to speak, an elimination of waste matter.

The purity and dryness of the high air on clear winter days is extraordinary and radiation from the sun is especially intense at such times. The effects of the ultraviolet light, made two-fold by the reflection of the snowfields, are felt throughout the whole organism.

EUROPE'S MOST CELEBRATED HOSTEL.

St. Bernard's Monastery 'Mid the Snows.

Continued.

By D. J. RYAN, F.R.G.S.

(In Cork Examiner Weekly).

Dangerous Route.

There is a gap in the history of the pass between the decline of the Roman Empire and the ninth century. That it was constantly used there is no doubt. That it was a dangerous route even when clear of snow is certain, for the traveller had to beware of avalanches and land slides as well as of brigands. We know that in the ninth century large bodies of pilgrims from the north travelled through the Mons Jovis Pass (at it then was) on their way to Rome. The inhabitants of the mountainous country were heathens to whom a flock of pilgrims were legitimate prey. A member of a powerful family seated at Menthon in Savoy became an Augustine Canon at Aosta, some miles on the Italian side of the Pass. He became Archdeacon of the Cathedral Chapter there and came to the conclusion that the best means of protecting the pilgrims was to make good Christians of the mountain people. This he succeeded in doing and built a hospice at the top of the Pass which bears his name. It is impossible to estimate how many wayfarers rested here in the past twelve hundred years. They must number millions. But remember that while most of the summer visitors nowadays are tourists of one kind or another it was not until the nineteenth century that ordinary people began to travel for pleasure. Until then those who availed of the help and hospitality of the monks travelled mostly on business and generally urgent business, such as finding work.

The monks entertained everybody who came to the monastery and claimed hospitality, but a voluntary contribution was expected from those who could afford it, and in proportion to their rank or means. It is interesting to note that the accommodation was up to recently divided into three grades: one for peasants, one for trading and professional classes, and a third for nobles. After the war a line was drawn at motorists, and anybody arriving with a car will not be now put up in the Hospice. This is quite reasonable for Aosta and Martigny are each within an hour's run of either side.

To meet the demands of the motor tourist traffic a portion of the buildings were converted into an hotel and restaurant in 1924, and since then a traveller can obtain accommodation for as long as he desires in the ordinary way of business. I am not an expert but I imagine that ordinary lowlanders would not find a long residence comfortable at a height of 8,200 feet. I

The visible chemical effect of the reaction given by these ultraviolet and ultra-red rays is seen in the tanning of the skin: and it is even claimed that some of these mysterious rays pass through the skin into the blood.

It is well-known that deserts, prairies and the ocean receive large quantities of light, but nowhere is the sun's radiation better favoured than in the high mountains where the air is free of dust and smoke. Nowhere can light, as a powerful factor in healing, be better utilized than in the Alps. Innumerable measurements in photometry have proved that the light in the mountains is far superior to that of the oceans and prairies. Thus, after a period of 25 years observation during the six shortest months — October to May — it has been ascertained that St. Moritz has 700 hours of sunlight, as compared with 535 in Basel and only 300 in Hamburg. A comparison between Davos and Kiel showed that in winter the sunlight exposure was four times as strong in Davos as it was in the German city.

Sunburn is an outer sign showing the effect of light at high altitudes. Thus the French author on travel, Bourrit, writes in 1782, in describing the shepherds of Grison "They are as black from cold as the Africans are from heat." This good French investigator does not seem to have yet known about the meteorological phenomenon of the so-called "reverse of temperature," that is, that in winter the mountain crests are bathed in warmer air than are the valleys which are like icy lakes into which the cold air flows down. Every skier knows, when he is browning his limbs in sunshine, sitting upon the roof of some warm hut, in December and January, far above the sea of fog, that humanity down in the valley is huddled close to warm stoves, dreaming of springtime.

All of the stimulating effects of the high mountain climate in winter have not been made clear. We do, however, know that the dryness of the high air acts as a favourable stimulant to the skin, the brain and the mucous membrane. It is also known that there is a far greater degree of electricity of the air and a higher quantity of radium in the Alps than there is in the plains.

have seen people quite giddy on arrival by car. The feeling wears off in a short time, particularly when one has a decent lunch in the restaurant. Still lots of lowlanders from England and Scotland and some from Ireland spend the most of their summer holidays tramping from hut to hut at from six to seven or eight thousand feet above sea level, and these are not mountaineering enthusiasts of the class that fly over Everest. Incidentally the Pass is 1,500 or 2,000 feet above the tree line, but botanists will discover hosts of real Alpine plants right up to the Hospice. Around it, even in summer, there are few forms of plant life. When the sun shines it resembles the sun of an abnormal winter day. You never have far to go for a handful of snow, even in July or August.

Having refreshed yourself at the restaurant, you will no doubt like to see the monastery. There is a lovely chapel well worth inspection, even if you don't feel inclined to say a prayer there. There is no necessity to remind Irish folk that a chapel or church is not a museum; but I'm sorry to say some travellers act in a manner that suggest otherwise. The English libel themselves by saying that the typical English tourist shocks the continentals by his casualness. But I have found them, as a rule, to respect other people's places of worship. I'm afraid our American cousins are less thoughtful in that regard. I have seen many English people, whom I knew to be Protestants, put something in the boxes for offerings in churches they visit, and saw them do so in the St. Bernard monastery chapel. I might add that I have seen Protestant Englishwomen light candles before shrines. I cannot say the same of either Scotch or Americans. The Scotch might do it if you had time or inclination to argue the matter with them — they are, as a rule, given that way. You will probably find many nationalities in the chapel, and if you care to make comparisons of behaviour you are free to do so — in your own mind.

Postmaster-Monk.

Leaving the chapel, turn to the left and go up a stone staircase until you find yourself in a long room with many chairs and seats and a long table with writing materials — the pens, however, will not write except by brute force.

At one end of the room there is a counter on which are displayed books, pamphlets, photographic films, photographs, postcards and souvenirs, nick-nacks, such as carved sheep bells, etc. In charge of this department you will meet an elderly monk who fills many offices, official and semi-official. He is postmaster as well as shopkeeper and one of the best linguists in a land of linguists. I am never surprised at meeting a man who can keep a conversation going in one language at the time, but here is a man who will keep going in four, five or six at the same time. "Yes, sir, I speak Eng-

We must add to these physiological effects of winter's sojourn in the high mountains, that unique experience of winter sport in all of its manifold forms — sport — which draws every person of all ages and professions and from every class of society under its magic spell. He who has once got away from his petty every-day work and has been able to experience a wonderful Swiss winter, will ever be drawn and will always return.

It is not so very long ago that in winter our mountains were an untouched wilderness. It was only the mountain farmers who laboriously tramped through the deep snow to feed the animals in the sheds; otherwise, however, the gleaming fields of pure snow remained trackless for long days and weeks. A transient trace of game was oftentimes the only mark in the spotless winterdress. To be sure, there had always been eccentric persons, who, as early as the beginning of this century could tell about the delicious warmth and the dream-like beauty of the snow-covered mountains, — but they remained "odd fellows." The masses of the population did not come and they even ridiculed these courageous pioneers of this new implement who often were obliged to learn the new art of skiing in secret during the night. Then there came that great man of the North, Frithjof Nansen and opened up a new kingdom for amazed mankind — the winter ski-ing. It was mass-inspiration which sized mankind, ski-sport became the sport of the masses — the sport of the people.

A well-known author upon sport matters once wrote:

"Blessed be the poor ski-runners — for theirs is rest in the sunshine,

Blessed be those clumsy at ski-ing — for theirs is the scenery and winter woods,

Blessed be the "know-nothings" — for theirs is the long day with changing light and wandering clouds, with the glorious view and the blissful dream in the blue distance."

Revue Touristique Suisse.

lish," and he sells you postcards, stamps, guide books or sheep bells in English, and tells you the equivalent cost in English currency. You, Herr, are Allemand, and our friend deals with you in German; while you, Signor of Italy, or Senor of Spain, or Monsieur of France, will find that the old monks can deal equally well with you. It is said he knows a number of Italian and all the Swiss patois and I do not know how many other tongues. When I was there he had served for I believe thirty years and must have seen hundreds of thousands of strange faces. As a rule, the monks spend only eight or ten years at most on the pass, but this is an exception.

Having purchased your postcards and stamps you will find a rubber stamp (much in demand) at the table. It is a badly treated instrument, for everybody wants to use it in a hurry, as evidence that he was really at the Hospice. Having stamped and addressed your postcards to your friends you drop them into a letter box outside the door. Continue your tour of the buildings. In a sort of enclosed backyard you see the kennels for the famous dogs. Around two o'clock some of the dogs are allowed out amongst the crowds of charabanc and motor visitors. Now you will observe a sort of mass dog worship, especially on the part of numerous old ladies, usually spinsters, who want to pat the animals and take their "pictures." The dogs are used to this sort of treatment, and invariably looked bored. The day I was there a hero dog which saved many lives was brought out. After a few minutes he got thoroughly fed up and shovelled his way out of the crowd and in towards the kennels. He was a modest hero.

I may say that the dogs now at the monastery are not of the old St. Bernard breed. That got worn out and was replaced by a cross between the English mastiff and the Newfoundland. The mastiff has practically disappeared in England, and it is curious that if the breed were revived the revivers would have to go to Switzerland for it. The dogs are huge fellows, and show strength and endurance in every part. They are very intelligent and highly trained for the work they have to do in winter.

In days gone by, but not so very long ago, winter must have been a lonely dreary and trying time at the Hospice. It is now, however, connected by telephone with Aosta, on the Italian side, and with Orsieres and Martigny, on the Swiss side. It has a wireless installation and is a meteorological station.

On to Italy.

Your thirst for knowledge or your curiosity satiated at the monastery, you will want to pass out to Italy. You will observe a gentleman in blue uniform and long blue cape, wearing the red cross of Geneva on his cap, at the gate. He represents the Swiss Government. He makes no business with you unless you happen to want to