PRESS RELEASE

From origins in the Engadin to the conquest of the Alps. The history of winter tourism.

The history of alpine winter tourism began in winter 1864/1865, when St. Moritz and Davos became the first resorts in the Alps to welcome winter guests. Since then, winter sports have grown to become an important sector of the economy – and a key element of Switzerland’s identity. A new, extensively illustrated book tells the full story for the first time.

Johannes Badrutt believed in the power of fresh mountain air and warm sunshine, and he believed in the appeal of winter. The hotelier brought guests from England, Germany and Italy to his Hotel Kulm and so made St. Moritz the world’s first mountain winter resort.

The journalist Michael Lütscher tells the full story of winter tourism from its beginnings to the present day in his book, “Snow, Sun and Stars”, newly published. He charts a development that began in the mountains of Graubünden in the 1860s and which by the First World War had spread to the rest of Switzerland and then the whole of the Alps.

While tourists had long been coming to the Alps in summer, in winter the snow-covered mountains remained “terra incognita” – largely “uncharted and unused territory”, as Lütscher writes. In winter 1864/65 the first winter guests travelled to the Alps, to St. Moritz and Davos. They came because of the good climate: for the pure, dry air and the bright sunshine. And they came to improve their health, because the first winter guests suffered from tuberculosis. In the winter mountain air they soon became healthy; patients became tourists who wanted to explore the mountain world. The British brought their passion for games and competition: winter sports were born. First came skating, games on ice and toboggan racing, which led to
skeleton and bobsleigh riding. But when the technique of skiing reached the Alps from Norway, a process began that would transform the face of the mountain world.

Lütscher portrays the beginnings of winter tourism as the “product of the first phase of globalisation in the late-19th century”. In those pioneering days, guests were coming from all over the world to the Swiss mountains. This development could be seen most clearly in St. Moritz, which had already become a chic, cosmopolitan winter sports venue by the end of the 19th century – and which soon became the model for resorts in Austria and the USA.

“Snow, Sun and Stars” reveals plenty of facts that today come as a surprise. For example, that Les Avants, above Montreux, was the first winter resort in French-speaking Switzerland – indeed anywhere outside Graubünden. Grindelwald and the Bernese Oberland, the Vaud Alps, central Switzerland and finally the Valais followed afterwards. Steadily, the whole of the Alps opened up to winter tourism, until “the former wilderness of the snowy mountains was transformed by cable cars, ski lifts and pistes into ski areas”.

Michael Lütscher has consulted countless sources for his book and spoken with contemporary witnesses. A wealth of illustrations, including rare photos from the late-19th century, documents the development of winter tourism. “Snow, Sun and Stars” traces the complete story for the first time. The book has been published to mark “150 years of winter tourism in St. Moritz”, which the Engadin St. Moritz holiday destination is celebrating in winter 2014/15.

Michael Lütscher (b. 1962) is a freelance journalist living in Zürich. He has worked as an editor at the business newspaper Cash and at the SonntagsZeitung, and is the author of many books including “Eine Stadt, ein Verein, eine Geschichte” (published by NZZ), the history of the football club FC Zürich.

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