

ELEGANCE

IN MOTION

It's all champagne wishes and truffle dreams in the Upper Engadin, finds Laurel Munshower, as she laces up her fur-trimmed boots to attend the Snow Polo World Cup St. Moritz





A Golden polo player statue (above) on the frozen lake at St Moritz in Switzerland (top). The challenge of playing on snow, the unique location at 1850 metres above sea level and the glamour of St. Moritz make the event a chilly – yet thrilling, one-of-a-kind spectacle (lower right)

Snow polo is played across the globe from Aspen in the US and Cortina in Italy but the St. Moritz original remains the most prestigious and fetches the highest prize money, resulting in often passionate tussles on the frozen lake (above)

Recession? What recession?" the announcer chuckles to thousands of spectators nestled among the peaks of Switzerland's Upper Engadin valley. I'm further ensconced in the VIP grandstand of the Snow Polo World Cup St. Moritz (www.snowpolo-stmoritz.com), where an army of Perrier-Jouët bottles are emptied without second thought into flutes insouciantly clutched by polo fans, bon vivants and the social elite. In the shadow of eye-wateringly expensive grand old hotels, they're dressed in snow-dusted mink coats and accompanied by dogs in matching finery, painting a picture that does seem like St. Moritz is situated in a high-altitude

haven beyond the reach of economic pratfalls.

This annual convergence of the posh and the ponies takes place at the tail end of January on frozen Lake St. Moritz, which withstands revellers, pounding hoofs, a heated stable, pop-up restaurants and boutiques, and a heated VIP tent – the latter causing the most concern to the ice's stability. But fret not – no one else does – quaff another glass of bubbly and join the madding crowd.

In an event as inherently over-the-top as this one, the best way to do that is as a VIP, a pricey privilege that opens up a world of Maserati transfers, free-flowing champagne and an exclusive grandstand steps away from that potentially troublesome heated VIP tent.

Here, my fellow sybarites have the chance to strip themselves of their decadent furs to reveal chic winter style that anywhere else would be considered laughable below-freezing attire. I float through the decadent crowd, weaving through a winter-wonderland setup of pure-white reindeer statues, fur throws and crystalline chandeliers as I graze on tables laden with Sprüngli chocolates, dainty Perrier-Jouët flutes and a truffle-scented gourmet buffet by local chef Reto Mathis.

It's the first of three days of polo and on the quieter side. The four sponsor-led teams competing for the Cartier Trophy are introduced: Perrier-Jouët, Badrutt's Palace Hotel, Maserati – and Cartier, who have won the past three years, and close the afternoon with an effortless

trouncing of team Perrier-Jouët. Six-goal-handicap players Nacho Gonzalez and Chris Hyde, who is also considered the world's top snow-polo player, make them the team to beat once more.

As the day wraps up, I wander to St. Moritz Dorf, the resort's swank village overlooking the lake. It lacks much of the Alpine Heidi charm – for that you may want to visit neighbouring Zuoz, cobbledstoned and historic – but chances are, you're not here for a quaint atmosphere. Via Serlas is the fashionable drag, occupied by high-end designer names – Chanel, Gucci, Cartier – and the legendary Badrutt's Palace Hotel (www.badruttspalace.com), which I'm told by Guido, a local, is "a house of madness". His brother once worked there, and

he confidentially continues, eyes twinkling, "When you know what happens there, you know it's special. You hear of guests bathing in tubs filled with champagne. These things don't happen in Suvretta." He's referring to Hotel Suvretta House (Via Chasellas 1; +41 81 836 36 36; www.suvrettahouse.ch), hidden away shortly outside the village and the destination of choice for the most discerning and discreet guests. "Badrutt's is where you stay if you want to read about yourself in the papers."

Just up the street lies Roo Bar at Hotel Hauser (Via Traunter Plazas 7; +41 81 837 50 50; www.hotelhauser.ch), where the younger set après-ski al fresco to the tune of thumping music and joyous chanting. Away from the vibrant bar I peek inside

the hotel's fantastic confectionery where I'm introduced to the region's speciality: the nusstorte (nut cake), a salty-sweet treat of caramelized nuts wrapped in crumbly pastry. Slightly farther on I find the après of choice for the more sedate. Its façade decorated with sgraffito – the traditional Engadin style of carving through white plaster to artful effect – Café Hanselmann (Via Maistra 8; +41 81 833 38 64; www.hanselmann.ch) is the more civilized choice to take a seat, and I enjoy a warming latte before heading back to my hotel in adjacent St. Moritz Bad.

Where the Dorf ("village") side of the resort currently reigns as the opulent hotspot, this wasn't always the case; the Bad, or "spa", side with its natural Mauritius Spring was the resort's



The interiors of Kempinski Grand Hotel des Bains may seem plucked from centuries past, though rooms are well appointed with contemporary amenities, while cocktails flow and the champagne is always on ice at the bar (above). Opposite page: a thrilling polo scene at Snow Polo World Cup St. Moritz 2015

original draw – attracting Romans as long as 3,000 years ago. Today it's the more low-key location, but not necessarily less on luxury, as I find during my stay at Kempinski Grand Hotel des Bains. The white, blue-accented and regally turreted grand dame hotel is situated amid a snowy park at the intersection of the resort's popular cross-country trails – not to mention steps away from the Signal cable car, depositing skiers onto the Corviglia pistes with ease.

The atmosphere inside the hotel is just as accommodating; an overall warmth emanates from the pleasant staff, who are ready with a smile and a greeting, and contemporary fireplaces glow in the buzzy lobby bar. Throughout, the modish hotel nods to the resort's past with vintage black-and-white photographs from the town. Looking for somewhere on-site to dine, Michelin-starred

Cà d'Oro's menu proffers gourmet Mediterranean, but I'm in the mood to taste the region's bounty. Restaurant Enoteca recently underwent a menu revamp to better portray the enoteca theme, and an expansive library of wine decorates the intimate dining room's walls beneath intricate cornices and decorated ceilings. Tapas quickly fills my table – fresh olives, antipasti, cured local meats such as Bündlerfleisch – before I dig into what seems to be this town's favourite delicacy: truffle. An unassuming-looking pasta is set in front of me, accompanied by a saucière of truffle foam, to drizzle atop. My waiter then appears with a bulbous black Périgord truffle to shaved over my pasta. As the costly slivers float down, I'm simply told to "say when". A dangerous game for an indulgent foodie.

Returning to my suite, I relish the bathroom's

blissful heated floor after the long winter day, before flopping down on a plush sofa to gaze at the peaks outside my windows. Dabbling in the pillow menu's options, I opt for a millet cushion scented with Alpine herbs, and know that this night, I will sleep well.

The next morning starts with a lazy breakfast of cheeses, dripping honeycombs, fresh pastries and eggs à la carte amid the sounds of a live pianist before I return to the polo village, where I'm greeted by a busier scene – and not just on the ground. In the blue skies private jets fly low enough to see their handful of elite windows as they begin their descent to neighbouring Samedan village's airport. Clouds of snow are kicked up as ponies race across the lake's frozen surface, softly spraying the faces of nearby spectators. Teams Perrier-Jouët and Badrutt's Palace play a thrilling

"CLOUDS OF SNOW ARE KICKED UP AS PONIES RACE ACROSS THE LAKE'S FROZEN SURFACE, SOFTLY SPRAYING THE FACES OF NEARBY SPECTATORS"



match that results in a tie, leading to an additional fifth, sudden-death chukka. Tensions are high, and obscenities from the players float out from the field to the crowd, but a last-second goal by Badrutt's wins them the match.

They make it look easy, deftly manoeuvring their way around the field – which I am about to find is far from the truth as I join English polo-star Malcolm Borwick for a quick lesson. He's a patient teacher and while I'm chuffed over my success rate of slamming the ball while on my own two feet, it's another story from atop one of the highly trained ponies. The stick is awfully heavy and my fear of whacking the equine in the face wracks my nerves; learning polo at this age seems impossible. Borwick reassures me: "Some great polo players have learnt the skill later in life, because they come into it with such passion." I perk up, but clumsily knock the ball under the pony's stomach. He reassures me again: "It's very windy and cold – quite the challenge to play polo here let alone learn it."

Relinquishing the grounds to the pros, Cartier go head to head with Maserati in a game that starts out scrappy – both teams are in it to win it – and the ball, larger and lighter than the traditional polo ball, is powerfully hit, often flying foul into the crowd where it bounces off heads and endangers buckets of bubbly. Resulting in the day's second tie, Cartier eventually score the breaking goal, one step closer to winning the World Cup for the fourth consecutive time.

As the polo matches don't kick off until noon, I spend a morning on a "snow safari" to get acquainted with the surrounding Corviglia area. Luckily, I am joined by Susi Wiprächtiger (+41 79 656 95 66; susiwip@bluewin.ch), who has been enthusiastically guiding the visiting elite

around the mountain for 30 years. I could hardly hope for a better companion; she's knowledgeable and full of humorous anecdotes of the one percent. There was the client who didn't seem to fully understand the privilege of private-jet ownership: "But Susie, don't you know? It's just so convenient to have your own plane!"; and the polo attendee who was baffled that her pup refused to wear sunglasses; and the wife who repeatedly urged, "No – more!" to the caviar being spooned onto her dish at a posh piste-side eatery. But not everyone is so unrelatable, and Corviglia is home to surely the happiest lift operator I have ever encountered in my 20-some years on the slopes; try not to be smitten with Anderson, a Caribbean transplant working in the shade of the Marguns lift, greeting everyone with an enormous smile, kind words and warm handshake.

After exploring the wide, rolling and immaculately groomed pistes, our final stop is Reto Mathis's iconic La Marmite (Corviglia; +41 81 833 63 55; www.mathisfood.ch), positioned at the top of the Chantarella funicular, where stories of caviar excess tend to originate. There may be spectacular views of the surrounding peaks, but it's difficult to tear my attention away from all of the incredible food on display: a cart laden with cheese, fanciful desserts and those infamous fish eggs. But if there's a signature dish, it's the CHF118 (\$119) truffle pizza appetiser – a crisp base under melted cheese and shaved white truffle.

After swapping my snow gear for some fur, I arrive at the polo final. It's a fast-paced day, and the subsidiary final sees team Badrutt's Palace lift La Martina Cup high after a win against Perrier-Jouët, owed in no small part to Argentine nine-goaler Augustin "Tincho" Merlos, who ratcheted



Polo matches on the frozen lake (top) don't start until noon but there are many social events drawing fur-laden celebrities and VIPs (above). The daytime polo culminates in lavish gala dinners and cocktail parties (right)



up four of Badrutt's five goals. But it's the Cartier Trophy final everyone's anxiously waiting for, and just halfway through the first chukka team Cartier have already gained two goals, a broken stick and a near-miss injury. The teams parry back and forth, but Maserati put up a strong defence and end up leading the match by a point just a minute from the end of the final chukka – Cartier's Hyde nearly equalises before the final second turns – but it's not to be. Maserati break Cartier's three-year spell to take home the coveted trophy.

Thrilled for the new champions, it's time to unwind and I hop into a four-wheeled Maserati pony of my own to unwind at Kempinski's spa. In a sunlit atrium, a few laps in the pool begin to peel away exhaustion, but it's the Alpine Kräuter-sauna, scented with herbs and laden with rustic wood, that melts any remaining vestiges of stress. But just to make sure, I book a gentle back and shoulder massage, the ideal solution to relieve soreness from a shoulder-first tumble I took on the pistes earlier. And as the spa is situated directly atop St. Moritz's namesake, the Mauritius Spring, I forgo the usual tea for a fresh glass of the natural mineral water,

which, I'm told, has healing qualities thanks in part to a high percentage of iron. It tastes quite distinctive, but I duly toss it back and wait for the rejuvenating results.

With the polo having reached its conclusion, the mountain holds my attention. Waking up early one morning, I decide to take advantage of empty, untouched pistes – the so-called "white carpet". I'm tired and cold and I begin to grumble regrets to myself in the cable car. But after I've strapped on my snowboard and begin to carve elegant curves into the untouched snow, my regrets fly away as I swoosh down the trail. As I play beneath the 3,056-metre Piz Nair, the sun brilliantly breaks free from behind the opposing 4,000-metre peaks. In this moment, I know there's nowhere I'd rather be. ❧

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