

Cricket on ice in St Moritz

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It had snowed the previous evening. It had snowed all night. It kept snowing, after only the briefest respite, all morning. The temperature remained below freezing.

The roads were cleared quickly enough – this was Switzerland, and snow is routine. It was also St Moritz, where snow is business. But even this town seemed to be cowering against the onslaught. The streets were unusually quiet, almost deserted. Only a few people scuttled around, including a couple of dozen figures out on the frozen lake, whose purpose might have seemed a little obscure, not to say bizarre.

They were – I kid you not – playing cricket.

Many years ago, Punch published a strip cartoon in which an Englishman was stopped by French customs officers who found a cricket bat in his suitcase. They looked puzzled. So he gave them an enthusiastic demonstration of its purpose, lashing an imaginary ball to all parts of the customs hall. He was led away, and the final scene shows him incarcerated under a sign saying “Lunatiques”.

It was perhaps fortunate that St Moritz has had one of its whitest winters in years and that there was a wall of snow between the lake and the road, rendering the cricketers largely invisible to any passing authority figures. For this was very mad indeed: a cricket match played on top of an Alpine lake.

When I thought about that for a moment, I felt queasy. But then if you stop to think about the entire notion of playing cricket at several degrees below zero, you need a sit-down.

The annual Cricket on Ice tournament dates back to 1988, a joint venture between British enthusiasts and the St Moritz municipality. To this day, Martin Berthod, the town’s director of sporting events, remains bemused. “I thought they meant croquet, you know,” he said, miming a croquet stroke. “But it’s good fun.” Does he ever play, then? He looks shocked. “No, no, no. I’ve got no idea.”

For some years, the cricketers had quite big ideas. There was substantial sponsorship, and top-line players of the more sociable kind were brought out to add a little of the gimcrack glitz of which Swiss ski resorts are so fond. The most famous incident in the event’s history involves the former England captain David Gower having a late-night drive on the lake, and discovering the ice was not quite as thick as he thought.

That sort of dubious glory has faded now. But the cricket goes on, thanks to the dedication of an Anglophile Zurich banker, Daniel Haering, who was educated nearby at the Zuoz Lyceum, an international school with a strong tradition of English sports.

Haering decided to get out of the celebrity business: “Had it really grown, it would have required massive investment and I was thinking ‘Do I have to change profession?’ So I decided to keep it as a bit of fun.” You might say it has less personality now, but more character.

Four teams are invited every year, including – always – the Old Cholmeleians, who sound like a P.G. Wodehouse invention but are actually the jolly, if occasionally creaky, old boys of Highgate School. They were joined this year by Copa, a team of irregulars notionally based in Prague, the Swiss (summer) champions, Winterthur, who did not actually have any Swiss-born players, and the school team from Zuoz.

The cricket was not very fierce. They use an orange rubberised ball these days rather than a hard one, which became sopping wet in the snow. This enables the batsmen to wear woolly hats rather than helmets, and the close fielders to worry a little less about their fingers being separated from their hands.

With the snow this deep, boundaries became almost unthinkable. But for Haering the actual matches are hardly the point. "The purpose is to honour the traditions," he says, "fairness, openness and honesty". And a little old-fashioned charm: he insists that everyone brings a dinner jacket for the end-of-tournament celebrations.

There is a wider tradition involved here, too. Though the heartland of cricket consists of Britain and the lands it colonised, no game has inveigled itself into quite so many weird places. Wherever a handful of devotees are gathered together, they will find a way of improvising bat, ball and stumps, no matter how unpromising the terrain. There is even a subculture of playing on sandbanks in mid-ocean.

Here on ice, it brings out the Everest spirit in a chap, a fact emphasised by the Union Jack fluttering from the little scoreboard. A couple of feet of snow? No problem. A municipal groundsman on a roller compacted the outfield, while the players helped shovel it off the matting.

It was strangely pleasant out there. I had a turn at umpiring and found the experience almost addictive, though it was lucky I was never called on to adjudicate a close leg before wicket. Bespectacled umpires are not at their best in a blizzard.

Another disadvantage of cricket on ice is the absence of a pavilion. The field is waterlogged eight months a year, which hampers any building plans. There was just a flimsy tent to protect the kit and the handful of spectators. Indeed, the first casualty of the festival was the scorer: "Can somebody please take over?" he cried.

"I'm effing freezing!"

Regulars can remember it far worse than this. "We played in -15°C once," recalled Curt Schmitt, a teacher at the Lyceum. "That gets a little cold when you're standing immobile on the boundary."

It isn't supposed to be this way. It's supposed to be classic skiing weather: the golden sun, the blue sky, the crystal-clear air, the dark green pines, the white, white snow.

Cricketers take what they can get, though. They can wait a long time for golden sun and blue sky in an English August.

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The details

For more information on the festival, visit www.cricket-on-ice.com

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