
Some early Kandahar racers

Racing pedigree

Mürren hosted the first modern slalom in 1922, the first World Championships of Alpine skiing in 1931, and ran the first Inferno race in 1928. It is also the resort chosen by the British-run Kandahar Ski Club, and together all these facts back up the Swiss area's claim that it is the cradle of downhill ski racing. **KATY DARTFORD** went for a visit

TWO men wait impatiently opposite me as I board the Schilthorn cable car in the Swiss ski resort of Mürren. Each are carrying paragliding packs about the size of me on their backs, giving them the appearance of hunched turtles. Nonchalantly, they sling their skis over their shoulders, far more interested in air thermals than the snow conditions.

The car-free village set in the shadows of the iconic Eiger, Mönch, and Jungfrau mountains has the highest skiing in the Bernese Oberland. I stare out of the glass and watch the town disappear into a speck as we are whisked up 2,970m to the summit and the Piz Gloria. The building claims to be the world's first revolving restaurant, and 'starred' in the Bond film On Her Majesty's Secret Service as the mountaintop hideaway of James Bond's nemesis, Ernst Stavro Blofeld.

I'm told the pair lugging their paragliding kit up the mountain are Army Major Adrian Pery, Chairman of British Telemark skiing, and his friend Mark Berry. Adrian not only paraglides, but dives, sails, jumps out of aeroplanes, climbs and rides horses. With all this, I mused, he would probably make a far better new 007 replacement to Daniel Craig than the current suggestions. Perhaps 2017 will be his year?

It's certainly the year of the Schilthorn – Piz Gloria as it prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary.

In 1967, the cable car finally opened up the mountain to the wider public, not just alpinists, thanks to funding from the film company who in return wanted the right to use the complex in the Bond film, shooting the Schilthorn into the global limelight.

To celebrate its anniversary, the building has had a facelift and a new glass 'Skywalk' has been created, which hugs the mountainside beneath the cable car offering spectacular views of the Lauterbrunnen Valley. In the movie, several bad guys plummet off these sheer cliffs into the depths below. Now people pay to do that in tandem paragliders.

With its Bond heritage, it's perhaps little wonder that the Schilthorn region is a magnet not only for skiers, but for all sorts of extreme sports fans like base jumpers and speed riders (who fly down ski slopes using special parachutes designed to let them fly fast and close to the ground). An apt playground for the modern-day Bond, I think, as I watch Adrian disappear off down the black run that's also featured in On Her Majesty's Secret Service, in the form of George Lazenby as he's chased down by Ernst Stavro Blofeld's men.

The black run is also part of the infamous Inferno, which at almost 10 miles is the world's longest amateur downhill ski race. The event, which began in 1928, now attracts around 1,800 amateur racers every January. The course also recently attracted occasional Daniel Craig stunt double Ben Collins – aka The Stig from former series of the BBC show Top Gear. Ben, however, descended the course in a Range Rover, and described it as 'insane' and the toughest course he's ever completed!

Hopefully there would be no such dramatic descents for me. I'm met at the start by part of Mürren's skiing aristocracy, Bernie Lunn. His grandfather, Arnold, founded the Kandahar Ski Club in 1924 and later set up the Inferno race. Bernie guided me down the course, pointing out some of its highlights.

Mürren claims to be cradle of downhill ski racing, and Bernie tells me that when the first race took place there was no lift and competitors had to hike up and powder-ski down. It was first won in one hour 12 minutes, but can now be completed in about 45 minutes, although the winner normally takes less than 15.

The slope drops steeply from the Schilthorn and runs down to the Engetal below Birg. Bernie shoots off, he's fast, and I wipe out trying to keep up. But it's not surprising he is such a good skier, he has it in his blood. His great-grandfather was the pioneering Alpine travel agent Henry Lunn, who set up the winter sports industry in Mürren in 1910.

I dust myself off and continue to ski down with Bernie. Along the way I spot Adrian and Mark, who are about to launch off the side of the col at Birg. I couldn't quite watch as Mark disappeared off the side of the mountain. I held my breath as I waited for him to reappear and soar into the sky, but eventually, peering down, I spot him, thankfully unscathed, scooping up his wing a few metres down amongst the rocks.

In the early days, Lunn and his fellow racers used the Telemark technique to ski, which when done right looks fluid, graceful and smooth. So I decided to set my heel free and sign up for a telemark clinic with Adrian.

But trying to unlearn years of alpine skiing technique proved difficult. Doing everything on the opposite leg to what I was used to just wouldn't click, until Adrian mentioned 'scree running' – "Sink your foot as if you're running down a scree slope, letting it slide into the rubble." I managed to make a few wobbly turns, but was soon completely knackered... "Once you've got the squatting position correct," says Adrian, "it's not at all tiring."

It wouldn't be a trip to Mürren without meeting another of its 'extreme residents', and having recently taken up snowboarding I was keen to have a lesson with former Canadian big mountain snowboarding legend Karleen Jeffery.

Like me, Karleen is only about 5ft 2in. Unlike me, the two-time World Extreme Snowboard Champion, four-time winner of the Rip Curl World Heli Challenge and six-time winner of the Mt. Baker Banked Slalom is also known as 'Gnarleen'.

As we head up the mountain, Karleen tells me she relocated to the Lauterbrunnen valley from Chamonix after meeting her husband, BASE jumper Dave Barlia. Karleen is also a passionate BASE jumper, but says since having her son she only does 'smaller' jumps these days.

Karleen gives me a few snowboarding tips to move me on to the next level, and as I practise a spin round the corner I almost take out Adrian, my own 'James Bond', as he was skiing down after another paraglide off the mountain.

I decided it was time to say: "Goodbye, Mr Bond!"

TRAVEL FACTS

Katy Dartford travelled to Mürren as a guest of Mürren Tourism (www.muerren.ch) and the Schilthorn Cableway Ltd (www.schilthorn.ch).

For details on accommodation visit:

www.muerren.ch

To plan the journey from the UK to Mürren (flights/rail transfers), visit:

www.myswitzerland.com

or call Switzerland Travel Centre Freephone 00800 100 200 30