

ST MORITZ SAMEDAN – SWITZERLAND’S OLDEST COURSE

High on St Moritz

St Moritz might be the celebrity skiers’ favourite, but can its two courses rival its Cresta Run and many pistes? Peter Swain hits the slopes



FOR THE SEASONED TRAVELING GOLFER, transport sets the tone for the trip, so when I arrived at St Moritz railway station to find a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce waiting to whisk me up to Badrutt’s Palace Hotel – all of 800 yards away – I knew right away that this was no ordinary golfing weekend.

I had flown into Zurich a few hours earlier and taken a train for the two-hour journey south. In my experience, rail travel and golf bags can be a tricky combination, but, this being Switzerland, it all went like clockwork.

Six thousand feet up, St Moritz is the latest Alpine skiing destination to make a pitch for the lucrative summer golfing market. Their boast that ‘golf balls fly higher at altitude’ obviously needed verification, so I had accepted an invitation to play in the hotel’s annual competition for heavy hitters.

Founded by a committee of Brits in 1893, Samedan is the oldest course in Switzerland and one of the first clubs to be recognized in continental Europe. With the famous Cresta Run, created by thrill-seeking English tobogganists in 1884, just above the town, and two Winter Olympic Games in the mid-twentieth century, St Moritz has an impressive sporting pedigree. ▶

Courses in Switzerland are playable from June through to September, and if you time it right the colourful Alpine blooms will be out in force





The Engadin valley in southeast Switzerland is where the Gnomes of Zurich come to play. I always thought the country had three official tongues – French, German and Italian – but here they speak a fourth, Romansch, a sort of modern Latin. But in any language, money talks. St Moritz has more jewelry and fur shops than you can shake a cocktail stick at.

The night before battle commenced, I hunkered down with my hosts in the Palace bar, where cigar smoking is not only permitted but positively encouraged. Very civilized. The unashamedly old-school five-star hotel is perched high above the lake with stunning 360 degree views of snow-covered peaks, even in high summer.

Next morning revealed the 6,800-yard course to be the flattest piece of land for miles around, which is doubtless why it was built here in the first place. The main hazards are not the hills but the pleasantly burbling alpine brooks and lakes that inundate the 18 holes. Unfortunately, on tournament day, they were being topped up by torrential Celtic Manor Ryder Cup-style rain, so a second, clubhouse breakfast was the order of the day.

One of the great pleasures of playing in a locale as civilized as St Moritz is the range of company the roving golfer encounters. There were Swiss, Germans, Italians, French, Americans and myself, united by a slightly unhealthy obsession with golf, and all speaking English. While the pro shop did a roaring trade in wet-weather gear, we fortified ourselves with hot chocolate, croissant and expansive talk.

When we eventually started, most of the pistes down which skiers hurtled in the 1928 and 1948 Games were shrouded in low cloud. No matter: even though the fairways were in good shape and the old-fashioned greens flat and true, staying out of the water hazards needed full concentration.

Judging a course while playing in steady rain is not easy, but with plenty of doglegs around fir trees, and water everywhere, Samedan is a tough challenge from the tips, if a tad easier from the rather generous ladies tees. A couple of the par-fours are reachable for longer drivers, which brings us to the main question: do the balls in fact fly further at 6,000 feet? In heavy rain, er, no. More research in clearer weather was called for.

St Moritz is a relatively conservative if very

Two hours south of Zurich, St Moritz may be an unlikely golfing destination, but with views like this what are you waiting for? Situated in the Engadin Valley, Samedan (above & right) is Switzerland's oldest course. A newer course, Zuoz right), 10 miles away, shares in the Alpine theme and – if anything – is the more interesting test of golf with a number of serious elevation changes



stylish resort. After we dried out, we repaired to the hotel's farmhouse restaurant next door, Chesa Veglia, for something hot and cheesy, then on to the town's famed sybaritic hot spot, Dracula, where the celebrity après-ski crowd hang out in the season.

There are two courses in the Engadin. The newer one is 10 miles down the valley at Zuoz. Built in 2003 and referred to as the 'youngster', with a slightly lower green fee than its august neighbour, I played it in glorious sunshine the following day, and actually preferred it. When golfing in the Alps, I want dramatic elevation changes on the course, and the Madulain track has them in spades.

Hilly without being over the top – think St Mellion with Edelweiss rather than gorse – the front nine is no more than a gentle ascent to base camp. A snack at the halfway house is recommended because the real crampon work is all on the back nine.

The tee at the 15th is up such a steep path, a local life insurance company, clearly familiar with the actuarial odds, has helpfully supplied a buggy just to get players up and down without too many heart attacks. At sea level, you might not break sweat, but in the thinner air, I was re-

FACT BOX

Return flights with Swiss Air: from £112
Train, Zurich St Moritz return: £75

Badrutt's Palace Hotel

3 nights B&B: £447 per person
based on two sharing
Green Fees: average £50
www.badruttspalace.com

Engadin Golf Packages

3 nights B&B at a cheaper local hotel
3 green fees, £285 all up (without travel)
www.engadin-golfhotels.ch



duced to a panting wreck. (Note to self: maybe cut down on the cigars.)

And yes, the balls do indeed fly further at 6,000 feet – difficult to put an exact figure on it, but maybe as much as 10%. If a humble mid-handicapper can reach a 400-yard par-four with a drive and a pitching wedge, something's going on. Of course, my slice became even more deadly, but attacking greens with shorter irons is always helpful. It was a blast.

There are, of course, other scenic Alpine courses, but these have to be two of the most spectacular in the region. If you like a choice of challenging set-ups, mountain climbing and good company with a touch of flat-out luxury and a good nightlife, St Moritz is tough to beat.

The courses are open from May or June to September and, given the short season, are in extraordinarily good condition. Badrutt's Palace is one opulent option but there are plenty of cheaper alternatives.

Suffice it to say, I didn't win, which meant the prize of a £10,000 Chopard watch went, surprise, surprise, to a Zurich banker. Luckily, Mrs Swain likes Swiss chocolates. ☑