

The Skier's Holy Land **The Austrian Alpine**

by Edward Iginio Placidi



Over the centuries, the Walser people persevered in their search for a home, fertile land and independence. They first migrated south from southern Germany in the sixth century to escape Franconian suppression, and many settled in Vallis, Switzerland. They tilled the soil and became known for their excellent dairy products.

In the thirteenth century, twelve Walser families moved east from Switzerland into what is today Austria. Soon afterward, high in the safe, rugged isolated mountains, they founded their

democratic community. These hearty Alemannic people conquered with the plow and survived through thrift, diligence and hard work.

At the turn of the twentieth century, their chosen homesite began to take on new meaning. Now the Walser people have laid down their plows and abandoned their cows, for they are the keepers of the skier's "Holy Land."

In the June 1956 issue of *Holiday*, writer Frederic Morton coined this lasting and apropos label for the mountains of the Austrian Vorarlberg,

"As long as snow will fall from heaven, the Arlberg remains the skier's Holy Land."

Lech and Zürs, as well as St. Anton, though not in the Arlberg but on the Tyrol side of the mountains, are the holy places of this revered skier's wonderland. So many runs and lifts zigzag these pristine mountains, it takes days to sample them all. Even when the famed ski resorts of Switzerland, Italy and Bavaria are looking to the heavens waiting for a deluge of white flakes, the holy land is carpeted



with a deep blanket of white powder. Good snow, and lots of it, is guaranteed!

Lech, located at the tree line, is surrounded by small dense forests. With smoother, more gradual slopes than Zürs, Lech is three times as large and has larger and a larger number of hotels.

Zürs, the final destination of the most fervent skiers, rests above the tree line. With the atmosphere of a small alpine village, Zürs always has the best snow. Running directly out of

ABOVE: A view of the majestic Trittkopf peak, with the Zürs church and hotels nestled in the foreground. Zürs is the birthplace of parallel skiing.

the village are four double chair lifts, one triple chair lift, four T-bars and a cable car that lead up the almost 8,000-foot Trittkopf peak. These ten lifts carry skiers far up the slopes to an endless number of runs that vary in difficulty and lead back down into Zürs.

In Lech you can ski any of sixteen lifts or take the chair lift up to the Kriegerhorn peak, ski down to the tiny village of Zug and back to Lech. Ski coupons are valid for the lifts in nearby Stuben and Klösterle as well as Zürs and Lech, and long lines or crowded slopes are unknown throughout the November to April season.

The holy land also promises the religious skier one of the longest "ski circus" pilgrimages in the world. From Zürs you can take the chair lift up to the Madloch peak and ski three miles down the Sterloch to Lech. In Lech you can board the cable way up to the 6,800-foot Rükopf peak and ski three miles back to Zürs, making a continual circle through the mountains.

Not only does the Arlberg offer some of the best ski conditions and slopes in Europe, but the Arlberg people have pioneered the finest in skiing techniques, style and equipment. The use of two poles for balance was introduced here. At one time, only one pole, acting like a ship's rudder to facilitate turns, dragged in the snow behind the skier.

Strolz is a world-renowned name in ski boots. Martin and Ulrich Strolz from the Arlberg, were early pioneers in the manufacture of handmade, sewn double boots, among the most costly and of the finest quality. Because of the boots' thickness, they are extremely difficult to break in, but well worth the initial pain. Long after the introduction of plastic boots, the Strolzs hung on to their traditional designs, but have never forsaken quality in their new models.

The holy land is especially distinguished by its skiing style and its role in the development of skiing techniques. This is the birthplace of parallel skiing! The ski school of Zürs, opened in 1906, is recognized as being among the world's finest. It is frequented by instructors from around the world, who come to polish their style and improve their techniques.

Many of the world's greatest skiers have come out of these mountains, and the man most hold responsible is Professor Kruzkenhauser, known as the "Ski Pope" of the skier's holy land. Kruzkenhauser, who lives only a few miles from Zürs in the village of St. Christoph, has been highly honored for his work in coordinating ski schools and styles in Austria. He has taught top skiers and instructors from numerous countries, and is the man behind the acclaimed Arlberg style for which Zürs and Lech are most famous.

With such tradition, the holy land has become the resort of many of Europe's most zealous skiers. In the 1926-'27 season, combined overnight stays in Zürs and Lech totaled 23,350. By 1972-'73, the numbers had grown to



801,441. The first ski lifts were not opened here until after World War II, but the first planned ski tour was conducted in February 1896. It was a cross-country trek beginning in Langen, in the Klostertal Valley, climbing up through the zigzagging 5,853-foot Flexen Pass (second only to the Grossglockner for its alpine beauty) to Zürs, on to Lech, and ending in the town of Warth.

When the Walser people settled here they originally founded a village nestled in a fertile, protected valley. Later named Lech, it was a well-established community long before Zürs was conceived. From their high mountain home they exported dairy products year 'round to the Klostertal Valley. In the late 1800s, "snow breaker" Franz Josef Mathies was the man who, during winter and with a horse or mule, a wagon and a dog, had to create a track to the valley. He was also the founder of Zürs and believed by many to have been saved by a miracle.

In November 1886, he was caught in two successive avalanches that buried him in eighteen feet of snow for thirty hours. Incredibly, he was found alive, but with both legs frozen. Rescuers had to peel him out of snow compacted like concrete. The doctor brought in from Innsbruck insisted that his legs be amputated, but Franz Josef's father refused and succeeded in healing him with herbs and ancient now-lost Walser methods. Franz Josef's recovery was so complete that he was accorded the nickname "Avalanche" Franz Josef, and he and his brother Alber Mathies went on to start probably the world's first ski school in Zürs in 1906. And in 1897, Franz Josef opened a guest house for travelers on the lonely road from Lech to the Flexen Pass. His Alpenrose, today the second largest Zürs hotel, was also the beginning of the town.

Now there are twenty-eight Zürs hotels owned by different families. A number of small shops, a bank and a post office provide other services.

"The Arlberg remains the skier's Holy Land."

ABOVE: Mathies Stübli (restaurant), the traditional evening meeting place of Zürs. CENTER: Cablecar climbing up the Trittkopf peak. BELOW: Picturesque view of the center of Zürs.





ABOVE: A panoramic view of the 8,000-foot Trittkopf peak with its numerous ski runs.

Skiers descend from two facing walls of white mountains topped by jagged peaks into a cluster of hotels wedged into a narrow valley. Evening twilight on peaks such as the Rüfispitz and the Trittkopf produce an almost surreal vision, leaving the viewer in catatonic awe.

In addition to the promised slopes of the holy land, skiers find comfort, convenience and atmosphere. Every hotel in Lech and Zürs has a ski room for guests to store equipment. Many hotels have small holes in the stone fireplaces or in the heating-system shafts passing through the hotel lobby

in which you can warm your hands after skiing. Some hotels have bar/restaurants you can ski up to and patronize without removing your skis. Like few other ski resorts, you can ski back to the front door of each hotel in Zürs and many in Lech; no taxis, cars or walking! Many of the bigger hotels provide saunas, swimming pools and massages as a comforting conclusion to a long day on the slopes. Amenities, excellent service, and the constant exchange of friendly greetings are the law of the land.

In many smaller hotels, guests are received as friends. In the dining room, bar and lobby, the owners often drink with guests and introduce guests to each other, and English is the unofficial

second language of the holy land. People are joined together in an amiable, cozy, family-type atmosphere.

Haus Mathies, a smaller hotel in Zürs, is often singled out for its warm, friendly atmosphere. Built by "Avalanche" Franz Josef's brother Alber, it is now a living institution. Every evening a multitude gathers in the Haus Mathies Stübli (restaurant), the traditional evening meeting place of Zürs, to drink, talk and eat. The old wood walls resound with boisterous laughter and music. This is where you go to find your friends or to meet new ones. Later on everyone departs in groups to hop from one Zürs discothèque to another: the Edelweiss, Hotel Mara, the Albona, the Zürserhof,

or to one of the many discotheques in Lech. The favorite tunes are American "oldies," with current European and American hits interspersed. Chubby Checker is still twisting his way from disco to disco.

Numerous international figures make Zürs or Lech their annual winter ski retreat. In 1976, Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard of Holland celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary in Lech and were honored for having visited Lech for fifteen consecutive years. The Shah of Iran used to stay in Lech but stopped coming because he was refused permission to buy or build his own hotel. Princess Grace and Prince Ranier of Monaco, Omar Shariff, Helmut Berger and Bruno Kreisky, the Chancellor of Austria, also frequent the holy land.

Skiers from all over the world sleep under the sloping roofs of old Vorarlberg-style hotels and traditional architecture and atmosphere have been retained. Hard, dark woods, often with carved snowflakes and other patterns, dominate the interior and exterior of the buildings. Colorful murals of country scenes adorn the façades of many hotels, and colorful patterns encircle the windows.

The two-and-a-half hour pilgrimage to the holy land begins at the Zurich train station. The "Alpinexpress" follows the long, narrow Zurich lake for almost thirty miles on to the Walen lake, fringed by majestic peaks, through tiny Liechtenstein to Langen in the Klostertal Valley. From Langen it's twenty minutes by taxi to Zürs and a half hour to Lech. Many of the bigger hotels will have a car waiting in Langen for expected guests.

This winter several sports events, of particular interest to skiing aficionados, will be held in Zürs and Lech. February fifth hails the "carnival on skis," a day of crazy dress or Halloween on the slopes. The twelfth of March is the Arlberg Ski Club's annual giant slalom day. The competition is open only to Zürs's guests. Trophies will be awarded, and skis, clothes and champagne will be given away. April second through the ninth, the Arlberg 1978 combined ski and tennis open competition will be held in Zürs, again with trophies and prizes awarded. In early March, fashion shows are the attraction on the skating rinks of Zürs and Lech.

The Holy Land welcomes all pilgrims with open arms, but alas even the most fervent zealot must have reservations. So for further information and reservations contact either the Zürs Travel Office, A-6763 Zürs/Arlberg, Austria, or the Austrian National Tourist Office. ■