



Friends in High Places

Private planes, polo, high society and snow... **VICKY SMITH** finds herself getting well acquainted with the finer things in life on the ultimate winter weekend away in St Moritz



LANDING AT SAMEDAN in the southern Swiss Alps is different to landing in other destinations. It's Europe's highest airport for a start (that's 5,600ft above sea level to be precise). Pilots have to complete special training to land here, and conditions need to be perfect. Another thing of note is that it's reserved for small planes. As in, the private variety. Most people who fly in and out do so on privately owned or chartered jets, and that's exactly what we're doing as we arrive for what could be the ultimate weekend away for those with a taste for the finer things in life – two days at the St Moritz Snow Polo World Cup.

The fun had actually begun while we were still on the runway at Farnborough, with mini bottles of Ruinart all round as we discussed the action ahead while cosseted in the lavish surroundings of our NetJets Challenger 350. After a smooth take-off, all that lay between us and a weekend of mingling, spectating and snow was an hour of total aviation enjoyment; canapés and drinks on tap, and the opportunity to peruse the views outside (and inside too, as it's one particularly pretty plane – all lacquered wood, bouncy carpets and big, butter-soft leather seats).

As we come to the end of our journey and the jet swoops in to land, the snowy peaks of the Engadin Valley are suddenly so close that I can clearly make out the people on them, and it feels as though we're racing cross-country skiers along the runway as they glide side-by-side with the plane as it gently comes to a halt.

Glancing out of the window, I see that our transfers have arrived: a fleet of Rolls-Royces parked on the snow, the drivers waiting patiently for us to disembark. Stepping out onto a blanket of sparkling white, I look on as the car doors open, ▶

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► automatically and in unison, and I'm left with the agonising decision of whether to make my onward journey in a Ghost, Wraith or Phantom. #firstworldproblems.

As we embark on the drive to our hotel – the Kempinski Grand Hotel Des Bains, where rooms are lavish and the bar perennially packed with the kind of glamorous folk for whom the phrase ‘people watching’ must have been coined – our driver asks what the tail number of our plane is, so we can charge the car to it. Charging your ride in a Rolls to your

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private plane in the blink of an eye? Yep, we’ve arrived in St Moritz alright.

The next morning, we set off to explore our snowy surroundings before the polo begins. Come ski season, this is a town with a reputation as one of *the* places to be, and within minutes of entering any hotel, bar or restaurant, you realise that it really, actually is. Take, for example, Badrutt’s Palace, one of St Moritz’s most iconic places to stay. Within minutes of stepping through the enormous rotating doors, I’m sitting with £15,000-worth of diamonds sparkling on my finger. Alas, a mysterious Swiss billionaire hasn’t leapt in to ask for my hand in marriage (although, if there are any reading, I am open to offers) – I’m at a Piaget pop-up, trying on a dazzler from its new collection. The stunning stones are eclipsed only by the two enormous security guards who are standing either side of me, staring stoically into space but not missing a trick. I’m not here to buy, but as I reluctantly hand the ring back, I notice several people waiting behind me who very

▲ HORSE POWER: [above] Netjets x Rolls-Royce, a winning combo; [opposite, from left] Teams Maserati and Perrier-Jouët battle it out on the ice; one of Netjets’ comfortable private jet cabins

much are, because buying breathtaking jewellery in your hotel lobby is just the kind of thing that happens here.

Another thing I notice that makes this town distinctive is the architecture – St Moritz isn’t your typical snow-capped wooden-chalet ski resort, but rather an abundance of modern, functional blocks dominate the landscape (although there are certain buildings of note, including the Foster & Partners-designed Chesa Futura, or ‘house of the future’). No, aside from the snow, it’s the people who make St Moritz beautiful – the aesthetically pleasing cream of the European high-society crop, who lazily eye-up the window displays of Hermès, Chanel and Loro Piana on the main shopping streets, clad in top-of-the-range skiwear and glossy, ankle-length furs.

But no-one’s here to gawp at pretty



buildings anyway – this weekend, St Moritz is alive with the crowd who’ve jetted in for the Snow Polo, and the buzz is absolutely electric. This extraordinary event – which is, as its name suggests, polo that’s played in the snow – has been going since 1985, when it first took place on the frozen surface of Lake St Moritz, and as we make our way down on the first day of the tournament, the activity on the banks of the huge icy expanse is non-stop.

We take our seats in the front row of the VIP stand as Team Cartier appear, the riders guiding their horses onto the ice behind two brand-new Maseratis, to a soundtrack of ‘Diamonds are Forever’. It’s all quite tongue-in-cheek until the match begins, and then it’s a no-holds-barred contest, with the players’ sticks propelling the bright orange ball through the air, prompting a cascading spray of ice with each whack. The sight of the horses cantering over the frozen lake against a backdrop of jagged white-capped peaks is captivating, and as the riders use their thighs

for all they’re worth to keep them in the saddle while veering almost to the very edge of the barriers, gasps are audible all round.

The horses are kept upright on the slippery surface by special shoes that are fitted with rubber tubing to funnel the snow out, as well as studs to add traction, so there’s no danger of any falls, and as teams Cartier, Perrier-Jouët, Maserati and Badrutt’s Palace battle it out over a series of matches, it feels like playing the sport on anything other than snow would be a bizarre choice – it’s very exciting of course, but aside from that, it is utterly, utterly beautiful.

If the action on the lake is exhilarating, it’s more than matched by what’s going on in the crowd, as spectators stand in line for top-ups of a seemingly never-ending supply of Perrier-Jouët champagne, ushers dance to euro-house hits that boom during intervals, and shrewd eyes behind expensive sunglasses eye-up who’s sitting where and what they’re wearing. In one instance, it’s hard to tell where one woman’s fur coat ends and her tiny dog begins, while a pair of leggy blondes are traversing the snowy lakeside walkway in gravity-defying heels with impressive skill. It’s all rather fabulous, and as the afternoon progresses, the frivolous spirit intensifies, with the crowd becoming more involved in the action on the pitch, as well as anticipating the action that’ll be taking place off it later on.

As night falls, the ice on the ground is overtaken by the ice on people’s wrists, and it’s a dazzling display all round as we make our way to a party at the Maserati showroom in the centre of town. I’m standing taking it all in when I’m approached by a woman with a Beverly Hills tan and a Brooklyn drawl, who grabs my hand, introduces herself as ‘an American ex-pat working as an art dealer in Knightsbridge’, and asks: “Are you coming to my gallery party tomorrow night, sweets?” I wonder if she’s got the wrong girl, but then clock on to the fact that even if you don’t know people personally here, your mere presence is enough to grant you membership to a pretty exclusive club.

I don’t need asking twice, and I quickly nod and say of course, before turning my attentions to the Quattroporte MY17 that I’m standing next to. This one’s just for show, but outside there’s a queue of

the gleaming vehicles ready to take us anywhere we want to go, and as I settle into the front seat and buckle up for the ride through town, I’m not the only one on the verge of letting out an exclamation of glee as the car’s rumbling growl cuts through the dense snowy silence around us.

I can’t even drive and I’m itching to get behind the wheel, but it’s time to show a modicum of restraint (a virtually unheard of concept in St Moritz). Well, until I’m back on board our NetJets Challenger for the flight home and the hostess asks if I’d like a glass of champagne for take-off... **H**

For more information on NetJets, please see netjets.com. To find out more about the Snow Polo World Cup, see snowpolo-stmoritz.com

BADRUTT’S PALACE

Steeped in history and having played home to many of the world’s rich and famous over the past 120 years, Badrutt’s Palace – known as the ‘Grande Dame of St Moritz’ – is one of Switzerland’s most iconic Alpine ski hotels. Located in the heart of St Moritz, the hotel prides itself on traditional luxury and elegance along with discreet service. An ideal destination in both winter and summer, Badrutt’s Palace is located in one of the most challenging ski areas in the world and offers a host of summer alpine activities. A member of Leading Hotels of the World, Swiss Deluxe Hotels and Swiss Historic Hotels, it offers 157 guestrooms and 37 suites with stunning views of the Swiss Alps. The hotel also houses the award-winning Palace Wellness spa and eight restaurants including IGNIV, the brainchild of Andreas Caminada, which has recently won its first Michelin Star. *For more info, see badruttspalace.com*

