

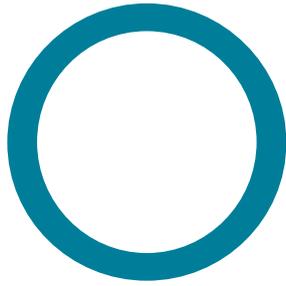


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# THE PEOPLE'S RACE

Kissed by the Devil at the Mürren Inferno

01 • Burn the devil! In a tradition to bring good weather, non-hazardous course conditions and a lack of serious crashes, a devil statue is carried through Mürren on Friday night as a fiery sacrifice to the race gods.



ut of the darkness, the devil emerges.

Cast in the rosy glow of hundreds of torches, he floats through Mürren, Switzerland's cobblestone streets, past 19th-century farmhouses and sleds propped up outside of pubs. Cowbells clang in time with the marching band that trails behind the horned effigy. Hundreds of children, villagers and amateur ski racers—some wearing devil masks, others carrying candles—join the procession, winding through the village in a fiery snake toward the devil's final resting ground. He is going to burn.

It is a clear, very cold night in late January on the eve of the Inferno, one of the oldest and longest downhill races in the world. The next day, many of these revelers will descend nine miles from near the summit of the Schilthorn, the 9,744-foot peak that rises above Mürren, down 6,463 feet into Lauterbrunnen, a traditional Walser village-turned-BASE-jumping mecca at the bottom of the valley. The Walsers are a group of Germans who migrated into the Swiss Alps more than 700 years ago, who still speak a unique version of the language and hold to a very definitive, mountain-specific culture—a perfect finish for a historic race. First organized by Sir Arnold Lunn in 1928 with a total of 12 racers, the Inferno today is the largest amateur ski race in the world, drawing nearly 2,000 competitors from more than 20 countries.

Largely regarded as the father of alpine ski racing, Lunn was a British aristocrat, writer and skier. He organized some of the world's earliest alpine ski races and determined that speed, not style, should be the winning criterion for a slalom run. Using this new measure, in 1922 he organized the world's first true slalom race in Mürren. In 1924, he founded the British Kandahar Ski Club, which kicked off a longstanding affection among Brits for the city. In 1931, Lunn arranged the first alpine World Championship, also hosted in Mürren, and was instrumental in getting ski racing into the 1936 Olympics. These days, the Inferno is strictly for amateurs; those days, the Inferno was a prestigious downhill for serious ski racers. Even Buddy Werner, the first American to win the Hahnenkamm in 1962, raced the Inferno before his untimely death in 1964.



Population 450, Mürren is a dreamy alpine hamlet stashed on a sunny, forested perch on the west side of the Lauterbrunnen Valley, about two hours by train from Zurich. Spilled above a massive cliff across from the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau, Mürren is an old farming village and was one of Switzerland's first ski resorts—lifts started spinning in 1911. No cars are allowed, so entry is by train or a tram (the same ridden by James Bond in the 1969 film *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*)—two stops, Stechelberg and Gimmelwald, then Mürren. Deep in the Bernese Oberland, this valley is a place lost in time, full of cowbells hanging from chalet eaves, backyards running amok with laying hens, and kids sledding to school. I once had tea with a 90-year-old woman at her home in Gimmelwald, a village one stop down on the cable car from Mürren. She was skilled

02 • A very emotional moment during 2013's race, as Ueli Stäger, the president of the race's organization committee for the past five years, steps down.

03 • The devil and his entourage, on their way through Mürren to his fiery end.



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at the lost art of bobbin lace, had never seen a computer and had lived in this same cabin, where she'd been born, her entire life. From Mürren, you can sled or ski to several different villages, including Lauterbrunnen, where you can catch a train up the east side of the valley toward Grindlwald (home of the *velogemel*, an old-school ski bike), Wengen (home of the longest World Cup downhill, the 2.77-mile-long Lauberhorn) or the Eiger (home of the burly north face). Mürren's slopes are a pleasure unto themselves: 32 miles of groomed piste and a sea of north-facing powder dens, sunny south-facing pitches that serve up prime spring corn, and plenty of backcountry options. At the moment, Mürren is largely undiscovered by freeriders—low tourist factor, no rowdy après joints and, save for the third weekend in January each year, no crowds.

**IN JANUARY 1928**, the day before the first Inferno, all 12 competitors hiked to the top of the Schilthorn, where they spent the night in a mountain hut. When they awoke the next morning, they discovered a course so precarious it resembled something that could have only been born in hell: steep, ungroomed, untracked and more than 6,000 feet to the bottom. In those days, it was a derby-style race with a mass start. The course followed a rough track to Mürren; from there, it was a free-for-all to the bottom. The first one to Lauterbrunnen won. And thus, the Inferno was born.

Eighty-five years later, the night before the race hundreds of people follow the 10-foot-tall devil effigy through Mürren's streets to the ice rink at the center of town, where two local firefighters lift the statue off a sled and onto a snowy ledge overlooking

the crowd. Children lay their torches at the devil's feet, the band kicks up, and then the firemen douse the devil in gasoline and set it ablaze. This is an offering to the ski-racing gods, thought to ward off evil spirits and bring racers good luck.

The gods are pleased, and the morning of the 70th running of the Inferno (the race took a brief break during the early 1930s and then again during WWII) dawns clear and crisp, about 25 degrees Fahrenheit. Middle-aged men in Lycra suits tote 210-cm skinny skis as they make their way to the Piz Gloria, the rotating restaurant on top of the mountain featured in *On Her Majesty's Service*, now the location of race headquarters. Ski clubs from across Europe—Germany, Austria and nearly every canton in Switzerland—fuel up in the restaurant. They are nervous and quiet. A ski tech sets up shop in the basement. This is serious business.

I'd never competed in a ski race before, but I'd seen many. As a journalist, I've covered ski racing since 2009; I've seen medals won, records broken and history made. I've always loved the team captains' meetings each night during a race series, because they're steeped in gentility and formality and feel like a United Nations conference with delegates from far-flung countries like Kyrgyzstan. In what other sport will you find bib draws held in 18th-century town squares, with wide-eyed schoolchildren helping racers pick their start numbers? Cowbells, *glugvein*, roasted chestnuts—all for a sport, that, in its purest form, comes down to man versus mountain.

So here I am, on a January day in Mürren, one of the cradles of ski racing, preparing to point it down a racecourse. I want to understand the pre-race fear and jitters, the intimacy and adrenaline and quiet encouragement in the start house, the tenuous line between pushing the limit toward perfection or carnage, hoping your gamble holds all the while. I want to experience the rivalry, competition and camaraderie of ski racing. It's my turn to go up against the mountain.

I do not have a Lycra speed suit or skinny skis. Instead, I wear a freeride getup—baggy Arc'teryx jacket, bright pink Marmot pants and a beat-up pair of 175-cm Blizzard Bonafides, desperately in need of a tune. In the morning, I grab my packet at the Piz Gloria, etch my last name on my bib in black Sharpie and head to the restaurant for breakfast. The 360-degree views offer glimpses of the Black Forest in Germany, Mount Titlis a couple valleys over in Engelberg, and the Eiger across the way. Muesli never tasted so good.

Around noon, I ski down to the start area, a collapsible tent 600 feet below the Schilthorn's summit. The race began at 8:20 a.m., with the fastest racers running first (a racer can improve his start number by notching good results in previous Infernos). These days, the mass start has been replaced by a more



civilized interval system with racers spaced out by 12-second pauses. I wear bib 1498 and am slotted for 2:20 p.m., the back of the pack. I wait around the start area and try to do the things I'd seen pro racers do: I kick my legs to get circulation going, stretch and practice my tuck. I'd inspected the course in the morning—there is a steep little pitch coming out of the start, but other than that it seems manageable. I run into Sir Arnold Lunn's grandson Stephen, who has raced the Inferno 20 times. He describes the race as "a people's race." And it's true: there are old guys and fat guys, 50-year-old women, hardcore amateur ski racers and skiers from Singapore and Scotland, all drawn to this obscure corner of the Alps by their love of skiing.

Racers swig from a bottle of yellowy liquid that hangs in the entryway of the start house. It turns out to be schnapps, made by the race's start chief, Rene Jaun, a Mürren native. The Jaun family has held the position for nearly 50 years. "It's a family tradition," Jaun says while making sure the start runs like a finely tuned Swiss machine. He passes me the bottle, labeled "Inferno Geist"—or "Inferno Ghost" in German. "Try it," he urges. It is a home-brewed herbal schnapps, whose Jaun-family recipe changes year to year and is a closely guarded secret, an elixir meant to purge racers' fears before they kick off down the track. I take a sip, just enough to warm my mouth, and soon am standing in the start gate.

Jaun counts down the seconds and the buzzer goes off. The gate pops open, and I kick out. *Schnell!* Jesus, the first section is steep. I round the first right-hand turn and plunge toward the valley below. The hulking, rocky crags of the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau frame my field of vision as I zigzag down the mountain. The course is rutted and the snow variable—soft and slushy in some parts, icy in others.

Before the first long traverse, a racer crashes in front of me, nearly causing a collision. Where World Cup racers are

04 • Starting gate jitters? No problem—that’s what the Inferno Schnapps is for.

05 • The Kanonenrohr is one of the cruxes of the race, a steep, barreled section where racers have to find the right mix between aggressive skiing and equally aggressive braking.



like meteors darting across the mountain, fast, sleek and full of unbound energy, I am slow and graceless and soon fully understand the importance of a good ski tune. In the middle of the course, on the quick climb up the Winteregg section, a spectator cheers my name. A sympathetic compatriot perhaps? The track isn’t as steep and scary as I was expecting (except the top) but it is more physically taxing: long flats, short up-hills, tucking until my back is sore. In the home stretch, close enough that I can hear the faint din of the band and cowbells in the distance, I skid out on an icy corner. I pick myself up and continue on, finally spotting the arch of the finish line. I slide through, pop my skis off and take a rest, completely knackered. My time? Twenty-six minutes, 39.61 seconds—96th out of 208 women and somewhere in the thousands overall. Oh well. The top finisher, Michael Kuno, sets a course record with his time of 13 minutes, 20.53 seconds, almost an hour faster than the winner of the inaugural Inferno.

At the finish, a marching band jams on trombones, trumpets and tubas. Racers mill about the finish area, drinking tea

and *glugvein*, rehashing the race and waiting for results, which organizers write in Sharpie on a poster board affixed to the outside of a pub wall. Competitors unbuckle boots and stash skis, relishing the fact that they’ve survived the Inferno. One German says he feels deep pride for having conquered this oldest and longest downhill race. I know what he means. We share our race stories, laugh and nod knowingly at having shared this experience. In this far corner of the Bernese Oberland amid all the post-race hubbub, I come to a deeper understanding of our sport—skiing appeals to man’s very primal urge to tame nature. It makes the planet feel smaller, the connections among us more taut and, in doing so, offers us a slice of a world that is rapidly fading.

In 1969, Lunn called the Inferno “the only true test of alpine skiing.” While skiing has evolved since his time and there are now gnarlier measures of a skier’s prowess, the Inferno remains a pure test of man versus mountain—no commercial BS, no sponsors and open to all. It’s just you, your skis and a nine-mile track kissed by the devil. §