

CLASSIC DRIVER

Getting Ready for the Cresta

Lead

The St Moritz Tobogganing Club is an institution like few others. Since 1885, men of courage have dared to plunge head-first on a toboggan down the famous Cresta Run. With the official season opening on 19 December, Classic Driver follows one Cresta rider preparing for the 2012/13 season.

Much has been written about the SMTC - most of it inaccurate. This is due, in part, to the careful way the Club protects its members from outside intrusion. It has created the 'myth' - but it underplays the hard work of the organising committee and its many *Arbeiter*s to make every Cresta season an unforgettable happening. The construction of the Run (and the installation of timing equipment) involves many day-and-night shifts before it can be officially declared open.





And that's just for the Run. Our rider will need a toboggan on which he can rely to complete the 3/4-mile course. Urs Vescoli, himself a very successful skeleton rider with international experience, is one of the few craftsmen in the world who make the special 'carriages' for the SMT. His metalworking workshop is located in the sleepy valley between Zurich and Chur, on the way to St Moritz.



There are three types of toboggan: American, Traditional and Flat Top. The two most commonly used are the Traditional (with its sliding seat) and the faster Flat Top. We accompanied our rider as he collected his new Traditional (built the same way as it was in the 1930s), and he explained why the sled, which takes many days to make, looks as it does: "It's pared to the absolute minimum - nothing is surplus". Every single toboggan is handmade and unique.





It's hard to imagine descending the ice channel lying on more than 66lb of heavy sleigh, as it, plus the rider, rapidly accelerate on the glassy surface. The rider will quickly reach high speeds, with the ever-present danger of a 'Cresta Kiss' - the removal of skin from the face as it makes contact with the icy run - which has left deep scars in some of the riders' faces.

Clearly, Bentley didn't consider the transportation of Flat Tops when it designed the interior packaging of the latest Continental GTC. It doesn't fit in the boot. So there's only one thing to do: place the sled in the area behind the front seats. It's a one-way trip, after all, and the roof is going to stay open. This isn't seen as a problem by the Club Member we are accompanying.





Arriving in a snowy St Moritz - and entertained by some interesting Cresta stories - we park outside the Junction Hut, the place where the toboggans are stored. 'Junction' is the starting point for the intermediate-distance runs. 'Top' is 352 yards higher and a run from Top can be made in just over 50 seconds, with an average of around 53mph and a terminal speed at 'Finish' of close to 80mph.

There's much activity. The huge red safety 'cushions' are being put into place at 'Shuttlecock', the course's most famous curve, an accident at which qualifies the rider for membership of the Shuttlecock Club. On average, one in 19 riders will exit at Shuttlecock - hence the 25 safety mats which protect the unlucky from harm. It takes the 12-strong team of experienced Italian and Portuguese course-builders nearly two months to build the Run: first, they build the section from Junction to Finish, which takes just under four weeks. Then, while nine of them support the daily Cresta riding, the remaining members of the team create the section from Top to Junction in around three weeks.





Together with 'our' Cresta rider, we pass through the metal gates with the hexagonal orange, red and white 'SMTC' badge, and cross the threshold to the members-only club. The Clubhouse Dressing Room is where the riders prepare for the run. Alongside the modern racing suits are the traditional wrist, knee and elbow pads that have been used for over 100 years. One can imagine the electric atmosphere here, early on a sharp, icy morning - when the ice is at its best.

The Club's predominantly 'British' atmosphere is in keeping with the fact that the SMTC is primarily about enjoying oneself, both on the course and, importantly, at social occasions. Not for nothing does the selection committee, when considering a new application for membership, ask itself "Will they be a fun member?" The SMTC is unique, but as long as applicants show courage and are willing to join in with the traditions of the Club and its members, they will always be welcome.

Photos: Jan Baedeker

Gallery

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