



WINTER 2014/15

FT Weekend  
Magazine

A 16-PAGE  
SPECIAL

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## A NEW US MEGA-RESORT

Work will begin next year to create the biggest resort in the US, the first stage of a project that could see seven existing resorts linked into a vast complex to rival those in Europe. The move focuses on a cluster of celebrated resorts in northern Utah, which until now have remained distinct commercial entities – despite in some cases being separated by only a fence.

Last month, Vail Resorts, the Colorado-based company that operates 11 resorts across the US, announced that it had acquired Park City Mountain Resort at a cost of \$182.5m. Vail said it would upgrade lifts and restaurants, develop 687,000 sq ft of residential and commercial space, and include Park City on its “Epic Pass”, a season-long lift pass covering all its resorts as well as several in Europe and one in Japan.

More significant, however, is the fact that the previous year the company also took on a 350-year lease of the neighbouring resort, Canyons. Now it plans to connect the two to create a “seamless” area with a total of 7,300 skiable acres of terrain – at least 1,800 acres more than any other US resort.

“The chance to own both these resorts and connect them – something that’s never been achieved in all these years despite it being relatively easy – that was a transformational opportunity,” Rob Katz, chief executive of Vail Resorts, told the FT.

In fact, the link-up requires just one lift, which will sit on land already controlled by the company and will travel over a ridge and down the other side. Construction is due to start next summer, subject to local government approval, but the Park City-Canyons link-up could be just the start. Plans have already been drawn up to connect the new resort with Deer Valley, Solitude, Brighton, Alta and Snowbird, a feat that could be achieved with the construction of just four new lifts. Together the resorts would comprise around



# FIRST TRACKS

From big plans in Utah to small skirts for skiers:  
*Tom Robbins rounds up the season’s developments*

18,000 acres, with 100 lifts (still far fewer than France’s Trois Vallées but with a much better chance of the deep powder for which Utah is famous). The resorts all stress that what’s being called the “ONE Wasatch” project remains a concept dependent on a series of government approvals, but Nathan Rafferty, president of the Ski Utah marketing body, says that Vail’s acquisition of Park City will “turbocharge” the process. “That’s something that obviously entails many more complications but we’re very supportive of it,” says Katz.

News of a second major shake-up in the area broke earlier this month, when Deer Valley announced that it was buying Solitude. Though Deer Valley denied that the purchase was in response to Vail’s acquisition of Park City, it will clearly give the company more bargaining power as ONE Wasatch moves forward.

[onewasatch.com](http://onewasatch.com)



**Top:** Park City, Utah, at the heart of what will be the biggest linked skiing area in the US.  
**Above:** the Hôtel des Dromonts in Haute-Savoie, which reopens in December

MAGIC MAPS

Piste maps are notoriously unreliable and difficult to follow but a

new smartphone app, which goes on sale in December, may have the answer. Fatmap, a new company set up by a group of tech entrepreneurs and Chamonix-based mountain guides, uses satellite imagery and aerial photography to build three-dimensional terrain models of ski resorts. As well as being easier to interpret than conventional maps, these will enable users to pinpoint their location using GPS. More unusually, in addition to showing pistes, the maps will also mark off-piste routes and allow users to make “3D fly-throughs” of the descent before they set out. Seven French and Swiss resorts will be available at launch, with more to be added over the winter. The app costs £2.99 per resort for the piste version, £9.99 for off-piste.

[Fatmap.com](http://Fatmap.com)



## A RETRO REBOOT

In the early 1970s, the ski resort to be seen at was neither St Moritz, Gstaad nor Verbier but funky, futuristic Avoriaz. Built from scratch in the late 1960s on a high-mountain plateau in France’s Haute-Savoie, this was the car-free ski resort of tomorrow, a cluster of tall buildings whose sloping sides, clad in red cedar shingles, blended in with the surrounding rock faces.

At the resort’s heart was the louche Hôtel des Dromonts, the work of a young architect called Jacques Labro, which featured a sunken bar, porthole windows, sloping roofs and organic-shaped arches. In 1973 the scene was completed by the arrival of the annual International Fantasy Film Festival, which brought a host of stars to the Dromonts.

By the 1990s, however, Avoriaz had morphed from jet-set to family destination, dominated by affordable apartments, and the Dromonts had lost its sparkle. Now, though, the hotel has been taken over by Maisons & Hôtels Sibuet, the family-owned group that runs nine properties, including the five-star Les Fermes de Marie in Megève and the Altapura in Val Thorens. It promises a “radical reconfiguration” to incorporate state-of-the-art facilities while retaining a 1960s-inspired style. Reopening on December 12, it will have 35 rooms, two restaurants and a new terrace for après-ski. Doubles from €200; [maisons-hotels-sibuet.com](http://maisons-hotels-sibuet.com)

COVER: A SKIER LOOKS TOWARDS PIZ CORVATSCH, ST MORITZ C.1962; FRED HAYES; MICHAEL MÜLLER/KME-STUDIOS

THE SKI SKIRT

An item of ski-wear last fashionable in Victorian days is set to make a comeback:

the ski skirt. Short, lightweight skirts, insulated with down or synthetic fibre, have suddenly appeared in shops across the Alps, alongside padded shorts for men. “We saw some coming on to the scene last year, and they were big sellers – we



couldn’t get enough from our suppliers,” says Hans Conrad, chief executive of Sport Conrad, a leading German retailer. “This year all the brands are making them.”

It’s a trend that stems from ski touring racers, who often wear thin Lycra suits but slip on insulated skirts or shorts while they wait on the start line. Other backcountry skiers have

adopted the idea, putting skirts or shorts over their trousers while having lunch or carrying out rope-work.

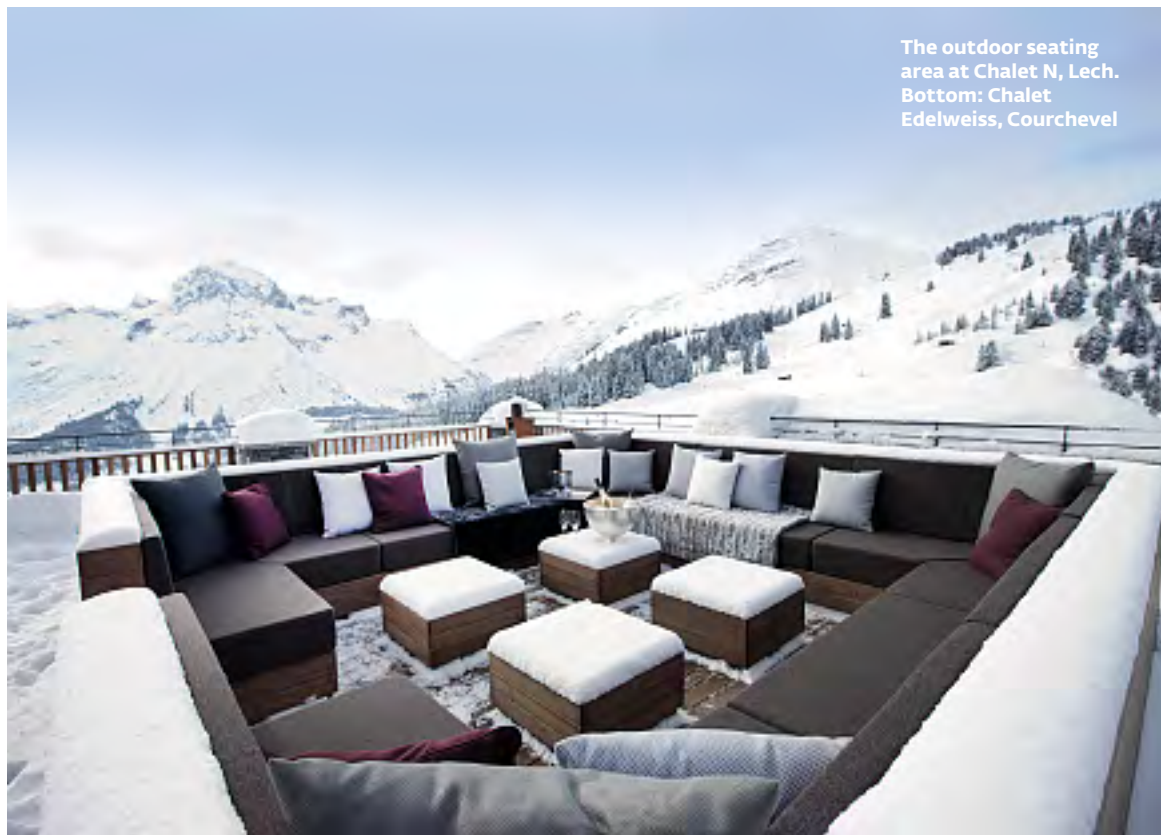
Now the look is crossing into the mainstream.

“Women are even wearing the skirts over jeans when it’s cold downtown,” says Conrad. “It’s pretty much become a fashion item.” The Ortovox Lavarella Skirt, left, €149; [sport-conrad.com](http://sport-conrad.com)



## LIBERATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS *at sea*

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The outdoor seating area at Chalet N, Lech.  
Bottom: Chalet Edelweiss, Courchevel

# THE RUSSIANS AREN'T COMING...

... so there's still time to book even the most lavish Alpine chalet, says *Gabriella Le Breton*



Over the past decade, the arrival of growing numbers of wealthy Russian and Ukrainian tourists has changed the face of high-end tourism in the Alps. Five-star hotels have raised standards and prices; designer fashion and jewellery boutiques have moved into mountain villages; and a new generation of ultra-luxury chalets has been built to cater to their demands and budgets.

This winter, though, will be different. A combination of political tension, EU and US travel bans on some individuals and a fall in the value of the rouble and the Ukrainian hryvnia mean that the industry is predicting a slump in Russian and Ukrainian visitors. France

Montagnes, a trade body for French resorts, says it expects 10 per cent fewer, and those who do come to be more price-conscious. Russia's own tourism industry union estimates that the number of Russians travelling abroad is down between 30 and 50 per cent on last year, and that more than a dozen travel agencies have gone bust.

The silver lining – other than for the Russian resort of Sochi, which is expecting a bumper winter – is that many of the most lavish chalets in the Alps, which would normally be fully booked months in advance, now have far more availability. And no one in the industry will admit it but

**€292,500**  
One week at  
Mont Blanc,  
Megève

discounts that were once unheard of in peak season are far more likely.

Here are some of the top trophy chalets which, at the time of going to press, still had availability.

### 1 Mont Blanc, Megève

New this winter, the seven-bedroom Chalet Mont Blanc is seen as a game-changer for Megève, its sleek, contemporary interiors a far cry from the resort's usual rustic chic. A glass and chrome staircase winds up to a bar from the double-height sitting and dining room, with floor-to-ceiling windows spanning all three floors. The heated outdoor seating area and infinity pool share eye-popping views across Megève, as do the indoor pool, spa and gym. *New Year's week is available at €292,500; other weeks start at €120,000; consensioholidays.co.uk*

### 2 Etesian, Gstaad

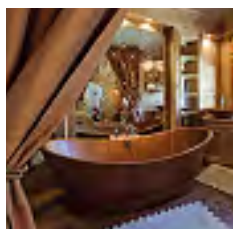
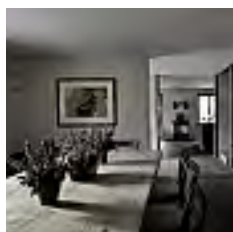
Set in private gardens in the heart of Gstaad, the 16-person Chalet Etesian is as palatial as they come. Spread across five floors, the original building is all intricately carved wood, frescoed ceilings, wooden baths, fur throws and expensive oils and antiques. Step into the newer section, however, for a change of pace: here you'll find a state-of-the-art spa, cinema, an entertainment room with a nightclub-worthy sound system, wine cellar and sprawling master bedroom. *Half-term week (February 15-22) is available at CHF90,000 (£59,445); other weeks start at CHF60,000 (£39,630); hautemontagne.com*

### 3 Edelweiss, Courchevel

When it launched last year, Chalet Edelweiss set a new benchmark for luxury chalets in Courchevel. The seven-storey timber and stone chalet centres around a spiral staircase that drills deep into the mountain to a colossal spa. The chalet's British hedge-fund-

No one in the industry will admit it but discounts that were once unheard of in peak season are far more likely

€295,000  
One week  
at Edelweiss,  
Courchevel



Above, from top: Bella Coola, Verbier; Chesetta, St Moritz; Etesian, Gstaad. Below: the indoor pool at Chalet Mont Blanc, Megève

manager owner is a self-confessed compulsive art buyer and the results of his addiction (Dalí, Miró and Picasso among them) litter the eight bedrooms, multiple dining and living areas, nightclub and bar. *Half-term week (February 15-22) is available at €295,000; other weeks start at €100,000; summitretreats.com*

### 4 Chesetta, St Moritz

One of few chalets to rent in St Moritz, Chesetta occupies a building that originally housed the village blacksmith. With its large country-house kitchen, where hostess Bettina serves up hearty breakfasts, its atmospheric dining room and sitting room warmed by a log fire, Chesetta achieves a true sense of homeliness. However, the gym, steam room, sauna, cinema and services of Daniel, a former butler and valet to the Queen, ensure you won't forget you're in St Moritz. Sleeps 12 adults. *Half-term week is available at CHF70,000 (£46,267); other weeks start at CHF50,000 (£33,000); oxfordski.com*

### 5 Bella Coola, Verbier

The lavish 10-person Bella Coola, set in a private garden in Verbier, achieves an intriguing blend of traditional Swiss and more exotic design elements. In addition to cosy wood-panelled bedrooms, a vaulted wine cellar and giant fossilised elk antlers, you'll also find delicately carved teak four-poster beds, vibrant Kashmiri saris and Moroccan lanterns. The spa area is spectacular: the large pool affords mountain views through glass doors, which open on to the garden, and there's a hammam and bar. *Christmas week is available at CHF81,250 (£53,570); other weeks start at CHF43,500 (£28,710); ckverbier.com*

### 6 Chalet N, Lech

Chalet N, which sleeps up to 22 guests and cost its 37-year-old Austrian owner €38m to build, is 54,000 sq ft of sheer opulence. Expect the "usual" mega-chalet trappings, only bigger and better: a spa with multiple treatment rooms, a beauty and hair salon, ice fountain and hay sauna; two dining rooms; a sitting room with bar and floor-to-ceiling bullet-proof windows; and 26 professional staff, including two award-winning chefs and a pair of butlers. *Half-term week is available at €297,000; other weeks start at €210,000; luxurychaletcollection.com*



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# THE BIRTH OF WINTER

A clutch of anniversaries has come at once this year – but nowhere will be celebrating more than St Moritz, writes *Mary Novakovich*



A St Moritz skeleton run in 1914; above, women try out their skis in 1935

**T**he concept of international winter tourism, so the story goes, started with a bet. By the mid-19th century, the Swiss Alps were a popular summer destination for aristocratic visitors in search of clean air but, in 1864, Johannes Badrutt, the owner of St Moritz's Kulm Hotel, was looking for ways to develop a winter season too. His solution was a wager with four departing British guests: come back for the winter, he told them, and they would find crisp sunny weather quite unlike the damp winters at home. If they weren't able to sit on the hotel terrace in their shirt sleeves, he promised, he would personally pay all their travel expenses.

They duly returned shortly before Christmas and, delighted

by what they found, stayed until Easter. Soon word spread among the upper classes, Badrutt set about developing St Moritz as an all-year resort and Alpine winter tourism was born.

It has long been a cherished story, though the mundane truth is that no one has ever been able to produce any documentary evidence for the bet. Even a new official history published by the resort admits it may be an early example of creative marketing (the date rather conveniently trumps nearby Davos, where the first winter guests arrived in 1865). Nevertheless, the resort is gearing up for a winter full of anniversary celebrations.

Ice rather than snow was the main attraction in the early days. St Moritz's "champagne climate"

and lakeside setting made it perfect for ice skating, prompting Badrutt to set up a skating club beside the hotel. Early Scottish visitors were said to have brought curling stones, and in 1880 the first curling tournament was held at Badrutt's fledgling club. The ice rinks are still there now, flanked by the hotel's Chesa al Parc restaurant and sunny terrace, where you can watch the action snuggling under blankets.

Soon, the young, rich British visitors were looking for more sport to keep them occupied during what had become a thriving winter season, and took to careering through the streets on sledges. In 1884, apparently in part so that the young men would no longer terrorise pedestrians, the skeleton track known as the Cresta

Run was built. Photographs of the exploits of early participants plaster the walls of the Kulm's cosy Sunny Bar, still the place where the Cresta Run prizes are handed out. Today, anyone can have a go (instruction, kit and five runs costs CHF600 [£400]; book at [cresta-run.com](http://cresta-run.com)) – anyone, that is, except women, who have been banned from the run since 1929.

No such gender restrictions apply to the world's oldest bobsleigh run, built in 1903 and still made from scratch every year using natural ice. What the club calls a "bob-baptism" – descending the 1.7km track at up to 135kph (alongside a pilot and brakeman) – costs CHF250 (£160; [olympia-bobrun.ch](http://olympia-bobrun.ch)). As part of this year's celebrations, visitors can also tackle the run in a bob from 1939.

Downhill skiing didn't really take off until the early 20th century: even by 1928, the Winter Olympics in St Moritz featured no downhill or slalom skiing. Now there are 350km of immaculate slopes, often used for competitions and training: it didn't surprise me last winter to see US skiing star Bode Miller flying past.

The celebrations start on December 5 with the St Moritz City Race, when skiers will whizz through the centre of town. Open-air concerts and a fashion show will follow over the weekend. Later events include a bobsleigh race using vintage sleds, a skeleton race through the streets and a special "British edition" of the annual gourmet festival. Badrutt's bet has certainly paid off. **FT**

Rooms at the Kulm Hotel cost from CHF575 (£380); [kulm.com](http://kulm.com). For details of the anniversary celebrations, see [engadin.stmoritz.ch/150years](http://engadin.stmoritz.ch/150years)

M. WEINTRAUB; IMAGNO/GETTY IMAGES

## IT'S A RECORD

Few other resorts can compete with St Moritz's winter sports heritage but one Swiss village is marking a rather different milestone this year. Saas-Fee, in the Valais region, offers some of the

highest slopes in the Alps and an ancient car-free centre but this winter is also hoping to draw visitors by celebrating the 30th anniversary of the global hit "Last Christmas" by British band Wham!, whose ski-themed video was shot

there. The resort is offering package deals in December and January at 1980s prices, and will run torch-lit processions around locations used in the video.

Other events are still being finalised but they are likely to include

1980s-themed dressing-up and a performance by a tribute band.

Wham! fans may want to stay at the Hotel Ferienart, formerly called the Walliserhof, where George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley stayed during the shoot. **TR** For details see [saas-fee.ch](http://saas-fee.ch)





# INTO THE WILD

Fifty years after heli-skiing's pioneers first took to the Canadian skies,  
*Tom Robbins* discovers the delights and dangers of this most addictive sport



Clockwise from facing page: finding deep powder in the trees; the first heli-skiers land in the Bugaboo Mountains in 1965; heli-ski creator Hans Gmoser

It is dark when we turn alongside the Columbia river and already the day is 26 hours old. We had left London at lunchtime, flown to Calgary and on to Kelowna, wound our watches back eight hours, then picked up a huge 4x4 and begun driving north. The river marks the start of the final stretch, a 90-mile dead-end road that is covered in snow and bordered by forest.

The temperature gauge on the dashboard drops to -15C. It's silent but for the splatter of snow on the underside of the car; the radio gave up its search for stations long ago. Once, we have to slam on the brakes as a deer leaps into our path, then again when a motionless moose suddenly looms in the headlights.

The story of the development of ski tourism might begin in the aristocratic surroundings of St Moritz in 1864 but the trail ultimately leads here, to a lonely logging road in a remote corner of British Columbia. Exactly 100 years after the first winter tourists set out for St Moritz, an Austrian guide on the other side of the world was preparing to take skiing into the jet age. And while the pioneers in St Moritz were drawn by the prospect of high jinks and high-powered socialising – of toboggan races and pony rides on the frozen lake, followed by grand dinners back at the Kulm Hotel – the Austrian and his adventure-hungry acolytes in Canada were driven by an

entirely opposite motivation: the desire to escape into the wilderness.

The guide's name was Hans Gmoser. Fleeing the deprivations of postwar Europe, the 19-year-old Gmoser had emigrated in 1951, finding work as an electrician before eventually becoming one of Canada's best-known climbers, skiers and guides. By the mid-1960s, ski resorts were booming – in 1964 work began on Whistler, a new purpose-built resort that would become the biggest in North America – but already Gmoser was feeling the call of the wild. In 1965 he gave a speech to the Canadian Ski Instructors' Alliance extolling the virtues of ski touring: exploring beyond the busy resorts and accessing new terrain by walking uphill on skis rather than using lifts.

"In addition to the somewhat frivolous thrill of dancing down the hill, [the ski tourer] also seeks the aesthetic values inherent in the mountain country to which the ordinary skier is completely oblivious," he enthused. "Ski touring takes us on to those

mountains and slopes which we always look at from the top of our lifts and wish we were over there instead of here. It gives us the means to manifest our, however hidden and subconscious, desires to explore the distant, the new, the unknown, to be adventurers, to be able to throw back the shackles of our physical limitations and to go wherever our fancy urges us to go..."

It was stirring stuff but there was more to come. For Gmoser was developing a new type of ski touring, in which the hard slog uphill would be removed by technology. "For uphill transportation for ski touring we need something with far more versatility and mobility than the most convenient types of ski lifts," he told the instructors. "The machine to fit the bill is a helicopter."

Finally, after six hours on the road, we emerge from the forests to see light streaming from the windows of a large building that's strangely reminiscent of both an alpine chalet and an airport terminal. Inside, people are sitting at a long bar, playing cards by the fireplace and table-tennis in an adjacent games room. Having not even passed another car

in the previous two hours, the sudden warmth, light and human contact are disorientating.

This is Monashee Lodge, the world's largest heliski lodge and the newest in the portfolio of Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH), the company Gmoser founded. The lodge offers every comfort: there is a hot tub on the roof, a team of masseuses, a large wine cellar, a climbing wall, ski shop, business centre, library and 69 bedrooms. Guests are looked after by seven guides and 26 staff. It is a huge, five-star example of how far heli-skiing has come.

Today the sport Gmoser pioneered in 1965 has spread around the world: heli-ski operations have sprung up in far-flung mountain ranges from Alaska to India, in Chile, Turkey, Georgia, Sweden, Iceland and many other countries. CMH, though, remains by far the biggest operator, employing at least 120 mountain guides at its 11 bases in British Columbia.

Gmoser had begun experimenting with helicopters to access the mountains in the early 1960s but the first commercial "helicopter ski touring" trips (the word "heli-ski" had yet to catch on) took place over two weeks in April 1965. If our journey felt long, it was nothing to that of those first heliski-ers, who reached the last section of road to their camp at 5pm but took nine more hours to cover the final 28 miles ("numerous ►

**Hans Gmoser and his adventure-hungry acolytes were driven by the desire to escape into the wilderness**





**Left, from top:**  
**Monashee Lodge;**  
**skiers waiting**  
**for a Bell 212 to**  
**pick them up.**  
**Facing page: a skier**  
**in trees near CMH's**  
**K2 Rotor Lodge**



◀ times we were stuck in the mud, got rained upon and pushed the vehicles,” Gmoser later wrote). Accommodation was basic: the guests (six the first week, 12 the next, each paying \$275) stayed in the plywood cabins of a disused sawmill camp, sleeping on iron beds in their sleeping bags. The guides, cook, pilot and mechanic slept on the floor of the kitchen building.

In the morning, the helicopter would begin to ferry the skiers up the mountain, a lengthy task given that this was a slow,

piston-engined Bell 47, which could only carry the pilot and two passengers. Women were taken last, to minimise their time waiting in the wind on the freezing mountainside. Each day they would make just one or two runs, often having to bushwhack back through the forest to camp, where they would gather in the kitchen to sing, play the instruments they had brought, drink and stay warm until going to bed at 10pm.

Halfway through the second week, the helicopter crashed. It was

coming in to land when the landing gear sank into deep snow, causing a rotor to strike the ground. The three people on board managed to jump out before it burst into flames; all were shaken but unharmed, and the pilot was quickly dispatched to find a replacement machine to finish the week. But the risks and hardships of that first fortnight were matched by the thrill of discovery – of unskied slopes and a new way of reaching them. The first heli-skiers went home, told their friends about their adventure, and Gmoser’s company never looked back.

**H**alf a century later, we crouch down beside the lake in front of the lodge and wait for our lift. It is -20C, cold enough to make steam rise from the water; a family of bald eagles swoops in and out of trees by the shore. Then, a low rhythmic thud carried on the wind, oddly familiar from countless Vietnam war movies; it grows louder as the helicopter approaches.

The flimsy three-seaters used in the early days have long gone; this is a twin jet engine Bell 212, which will easily swallow our group of 10, as well as the guide and pilot. There’s a surge of adrenaline as it eases down from the sky, rotors furiously beating the air, skids just feet from our huddled group, its belly close enough that I can see every rivet. The guide slides back the door and we clamber in, rushing and struggling to strap safety belts over our bulky clothes. Then the helicopter gently lifts and turns, crossing the

misty lake and climbing the steep, forested slope on the far side.

Coming in as an outsider, CMH feels like a tight-knit club, if not quite a cult. The other skiers in my group – indeed 90 per cent of those in the lodge – are indistinguishable thanks to their brightly coloured Gore-Tex ski-wear, all of it branded with the CMH logo. Most of them have been coming for years, if not decades, often moving between different CMH lodges before settling on a favourite.

In part their loyalty is due to a gimmick introduced in the early 1970s. Each night, the vertical distance each client has skied that day is posted on a board in the lodge, along with their cumulated lifetime total. Perhaps it’s something to do with the alpha-personality types who go in for this kind of holiday, and who can afford it, but in the CMH club, people really seem to take pride in this (utterly meaningless) figure, a badge of how much virgin snow they have defiled. Those who hit a million vertical feet are awarded a special CMH ski suit, presented after dinner in the lodge. My total after four days was just over 80,000ft; the frontrunner in the lodge that week had notched up a lifetime total over 26 million (he is so in thrall to the experience that he keeps a room at the lodge for the entire season).

It would be easy to mock – to bemoan how the original motivation of exploration and escape has been replaced by one of consumption and competition – were the whole thing not done in such warm North American spirit. The special suits are awarded in a sort of gang show (think shaving foam and dressing-up) designed to humiliate as much as honour the recipient. Dinner is eaten around large communal tables – a concept that ordinarily strikes terror into my English heart but which is a delight here thanks to the friendliness of the mostly US guests and the club-like atmosphere that prevails. After

## AUSTRIA'S BIGGEST PARTY

If knees really knocked, mine must have been reverberating around the Kitzbühel valley. I was about to ski the most feared downhill racecourse in the world. Even where I stood waiting, the run was so icy, bumpy and steep that I could hardly stand up.

The Hahnenkamm – the very word sends shivers down the spine of most skiers – is a mountain above the

Austrian resort of Kitzbühel that hosts a series of races each January: slalom, giant-slalom, super-giant and, the blue riband event, the downhill. Race week is the highlight of Austria’s skiing calendar, and the medieval town bustles with celebrities, reporters and tens of thousands of tourists enjoying not just the races but the parties and side events. This winter a bigger turnout than ever is expected – though the first races took place in 1931, this year the event celebrates its 75th

edition. Events kick off with the “Weisswurst” (white sausage) après-ski party on Friday, January 23, followed by the Kitz Charity Trophy on Saturday and the Playboy “after-race” party on Sunday. Whatever the results, thousands of visitors will applaud their ski heroes at the awards ceremony on Saturday night.

For the racers, the downhill has acquired an almost mythic status. Franz Klammer, who dominated the race in the 1970s, said he regarded



his fourth victory, as an “old man” of 30 in 1984, as more satisfying than his Olympic gold medal. Bill Johnson, the 1984 Olympic gold medallist,

summed it up: “No one is a champion until he has won at Kitzbühel.”

But perhaps the event’s most surprising feature is that each year,

after the racing is over and the course has been tidied up, it is opened to the public for the rest of the winter. Visitors can choose to tackle the whole course – the “Streif” – or opt for the gentler “Family Streif”, which bypasses the most terrifying sections, such as the nightmarishly steep “Mousetrap”. How did I do? Well I got to the bottom, eventually, but it was not a pretty sight.

**Arnie Wilson**  
[hahnenkamm.com](http://hahnenkamm.com);  
[kitzbuehel.com](http://kitzbuehel.com)





dinner and at the bar, people stand up to tell jokes and shaggy-dog stories that have been passed down between generations of guides and guests. Some of the punchlines might have been lost along the way but it's hard not to be charmed. By the second night, everyone seemed to know my name.

**T**his winter there will be numerous events to mark the 50th anniversary of the sport Gmoser created, including several "nostalgia weeks", but the connection with the past seems to run strong through the whole operation. Despite the delights of the new lodge, many of those I talk to like to remember the early days before its construction, when they stayed in a basic hostel used by workers building a nearby hydroelectric dam. They recall leaking roofs and lumberjacks swinging punches – even the day the hostel caught fire is a topic for nostalgia, as is another helicopter crash. "The machine was on its side and filling up with fuel – I thought I was a dead..." one man tells me with a grin. Didn't that put him off? "Well it was the final week of the season anyway but I was back the next year."

Perhaps this is the key: despite the luxury and the special suits, this remains a genuine adventure. In all, 42 people have died skiing with CMH, the most recent being last winter. Given the size of the operation, it's not a surprising figure – it represents approximately one death per 31,000 skier days – but

**I plunge downwards...  
The feeling is  
somewhere between  
falling and flying, a  
delicious mania found at  
the outer limit of control**

the presence of risk, no matter how small the chance of being involved, changes the atmosphere, making everything more vivid. Safety briefings are taken seriously, guides are respected, guests build stronger bonds, après-ski is more celebratory.

And whether it's a club or a cult, it's one with a total commitment to a single central tenet, one that remains the same now as it was in 1965. Our helicopter lands at the top of a run called Nagel East, touching down in a clearing surrounded by blackened tree trunks, the survivors of a past forest fire. We jump out, huddle together once more as our guide unloads the skis, then watch as the helicopter peels away off the mountainside to get the next group, its frantic noise replaced by a crescendo of silence.

The guide leads and we follow in line, traversing at first, poling hard to get moving in the deep snow, passing through a glade of skeletal trees, before regrouping where the mountainside starts to fall away. The guide gives a list of safety instructions, then one by one we push off.

The skis accelerate rapidly and then, like a speedboat starting

to plane, rise up and come alive, floating through the thigh-deep snow. Powder like this can be more than 90 per cent air – less dense than the froth of a cappuccino – and it is the only thing supporting me against gravity's pull. I plunge downwards, weaving between the black trunks that are the only solid, vertical reference points in a mad world tipped on its side and awash with rushing snow and plummeting skiers. Some turns send up white waves that cover my face. The feeling is somewhere between falling and flying, a delicious mania found at the outer limit of control.

This is skiing's "rapture of the deep" – potentially dangerous because it is so all-consuming, calling skiers to go faster, to abandon restraint, do anything to prolong the sensation. But it is wonderful too, the club's motivation and lifeblood, the ephemeral commodity that has sustained CMH for 50 years and built an industry, the siren call that draws people across the world and up long logging roads in the darkness.

*Tom Robbins was a guest of Pure Powder (purepowder.com) and Air Canada (aircanada.com). Pure Powder, a specialist heli-ski tour operator and CMH's UK agent, offers a week's trip with CMH from CAD\$11,500 (£6,329). Air Canada has daily flights from London to Kelowna, via Calgary, from £825*

## THE FIRST SNOWBOARD

If you snowboard, having a go on a "Snurfer" (below) is the equivalent of teeing off at St Andrews. To the layman it may look like a humble 1960s toy but without doubt this is the precursor of modern snowboarding, and next year marks the 50th anniversary of its invention.

That moment is well documented. In 1965, Sherman Poppen, the owner of a company selling industrial gases and welding supplies, had been instructed by his pregnant wife Nancy to entertain his two young daughters in the snowy garden outside their house in Muskegon, Michigan. He took a pair of cheap children's skis, bound them together and let his daughters jump on sideways. Nancy came outside and christened it "snurfing" – from "snow" and "surfing". Soon Poppen found himself besieged by requests from local kids for their own snurfers, so he began refining his creation (including adding a rope to the nose) and in March 1966 filed a patent describing "a new snow sport which incorporates features of certain summer pastimes, namely surfboarding, skateboarding and slalom water skiing".

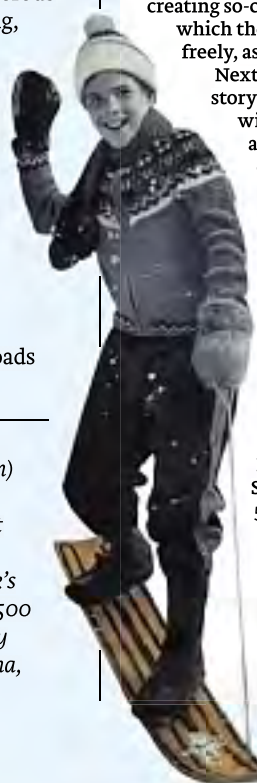
Poppen's Snurfer was licensed to two manufacturers and went on to sell more than 750,000 units; there was even a snurfing competition series. Most important, though, was that Snurfers found their way into the hands of a new generation of innovators, including a young Jake Burton, who together went on to develop the modern snowboard.

But the story doesn't end there. Though the Snurfer had been consigned to history by the mid-1980s, the concept has enjoyed something of a resurgence in recent years. Hoping to recreate the fluid feeling of surfing, some snowboarders stripped their boards of the modern fixed bindings, creating so-called "no-boards" on which their feet could move freely, as with the Snurfer.

Next month, though, the story will go full circle, with the relaunch of an official Snurfer, endorsed by an 84-year-old Poppen himself. Vew-do, a Vermont-based manufacturer of balance boards, has snapped up the lapsed trademark and begun manufacturing Snurfers again.

In January, Poppen is due to attend Denver's SIA Snow Show to kick off the 50th anniversary celebrations and "reintroduce the Snurfer brand to an entirely new generation of backyard enthusiasts".

**Chris Moran**





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### Ortovox S1+ transceiver

The clam-shell design and illuminated digital display make this one of the easiest to use transceivers on the market. £349. [ellis-brigham.com](http://ellis-brigham.com)

### McNair Mountain Shirt

A reaction against luminous space-age fabrics, these thick merino wool shirts are designed to be worn as an outer layer and are building a cult following in the French Alps. From £335. [mcnairshirts.com](http://mcnairshirts.com)



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### K2 Route helmet

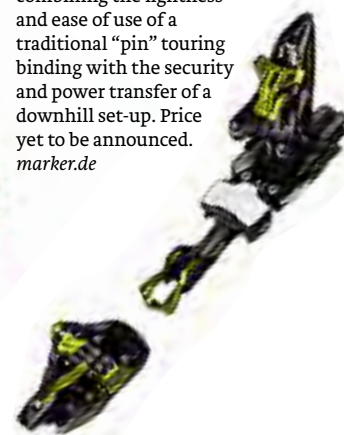
K2 claims that, at just 320g, the Route is the lightest snowsports-certified helmet ever made; it can also be worn for cycling. £110. [k2skis.com](http://k2skis.com)

### Faction Agent 100

Part of Faction's growing range of backcountry skis, the new Agent 100 uses carbon and Paulownia wood to significantly lower weight. £539. [factionskis.com](http://factionskis.com)

### Marker Kingpin binding

A pioneering hybrid, combining the lightness and ease of use of a traditional "pin" touring binding with the security and power transfer of a downhill set-up. Price yet to be announced. [marker.de](http://marker.de)



### Patagonia Nano-Air Hoody

Patagonia claims that its new, stretchable hoody is breathable enough to be left on all day without overheating. £200. [patagonia.com](http://patagonia.com)



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# PERFECT PISTES FOR KIDS

Chris Moran finds family fun and adventure on the French slopes

"I just hit one of the babies in the face!" laughs Rosie, aged six. Her friend Harry, five, wants no more of this dangerous snowball fight and skis off as fast as he can. "Their mum is going to eat you," he shouts back.

This is the Moon Wild piste in Méribel, France, which winds – half ski-run, half snowshoe trail – through the forest. It is dotted with convincing life-sized models of alpine animals, which my son and his friends have been delightedly pummelling with snowballs for the past 10 minutes.

We are on a south-facing plateau above Méribel Village – one of around 25 settlements that make up the Trois Vallées, the world's



Dressed to thrill: young skiers at the Parc des Indiens in Courchevel

largest linked ski area. In summer the plateau is home to the resort's golf course, dog-walking area and wildflower park. In winter it's the landing slope for tandem parapente flights, and is now the setting for a number of pistes specifically designed for children. "On that far

side is the Moon Wild piste," says ski instructor Greg Jones, pointing with a ski pole as we head back to the top on the eight-person chairlift. "And this side is the Inuit piste. It's been open a couple of years now and you just can't get a better spot for kids to learn."

JENNY JONES

## Tips on getting started

Learning to snowboard doesn't necessarily mean heading out to the mountains. My first time was a half-hour taster session at what's now called the Mendip Snowsport Centre, the closest slope to my home in Bristol. I didn't go until I was 17 but you can

start kids whenever they think they're ready. I'd say that by seven or eight they really get it. Just remember that it's not about getting good or doing the biggest jumps; the best snowboarder on the hill is the one having the most fun. Snowboarder Jenny Jones is the first Briton to win an Olympic medal in a snow event



On the far side of the mountain, in Courchevel's sector of the Trois Vallées, there is more to delight the kids: the Parc des Indiens, a Native American-themed kids' area, with hot drinks in teepees, dressing-up and the chance to try archery. It may not be politically or anthropologically correct but children seem to love it

"Méribel saw it and built an even bigger version," says Jones, whose ski school Marmalade is one of a dozen independents thriving in the Trois Vallées, many of them offering small classes, native English speakers and young, engaging instructors.

We take Harry and Rosie down the Inuit piste and see what he means: every few metres there's a themed ski challenge: clang your ski pole on hanging metal sun-charms, high-five a totem-pole penguin (they spin if you make good contact), bang a drum stretched with animal hide or ski through a blue whale. As we pause by the slope-side, a man in a narwhal costume skis past, chased by 20 kids. However bizarre, I can't think of a better place to learn. **FT**

For more details see [meribel.net](http://meribel.net) and [les3vallees.com](http://les3vallees.com)

DAVID ANDRE





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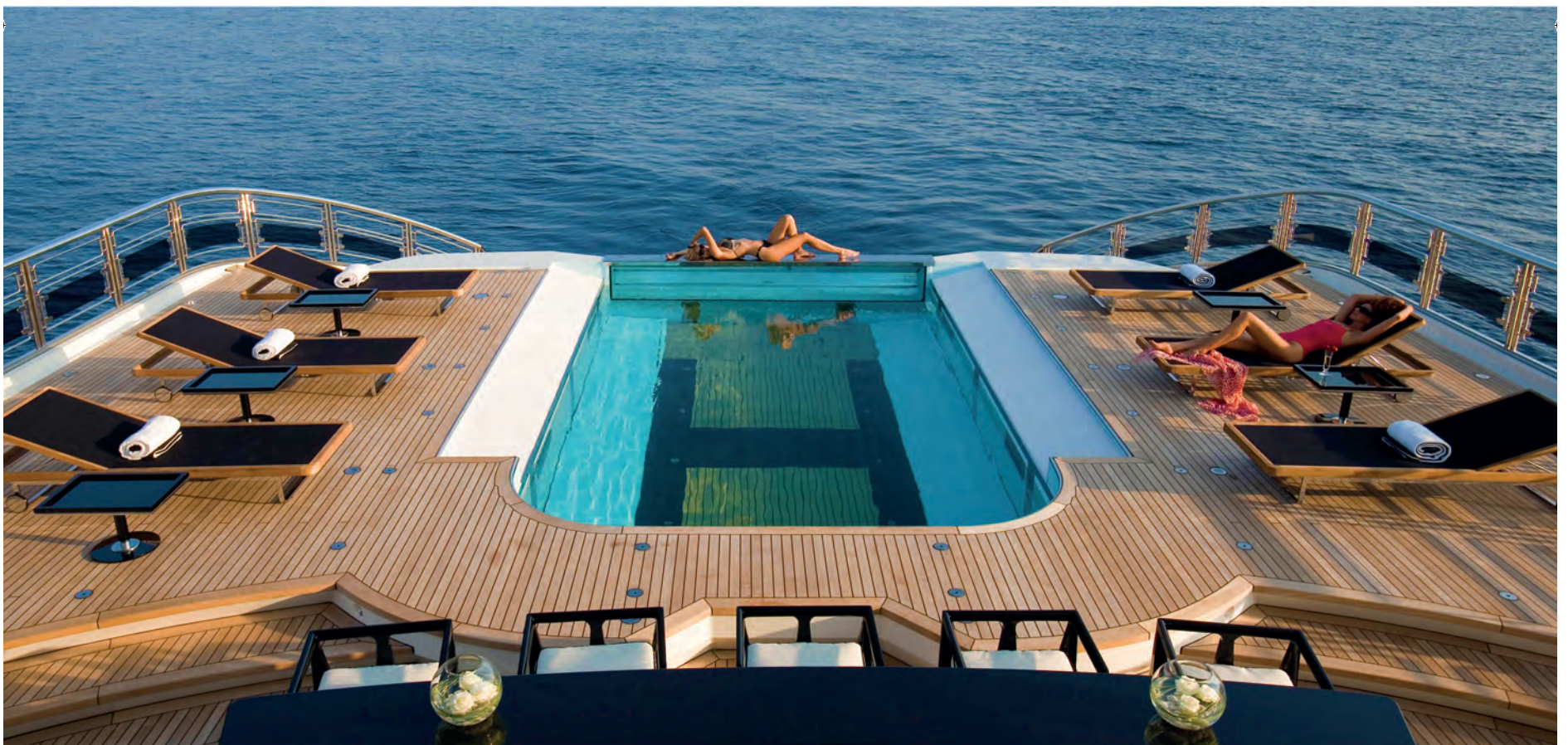
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◀ stocked shops that characterised Muranów, like most of Warsaw, during Poland's subjection under Soviet-imposed communism.

With the advent of democracy in 1989, prosperity and fresh paint started to brighten this long-neglected quarter of the Polish capital, the scene of so much horror and degradation in the mid-20th century. Now the crowning achievement is only days away: the formal opening, on October 28, of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, a \$120m project as bold in its intellectual conception as in its architectural design.

Its creators have deliberately situated the museum, a glass and copper building whose spacious interior is filled with radiant light and a swirling wall, opposite the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes. The idea is to put a stamp of life and renewal on what was once a landscape of unremitting devastation and death. "The museum is a message of hope on a site of genocide," says Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a Canadian-born professor at New York University, who is the programme director of the museum's core exhibition. "For me, this project represents the new Poland."

**D**esigned by the Finnish architects Lahdelma & Mahlamäki, the museum is making its grand debut amid a burst of enthusiasm in Poland to bring the nation's Jewish heritage out from the shadows and to encourage the increasingly energetic revival of Jewish life in Warsaw and smaller, provincial cities. "The miracle of the rediscovery of Jewish Poland and the re-emergence of Jewish life, albeit on a small scale, are making a real impact. Non-Jewish Poles are now celebrating their country's Jewish heritage," says Jonathan Ornstein, the New York-born director of the Jewish Community Centre in Kraków, Poland's second city.

Nevertheless the museum, open for cultural and educational events since April 2013, seems sure to stir controversy. For, in contrast to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, or Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the new Warsaw museum is not specifically about the mass murder of Jews in the second world war. In fact, only one of the core exhibition's eight galleries, which cover a combined area of more than 4,000 sq m, deals with the Holocaust.

The international historians and museum experts who developed the core exhibition do not skate over the Holocaust – far from it. But their chief purpose is to narrate and celebrate the story of Jewish civilisation in Poland, a story that spans the arrival of Ashkenazi Jews from western and central Europe in the Middle Ages to the rebirth of Jewish communities in contemporary Poland. In this historical sweep the Holocaust, unquestionably the central and most terrifying fact of the story, is treated as one element of a seamless narrative.

Throughout, the threads of Poland's Jewish past are intertwined with those of its history as a state in such a way as to make it hard to imagine Polish Jews without their Christian neighbours or vice-versa. "We're trying to show the history of Polish Jews as an integral part of the history of Poland," says Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.



Top: the light-filled new museum is located opposite the 1948 Monument to the Ghetto Heroes (above)

**'We're trying to show the history of Polish Jews as an integrated part of Polish history'**

One example is the museum's exhibit on Michal Landy, a Jewish high-school student in Warsaw who was killed during an anti-tsarist protest in 1861 as he retrieved a cross from a wounded demonstrator. The death of a Jewish boy holding an object sacred to Polish Catholicism is a symbol of brotherhood across the religious divide that perfectly suits the museum's purposes.

To date, no big European or US museum has tackled the history of a nation's Jewish inhabitants with such emphasis on the theme of integration. "Elsewhere in the world, museums tend to focus on the Holocaust, not on 1,000 years of Jewish life in Poland, as if life is less important than death," observes Dariusz Stola, a history professor and the museum's director.

That such an approach should emerge in Poland, the historical heartland of European Jewry, is particularly striking. Since the rise of modern European anti-Semitism in the late 19th century, and especially since the Holocaust, which resulted in the deaths of 90 per cent of Poland's prewar Jewish population of 3.3 million, many Jews outside Poland have tended to regard Poles, a predominantly Catholic people, as riddled with hostility towards Jews.

With only some exaggeration, Ornstein says: "The traditional view of Jewish communities in the US and elsewhere was that Poland was ►

◀ a hellish place where the Germans committed genocide – but the Poles would have done it, but for the Germans being more efficient.”

As a public-private partnership involving the Polish government, the city of Warsaw and Poland's Jewish Historical Institute, the museum is part of an effort, now more than 20 years old, by the new democratic state and independent professional and social groups to rebuild trust between Poland's non-Jewish majority and Jews both in and outside Poland. The core exhibition takes care, therefore, to address historical episodes of Polish anti-Semitism and outright violence towards Jews.

**T**ake the July 1941 rampage in the eastern town of Jedwabne, where Poles, unprompted but against the backdrop of Nazi occupation, slaughtered hundreds of their Jewish neighbours. Jan Gross, the Polish-born US historian who documented this crime in his book *Neighbours*, published in 2001, came under attack from Polish nationalists, who accused him of distorting evidence and denigrating Poles.

But in that year, on the 60th anniversary of the murders, Aleksander Kwasniewski, Poland's then president, took the brave step of making a formal apology for Jedwabne on behalf of the Polish nation. The museum exhibition tells the story of Jedwabne, setting it in the wider context of Polish Jewry's extermination at Nazi hands.

“In proportion to the killings elsewhere under Nazi occupation, Jedwabne was minor. But the important thing is that it was Poles, not Germans, doing the killing,” says Stola. “As a nation, we have finally developed a language to speak about difficult historical topics. This wasn't possible under the communist system. Twenty years ago, people were over-sensitive and would say, ‘You can't criticise your own nation.’ Today people say, ‘Why not? It's my job as a citizen.’ So it's possible to speak about anti-Semitic prejudice today without being labelled anti-Polish.”

Thanks to postwar border changes and population transfers, as well as the annihilation of the Jews, Poland under communism was, for the first time since the 14th century, an overwhelmingly Catholic country. But anti-Semitism in the late 1940s and 1950s gained strength from the view that communism was an abomination assisted in its arrival from Moscow by Polish Jewish acolytes of Josef Stalin. The roles of Jakub Berman and Hilary Minc, two devoted Stalinists, in consolidating the one-party dictatorship buttressed this argument.

In a later episode, well covered by the exhibition, an anti-Semitic campaign was fomented in 1968 from within the communist party by Mieczyslaw Moczar, a nationalist hardliner in charge of the police. This campaign, Europe's most vicious outburst of government-sponsored anti-Semitism since the second world war, resulted in the emigration of thousands of Polish Jews, including eminent university professors, authors, doctors and lawyers. By 1971, scarcely 10,000 Jews remained in Poland, and most preferred to draw as little attention to themselves as possible.

Even so, the Solidarity movement that pushed the communists out of power in 1989 contained



“The massacre of Michal Landy”, anonymous



The aftermath of the Warsaw ghetto, c 1943



President Kwasniewski's apology for Jedwabne, 2001

**‘Today it's possible to speak about anti-Semitic prejudice without being labelled anti-Polish’**

**Dariusz Stola, museum director**

some highly influential Jewish intellectuals, notably the historian Bronislaw Geremek, who later became Poland's foreign minister, and Adam Michnik, now editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a leading newspaper.

There are no official estimates of Poland's Jewish population today. Pawel Spiewak, director of the Jewish Historical Institute, puts it at about 20,000. Other experts estimate that 200,000 of Poland's 38.5 million people may have Jewish roots without being fully or even vaguely aware of them.

What seems clear is that anti-Semitism in Poland – though far from eradicated, as one public opinion survey after another shows – is a more marginal phenomenon than it used to be. This is partly down to the fresh air of free civic discussion blowing through Poland's young, vigorous democracy. But it is also down to the excitement, curiosity and surprise of a nation learning, after the fear and silence of the communist era, just how much Jewish culture contributed to Poland's past.

What is more, Poland has escaped most of the anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic violence that erupted earlier this year in western European cities such as Berlin, Brussels and Paris. Konstanty Gebert, a *Gazeta Wyborcza* columnist, Jewish activist and pro-democracy campaigner in the 1980s, sums up: “I feel I'm safe in Warsaw, not so safe in Paris.”

The revival of Jewish life in Poland differs from that in Germany, where it is driven by the arrival of Jewish immigrants – about 220,000 since German reunification in 1990 – from eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In Poland the revival is home-grown, though it benefits from US Jewish support, and the rediscovery of the nation's Jewish past is often led by Catholic and non-religious Poles, not by Polish Jews.

Such is the case, 170km southeast of Warsaw, in Lublin, where Jews comprised more than a third of the city's 120,000 people in 1939 but now number only a few dozen. Besides deporting most Lublin Jews to the Belzec death camp, the Nazis razed the city's Jewish quarter house by house. Postwar communist planners then placed wide roads, lawns and a huge car park where once there had been synagogues, Jewish shops and apartment buildings.

In two strokes, a centuries-old dimension of Lublin's history vanished – but now it is reappearing in altered guise. For 20 years Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre, a local cultural institute, has meticulously amassed documentary material for exhibitions that pay tribute to the city's Jewish heritage. The institute draws its name partly from the 14th-century gate that used to connect Lublin's Jewish and Christian quarters, and partly from the theatrical career of its founder, Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, an opposition activist in the communist era.

“When I started out, I knew nothing about the Jews of Lublin,” says Pietrasiewicz. “When a friend told me that, not far from the Grodzka Gate, there used to be a Jewish quarter before the war, it was a shock. I had to ask myself, ‘How is it possible I knew nothing of these people? What can I do to change the situation?’ Over the past 20 years, my work has been a kind of moral reaction to this discovery.”



all were transported to Treblinka as the Nazis wiped out the shtetl in 1942-1943. The rest gradually left Poland after a pogrom in the nearby city of Kielce in July 1946 killed 42 Jews, including three from Chmielnik. Wartime atrocities and post-war violence alike were buried in almost total silence in Chmielnik and surrounding villages until the collapse of communism opened up a space for public discussion.

“When I started as mayor, this whole subject was foreign to me,” says Zatorski, echoing the words of Pietrasiewicz in Lublin. “But I treated it as my duty to take care of the history that had been forgotten for 40 years. I decided to restore the completely destroyed cemetery. I told the local people, ‘Think of the devastated Polish cemeteries in Ukraine. Imagine what Jews think when they come here and see cows roaming around the Jewish cemetery.’”

The synagogue was renovated at a cost of 7m zloty (£1.3m). Four million zloty came from EU funds, Poland’s culture ministry contributed 1m zloty and Zatorski found the other 2m zloty from his local government budget. He encountered, and still encounters, resistance: one political opponent, who is challenging him in Chmielnik’s mayoral election next month, refers to the synagogue as “that object”, rather than calling it by its real name, and says the money would have been better spent on modernising the town’s sports facilities.

Zatorski persevered, rebuilding the synagogue as a museum and cultural forum whose central feature, a *bimah* (platform) made entirely of glass, is touted as the only one of its kind in the world. Around the *bimah* are exhibits of Chmielnik’s prewar life such as prayer books, a Hanukkah lamp, cutlery for fish, a *shofar* (horn), a violin and a brass menorah. By using the synagogue not primarily as a site of mourning but for modern educational and cultural purposes, Zatorski is, like the creators of the Warsaw museum, challenging the mental picture of Poland as nothing but a vast Jewish cemetery that many Israelis and American Jews have held since 1945.

“We don’t focus on the Holocaust but concentrate on the cohabitation and tolerance of the two communities over history – Poles and Jews. This plays into Poland’s sense of its place in a Europe of unity, toleration and dialogue,” Zatorski says.

It is tempting, but too cynical, to regard initiatives such as the Chmielnik synagogue, the Lublin cultural institute and the new Warsaw museum as schemes to drum up tourism or even to rehabilitate Poland in the eyes of foreign Jews. The principal inspiration behind all three projects strikes me as something more elemental – a national yearning to recover lost memory.

Nazism and communism clamped 20th-century Poland in a 50-year vice of carnage and captivity. No less damaging was the determination of the two totalitarianisms to destroy or suppress physical evidence and cultural awareness of Poland’s past. The restoration of the nation’s Jewish heritage is one part – but an essential part – of Poland’s larger effort to reconstruct itself as a nation whole and free. **FT**

Tony Barber is the FT’s Europe editor. To comment on this article, please email [magazineletters.com](mailto:magazineletters.com)

The institute now houses thousands of photographs and other memorabilia, as well as thousands of hours of recorded memories of the city’s inhabitants, all contributing to recreate the atmosphere of Jewish Lublin in the pre-Holocaust era.

**A**rguably, the lovingly restored synagogue and Jewish cemetery of Chmielnik, a former shtetl 225km south of Warsaw, are Poland’s outstanding example of what can be achieved at local level when civic pride and a nose for economic opportunity are married with political courage and moral purpose.

In large part, these projects are the work of Jaroslaw Zatorski, the mayor of Chmielnik for 21 years. A man who speaks as if he has never minced a word in his life, the mayor says that he belongs to no political party – “I keep away from political parties like the devil from holy water.”

Jews accounted for four in five of Chmielnik’s more than 10,000 prewar inhabitants. Virtually



Top: a Warsaw ghetto street scene, recreated in the museum. Above: an external view of the museum



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