

## Switzerland

## Curling and skiing in the Swiss Alps

The Alpine sport of curling is addictive — and the slopes are pretty good too — in the resort of Adelboden, says **Tom Chesshyre**

**S**liding across an ice rink clutching a broom and pushing a polished granite stone towards a bullseye known as the “dolly” — in a freezing sports hall in a little-visited ski resort in the Swiss Alps — I am beginning to wonder whether curling is all it’s cracked up to be.

Already I have deposited myself face first (a few times) on the ice. Skidding forwards on special “slider shoes” and directing the 20kg granite stone towards the dolly had seemed so easy when Annina, the Adelboden curling club champion, had shown us. But out on the ice in our sliders it’s another matter.

Limbs seem to move independently of one another. The starting blocks, or “hacks”, from which we are required to push off, seem designed for embarrassing forward plunges. The likelihood of sending a stone 150ft (45m) down the narrow strip of ice anywhere near our target seems zero — on a par with shooting a clay pigeon or hitting a hole in one in golf while blindfolded.

It had all seemed captivatingly simple when I’d watched it on television during the Winter Olympics in Sochi in Russia, where the Great Britain women’s team so brilliantly picked up bronze in a last-gasp victory over Switzerland (as it happens). The cunning tactics and many dramatic finales appealed, and I had thought: “I’d like to give that a go one day.”

So here I am, in Adelboden in the Bernese Oberland in southwest Switzerland, having a try. Annina is patient as my friend Jamie and I simply do not seem to get it at all. We are told to use the broom to balance with our left hand and gently release the stone with our right. The idea is to let the force of the thrust from the hacks launch the granite, rather than simply pushing the stone forwards using your arms. “Do not go over the hog line!” Annina yells. This is a black line across the strip of ice.

It’s all getting rather stressful. But then Annina decides it’s time for Jamie and me to play an “end”. We are each given eight stones — the granite for most curling stones comes from Scotland, we have been told — and we take turns aiming for the dolly. This is when the curling bug takes hold.

Competitive juices begin to flow,



On the slopes in Adelboden

concentration is focused, and almost immediately we are coming pretty close to the dolly, twisting the handle attached to the stones one way or the other to curve round earlier stones blocking the way. An hour passes in a flash — plus many a slide — and I end up victorious, two stones to one. Annina, who wears Buddy Holly-style glasses and pearl earrings, grins. She knows we are curlers in the making.

“The thing about curling is you always win,” she tells us. “Either you win on the ice or you win in the bar.” This time it’s

Jamie’s turn to grin (it is apparently a curling tradition in these parts for the winner to buy the drinks). We thank Annina and go to the Weltcup Bar round the corner, where we are about to discover another facet of this picturesque resort.

The bar is a short walk up the narrow high street, with its charming 14th-century stone church (a plaque says that an archway into the grounds was built by British soldiers who wound up here during the Second World War), as well as cake shops and delis offering delicious cheeses and slices of cured ham. The bar gets its name from the fact that Adelboden is the venue for an annual World Cup downhill race every January, when 60,000 or so people descend on the village.

Inside it’s standing room only, with Led Zeppelin pumping out. I buy a couple of foaming draught lagers and we lean against a wall toasting our curling efforts. Adelboden is such a small place that it’s almost inevitable, even after only a few, to bump into someone you know. Pascal Frei, the head of the local ski school,

soon bounds up. He buys more beers — Adelbodians are social creatures — and explains how important the race is to the resort. “We have a budget of €5 million to stage the race, but it brings in €60 million. It’s the equivalent in earnings to having a factory here with 50 people in it working year-round,” he says.

Pascal is telling us all this because last year’s event was cancelled at the last minute, causing much disappointment among the vast crowds who had bought tickets and turned up. Rainfall had ruined the World Cup slopes. This year the snow is poor too. There is only artificial snow (we are visiting in early December), and Pascal is worried that the race could be cancelled again, hitting the local economy hard (it isn’t, the race goes ahead in January because there’s good snowfall in the end).

However, here’s the huge plus point about Adelboden. The resort must have one of the best piste maintenance teams in the Alps. So, despite the lack of real snow, the artificial snow on the slopes that are open is immaculate, with a series of exhilarating blue runs, as well as a few more challenging reds. These are linked by a marvellous spidery network of connecting pistes. It seems almost a miracle that there is so much mountainside to explore.

The resort best suits intermediates and beginners. Ueli Allenbach, our guide, points out peaks — in the distance we can see the Matterhorn — and offers tips in between zooming down the red runs. One of these is to ski backwards slowly for a few metres from time to time. This helps to improve the position of your feet in your boots, he says, and means that your body position will lean forward slightly, rather than rocking backwards and causing lack of control. The standard of skiing in the resort is high. Most people seem to have skied all their lives and are from the region, many from the nearby city of Bern.

## Where to curl in the Alps

**Pralognan-la-Vanoise, France**

Pralognan-la-Vanoise hosted the curling events at the Albertville Winter Olympics in 1992 and has a year-round lane, with an hour’s ice and equipment rental costing from €60 (£51) for up to eight people (pralognan.com)

**Seefeld, Austria**

The tourist office in Seefeld offers lessons at 5pm every Wednesday at 5pm during the winter. The hour-and-a-half session includes basic instruction, followed by practice and a tournament. Stick rental costs €9 (seefeld.com)

**Cortina, Italy**

Curling has been played in Cortina since the 1900s, but its popularity surged after the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics. Every summer the curling centre hosts an international tournament. The curling club (cortinadolomiti.eu) organises two-hour lessons from €28pp (minimum six people) **Ben Clatworthy**

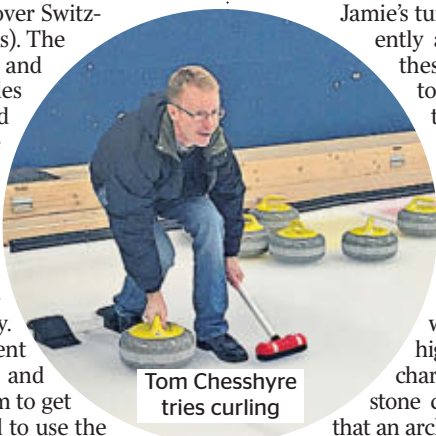


Our favourite restaurant is Berghaus Standhütte at 2,100m, which overlooks a popular paragliding spot, where we eat enormous dishes of *chässchnitte* — a hunk of toasted bread covered with ham, cheese and a fried egg, all soaked in red wine with slices of pear bobbing about. Delicious.

We get our fill of the local food and the slopes over a long weekend, but there’s another lure in the back of our minds — round two on the curling rink. This time Jamie gets the better of me... but at least I don’t have to buy the drinks.

## Need to know

Tom Chesshyre was a guest of Adelboden Tourism, SkyWork Airlines and Parkhotel Bellevue & Spa. SkyWork (flyskywork.com) has return flights from London to Bern from £190. Parkhotel Bellevue & Spa (parkhotel-bellevue.ch) has half-board doubles from £230. Further information: adelboden.ch. Curling lessons from £140 for an hour for two at the Freizeit und Sportarena (00 41 33 673 17 77, adelboden.ch). “Fun Curl” events at the ice rink at 5pm every Monday and Friday cost £20; put your name down before noon on the day



Tom Chesshyre tries curling