

HOT
ON
THE
TRAIL
OF

Sherlock Holmes



Best known as the prolific author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was an adventurer at heart. That spirit led him from the plains of South Africa to the peaks of the Swiss Alps. In 1894, long before skiing had a following, he telemarked across the Maienfelder Furka Pass—near Davos, Switz. Not only did Conan Doyle become one of the first Brits to ski, but his turn-of-the-century alpine chronicles ignited a love affair between the British and Davos that continues to this day. Author **DAVID GOODMAN** set out last March to retrace Conan Doyle's route.



"The 'ski' are the most capricious things upon earth. One day you cannot go wrong with them. On another, with the same weather and the same snow, you cannot go right. And it is when you least expect it that things begin to happen....For a man who suffers from too much dignity, a course of Norwegian snow shoes [skis] would have a fine moral effect."

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "An Alpine Pass on 'Ski'", *The Strand Magazine*, December 1894 (Source for excerpts that follow.)

It was an outlandish undertaking for an English gentleman. Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the celebrated Sherlock Holmes detective novels, was in search of an adventure. The year was 1894, a time

when few Brits had even seen skis, no less tried them. But Doyle was captivated by the thought of gliding on snow. Like his famous sleuth, Doyle was not content to dabble with small challenges. The goal he set himself was ambitious, if not absurd: To cross the Maienfelder Furka, an 8,000-foot pass in the Swiss Alps that separated the nascent resort communities of Davos and Arosa, on skis.

It is thanks to Sherlock Holmes that Doyle's misadventures in the Swiss Alps received worldwide attention. By the early 1890s, Doyle had developed a loyal audience for his fictional detective, as well as for his other writings. And so it was that "An Alpine Pass on 'Ski'", Doyle's humorous account of his Swiss trip published in the December 1894 edi-

tion of London's *The Strand Magazine*, became the first piece of popular ski journalism.

I set out for Davos last March with a mission worthy of Holmes and Watson. I went to retrace Conan Doyle's steps—to crack the lingering mystery that surrounded Doyle's pioneering ski adventure. What exactly did this over-enthused Brit do in Davos a century ago? Is it possible that he actually descended extreme "60-degree slopes," as he reported, flirting with death at every turn? And what legacy remains of his time in Davos? The only way to answer these burning questions was to follow in his century-old ski tracks.

Here, then, is the result of my investigation.

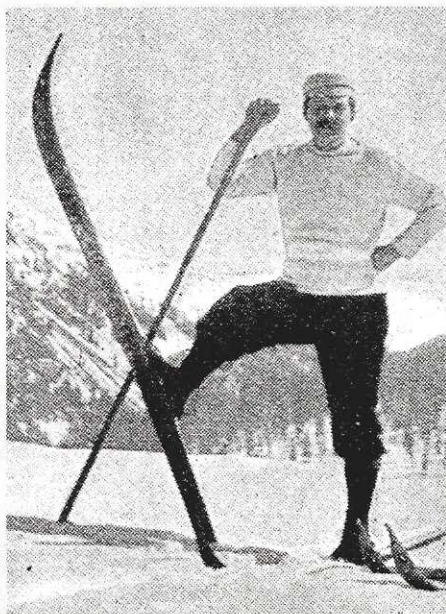
Upon arriving in Davos, I immediately set about looking for traces of Conan Doyle's passage a century before. My first stop was the Hotel Belvedere, an imperious looking building framed by Roman columns, guarding one end of the town. I settled into a room with the same views that tantalized Conan Doyle. Then I took up my quest.

"Sir Arthur Conan Doyle?" replied a surprised Ernst Wyrsh, proprietor of the Hotel Belvedere. "Yes, he was here," he offered, as if speaking of someone who had just stopped by. "I believe it was at the turn of the century." Wyrsh then provided me with my next clue, directing me to look in the main town park for a plaque dedicated to Conan Doyle. I wandered along the gravel pathways behind the famous Davos outdoor ice stadium until I came upon a discreet 4-foot-high stone sticking out of the snow. Here was the solid evidence I craved. A bronze plaque on the stone read: "In tribute to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1859-1930. English author—creator of Sherlock Holmes—and sportsman, who on March 23, 1894, crossed the Maienfelder Furka from Davos to Arosa on skis, thereby bringing this new sport and the attractions of the Swiss Alps in winter to the attention of the world. The perfect pattern of a gentleman."

Next I went in search of descendants of those who knew Conan Doyle. A perusal of the local phone

book turned up 71-year-old Jan Branger, whose great uncles served as Conan Doyle's guides. Sipping espresso at a hotel bar, Jan explained with a proud twinkle in his eye that the Branger family has inhabited the Davos Valley for some 500 years. In the late 1800s, his grandfather's brothers, Tobias and Johannes, "were the only ones who knew how to ski," he said. "After Doyle, other Englishmen came to ski with them. So they sold them skis—but I don't think that was a big business for them." He didn't know much about the Conan Doyle adventure, but was nonetheless delighted that I had come to find out more.

"Whenever you brace yourself for a fall it never comes off. Whenever you think yourself absolutely secure it is all over with you....You stop upon the level to congratulate your companion, and you have just time to say, 'What a lovely view is this!' when you find yourself standing on your two shoulder-blades, with your 'ski' tied tightly round your neck."



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—or Conan Doyle, as he called himself—possessed some of the requisite character flaws of the modern-day ski bum. Born in 1859 in Edinburgh, Scotland, he trained as an ophthalmologist and opened a small practice in Southsea. But he did not display much talent for holding down a real job. He would arrive at his office at 10 am and sit there until 3 or 4



pm, without a knock to disturb him. He quickly turned failure to his advantage. "So long as I was thoroughly unsuccessful in my professional venture," he wrote, "there was every chance of improvement in my literary prospects."

By the age of 28, Conan Doyle had created Sherlock Holmes and promptly recast himself as a successful author. Despite enjoying six years of rising success with his brilliant and witty detective, he lamented being an author of popular literature. He had aspirations to literary grandeur, and considered mystery novels beneath him. So in 1893, Conan Doyle killed his golden goose: In "The Final Problem," Holmes and his archenemy Moriarty plunge to their deaths off the towering Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. However, his readers would not tolerate this untimely ending, and Conan Doyle was forced to resurrect Holmes by popular demand. All told, Sir Arthur—he was knighted for his defense of Britain's unpopular efforts in South Africa's Boer War—penned 60 Sherlock Holmes adventures, creating the world's best-known fictional detective. Conan Doyle was a literary star, with avid followers who devoured whatever he wrote. Thus it was that Conan Doyle's ski journalism ignited a love affair between the British and Davos that continues to this day.

Conan Doyle was initially drawn to the Swiss Alps as a result of illness, not sports. His wife, Louise, had been diagnosed with a serious case of tuberculosis; she was not given long to live. Conan Doyle was racked with grief at the prospect of losing his young wife and

resolved to find a remedy. He learned that some eminent physicians believed that the high, dry climate of the Swiss Alps—and Davos in particular—was particularly beneficial to TB patients. So in the fall of 1893, Conan Doyle and his wife "made for Davos in the High Alps where there seemed the best chance of killing this accursed microbe."

The mile-high valley of Davos was simultaneously breathtaking to survey and breath-restoring to the thousands of "lungers" who were taking up residence there. The wood chalets that dotted the hillsides beneath the towering alpine peaks were rapidly being joined by the numerous sanatoriums cropping up to house TB patients and their families. Conan Doyle and Louise Doyle took up residence in the Hotel

Belvedere, a prim whitewashed hotel just above the main thoroughfare, with rooms that faced onto the snowy landscape. For a sportsman such as Conan Doyle, peering up at the mountains day after day inevitably sparked his imagination. While the mountain peaks worked their magic on Conan Doyle's mind, the fresh air helped Louise regain her strength.

Conan Doyle's musings about winter recreation led him to the brothers Tobias and Johannes Branger, who owned a sports store in Davos. The Brangers had first



Above: The author's wife, Sue Minter, climbs past farmhouses en route to the Maienfelder Furka Pass. **Left:** An old wooden barn at Parsem ski area.



seen skis at the 1878 Paris Exposition. They managed to obtain several pair of the strange contraptions by 1890, from which point on they could often be seen on the hillsides around town “with awkward attempts and many falls” struggling to master the new sport.

Conan Doyle asked the Brangers to teach him how to ski. The Brit was sufficiently cocky and foolish to persuade them to take him across the Maienfelder Furka Pass on skis, a feat that the Brangers had only accomplished the previous year. And so at 4:30 am on March 23, 1894, the brothers Branger and their English charge set off into the mountains around Davos.

“We enjoyed the view of a whole panorama of mountains, the names of which my readers will be relieved to hear I have completely forgotten.”

Davos and Arosa are sister resort towns separated by a wall of 9,000-foot peaks. To travel between them today requires a 3-hour train ride around the mountains. Hardy skiers can take a more direct route over the Maienfelder Furka, a cleavage that

affords passage through huge rock cliffs. The route is rarely skied, having long since fallen victim to the convenience offered by high-speed lifts at the nearby Parsenn ski area in Davos. (It is possible to descend off-piste to Arosa from the top of the Parsenn lifts, but few people do.) To carry out my investigation, I deemed it crucial to follow Conan Doyle’s exact route. Donning telemark skis and climbing skins, I was joined by my wife, Sue Minter, and local guide Peter Lauber to follow in Conan Doyle’s ski tracks.

Exactly 104 years and four hours after Doyle headed up into the hills, we pushed off from the road on a perfect, sunny day. We slowly but methodically made our way up, past farmers’ cottages and shepherds’ huts. The houses quickly vanished as we entered a quiet forest, where drooping spruce limbs formed an archway over the trail.

After 90 minutes of gentle climbing, we came to a small enclave of deeply weathered wood chalets. A stray ski track weaved between them. A lone white chalet with the date “1892” etched into the gable crowned

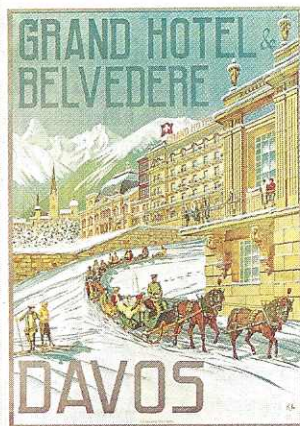
the top of the valley. This was probably what Doyle described as “a wooden cow house, which was the last sign of man we would see until we reached Arosa.”

True to Conan Doyle’s description, we were now surrounded only by snow and serrated peaks. The soft rolling terrain of our route contrasted with the jagged black and white ridgelines that marched off as far as we could see. Behind us, the lifts of Davos appeared as faint gossamer strands lacing the distant peaks.

We stopped at a small knoll for a lunch of Swiss chocolate and cheese. From there we got our first glimpse of the Maienfelder Furka Pass. It appeared as a soft U-shaped gap between two sheer limestone walls. Wet snow avalanches triggered by the hot sun raked the mountain flanks around it.

“The snow was rapidly softening now under the glare of the sun, and without our [skis] all progress would have been impossible....The snow fell away from here at an angle of from 50 degrees to 60 degrees...until it ended in absolute precipice, [and] a slip might have been serious. My two more experienced companions walked below me for the half-mile or so of danger....”

We traversed a gentle ocean of white. The ferocious climb that Conan Doyle described was nowhere to be found. Our climb to the pass was slow, gentle and steady. The only “absolute precipice” was above us, the imposing yellow limestone wall of a peak



Clockwise from upper left: The cablecar ride to Jakobshorn reveals a stunning view of Davos-Platz; Hotel Belvedere, as Conan Doyle would have experienced it; local Daniel Funkauser gets fresh tracks at Parsenn; Conan Doyle glissading before the fall; the Schatzalp Mountain Hotel in Arosa; Jan Branger, grandnephew of Conan Doyle’s guides.



known as Amselplue. A small shepherd hut marking the pass finally appeared on the horizon. Upon reaching the pass, we found a sobering memorial plaque on the hut. It honored Erwin Lamm, a mountain guide from Arosa who was killed in an avalanche on the pass just four years earlier. Lauber, our chisel-faced young Swiss guide, paused in silence. It was a reminder that as long as people have traveled and played in these hills, there has been an equally long tradition of tragedy.

The hotels and chalets in the Arosa valley appeared tantalizingly close. But Peter suddenly turned to us and declared, "I don't know if we can reach Arosa." He worried about the record heat—the sweat rolling down my brow confirmed that it was over 40 degrees Fahrenheit—and the consequent potential for avalanches. Finally, he decided we could continue, but it was possible we would have to turn back if the snow felt unstable. To emphasize his point, he nodded to the plaque of his fallen friend. No further explanation was necessary.

"In that great untrodden waste, with snowfields bounding our vision on every side and no marks of life save the track of the chamois and of foxes, it was glorious to whiz along in this easy fashion.

It seemed to me that the difficulty of our journey was over, and that we had only to stand on our 'ski' and let them carry us to our destination. But...the slope grew steeper and steeper, until it suddenly fell away into what was little short of being pure precipice....To me it seemed as if a parachute was the only instrument for which we had any use...."

For the enthusiastic but fumbling Doyle party, the sight of what lay beneath them on the descent of the Maienfelder Furka struck fear. They were confronted by one vexing problem: They had no idea how to control their skis on a sustained descent. The technique the three men resorted to was to remove their boards and lash them together into a toboggan. They then sat on these unguided missiles and hoped for the best. For poor Doyle, pride was the first casualty.

"Sitting on these [toboggans], with our heels dug into the snow, and our sticks pressed hard down behind us, we began to move down the precipitous face of the pass. I think that both my comrades came to grief over it....But my own troubles were so pressing that I had no time to think of them. I tried to keep the pace within moderate bounds.... Then I dug in my heels hard in, which shot me off backwards, and in an instant my two 'skis', tied together, flew away like an arrow from a bow, whizzed past the two Brangers and vanished over the next slope, leaving their owner squatting in the deep snow....I made my way down in my own fashion."

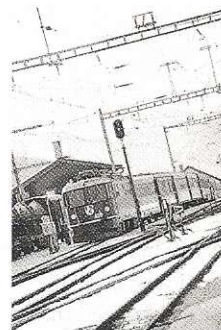
A century later, Sue and I reveled in the terrain of the Maienfelder Furka. It was a skier's treasure: a virgin white slope to inscribe as we pleased. The descent began as a moderate slope of about 20 degrees (akin to a "blue square" run at a ski area), the perfect angle for swinging big, fast, easy turns. The two of us and Peter swooped, whooped and carved figure-eights down this passageway buried in wet, white snow.

Doyle's Davos

DETAILS At 5,100 feet, Davos is the highest ski town in Europe. The so-called Davos ski resort actually consists of seven ski areas spanning the neighboring towns of Davos and Klosters—Parsenn, Pischa, Jakobshorn, Strela-Schatzalp, Rinerhorn, Madrisa and Gotschna. These ski areas are all linked by lifts and/or buses.

Some of the skiing highlights in the area include the long, spectacularly scenic intermediate runs down the Parsenn; the short, steep mogul fields of Jakobshorn, and the sweeping cruising runs of Pischa and Rinerhorn. Prince Charles of England favors the Parsenn and Gotschna during his periodic ski trips to Klosters. The local scuttlebutt is that Charles is a weak skier, but his usual escorts—four Davos ski instructors and four armed Swiss policemen—are quite deft.

GETTING THERE I flew Swissair from New York to Zurich, then walked from my plane right onto the famous Swiss Rail system. Davos is a scenic three-hour train ride from Zurich. Swissair and Swiss Rail allow you to check your luggage from the U.S. right through to your Swiss hotel (for an additional fee). Swissair has direct flights from numerous North American gateway cities. Contact Swissair at (800) 221-4750.



WHERE TO STAY For a taste of what makes Davos grand and historic, you can stay in the same hotel that Conan Doyle chose: the Steigenberger Belvedere (41-81-415-6000; in U.S., 800-223-5652). The elegant, century-old Belvedere is one of only two five-star hotels in Davos. Rooms start at \$98 per person.

The three-star Berghotel Schatzalp (41-81-413-8331) is an historic converted sanatorium. The hotel is reached via cablecar, and the views from the mountainside perch are the best in Davos. Rooms start at \$86 per person.

THE SLOPES The Davos region offers more than 200 miles of alpine ski and snowboard trails and 47 miles of groomed cross-country trails. The longest run is 7 miles with a vertical drop of nearly 7,000 feet. Lessons with English-speaking instructors are easily arranged, and excellent rental equipment is widely available around town.

The easiest option if you are staying for several days is to buy one ski pass for all seven Davos ski areas. A 5-day all-area pass costs \$166. A single-area day pass costs \$35.

INFORMATION Contact Switzerland Tourism in the U.S. at (212) 757-5944 or www.switzerland-tourism.com. Or check out the excellent Davos Tourism website, www.davos.ch, to book lodging on-line.



The slope abruptly steepened toward the bottom of the pass. This was undoubtedly where Conan Doyle parted unceremoniously with his skis and began his body roll to Arosa. Once we determined that the heavy snow was safe, we charged downhill for a rousing high-speed finish. But we weren't through yet: There was a winding forest trail to negotiate. Here, with my legs going limp from fatigue and blind hairpin corners coming up fast, I finally felt some empathy for what my hapless English predecessor must have felt.

Conan Doyle and his colleagues arrived in Arosa and promptly made for the Hotel Seehof. They arrived at 11:30 am, seven hours after they began, but 90 minutes ahead of schedule. Arosa locals had prepared to fete them over lunch, but Conan Doyle and his partners ended up welcoming the surprised and impressed revelers instead. From their perch at the Seehof, the celebrants had a top-to-bottom view of the route their heroes had taken. The author was not so sure this was a good thing.

"My tailor tells me that Harris tweed cannot wear out. This is a mere theory and will not stand a thorough scientific test. He will find samples of his ware on view from the Furka Pass to Arosa, and for the remainder of the day I was happiest when nearest the wall."

With the benefit of our modern telemark skis, beefy cable bindings and plastic tele boots, and with leisurely breaks for lunch, chocolate and photos, we shaved only 30 minutes off Doyle's time. Considering that we skied what Doyle rolled down, I had expected a wider lead. Especially considering that as a group we had more than six decades of combined tele experience to Conan Doyle's four months. Perhaps he rushed

where we dallied. Or could it be that the English gentleman was more fit than us, if not more deft?

The Hotel Seehof, as we discovered, is feeling its age. Built in 1879, it is now a curious jumble of mismatched kitsch. Inside, old stuffed chairs and a threadbare living room speak of faded grandeur. The hotel manager told us that parts of the hotel have burned down and been rebuilt twice in the past 16 years. Alas, there was little evidence of the Seehof's former glory, and no sign of Doyle's passage. The puzzled manager confirmed that Doyle buffs occasionally pass through and inquire about their hero, but she was unclear why.

We nevertheless reveled in Doyle's spirit. Over a century after his trouserless arrival here, we have him to thank for having helped make skiing a mainstay of European culture. We hoisted a local Kalinda Brau to celebrate his accomplishment and our own.

Thus concluded my investigation of Conan Doyle's alpine misadventures. Judged from the perspective of a modern skier, I might conclude that Doyle exercised considerable poetic license in his characterization of this eminently pleasant ski tour as a death-defying feat. But an honorable sleuth would not besmirch the reputation of a well-intentioned English gentleman. Let us just say that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's heart, if not his ski, was in the right place in his account of his mountain travels.

With that I deemed the case closed. As Sherlock Holmes once concluded to Watson, "Chance has put in our way a most singular and whimsical problem, and its solution is its own reward." ♦

With Arosa seemingly just below as he descended the alpine pass, Doyle mistakenly thought he was almost there. Little did he know that he was about to lose his skis, his pants and his pride.