



A view toward the lake of St. Moritz, which is dominated by the Palace Hotel, at right. Bottom row, from left: Auto heir Georg von Opel's capacious new chalet; at the Corviglia Diamond Jubilee: Zoe Ley, Lambros Milona and Princess Lily Sayn-Wittgenstein Milona; the 250-foot-long auto tunnel Wally Boats owner Luca Bassani constructed beneath his chalet; Nina Flohr and Marc Syz; readying for another death-defying toboggan plunge down the Cresta Run. Center: Lord Clifton Wrottesley, reigning champion of the Cresta Run, accepting the Morgan Cup. Below right: interior architect Celeste Dell'Anna's ornate ceiling for the von Opel library.



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hoever invented the term "social climbing" must have had the Corviglia Ski Club in mind. Perched on a powdery plateau 8,000 feet above the glittering village of St. Moritz, it is virtually impenetrable to outsiders, be they billionaire parvenus or card-carrying bluebloods who somehow haven't quite cut it. Although the pink-stucco clubhouse itself is "nothing but a shack," as one member puts it, the institution was founded in 1930 by a largely aristocratic group that included several Rothschilds and Agnellis as well as the Duke of Alba. The first couple of years, members brown-bagged it, using the cozy hutlike building and its glorious terrace as a place to warm up between ski runs.

Seventy-five years later, there is no need to bring a Thermos, but not much else has changed: The roster of its 132 life members still reads like the *Almanach de Gotha*. Fürstenbergs and Hanovers abound, along with

the likes of the Landgrave of Hesse, Prince Edward (elected last year) and the Dukes of Beaufort and Marlborough. And if they're not royals or aristos, they're loaded: In addition to a flotilla of Greek shipping tycoons—Niarchoses, Livanoses, Mavroleons and Goulandrises—the membership includes secretive Swiss currency trader Urs Schwarzenbach and Mercedes-Benz heirs brothers Mick and Muck Flick. Beer heiress Charlene de Carvalho-Heineken, with a net worth of \$5 billion, is rumored to be the Corviglia's wealthiest member.

February, high season, is when the club holds its annual meeting to elect new members and conduct other business. This year, the club also pulled out all the stops to commemorate its diamond anniversary with a series of parties and the private publication of a fabulously illustrated self-history, compiled from the Corviglia's archives of candid photographs of the world's grandest folk at play. Peppered with members' sentimental reminiscences, written on the stationery of their various schlosses, the book looks something like the world's fanciest high school yearbook. Instead of senior-class photos, there's the "Glamour Girls" section. Since 1939, the club has annually elected a Glamour Girl—often the horsey-looking offspring of, just coincidentally, a particularly rich or powerful member (see Christina Onassis '71). There have been some babes, however (Vicomtesse Jacqueline de Ribes '51, Baroness Denise Thyssen-Bornemisza '80, Princess Caroline '86).

The annual meeting of the club is scheduled for 4 p.m. on the first Friday of February, and at the appointed hour a virtual avalanche of Eton blue and brown (the colors of the Corviglia) cascades through the lobby of the Palace Hotel, the 165-room Renaissance-style behemoth that dominates the town.

"Mr. Niarchos!" chirps a concierge, suddenly hopping to attention when shipping heir Spyros Niarchos speeds through the revolving door.

A minute later, there's Cinecittà-handsome Prince Augusto Ruffo di Calabria, the club's president since 1995. Notwithstanding his imposing name, Ruffo exhibits a self-deprecating sense of humor. At 50 he is the youngest president in the club's history, known for using his offhand charm to smooth the easily ruffled feathers of its constituents. (Seasoned observers claim, however, that it's Ruffo's wife, Tana, and her sister, Milana Fürstin zu Fürstenberg, née Princesses Windisch-Graetz, who are the ultimate arbiters. "If those girls don't approve of you, you're out," says one local of the siblings.)

Standing guard in the lobby is a tall silver-haired gentleman—David Webb Carter, the club secretary. A former brigadier general in the Irish Guards, Carter (referred to simply as "the Brigadier") maintains offices in the clubhouse and the Palace, keeping an ever-watchful eye on all affairs of the club. His vigilance extends particularly to intrusive journalists, to whom he communicates almost telepathically Bylaw 8-12 of the organization: "The Club discourages publicity of any kind."

"I've never met a journalist I trusted and I'm not about to start now," he says upon meeting me. (Needless to say, a journalist couldn't get within earshot of the meeting, held in the hotel ballroom.)

At this year's meeting, six new life members—including Lord Foster of Thames Bank OM, the eminent architect raised to the peerage by Queen Elizabeth—are elected. (Life memberships are very distinct from the more easily available seasonal memberships.) Afterward, the members



Below, from left: Glamour Girls Angela Münemann '61; Princess Monica Liechtenstein '60; Mirja Sachs '70





Clockwise from top left: Chesa Futura, the condominium designed by Norman Foster; Vicomtesse Jacqueline de Ribes; Mario's bar; Baroness Denise Thyssen; a sign outside the all-male Cresta Run; a detail of the interior of a chalet designed by Laura Rimini and Roberto Peregalli





Above: The hand-painted salon of the von Opel chalet. Right: Rolf and Maryam Sachs; the Palace lobby.



humidification system and an auto elevator that descends to a 250-foot-long tunnel—which leads to the garage housing his fleet of sports cars. Bassani built his home on one of the last great properties available in the area known as Suvretta. With residents such as the Agnellis, Niarchoses and Livanoses, it's the Bel-Air of St. Moritz. (One other dig at the Mittals was to note that their house is up the mountain at Chanterella. Though it has spectacular views, it's not Suvretta.)

Like it or not, the era of the Aspen-style mega-chalet has arrived. The most capacious new house has just been completed by auto heir Georg von Opel, in the neighboring village of La Punt, designed by flamboyant Milanese interior architect Celeste Dell'Anna, who worked in the early Eighties for Renzo Mongiardino. Dell'Anna brought in scores of craftsmen to create a faux 16th-century castle.

Nearby, other longtime Mongiardino alumni have created a ravishingly beautiful chalet, one human in scale but also deceptively antique-looking inside. Architects Laura Rimini and Roberto Peregalli, who opened their own office after Mongiardino's death, gutted an ancient farmhouse that belongs to Rimini's family and built the perfect fantasy of Swiss Alpine life.

For many St. Moritz denizens, however, life is lived in hotels. Though the quieter rich prefer the more polished Kulm hotel (owned primarily by the Niarchos family and decorated by Mongiardino), the rambling, idiosyncratic Palace is still everybody's hangout. Built in 1896, it is run by fourth-generation owner Hansjürg Badrutts. In 1999 the Badrutts flirted with a sale to the American Rosewood Group, with whom they entered into a management contract, but they subsequently paid a penalty to end the deal and regain their independence. "Americans don't always understand ways of running things here," Badrutts explains. "As long as I'm alive, it's going to be like this."

The Badrutts have seen their share of arrivistes. "The Russians used to be rather obnoxious, with their enormous wads of cash," he says, referring to

guests who first began arriving in the Nineties. "The first years they came, we practically had to tell them how to use a fork. Now they've settled down."

The Badrutts have a virtual monopoly on the local watering holes. In addition to their basement disco, King's, they own the neighboring Chesa Veglia, which houses a grill, and yet another private club and a pizzeria. They also cater the Corviglia. The only exceptions to the Badrutts' monopoly are Dracula and the local bordello, known as the Russian Tea Room. (The thriving establishment takes its name from the origin of its employees.)

But all roads in St. Moritz seem to lead to Mario's. If you really want to get ahead, do as the locals do: Leave your fur coat piled on a chair in the hall and be nice to Mario, a trim, lively fellow who will seat you at one of the good tables and personally whip up his famous spaghetti for you if you're well behaved. The grandest people have paid obeisance to Mario, who's been tending the bar since 1963. The late Gianni Agnelli, when his Turin soccer team was in the championships, gave him the best seats in the stadium, close to the president of Italy, which no doubt accounts for the reverence with which Mario speaks of "*L'avvocato*" today. He is somewhat less affectionate regarding the late Stavros Niarchos, who was known to be a bit gruff. Toward the end of his life, riddled with illness, he could hardly speak, Mario recalls. Still, he would come to the bar attended by a nurse. The tycoon would garble something completely unintelligible, and Mario would pour him a drink. One day, he remembers, the nurse took Mario aside: "She asked, 'How can you understand him?' I said, 'I can't, but I know what he drinks.'"

A repository of local genealogy, too, Mario can tell you who all of Heini Thyssen's five wives are, which children go with which, and who doesn't speak to whom, thanks to that \$2.7 billion dollar family trust lawsuit. Coincidentally, just minutes later, a busboy hands him a phone, whispering, "Denise Thyssen."

"ST. MORITZ IS GETTING BIGGER AND IT'S OWNED BY MR. SCHWARZENBACH"



Above: Princess Teresa zu Fürstenberg. Left: The Mittals' new \$40 million chalet, designed by architect Thierry Despont.



"Baronessa!" Mario booms into the telephone. "Table tonight? *Perfetto!*" A bit later, I catch up with the Baronessa herself, over tea at the Kulm, where she stays. Like everyone else, she is recovering from the ball. Having also attended the Corviglia's 50th anniversary party, she has some observations on how things have changed over the past quarter century. Apparently, the hyperexclusive club has become more inclusive. "In 1980 you knew everyone at the party. It was the whole Almanach de Gotha. In 2005 there were a lot of people you didn't know. But perhaps it was more fun."

Born in Brazil to English parents, she went to Swiss boarding schools and became the fourth Baroness Thyssen in 1967. The marriage lasted for 17 years—"the best years of my life," she says. "Every night in Lugano, before we went to bed, we'd turn the alarms off and walk through the gallery [now a museum], amongst the Titians and Caravaggios. And we had such fun acquiring pieces—putting a Goya in a suitcase and taking it home."

The marriage ended in the early Eighties, when the Baron met his last wife, Tita, 1962's Miss Spain. Reportedly, Tita instigated the family rift by inciting her husband to sue his firstborn son, Heini Jr., to regain control of the family trust. The case dragged on for three years and cost more than \$100 million in legal fees before it was settled just before the Baron's death in 2002.

But Denise has a forgiving attitude. "I'm on good terms with all of them, even the last," she says.

For the last word on old-guard St. Moritz, one might as well end with a visit to the first Baroness Thyssen, now HRH Princess Teresa zu Fürstenberg. In 1925 she was born the Princess of Lippe, in Vienna. In 1946 she married Thyssen, with whom she had Heini Jr., before divorcing in 1954. Later married to Prince Friedrich Maximilian zu Fürstenberg (now deceased), the septuagenarian is tall, elegant and funny—a straight shooter.

"Oh, you've been to see Denise—one of my successors," she says, dressed in blue jeans and sitting in the airy living room of her art-filled

chalet. "I'm a great friend of all of them, even the last. No use fighting."

She came to St. Moritz the year of her marriage to Thyssen, when it was a much smaller place. "It's getting bigger and bigger," she says. "Now it's owned by Mr. Schwarzenbach and Mr. Foster. It's their world." Needless to say, she is no fan of the proposed Corviglia addition. "I absolutely hate it!" she exclaims. "But I like him," she adds, referring to the architect.

Which is not to say Fürstenberg doesn't keep up with the times. She went to the Mittals' party, though she had never met them before. Like everyone, she was invited by Ester Velo, the socially active wife of an important lawyer. "They don't know a soul!" she says, with a mixture of incredulity and sympathy.

"They were very sweet," she reports, and generous: "Caviar, caviar, caviar!"

But the house? "It's not to everyone's taste," she says diplomatically.

Fürstenberg provided perhaps the most charming, and honest, reminiscences to the Corviglia's recent publication: How the Shah of Iran really couldn't ski and was constantly being picked up by his bodyguards after falls. Also, how the marriage of the daughter of a life member to a ski instructor prompted long discussions about whether they should eat upstairs or downstairs. ("The dilemma caused a lot of fuss—unfortunately I can't remember how it was resolved!" she wrote from Schloß Werenwag.)

But she got into some hot water over a portion of the letter that recalled the anti-German snobbery of an Italian former club president, Count Theo Rossi. She recalls him disparaging one gentleman for being "not only German, but an idiot." While she intended the story to be charming, Rossi's widow didn't see it that way. Rumbles of Countess Rossi's displeasure circulated, causing Fürstenberg her own dismay. "I'm glad someone thought it was amusing," she says, rolling her eyes when I bring it up.

St. Moritz is a sublimely beautiful place. But clearly you have to watch your mouth—and your step. ●

BIGGER," SAYS PRINCESS TERESA. "NOW AND MR. FOSTER. IT'S THEIR WORLD."