

[Snippets from Switzerland]

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Switzerland's Bernard Stamm has set a new world record after he crossed the Atlantic in a monohull, completing the journey in eight days, 20 hours and 55 minutes.

The former Vendée Globe competitor beat the previous record holder, Robert Miller, by more than three hours. Miller congratulated the Swiss for his achievement, particularly for breaking the record during the winter months, when conditions are rougher. It took Stamm three years to prepare for the challenge, surviving on a non-existent budget and only finding sponsorship at the last minute. Stamm set off from New York on January 28 together with three crew members. Christophe Lebas, Jean-Baptiste L'Ollivier and Francois Scheek accompanied the Swiss sailor on his epic 2,925 mile journey.

Tuesday's (6.2.002) accomplishment was compensation for Stamm's disappointing performance when he was earlier forced to pull out of the Vendée Globe.

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Some 15 years of preparation went into a film by Swiss director Dieter Meier, which has been given its première at the Berlin film festival.

Meier says that during the course of his work on "Lightmaker" he twice changed its title, was involved in some six years of litigation with the company processing the film he had shot, and was forced to change his original co-producers.

Then there were technical problems caused by the complexity of the story he had created with his co-writers. "It was like finding myself in a jungle," he said, "with 30 different stories to relate." But eventually Meier found a way through his creative jungle, and arrived at the finished script. "It was as though I was a mountaineer who planned a three-week climb in the Hialayas," he said, "and became lost there for four years."

The result of the years of toil is a fantasy film about a young New York violinist who is lured into the underground realm of King Osso by the king's daughter. Osso's doomed empire can only be saved if the violinist plays his "magic" strings to create light and live there - hence the title "Lightmaker". Meier - who apart from being a film director belongs to the Zurich techno pop group Yello - shot the film in English.

One in five Swiss children left unvaccinated

Swiss parents are becoming increasingly sceptical about having their children vaccinated. Up to 20 per cent of children are no longer given shots against measles, for example, raising fears that the disease will resist efforts to wipe it out in Europe.

Novartis posts record profits

The Swiss healthcare group, Novartis, made a record net profit of SFr7.21 billion (\$4.32 billion) last year, a rise of eight per cent over 1999.

Swiss bank "drops" Clinton from its invitation list

The investment arm of Switzerland's largest bank, UBS, has reportedly withdrawn an invitation to the former United States president, Bill Clinton, because of continuing controversy over his pardon for the Swiss-based fugitive financier, Marc Rich.

Swiss sweet tooth sends chocolate sales soaring

The Swiss are eating more chocolate than ever with consumption last year increasing by 5.9 per cent. The average Swiss now eats 11.9 kilogrammes of chocolate a year - 400 grammes more than in 1999.

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St. Moritz

The Austrian resort of St Anton may only just be recovering from two weeks of hosting the world skiing championships, but preparations are already well under way in Switzerland for the 2003 event.

Nearly a hundred members of the St Moritz organising committee have just returned from the St Anton championships with notepads full of lessons learned during the fortnight in Austria. Many of those who attended the St Anton championships might think that the Swiss resort will have a difficult time following on from such a generally successful tournament. A record 260,000 spectators were in St Anton during the two weeks of sport, with top class performances and vigorous après-ski events keeping the crowds happy.

But Alexander Schmidt of the St Moritz organising team insists that the aim is to produce an event that is different, rather than better, than that put on by his Austrian counterparts. "We definitely want a more Swiss atmosphere in St Moritz," he said. "The Swiss après-ski, for example, is not so focused on beer as the Austrian version. In Switzerland it's more to do with sitting and having a drink in small huts, rather than having big parties on the streets." That doesn't mean to say, though, that Schmidt is hoping for a quiet two weeks in St Moritz. "No, not at all," he laughs. "What I'd like is to see a big international event being used as a platform for Swiss

culture – an event where you actually know that you're in Switzerland." Aside from digs at the slightly bland mixture of beer and pop music that filled the streets of St Anton this month, the organisers of the St. Moritz tournament also noted a number of more serious issues that they hope to address before 2003.

"In St Anton the crowd left out on the left of the finish area couldn't see what was happening when races finished on the right hand side, and vice versa," said Schmidt. "In St. Moritz we will have a single finish line and a closer area with an atmosphere more like a stadium, where everyone will have a good view."

It's also hoped that St Moritz will be able to use its much greater size to ensure that visitors can stay in the town itself. The streets of St Anton tended to empty later in the evenings with many of the resort's hotels block-booked by national teams, sponsors and the media.

The only thing the organisers can't promise is an improvement in the fortunes of the Swiss ski team, who returned from St Anton with just three medals, having taken the dreaded fourth place on no less than four occasions. "We certainly hope the Swiss team can improve on their medal tally," Schmidt said with a smile. "But it's not something we can really influence. That's the duty of the athletes, the trainers and the ski association. But we can at least provide an excellent platform for them to win some medals on."

(article provided by swissinfo.org)

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