

The Zermatt of Scotland

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THE ZERMATT OF SCOTLAND

After having taken part in the *Landsgemeinde* of the Swiss of Scotland, which is reported in the Colony page, I made a short round trip to witness the beauties of Scotland. As I chanced to spend my first night north of Edinburgh at the newly created resort of *Aviemore*, which is the Scottish answer to our Swiss Alpine resorts, I found a ready-made although weak excuse for writing about my trip in these pages.

Aviemore, the first Highland resort, should perhaps not only be compared to Zermatt, the Queen of Alpine resorts, but also to Anzère, the highly publicised Valais resort which is now in the course of prefabrication. As one drives along the Spey valley from Perth to Inverness, one passes in front of the railway station of Aviemore and sees to the left a large RAC signpost indicating the AVIEMORE CENTRE, its hotels and many amenities.

It is indeed a very small resort but contains almost everything that one might hope to expect and need. There are two ultra-modern hotels, the "Badenoch" and the "Strathspey" and a large motel. I stayed at the "Badenoch". It is not exactly cheap since bed and breakfast for a single person cost £4. But there are small rooms with bunks for the intention of week-end skiers and these are a little cheaper. The Centre has all the necessary built-in amenities. There is an ice rink where one can skate and curl. There is an indoor swimming pool and one can be in trunks minutes after having strapped off one's skis. There is a Cinema Theatre which can be used as a conference hall, a multi-purpose hall, at least four shops including the hairdresser's, a bank, two restaurants and an information office. Children with their little electric cars are the masters on the Nordic-type piazza between the hotels and ski beginners can make their first attempts on an artificial ski-slope behind the resort.

The atmosphere in my hotel felt uneasily *nouveau riche*. The place was practically reserved by a multitude of *bakers* who had chosen Aviemore for a congress. Judging from what I could see, *bakers* in Great Britain are men of good means and healthy teeth.

The brochures obtainable at the Information Centre present a really attractive picture of the pleasures of Aviemore and its surroundings. There are marvellous hikes to be made in the Cairngorm and Monadhliath mountains, nature trails where one can meet

the roe deer, the wild cat, the badger and the otter and spot such rare birds as the buzzard and the osprey. One can go fishing and horse-riding. There are rock-climbing possibilities as well and a guide can be hired for the day at the modest cost of £4.

For all its wonderful amenities, Aviemore could do with an improved coach service since there are only two daily buses for the starting station of the Cairngorm chairlift. Having missed the first bus, I resolved to hitch a ride for the nine miles up to the foot of Cairngorm. This proved not too difficult and I was soon picked up by three students on their way for a skiing afternoon. We drove across beautiful Queen's Forest but witnessed a sight which one would more readily come across in the South of France: acres of woods burnt down as a result of the carelessness of picknickers. We passed along deep blue Loch Morlich and the camping site next to it. The road wound up the mountain and ended at a car park situated a few hundred yards from the first chairlift up Cairngorm. I used this machine for the first and short lap up the mountain. The second chairlift was not working owing to the gale which was sweeping up the mountain from the West. It was necessary to walk and 45 minutes of steady climb brought me to the end station. The ski run probably had a fall in altitude of 1,500 ft. A minor descent by Swiss standards but not to be spurned by any skier, however good, finding himself in the British Isles. The Swiss are also favoured for Spring skiing since they have Zermatt and St. Moritz. The Scots

only have Cairngorm and, as I had just reached the brow of the ascent, I saw a group of young people happily pottering down a napkin of snow barely 200 yards long.

A track continued towards the summit of Cairngorm, which lies at 4,084 ft. Hikers were told to follow it owing to the great erosion of the mountain. After 20 minutes I arrived at its rounded summit. I beheld an incredibly remote and desolate scenery. The massive Central Highlands spread out to the east before me. Their rounded and lonely summits, their eroded and reddish rock jarred by precipitous corries, their patches of snow floating in the distant mist, their almost arctic vegetation creeping from between the stones of granite and the brown shrub which spreads across the Highlands like a plague gave them an appearance of infinite sadness. The scenery was beautiful, but the mountains were too squat, the colours too wan for it to have anything of the grandeur and gaiety of the Alps. "Give me the Alps!" was what I told myself, standing atop Cairngorm, whipped by a blistering westerly squall.

I continued my walk in the direction of Ben Madui, Britain's second highest mountain. The sun was shining strongly but the wind was blowing relentlessly. I trudged across a vast snow field and turned back in a wide circle until I was on a cliff overlooking Loch Avon, a sheet of blue steel way down below. Apart from the flow of the torrent bounding in the Loch and the distant wind, no living sound broke the silence of this rocky wilderness.

Three hours later I was down at the parking again, waiting for a car to bring me back to Aviemore. Every muscle was sore and my face was scorching from the sun and the wind but I was in a splendid shape.

(PMB)

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