

Feeling the burn



The Inferno, staged every year in Mürren, is the world's longest downhill amateur ski race. **IAIN MARTIN** joined more than 200 other British skiers on the start line

I looked below me and realised that I'd taken the Gunbarrel too fast – I was flying through the air and this wasn't going to be pretty.

"It's your first time, so don't overdo it," was the advice Simon had given me when we skied the course together the previous day. "Put in an extra couple of turns and check your speed or you'll come a cropper!"

I watched the hard-packed snow loom up beneath me and prepared myself for a crunching...

As I woke up in a cold sweat, I realised it was still only 5am. It was dark outside and I had 3 hours, 58 minutes and 12 seconds (precisely, because this is Switzerland, after all) until I started 'The Inferno'.

My subconscious might have given you a clue: This is no ordinary race. The Inferno is the largest amateur downhill race in the world, which means that any keen skier can take part.

I love a challenge – I've skied plenty of steep and deep and have been ski touring well past the resort boundaries, but maybe this time I really was taking it too far?

And that is the unique appeal behind this historic race. It is the rare chance to push yourself to the edge in an otherwise sterilised world governed by health and safety.

This year's event generated 2,500 applications from skiers across the world for the 1,850 places available.

On race day, 25 countries were represented, mostly by ski clubs in Switzerland and Germany, but also from Australia, New Zealand, Japan, India, the USA, and by over 240 competitors from the UK.

The sizeable British contingent mainly consisted of members of the famous Kandahar Club. You may have heard of its founder, Sir

Arnold Lunn, widely considered the 'father' of downhill ski racing.

In January 1928, Lunn and 16 other members (including three women) made their way through untracked snow, by any route of their choosing, down to Lauterbrunnen – a 15km journey. The winner took 1 hour, 12 minutes, and The Inferno (so called because of the 'infernal' burning in the thighs caused by the lactic acid build-up) was born.

Snow conditions meant that the 2017 race

finished in Mürren rather than Lauterbrunnen, but it was still 7.6km long with a vertical descent of 1,140m. Unusually for a downhill race, The Inferno includes a short upwards climb where you need to 'use your lungs', as the race organiser put it, so it presents a unique test of fitness and technique.

When my start time eventually came, I made sure I put in the extra turns and reassuringly stayed in contact with the ground under my skis this time as I passed through the Gunbarrel, down the Mineshaft and over the Hog's Back. I made it





FACTS & FIGURES

The Inferno, staged every year in the car-free village of Mürren in Switzerland, is the world's longest downhill amateur ski race. In 2018, it celebrates its 75th anniversary on 20 January.

Accommodation in Mürren can be booked via the Mürren Tourism website: www.muerrren.swiss

The Inferno Downhill is strictly limited to a maximum of 1,850 skiers. Prices are: Inferno Downhill, CHF70 per person; Inferno cross country, GS and downhill CHF100 per person; and the new Sir Arnold Lunn Cup team race (four skiers per team) CHF100 per team.

More details at: www.inferno-muerrren.ch

To plan a journey from the UK to Mürren (flights/rail transfers), log on to: www.myswitzerland.com or call the Switzerland Travel Centre: Freephone 00800 100 200 30.

up the Woodcutter's Path and carved through the S-bends before the final schuss to the finish.

I heard the commentator call out my name as I crossed the line, but all I could think of was whether it was possible to go back up and do it all over again.

It's not often that you get the chance to ski as fast as you can (or as you dare!), and there is nothing as exhilarating and as guaranteed to get the adrenaline flowing.

According to my Garmin tracker, I hit a top speed of 98km per hour. Now every time I watch TV's Ski Sunday and see the speeds the professionals record on the speed gun, I can't help thinking that I should have topped 100. Maybe next time...

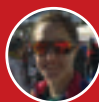
➤ **This winter will see the 75th Inferno and the 90th anniversary of the first race. Celebrations will take place from 17-20 January, 2018 in Mürren.**

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We spoke to some of the British competitors about why they were at The Inferno and what they enjoyed about the race. They range from a 21 year old to a 73 year old!



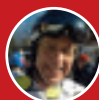
ALICE MANSON (49, Winchester)
- 11TH INFERNO

What brought you to The Inferno?

I used to ski here with the Kandahar when I was a child and it's great to race again now.

How did you feel when you finished?

Pleased, relieved and a bit frustrated with all the bits I went too slow in.



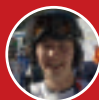
SIMON HULSE (63, Somerset)
- 22ND INFERNO

What brought you to The Inferno?

The thrill of going really fast - straight down with no speed limit!

How did you feel when you finished?

Complete and utter relief - yet I wanted to go straight back up and do it again!



HUGO BOTTING (21, London)
- 3RD INFERNO

What brought you to The Inferno?

Family connections: Both my brothers have done it for the past few years and my father's done it for many years. It's a lot of fun.

How did you feel when you finished?

Like I wanted a very big beer!



OLIVIA BYROM (27, Bristol)
- 4TH INFERNO

What brought you to The Inferno?

I've been coming to Mürren since I was a child and eventually decided it would be good to come and do this crazy thing called The Inferno.

How did you feel when you finished?

Pretty disappointed as I had a bit of a splat.



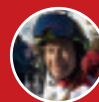
JESSICA STEPHEN (29, Edinburgh)
- 5TH INFERNO

What brought you to The Inferno?

My parents raced it before my sister and I were born, then we came along and stopped their racing careers. Now it's us that's taking part!

How did you feel when you finished?

Tired and hot.



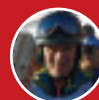
PAULA BOYAGIS (60, Wiltshire)
- 10TH INFERNO

What brought you to The Inferno?

My father was Chairman and President of the Kandahar Ski Club and once I'd stopped other ski racing it seemed like the event to do.

How did you feel when you finished?

Exhausted and relieved to have got around some of those corners - it was very rutted.



NICK MORGAN (55, Yorkshire)
- 16TH INFERNO

What brought you to The Inferno?

A good friend of mine, Ed Mannix, introduced me to the Kandahar Ski Club, and what a fine lot they are.

How did you feel when you finished?

As usual, I felt as if I could have knocked minutes off my time, but the main feeling on arriving was 'Oh good, I'm still alive!'



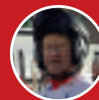
SIOBHAN MCCULLER (39, London)
- 1ST INFERNO

What brought you to The Inferno?

It's got a great reputation for being a fun amateur race. My fiancé and my friends that have done it invited me along to race.

How did you feel when you finished?

Elated, relieved and quite surprised that I got faster as the race went on. I'd definitely do it again.



CHRIS COPELAND (73, Somerset)
- 1ST INFERNO

What brought you to The Inferno?

A member of my yacht crew told me that he'd done it for the last 10 years and he persuaded me to come along and join in.

How did you feel when you finished?

Absolutely exhausted, but exhilarated to have finished.