

Ice picks at dawn

Can you tell what it is yet?



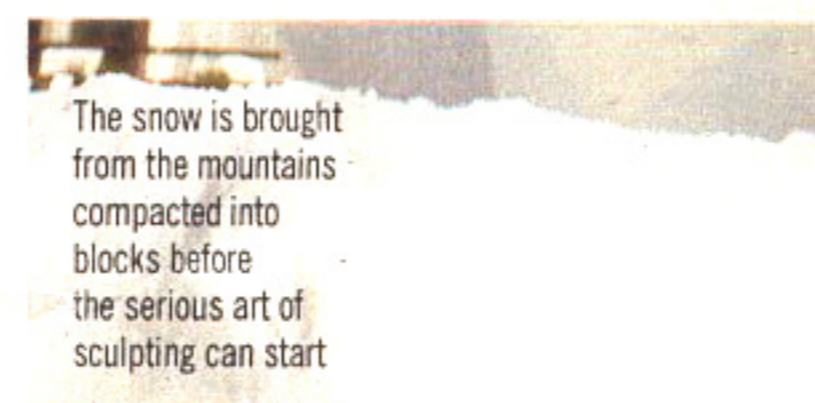
If you despair at Britain's lack of success in the winter Olympics, take heart, because in the crazy world of international snow sculpting we are the champions (almost)



Under the shadow of the Eiger, in the glacier village of Grindelwald, Switzerland, sculptors from different nations gather for the annual World Snow Sculpture competition. Clutching spades and ice picks, teams are poised around 40-tonne blocks of snow ready to hack into them to create a chilly collection of icy art. You'd think with the precious

lack of snow in Britain, our team would be to snow sculpting what Eddie the Eagle was to Olympic ski jumping. But we won last year. Kirstie Reid, 33, is captain of the British team and it's her fourth time in the event. 'We built an enchanted forest when we won, but the first year we entered we made a right mess,' she admits. 'We tried to build an omega shape, digging

out from the inside but there was too much snow to shift.' For the town's population of just under 4,000, it means the town centre's car park will be home to ten teams – 38 sculptors working on 3.5-metre-high blocks of snow. The snow is brought from the mountains and compacted into blocks, sometimes containing sheep droppings and tufts of grass. Each team has five and a half days to complete their sculpture, which must be on this year's theme: Looking for Change. The competition was started by the Japanese in 1983. 'Some Japanese artists built a sculpture of Heidi,' explains tourist officer Hans Schunlegger. 'Ja ja! That was the begin [sic]. Now we have artists, every year, coming to Grindelwald.' Each team is allocated a hotel and free meals, excursions and ski pass, amounting to about £1,000 each. For some, it's a far cry from earning a living from



The snow is brought from the mountains compacted into blocks before the serious art of sculpting can start

commissions in bronze or stone. This year, the British team is the same winning combination but for the addition of Kirstie's 65-year-old dad, Tom, a retired banker. 'Dad fancied helping out with the spade work,' says Kirstie who is a sculptor and art teacher. 'Most of the work at the beginning is exhausting because you have to shift huge amounts of snow, cutting away with picks and shovels. It's not cold because you're working hard and when the sun comes out you actually sweat. Our toes and fingers get cold though, so we wear thermal socks and Gore-tex gloves and waterproofs because it can get wet sitting in the snow all day. We use

anything we can, shovels, picks, graters. Then it's just carving and more carving, and sanding.' Day two, Wednesday, and things are well under way. But the British team – made up of Kirstie, Eamonn Hughes, 32, an old friend from Wimbledon Art College, sculptor Jonathan Cox, 33, and Tom – are nowhere to be seen. Their creation, a nest of baby birds, craning their necks towards the sky, looks more like a bowl of bananas. 'We don't know where they are,' says Markus Nordin, 28, on the Swedish team. 'They have a lot to do. But they have a late night,' he smirks. Finally the truth emerges. 'It was the fondue evening for all the

teams,' says Kirstie. 'They gave us drinks before sending us on the longest toboggan run in Europe. It didn't seem so scary when you're drunk. Eamonn had a bit too much to drink and it was a colourful evening.' Actually it sounds like he spent most of the night decorating the inside of the hotel toilet bowl and the others are all very hungover. Not a particularly constructive day on the ice front. By Thursday, forms are starting to emerge. 'Oh, I get it,' a passer-by announces of the British 'bananas'. 'That's the nest and those are the heads.' 'Yeh, but look at this one,' replies

her friend, indicating the US entry. 'It's gonna levitate!' Klaus Ebeling, the US captain, points at the letters IT, and promises they will appear to rise from the ground, if you look at them in a certain way. By now, the Germans, with matching facial hair and mullets, are working in a unified fashion on their geometric sculpture: The Force That Drives Us. 'Vee have a captain but vee all help viss ze idea and vork as a team,' says Gunther Seemuller, 38. 'Vorsprung durch technic,' mutters Tom, looking over. The French, led by architect Jacques Chapuis, 43, are getting

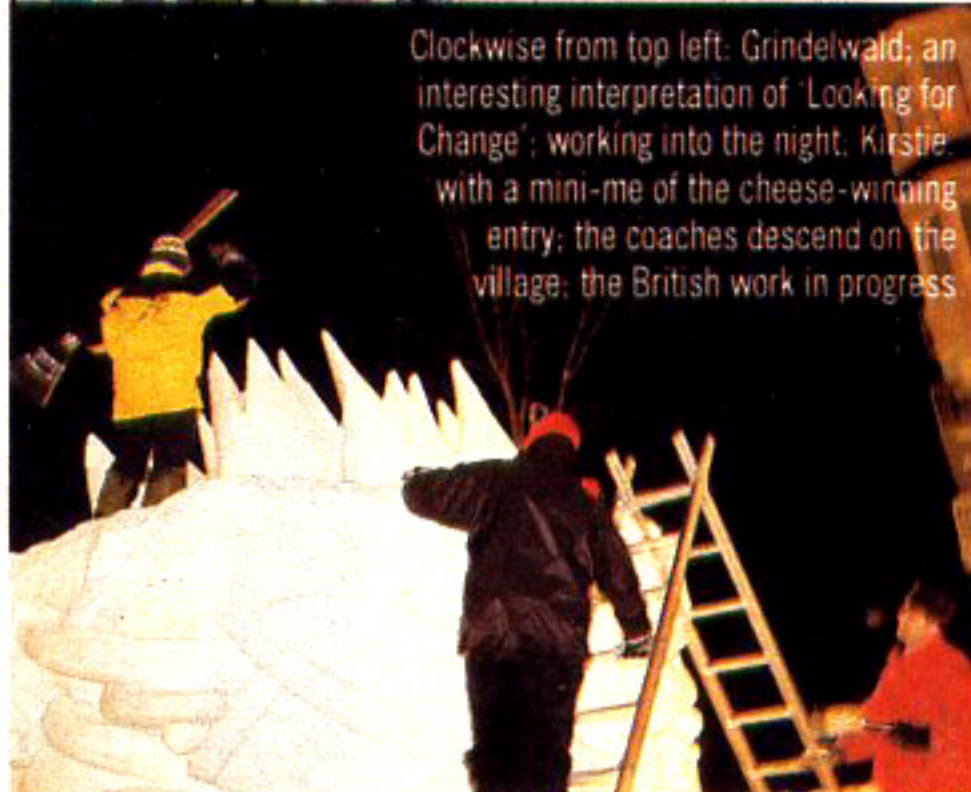
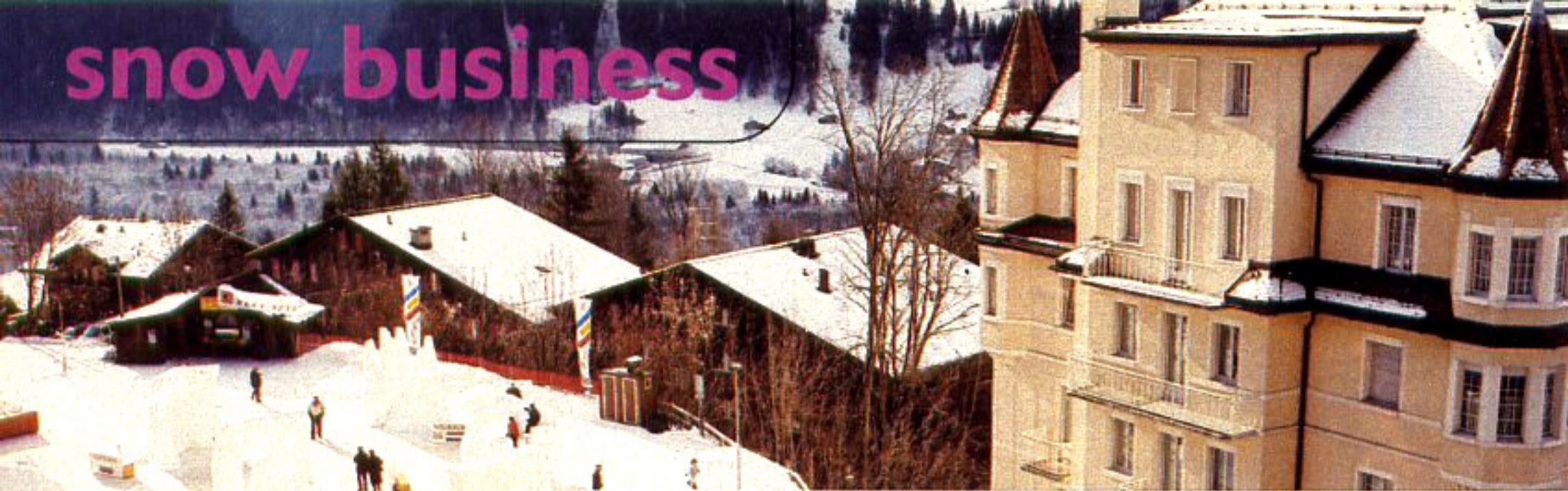
animated over their sculpture of three figures passing snow blocks to one another. Team spirit, however, is another thing. 'Eee is rubbish captain,' says team member Laurence Mollard, 34. 'He want this, we want that. But ee as de modelle in iz ed. Ee is architect – straight lines. Bla! Isobel and me, we want just to use our eyes. He's afraid.' Sweden, who are two team members short, are working all hours on two giant snow chains leaning into each other with a broken link at the top. Markus appears to be dancing on the base of his sculpture. 'I've got muscles aching I didn't

'The first year we entered we made a right mess' Kirstie, British captain



The British entry – a nest of birds, in case you didn't know, and, right, the Swedish chains

Photographs by Jane Hodson



Clockwise from top left: Grindelwald; an interesting interpretation of 'Looking for Change'; working into the night. Kirstie with a mini-me of the cheese-winning entry; the coaches descend on the village; the British work in progress

know I had,' he says. Ah, maybe he's just limbering up. The Italians, in matching fur-lined parkas, are carving out a black hole – 'a deep gap of huge joy' – spiralling in towards a mother cradling a baby in her arms at the rear. The Swiss, who are building giant suitcases, have lost one of their members after he broke his collarbone in the toboggan run. Klaus, meanwhile, is still trying to get 'IT' to levitate by looking at it in a certain way. Thursday night, there's a party for competitors and sponsors, involving alpine horns, a yodler, and warm cider. The Brits give it a miss. They are in bed early for a 7.30am start. 'Slackers,' says Michel, an actor on the Canadian team. 'They have an awesome amount left to do.' The next morning, the final day before judging, several of the teams are out at dawn with their ice picks. Only on the final night are they allowed to work right through. They can use any tools they wish and bring water to make slush, should they accidentally knock off a part of their sculpture. 'A few years ago,

a French entry collapsed on one of their team and he ended up in hospital,' says Kirstie. 'Some are more precarious than others. Ours isn't too bad but I've had to be careful working on the beaks. Staring at white snow can make you dizzy when you stand up and look around. It would be easy to knock a bit off.' The Russian team have been working in 12-hour stints. Their sculpture, exploring 'barriers', looks just like a wall of snow. It will eventually have the indent of a man's body on one side, and appear as if he's falling through the other. 'Poetry,' sighs Jacques. As the sun emerges from behind the three giant Jungfrau, Mönch and Eiger mountains there is a flurry as the sculptures are covered with heat-reflecting material to stop them turning into giant Slush Puppies. Three years ago, the Swiss team arrived on the final day to find part of their sculpture collapsed. Various theories abound, from children playing to sabotage. This year the organisers have employed a guard to protect

the sculptures, just in case. Judgement Day: on Saturday, the Brits begin work at 6.30am, after finishing at 1.30am the night before. The nest is completed and the chicks now have beaks and eyes made by imprints from a horse brush. 'We're rubbish at finishing,' says Kirstie. 'It's not our strong point.' The judging, by Swiss artists, is on technical skill, artistic impression and interpretation of the theme and the winner gets a crystal on a wooden plinth. The judges take three hours to deliver their verdict. They have kept an eye on progress through the week. 'They come round and tell us they like what we are doing,' says Kirstie. 'Everyone says it's not about winning but it is a competition. It's hardly ruthless though. Everyone is open about what they're doing. In fact we even help each other if people are running out of time.' Before the teams are called up on stage local herdsmen demonstrate magnificent pelvic thrusts by ringing giant cowbells – *trychle* – hanging around their

'A few years ago, a French entry collapsed on one of their team and he ended up in hospital' Kirstie (below)

midribs. After the entertainment the compère clears his throat. 'In second place, for the birds that are flying away. A very nice sculpture they have done for us. Grossbritannien!' Kirstie and her team have won cheese and meat from Grindelwald. But it's the French, with their giant snowmen passing blocks of ice from shoulder to shoulder, who scoop the prize. Everyone else came fourth, says the compère, but 'deserved to come first,' he adds, confusingly. The British team are interviewed by the local TV station. Afterwards, with what energy they have left, the teams party at the town's only nightclub, The Plaza, but it's not long before most of them sneak off to bed. Outside, the ice sculptures catch the moonlight, but soon they will just be slush and a few clumps of sheep dung.

Chris Morris

The M team stayed at the Belvedere hotel, Grindelwald; call 00 41 33 854 5454, email belvedere@grindelwald.ch or call the Grindelwald Tourist Office on 00 41 33 854 1212.

