

# Swiss Holiday Scene : Quiet reflections - and high jinks : Sleigh ride to romance?

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# Swiss Holiday Scene

Compiled by the Swiss National Tourist Office

IN Switzerland as in many other countries the New Year is ushered in with a unique blend of quiet reflection on the past and the future, with solemn ceremony and boisterous gaiety.

Switzerland is also one of the countries in which official New Year receptions are traditional. In Berne, the federal capital, the diplomatic corps ceremonially calls on the Federal President to pay its respects, a custom which is now not held on New Year's Day itself but a few days afterwards.

The turn of the year in

Switzerland is characterised by a colourful variety of popular traditions.

The fact that the year both ends and begins in the depths of winter is not fortuitous. The Romans moved the New Year from March 1 to the closing days of the Saturnalia, one of their most important feasts.

The Teutons, too, felt the need for noise at this time of the year, when the days are shortest and the nights longest; they were protecting themselves against the lurking powers of evil.

## Quiet reflections – and high jinks

### *Sleigh ride to romance?*

IN the canton of the Grisons well known New Year traditions are linked with an institution that once was undoubtedly of some importance throughout Switzerland: the so-called "Knabenschaften" or boys' associations.

According to the Grisons historian, G. Caduff, these are strictly private, rigidly organised guilds to which all unmarried men in a village belong from the time they leave school until they wed.

The influence of the one-time guilds can be seen behind the Engadine Schlittendas in which every winter, on fine Sundays, the unmarried girls and boys pair up and, dressed in local costume, go on horsedrawn sleigh trips from village to village to the accompaniment of music.



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THE noisy antics of large or small groups, prancing figures clanging bells and sometimes wearing masks, are a relic of pagan beliefs not completely eradicated by the festival of

Christmas. This activity reaches its climax on New Year's Eve.

The Silvesterklausen of canton Appenzell - Ausserrhoden are among the most striking of these figures. Their name is an

allusion to St. Nicholas.

The Silvesterklausen are especially active in the commune of Urnasch. These masked, noisy groups wearing magnificent headdresses frolic around

demanding money from the onlookers.

On January 13, corresponding to the old New Year's Eve of the Julian calendar, they give a repeat performance.