



An Insider's Guide to Davos

Forget the sessions...Check out the coffee line-up

This week thousands will make the arduous journey to the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in a small southeastern Swiss village called Davos -- a place otherwise known for its skiing, sanatorium, collection of Kirchner paintings and 'Davoser-torte' cake. Attendees rub shoulders with national leaders, billionaires and a smattering of cultural celebrities and so, for the global elite, an invitation to Davos is like the golden ticket to Willy Wonka's factory. Repeat visitors clear the time annually on their schedules.

They have to make extra time because getting to Davos in mid-winter is no easy task. Jets can't land in the village. Only political leaders are allowed to arrive by helicopter -- and bad weather can make a chopper ride pretty iffy. So most attendees drive or take the train from Zurich; three hours of prime schmoozing. Networking and innovation can happen under strange circumstances at (or on the way to) Davos.

Serendipity rules, and this author has found himself accidentally having a meaningful discussions with an orphanage director from Rwanda followed by a well-known rock star and a former national president. From meetings with business leader to meeting Miss Universe - anything and everything can happen in Davos.

Of course, Davos also has its unspoken rules:

Most people in Davos are not invited to Davos

- Do not assume that everyone going to Davos will actually be invited to the annual meeting. Over the years, companies have arranged lavish receptions and dinners in the village. Because invitations to the World Economic Forum conference itself are strictly limited, most of the people you'll bump into at a party aren't actually at the conference. Indeed, some prominent business leaders simply come to Davos for the parties, and don't attend any meetings at all. Experienced Davos-goers seek out invitations to the best events, like the Google Party, months in advance. All in all, registering at the conference is less important than being at the right parties.

Most Davos invitees do not attend formal Davos Sessions

- Even those who *are* invited to the conference often do not attend the formal Davos Sessions. The sessions are wonderful... and almost unreachable through all the security. Once you get past all the guns and fences, you'll be hard-pressed to find a seat. So many invitees

watch the sessions on closed circuit TV in the Davos Kongresshaus. The silver lining: the conversations are better in line for coffee at the Kongresshaus than in the seats at a session.

Most Davos invitees are not from the business community

- Davos is labeled a meeting of the world's business elite. But the truth is that slightly more invitees come from governments and the not-for-profit sector. That's part of why the World Economic Forum now spends so much time talking about issues related to climate change and the U.N's Millennium Development Goals.

Davos provides a convenient forum to address complex issues

- Lots of diplomacy happens at Davos – between countries, between companies and between countries and companies. Leaders can meet each other at Davos beyond the public glare that make their meetings impossible anywhere else. The World Economic Forum even provides special rooms for various sorts of “bilateral talks” – including some rooms with *two* separate entrances, so that no one sees who is meeting with whom. Quiet discussions at Davos can often enable higher profile discussions later.

Does Davos make a Difference?

- Davos has transformed the World Economic Forum from an obscure European meeting hosted by a West German professor into a global brand. But does it make a real difference? Lots of the WEF's most important work goes on between conferences, and in various global studies it releases through the year. Every year the Forum releases a Global Competitiveness Ranking Report, for instance, which compares productivity gains in different countries and gives observers important information about the effectiveness of different public policies. The Forum also recognizes governments that promote transparency, democracy and productivity while shaming governments that fail to deliver on those kinds of promises.

Of course, Davos isn't the only public policy conference of its kind. The Clinton Global Initiative and the techno-hip TED conferences are also gaining more and more attention each year. To keep pace, the World Economic Forum has now launched regional meetings on every continent, an entire separate summer Davos conference in China and a Global Agenda Council of thought leaders in Dubai. All this has actually enhanced the prestige of the winter meeting in Davos itself.

Each year Davos is fully subscribed with folks keen to find a way into the remote Swiss village. Recession hasn't killed it. Nor has the proliferation of other conferences in other venues.

There's no sign that the influence of the World Economic Forum's Davos meeting is abating any time soon.

By Barry Appleton

Managing Partner

Appleton & Associates International Lawyers