

# How my kids fell in love with skiing and, at last, I did too

**Mariella Frostrup** grew up skiing in Norway but had been put off by the cold, the clumsy kit and the Alps' lairy resorts. Then, determined to see her own kids on skis, she headed for the mountains once more

My earliest memories of snow are from kindergarten in Norway, clinging to my mother's hand while we rattled beyond the city limits on a small train full of noisy toddlers headed for the snowy slopes outside Oslo. It was there, in the icy outdoors, that I reluctantly learned to ski in what felt like the interminably long hours before she arrived to pick me up again. It was there, also, that my ambivalent relationship with the sport began. A love of the winter landscape, the sound of snow underfoot, the particular muffled silence it creates – but also the tedium of the gear, the misery of being too cold and, in recent years, the off-puttingly raucous atmosphere that distinguishes so many ski resorts. Yet it's hard to escape your roots.

Fantasies of watching my own children weave their way, knees together, feet splayed – "pizza legs" it's called now – down a slope were just starting to manifest when my friend Catherine called to suggest a short trip to the French Alps. A group of us – five children including

my own, both under five, plus five adults (of every skiing standard imaginable) – thrown together on a three-day trip to St Foy. Imagining the reluctant risers and slow eaters, misplaced boots and mini-meltdowns almost made me turn her down. Winter sports make beach holidays appear like unfettered freedom. The difference between chucking a couple of bikinis in a bag or setting off weighed down with everything from thermals to ski suits doesn't really need pointing out.

You'll probably have gathered that I myself am no ski champion. For those who shimmy down the mountain from suicidal heights, wind in their ears, sun on their faces, such drawbacks are no doubt inconsequential. For others of similar mind to me, who have to dredge up every last iota of courage to crawl down a red run, the drudgery of the preparation often overshadows the pleasures.

Nevertheless, the thought of my babies mastering the sport was just too compelling to forgo. With our accommodation only available from Saturday to Tuesday, and luggage guaranteed to cause a tussle at the airport, we elected to maximise our stay by travelling out on the "snow train". Also perfect for flying-phobics, it rattles you through the night from London's St Pancras to the Alpine town of Bourg St Maurice, with just a quick changeover at Gare du Nord in Paris. To say it's spartan would be to overstate what's on offer – berths with six bunks so narrow that the horizontally challenged might have to enter sideways, with paper-thin sheets sewn together at the feet and blankets you prayed had been dry-cleaned in the past six months. Nevertheless, it's fit for purpose, and the staff are incredibly friendly and helpful. If you feel like rocking through the night, there's a soundproofed disco car, and for younger kids it's an unbeatable adventure.

We stocked up on wine and cheese during the stopover in Paris and, once we'd persuaded the over-excited youngsters into the next door cabin and feasted until midnight. Later, my friends and I slept off the cotes du rhone while my husband, who'd volunteered to sleep with the children, spent the small hours ferrying them to and from the toilet at the end of the carriage.



By 9am next morning, we'd reached our destination – an American-owned chalet in the unspoiled hamlet of Le Miroir, a mere 15 minutes from the train station. This classic 19th-century Alpine village clings to precipitous slopes with the homes of woodcutters and shepherds nestling beside the luxury imitations, like our own Chalet Merlo. If the train introduced us to unexperienced depths of deprivation, the chalet was the polar opposite: a light-flooded, underfloor-heated oasis, hewn from antique pine and filled with the welcoming scent of home baking.

The views of the snow-clad, pine-scattered mountains from the leather sofa were spectacular, and begged the question: why bother to don skis when we could sit, vino in hand, and gaze at the view in comfort? My companions didn't agree. Bill, Jason and Catherine didn't get the kids kitted out and married up to an instructor so they themselves could hit the slopes of St Foy, a 10-minute minibus ride away. Bill's wife, Susie, a "retired" veteran of the sport, wanted rid of us so she could carry on reading her book, chronicling the misadventures of those who have miraculously survived near-death experiences. My fear, as I took to the slopes, was that I might be joining them, particularly after discovering that my minimal skiing skills had all but deserted me. It was only shame, in case my toddlers saw me stumbling around like a drunk, that persuaded me on



a chair lift up from the nursery slopes to the nearest green run.

When I'd finally stopped panicking and was gliding down the tree-lined piste I was struck by the resounding silence. Past visits to Alpine resorts had been rendered even more terrifying thanks to the crowded slopes and breakneck speed of the snowboarders. I'm reluctant to say this in case it all changes as a result but St Foy offers the opposite: an unexploited oasis of calm, under-populated slopes.

A bigger surprise was my husband, a man whom I'd happily describe as exercise-phobic, whose skill on the slopes had been boasted of but left untested during our eight years together. Cruising at snail's pace down a green, I was overtaken by an exceptionally elegant skier, his style reminiscent of James Bond. It took a few seconds to comprehend that

this was my spouse, whose transformation from earth to snow was like the miracle of watching a hippo swim.

By lunchtime that first day, I was more than ready for lunch. So, it turned out, were the kids, having just completed their first ski lesson. Their guide, Benjamin, took on godlike status when, after only two hours in his company, my two midgets slid off the chair lift and snow-ploughed confidently toward me as though they'd been doing it all their short lives. Only a warning look from my husband prevented sentimental tears sliding down my face.

Their excitement at this newfound skill was contagious and we spent another 15 minutes letting them display their prowess before entering the Restaurant Les Brevettes, housed in a tiny chalet right on the slopes, and open only during the winter season. North African



Mariella chills out in the chalet's hot tub with her friend Catherine and with Max, Catherine's son. Far left, unspoilt Le Miroir and, left, the views from Chalet Merlo. Inset, Mariella braves the slopes. Photographs by Jason McCue and Mark Junak

incessant chatter about the state of the snow were a welcome distance away. Left to our own devices, spoilt by Fiona the cook's amazing meals and our friend Bill's cocktail skills, we chatted around the log fire, the children flat out in their rustic wooden bunks. Far from the maddening crowd, we discovered a less frenetic idyll where spartan accommodation, heavy drinking, late nights and boisterous new acquaintances didn't go hand in hand with enjoying the snow.

On our last day, Catherine and I set off with a snowshoe guide on a nature trail wearing what looked like tennis racquets complete with spikes tied to our feet. Feeling ridiculous at first, within minutes we were addicted, whizzing up and down slopes, silent but for our cursing and the twitter of the occasional bird. The only tracks we saw were those of the forest dwellers: lynx, wolf, fox and white hare, to name but a few. Exhausting, exhilarating and also delightfully tranquil, it's a pastime I'll be pursuing with enthusiasm on my next visit.

The three days disappeared in an orgy of indulgence. A morning's skiing or snowshoeing, an afternoon's reading, massage and hot tub, followed by fine food and indiscreet conversation and bed by 10.30pm – it proved an addictive combination. From our mountain hideaway, all you could hear was the eerie echo of the mighty peaks above. I'm now a convert, which is lucky since otherwise Molly and Dan would no doubt be quite prepared to leave me behind next year. They're already better skiers, after all.

## ESSENTIALS

A week at Chalet Merlo (0845 324 3521; chaletmerlo.eu) in Le Miroir costs from £557pp, based on 12 sharing the chalet, including half-board, wine and champagne, as well as transfers (from the airport and in resort). Rail Europe (0844 848 4070; rail-europe.co.uk) has returns from St Pancras to Bourg St Maurice from £124, including Eurostar to Paris, then sleeper service onwards to the Alps. Daytime services start at £99.



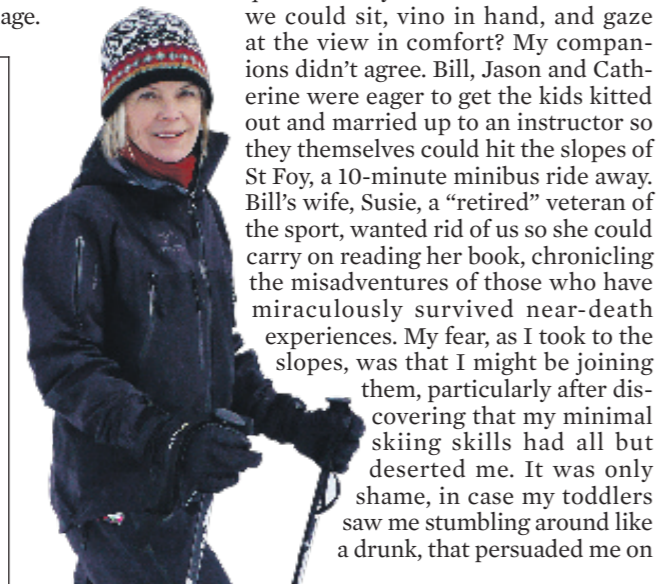
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