



When I was a kid, I had two rather grand ideas of what I wanted from life: to ski well and to speak French. It came, I think, from reading bad pre-adolescent novels of wayward, rich girls at Swiss finishing schools. Being lazy, I did nothing to achieve either of these things until much later in life, when I married a French journalist who grew up in the Alps. As for skiing, I had a thwarted attempt, aged 12. Wearing a cousin's itchy woollen underwear and those old-fashioned ski boots that felt like bears' claws, I spent the trip in tears. The East Coast of America with its bitter winds is no place to learn to ski.

I was 25 before I really learnt to ski. I went to Aspen, Colorado, with a wonderfully patient man and his father – both very good skiers. Kitted out in a fluorescent-pink suit – this was the Eighties, after all – I was determined to ski properly. If Princess Diana could do it, then I could. But I got off to a terrible start. The first day the two men took a wrong turn and we went careening down a black run full of moguls as high as my hips. Because I did not know what a black run or a mogul was, I was fearless, slashing my wayward skis this way and that. My method of stopping was to fall over, sideways. The men were suitably impressed; but even in my ignorance I knew that was not skiing with style. The next day, they deposited me at the ski school.

Then some years later, I went to Princess Diana's Austrian ski resort, Lech, and once I arrived there I knew I never needed to ski anywhere else. I have skied all over Europe in grand places such as Gstaad and St Moritz. But I became a better skier in Lech, because it was the first time I did not focus on the pain in my foot or the pressure on my knee, but just how utterly cool it is to be coasting down a mountain with the sun beaming down.

That Christmas, I fell in love with Lech. A perfect chocolate box town with no cars, no crowds,

and restaurants in the middle of the pine forests where you arrive by horse-driven sleigh. There is real mountain history here, and no ugly concrete buildings as in Chamonix. Skiing came to Lech in the 1880s when the priest made skis out of old barrels, and since then, it has been a family business. Hemingway used to spend several months a year skiing here.

Lech has a very good ski school, the oldest in Europe. I took a few classes. Then I hooked up with Gerhard, a tall guy from Salzburg who taught me how to ski the White Ring, a beautiful piste that goes in a circle from Lech to the nearby village of Zurs and back. For a while, I went to Lech every winter and stayed in places from the grand Hotel Post to a tiny chalet. But if Lech is my favourite ski resort, then my favourite ski hotel is the Goldener Berg in Oberlech.

Let us fast-forward a few years. I am returning to skiing after a hiatus of four years. My shape has changed from pregnancy; my knees are not as strong; my flexibility has gone. I am older, not quite 20 years older from the time I started, but getting there. And this time I am not lugging a suitcase full of Prada boots and Sam de Tèran ski pants, but nappies and bottles. I am with my son, Luca, nearly two, and my husband, Bruno, a former ski instructor whose sportif exploits are so renowned that my friends call him the French Daredevil. This is going to be a different kind of ski trip.

I bring my family to Lech, promising them on the plane to Zurich that there is nowhere more magical. Bruno snorts. He comes from a village in the French Alps, and hates it when I complain how overdeveloped they are. He retorts that the highest

**Janine di Giovanni and her son Luca relax on the slopes at Lech in Austria (above). Janine on skis (right), and with her husband Bruno Girodon, and Luca on a sledge (below right)**



# LOVE IN A COLD CLIMATE

Janine di Giovanni's on-off relationship with skiing turned a corner when she visited Lech with her husband and child – and fell in love all over again



mountain in Europe is in France, Mont Blanc, and therefore the best skiing.

Also, Bruno is bored with skiing. This is hard for me to fathom, but he was three when he started, and so it is simply not challenging enough. He loathes waiting in line for chair lifts. Instead, he gets his kicks by paragliding and landing on skis. Or else, he puts deerskin on his skis and walks up the side of the mountain, then skis down a barren slope.

So he arrives a bit cynical, but he changes his mind in the gondola that takes us from Lech to the Goldener Berg, which is actually on a piste, clinging to the side of the mountain. Bruno suddenly looks awakened from a deep sleep. "I wish I had my paraglide with me," he says longingly.

We arrive in Oberlech – our luggage will follow us – and trudge up hill. Inside is a smiling woman called Martina, who hands us a glass of champagne. She advises us to take a sauna. She has even organised a babysitter, an English snowboarder called Gemma, who arrives with a sledge to pull Luca around.

This is going to work, I think happily as I settle down in the outdoor Jacuzzi, a glass of lemon water beside me, and snow falling on my head. Luca is in his pyjamas with the feet in, eating dinner with Gemma, and I have forgotten my money and work problems.

Family holidays are not easy, especially for people like Bruno and me who came to parenthood late in life. But the Goldener Berg is warm and cosy and run by the Pfefferkorn family, who have lived in

Lech since 1640. Now the same people come back over and over, and Gucky Pfefferkorn, who along with her husband Frans bought the hotel in 1965 and raised her daughters here, says many of the young families who come came themselves when they were children.

In the morning, we ate breakfast, strapped on our skis outside the front door and skied on to the piste. It is that easy. But the visibility is not great the four days we are there, and my four slothful years have made a difference. My knees ache and my muscles are tight.

There is one thing about marrying the French Daredevil, I think, as he leads the way. I will never have to pay for another ski instructor. I come away with huge respect for my husband because it could not have been easy dealing with me. I no longer have the care-free spirit I had when I was single. Now, I feel real fear. I don't want to break legs, or worse, end up in a wheelchair. As a result, I whine, I panic. But I think age does that to you. Instead of whipping down the mountain at top speed, I see myself wrapped around a tree.

One day we take up the White Ring, even though the snow is falling so heavily I cannot see my hand in front of my face. We are the only fools on the slopes: at the Goldener Berg, all the other guests are lounging around drinking hot chocolate.

Down a particularly nasty slope, I see an elderly German who has fallen and is bleeding profusely from the nose. Bruno picks him up and administers first aid. The German skis off shakily to join his friend, but we find him prostrate again, a few miles down the White Ring. He's lying in the snow and can't get up. His nose has stopped bleeding, but he has cut his eye. We nurse him again, wondering why he decided to take such a tough route when he clearly cannot ski, then set off towards Zurs for a *vin chaud*.

This is the best moment, après ski. You are warm, your muscles feel well used, and you know you are headed to dinner. "You panic too much!" Bruno tells me as we drink the hot wine. "Relax. You know how to stop, you know how to turn. Just enjoy it." It is then I have a memory that changes everything. It is a tale of another old boyfriend, Jonathan. We went together to Wengen in Switzerland. Jonathan could not ski, but he was Irish and didn't give a damn. So he blitzed down the mountain, out of control, in a ski suit three sizes too big. People cleared the piste in fear, as though King Kong were coming down. His skis were miles apart, and his method of stopping was to fall down, or run into other skiers.

But the main point was that he truly, truly had fun. He was never afraid, as far as I know, and he did not care who saw him fall.

That night, over dinner at the Goldener Berg – did I tell you they have an extraordinary wine cellar? – and a bottle or two of red, I got back that feeling, the one I had before my four-year ski hiatus.

The next day I stepped into my skis and skied off from the front door of the Goldener Berg. I kept thinking of that old Hemingway line, grace under pressure. It describes skiing perfectly. When you are skiing well, it's as if you have a curtain of Zen pulled over you. Your skis glide effortlessly over snow, your turns are perfect, your mind is clear. And although I always said I would never be one of those people who planned their holidays in advance, before we left for Zurich airport, we booked the Goldener Berg again for next year. ■

**GETTING THERE** Lech can be reached by flying into Zurich or Innsbruck. The Goldener Berg arranges transfers by car, shuttle bus or train; from Lech you reach the Goldener Berg by cable car (00 43 55 83 22 050; [www.hospiz.com](http://www.hospiz.com))

**REASONS TO GO TO... LECH, AUSTRIA**  
One of Europe's oldest, most picturesque ski resorts  
An excellent ski school  
Great food and wine