

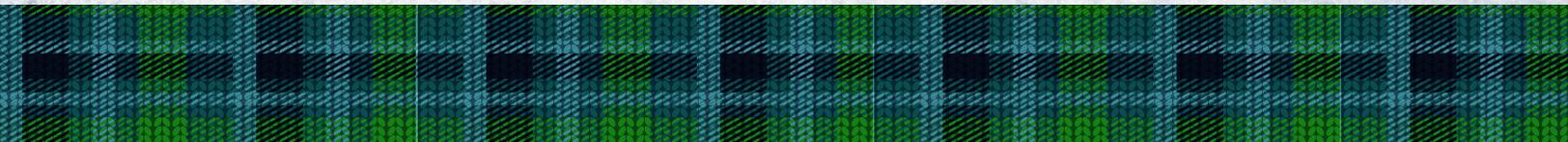


By Genevieve Northup

# HOW TO ENJOY A SKI VACATION



# WHEN YOU'RE NOT INTO THE SPORT



**M**y husband and I had been in Germany for a month when we joined friends for a ski holiday at a famous resort in France. I had only been skiing once before in my life, and I was headed on my first ski trip in Europe ... with a group of experts. That trip was full of lessons worth sharing so that your European ski vacation is more fun than mine — whether you try skiing or not.

ski-out once, I can't imagine going any other way.

### **Lesson 2: Plan for easy trails at the summit, rather than in the middle or near the base.**

This isn't an issue when the weather cooperates. We departed the gondola at the mid-station the first afternoon and headed over to catch a chairlift to easy greens. Before we could get on, the lift was closed due to high winds. We returned to the chairlift, which was now shut down, too. I was on skis for the second time ever, the first time in five years, and the only way down was a long red run (rated between blues and blacks in the U.S.). Let's just say the next two hours were rough.

to greens that would take us from the top, across another mountain and to a base station, where we planned to catch a bus home. Weather at the mid-station was calm, but we exited the chairlift to the worst whiteout the expert skiers in my group had ever seen. There were no lodges or warming huts. I could not take the chairlift back. We even contemplated paying 700 euros for ski patrol to take me down via snowmobile and were told it was "too dangerous" thanks to low visibility.

If this happens to you, remember you can always do the "pizza wedge" the whole way or take off your skis and walk. It will take a long time — and, trust me, it won't be pleasant — but it is the safest technique for newbies.

### **Lesson 4: Select locations suitable for everyone who will be skiing.**

Since that fateful day when I thought I was going to die on the mountain, we have booked in areas with both beginner and advanced pistes (another word for trails/slopes). We've had great experiences in Alpbach, Austria and Courchevel, France.

### **Lesson 5: Take lessons until you're really good.**

I didn't give up after that first trip. Instead, I signed

## Going to ski?

### **Lesson 1: Lugging your gear is best avoided.**

To reach the slopes from our hotel, we had to walk in heavy, uncomfortable ski boots to the bus stop while balancing skis, poles, helmets and goggles. Then we had to get on a crowded bus with everything and avoid having an eye poked out by someone else's stuff. I was sweaty and exhausted before I'd gone on a single run.

On subsequent trips, we've either rented lockers at the top of the mountain or splurged on ski-in/ski-out accommodations. If you choose the latter, make sure the slope at the hotel is rated for beginners, so everyone in the group can enjoy the convenience. Now that we've paid for ski-in/

### **Lesson 3: Choose runs wisely — weather conditions vary drastically between the base, mid-stations and summit, and some areas have inadequate warning systems.**

There were no alerts before we started up the gondola, or else I would have remained on safe ground. Though, had we planned better, we could have started on another mountain with shorter, less difficult trails to the base, or at least a nice lodge to wait out the weather.

Luck was against me again the next day. After a few runs near the mid-station on a different mountain, we hopped on the chairlift, heading up

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up for two days of private lessons on our next vacation. Six years later, I still take a two-hour re-fresher every time to rebuild my confidence after months away from the slopes. I also wear a helmet, no matter what.

**Lesson 6: Accept the challenge and rest up.**

You are fighting against gravity to slowly wedge or parallel downward. Your friends make it look easy; however, they are doing less work while whizzing by. You will be sore and exhausted, so take a day of rest or go out for half days only. I'm in decent shape, and I still hurt all over after a few hours; I tend to alternate one day on, one day off.

**Staying in?**

**Lesson 7: There is plenty to do should you opt out of skiing.**

Sometimes, it is nice to relax and do nothing. Sit by the fire in the lobby with a good book and a mug of hot chocolate (or bottle of wine). Head into town to window shop, but watch your spending

because everything is pricey in these resort towns. Get a massage without leaving the comfort of your accommodations; most hotels have therapists on staff, even if they do not have spa facilities.

We stick to dog-friendly options and bring our Labrador mix along. When I'm not skiing, I'm throwing snowballs for her, which she attempts to retrieve. And I go on snowshoeing tours with her in tow, which are great exercise and so much fun. Some of the best and most affordable gourmet French food I've ever had was served in remote villages along snowshoe trails.

Après-ski in Europe is awesome. Most places provide half board, which includes delicious dinners. At four- and five-star resorts, you can expect multiple courses of high-end European dishes, so settle in for a fine meal and a few glasses of wine. Some destinations have lively bar scenes, too. Either way, you can stay out late because wake-up calls don't come so early here, even among serious athletes. The lifts usually don't open until 9:30 or 10 a.m., leaving plenty of time to eat breakfast and rehydrate before hitting the slopes. ■

