

My skiing 'Barmitzvah' trip in the French Alps - February 1968

I was with a French mate, Denis, born in France but who had spent his childhood in Senegal. I'd played rugby with him a few times for a university team in Aix.

We'd gone to a smallish ski resort in the Alps, with one of his French mates Didier. Both were very competent skiers. This was my second piste experience. I was still suffering from P.T.T.D. (Post Traumatic T-bar Disorder)! I still wore the same non cutting-edge gear- rugby shirt, fishing smock and Levis and Annabelle's ski boots which still seemed reluctant to bend anywhere but on the laces. Only the hire skis were a different colour- but still two metres long!

It was a leaden sky morning, the falling snow wet and sticky, not powder-puff light. Our chat and banter as we left our hostel/hotel disguised in part my apprehension. As we trudged across the wet snow of the nursery slope, I carried my skis like offensive weapons over my shoulder. I exited the banter, eyes focused on the ski lift i.e. the swinging, clanking T-bars. Aware of my hang-up (an apt description), Denis fixed it so that he went first, so I could follow his moves and Didier would go behind me.

My T-bar clanked towards me; was held momentarily by the attendant until I made my grab and moved off, teeth and buttocks clenched, eyes on Denis and the ski tracks, legs straight. Up we went through a pine wood. So far, so good, except Denis fell off without warning, just before the ski tracks I was following went down an incline! Well, every up is a down waiting to happen n'est ce pas? This up and down settled into up and up and up and the intensity of the falling snow increased. I parted company with my T-bar at the top with all my bits intact and proud as punch. Then I realised I was alone! Didier was nowhere to be seen. When I enquired of another skier, he shrugged 'Ils sont tombés!'

I waited. I was soaked. Still on a high from my T-bar triumph, I glanced down the mountain. It was still snowing and our hotel was about the size of a box of matches!

I was alone and there was another problem, I didn't know how to ski!! I stared anxiously, heart-thumping at the gulley below me. This was the piste, part of a very long downward slope to the resort.

'In for a penny, in for a pound.' Whoosh! Off I went down the gulley and into a snow drift! I emerged minus the bottom part of one of my ski poles. I turned myself round and faced the other way. I skied (sorry – slid) across into another deep bank of snow. I was practising that great piece of advice, "if you're going too fast, fall over". The gulley, probably 20 to 30 metres across continued down the mountain. Wet, weary and sweaty, as I was picking myself up for the umpteenth time, a tanned, handsome ski instructor swished to a halt in a flurry of snow and ice. He was accompanied by a strikingly pretty, female pupil "under instruction". Assessing my predicament in seconds, he offered me this advice, 'Il suffit a faire une chasses neige et tu descendras lentement.' You just need to do the snow plough and you'll get down slower. My version of the snow plough only consisted of ploughing into snowdrifts on opposite sides of the gulley. He noted my look of bemusement – 'comme ça!', before disappearing with his charge in a spray cloud of snow.

As a kid I was a keen, daring sledger. I'd never done a snow plough and never been shown, so I looked downhill and saw that the gulley opened into a huge wider slope. If I had been wearing goggles, I would have pulled them over my eyes, but I did manage to push off with both ski poles and hissed down the slope, living the dream and staying on my skis. As the hotel grew in size the wet snow slowed the finish! Thank God!