

Martin had been reading a parenting book that challenged fathers to take their children on adventures to help them build memories and their enthusiasm for discovering new skills and horizons. Martin was however, naturally averse to risk taking, so when his workmates were talking enthusiastically about their various skiing plans, he inwardly shrank from the idea of going anywhere near that kind of resort. Coincidentally that evening his wife asked him what he was going to do with the children in the Spring half-term week as she felt the need to help her elderly Aunt sort her house in Scotland ready for her coming move and she needed to be on her own to do this.

“Why don’t you take them to a ski resort to learn how to ski?”, she helpfully proffered.

“My work mates were talking about skiing today,” he replied, “but I guess we’ll be OK just staying here. Luke and Mary both have friends they can play with and I can cook for them.” He didn’t feel his response was particularly convincing and he knew he’d have to do better than that.

“Why don’t you ask your workmates if any of them knows of a ski apartment that is available to rent and you could take the kids and pay for them to have ski lessons? You might actually enjoy the mountains and the snow. We’ve got plenty of cash in our holiday budget.”

Martin didn’t feel he had any way out. “OK I’ll ask them tomorrow but if they don’t know of anything, it will be too late now for the half-term week.” Martin felt more confident and he had to make an effort. The next day he dutifully asked one of his mates if he knew of an available apartment, he could rent at a ski resort as he was vaguely wondering what to do with his children for the half term week.

“Martin, as it happens my parents have an apartment in Avoriaz that they aren’t using that week and Babs and I are joining forces with Colin and his family – we going to a resort in the Pyrenees. I’ll ask them if you can use it. You’ll need to pay them the usual rent of course.”

“Thanks David,” Martin responded. He didn’t want to ask about the rent, he had the money anyway. “I’ve never been to a ski resort before. Whereabouts is Avoriaz?”

“Oh. It’s in the French Alps on the Swiss border. A nice resort - one of the very best actually. I’ll let you know tomorrow what they say.” The next day David confirmed that he had booked the apartment for Martin and his two children and that evening Martin broke the news to his wife and children who bubbled over with excited anticipation. This would be great and Dad was taking them!

“You’re alright with it aren’t you?”, Sheila asked after the children were in bed. She didn’t think her husband looked that happy about the prospect. “You can learn to ski with the children.”

Three weeks later Martin found himself at 8.10 am driving the car onto the Eurostar at the Folkestone with two excited children and piles of luggage on board. Sheila had helped him pack the car at 6am and sent them on their way with packed lunches before she caught the train to Edinburgh. After a fifteen hour drive a somewhat exhausted Martin finally drove up the mountain road to one of the highest resorts in the French Alps. The last section of road was steep, covered in snow and with sheer drops on the outside of the bends, but the visibility was excellent and Martin was past caring; he only wanted to get to the resort. He had been driving for several hours after dark. They found that they had to park outside the resort as no cars were allowed past the gates at any time. So it was that Martin (now in his 40’s), Luke (aged 8) and Mary (aged 10) carried their cases into the resort sat on a bench waited for the free donkey and sledge 24-hour service which take them to their apartment, before climbing the stairs, unpacking and falling into their beds and deep happy slumbers.

The next day they woke to brilliant sunshine and the sounds of sledge bells outside as the donkeys plied their resort rounds collecting and delivering people and equipment. After a very excited breakfast clad in thick coats, hats and warm boots the children waited with Martin outside and in a few minutes were in their way to the ski-school. With the aid of his pidgin French and clamour from Luke and Mary, Martin paid for equipment, passes and ski-school for himself and the children. Their beginner's instructor, a young Frenchman called Rafael, soon had some ten children together with Martin, Jan and Edith, ready, equipped and out on the beginner's slope. None of them had skied before. The school would be every morning for the next four days: the afternoons were free, but on the Friday day, Rafael confidently told the class he would take his school cross-country adventure into Switzerland and back. They would meet at the usual time but would not return until the late afternoon so they would need to bring a packed lunch with them.

By the second day Edith had dropped out leaving Martin and Jan the only two adults trying to keep up with a gang of children who were improving in leaps and bounds. Rafael's main line of communication was the phrase, 'Le Ski parallel!' which he kept shouting as he trained his class. Rafael told the class that the following morning he would take them up the lift as far as the French Junior ski run. The previous afternoon on his way to try out a Green piste, Martin had seen the French Junior boys hurtling straight down their run clad in only shorts and skis, it looked highly dangerous. He was determined to stick with the class if only to stay with his children. He had lost count of the number of times he had crashed practicing on the Green piste, but others had been kind and helped him up on several occasions. So, when Rafael lifted up the boundary rope at the head of the Championship run and beckoned the class to follow him onto the Black piste, Martin at the rear watched heart in mouth. Martin was relieved to see Rafael was leading them on a zig-zag path across the piste rather than on a suicide straight down run. He followed trailing a little tentatively.

By the third morning Rafael had the class on a remote Blue piste and was training the children to take small ski jumps on a specially prepared section with lots of humps. He didn't ask either Martin or Jan to try this much to Martin's relief. Finally, the day came for the adventure into Switzerland. The class excitedly exited the lift high on the mountain and followed Rafael as he led the class onto deep virgin snow. Slowly the class headed across country till lunch time when a wide vista opened up and they could see the Swiss mountains and make out Lake Geneva. After lunch Rafael led the class back on a different route and after a couple of hours, they reached one of the regular Avoriaz pistes. Martin realised he was now the slowest in the class, even Jan was managing to keep up with the children, but then he had some ten years on her. However, he bravely struggled on, Rafael keeping him in sight in the rear.

Martin reckoned the new piste must be a Blue run. It wound its way through a forest of trees and soon found he was seriously lagging, but the class waited for him while Rafael gave them extra tuition. This piste was quite lonely and much narrower than the lower ones. Rafael communicated that they would now ski all the way to the village and that the route would be straight forward. He told the children to keep together. And he gave the oldest boy who was one of the best skiers now the responsibility of stopping the class every ten minutes and waiting for the adults to catch up. Rafael however kept pace with Jan keeping an eye on the children ahead and Martin at the rear. Martin was tired but happy and reflected that the children had great fun and they enjoyed good bonding times each evening.

The skiing was OK, and he was thankful he hadn't had to attempt any hairy ski-jumps. At that moment he found himself gaining speed and parting company from the main piste. He hadn't been concentrating and was on a very narrow secondary piste to which he was now committed. He didn't

want to crash again and could not think how he could slow down as there wasn't the space to even attempt a snow-plough. He felt himself suddenly leaving the ground and closing his eyes he offered a desperate prayer for help. Then he remembered, "Le ski parallel." He instinctively obeyed bending his knees and his chest seemed to move forward. He opened his eyes to see his skis landing and somehow, he kept his balance as the braking effect took hold and the narrow run took an upward incline and he found himself back on the main piste. There 20 metres away was Rafael and Jan waiting for him. "Wow," Jan exclaimed, "we just saw you do a very brave ski-jump. How did you know it was there?" Martin looked somewhat sheepish, "I didn't," he replied with his heart pounding and not quite believing he was still alive. That evening Luke and Mary were full of awe when they heard from Jan and Rafael of the ski jump that their dad had successfully managed. The next morning a very happy tired and exhilarated family headed back the UK, but somewhat sad to have said good bye to their teacher Rafael!