

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

SKIING

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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

SKIING



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THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Skiing requires a commitment to pleasure of the sort endorsed by hedonists, layabouts, ne'er-do-wells and philanderers – in other words, a single-minded approach to absolute self-indulgence.

Skiers are deeply flawed people, so it will come as no surprise that most of them are also extremely proficient bluffers. All skiers will remember that triumphant moment when they first skied down to a crowded restaurant terrace without falling over. Flushed with pride, they will have puffed up their chests in the fond belief that onlookers were bursting with admiration. In fact, onlookers were doing nothing of the sort, waiting patiently instead for someone else to fall over so that they could point at them and jeer.

But in that brief moment of triumph, the discerning novice will have discovered a profound truth about skiing. All skiers, irrespective of their age, sex or ability, like to pretend that they are better skiers than they actually are. That axiom lies at the root of the sport, and from that root flourishes the most luxuriant verbiage of preposterous

declarations about imagined skills and expertise.

This book will offer a few hints and techniques that will allow you to be accepted as a skier of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and advice – without anyone discovering that you can't ski to save your life.

HOW IT ALL STARTED

The British always claim to have invented alpine skiing, a remarkable feat bearing in mind the paucity of Alps in the British Isles. But let's not split hairs. Alpine skiing, the most popular variety of the three main forms of the sport, is that particular discipline that involves skiing downhill. Skiing along on a level gradient is known by those who find it tedious as 'poling' or by those who find it interesting as 'cross-country' or 'Nordic' skiing (possibly invented and, unaccountably, enjoyed hugely by Norwegians).

Uphill skiing is widely described either as 'ski touring' or, by those rash enough to attempt it, as 'absolutely bloody exhausting'.

The British did, in fact, invent alpine skiing – but were not the first to spot the potential of binding wooden planks to their feet as a means of transport. That responsibility lies with the Swedes, or possibly the Finns, or possibly the Laps, or the Norwegians, maybe even the Russians. The Mongols and Turks are also keen to state their own case for having invented it. So too are the Chinese. Sinologists will

happily produce ancient manuscripts that mention *mu-ma* – literally, men on ‘wooden horses’ travelling at the speed of a galloping thoroughbred across the Manchurian plains. This suggests that even during the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD), primitive skiers on primitive equipment could happily have seen off the British Olympic downhill team.

The oldest ‘ski’ in existence was found in a peat bog in Hoting, Sweden, and dates from 2500 BC. Some cave drawings dating from about the same time showing hunters on skis have been found in Rødøy, Norway. But it wasn't until the 1820s that skiing came into its own as a sport when the Norwegians began cavorting about in the snow on skis. They loved it. By the middle of the century they were holding cross-country races for ‘gentlemen’. Then, in a competition in Oslo in 1868, a farmhand called Sondre Norheim turned up and spoiled everyone's fun by winning every race. The secret of his success was a ski he had designed himself, with a ‘waist’ and a secure binding.

Sondre sank without trace but his invention found its way to the Great Exhibition in Paris in 1889. One interested purchaser was a doctor from Switzerland who took the new skis back to Davos, put them in his attic then forgot about them. A few years later they were discovered by his apprentice, Tobias Branger, and he and his brother became known as the Davos ‘plank-hoppers’.

Nobody took them too seriously until Sir Arthur Conan Doyle turned up one day in 1894 and asked to be shown how to plank-hop. The Branger brothers took him over the mountain pass to Arosa and Sir Arthur was

smitten. Writing in *Strand Magazine* a short while later he observed prophetically: ‘I am convinced that the time will come when hundreds of Englishmen will come to Switzerland for the “skiing” season.’

Sure enough, Sir Henry Lunn, inventor of the modern package holiday, arrived in the early 1900s with his newly founded Public Schools Alpine Sports Club and promptly colonised the Swiss Alps with carefully selected members of the British upper classes. The bemused Swiss claimed that they needed a passport to get into their own towns and villages.



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a skiable mountain in the Alps
that didn't have a train going up it,
round it or through it.

The British then insisted their diligent hosts find ways to get them to the top of mountains with the minimum of fuss. They demanded that trains be installed, or else. This is where the Swiss came into their own because, as everyone knows, they like trains a lot. Within a few years there was barely a skiable mountain in the Alps that didn't have a train going up it, round it or through it. Once at the top, the British would get out, put on their

skis and hare off to the bottom, making as much noise as possible. Previously, the whole point of skiing had been to get from one point to another – and nobody could see the point of going halfway, then coming back, then doing it all over again.

Nevertheless it caught on, albeit as an elitist pastime, practised exclusively by people with nasal voices and no chins. The splendidly egalitarian Swiss soon put a stop to that when Zurich engineer Ernst Constam arrived in Davos in 1934 and invented the cheap-to-install drag lift (*see* T-bars, page 39) – the only form of uphill transport designed with the explicit purpose of jettisoning its passengers without warning. Suddenly the slopes were invaded by the world's great unwashed – keen to spend vast amounts of money (something else the Swiss like a lot). The British retired to their mountain hotels grumbling that, yet again, someone had stolen their idea and ruined it.

SKIING CLUBS

There are only two skiing clubs that you really need to know about: the Kandahar and the DHO. The Kandahar Ski Club was founded in 1924 by Sir Arnold Lunn, Henry's son, in Mürren, Switzerland. It was named after Field Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, Afghanistan, who apparently knew a thing or two about mountains. Some idea of the spirit of the club comes from an account of one of its early meetings. Casting around for a suitable badge or emblem, founder member AH d'Egville suggested a simple 'K'. 'But nobody will know what the "K" means,' reasoned a fellow member.

‘If they want to find out what “K” means’, thundered Eggy, ‘they can bloody well find out for themselves.’

The DHO (Downhill Only) Club was founded a year later directly across the valley in neighbouring Wengen. Here, the admission policy was a little more relaxed and the occasional native of Wengen was allowed to join. The then mayor of Wengen, one Dr Zahnd, observed proudly of his fellow citizens that they had ‘learned from the British, not only to race and to battle but also to lose’. They must have been profoundly grateful for this lesson.

There has been no love lost between the DHO and the Kandahar. Like any other club, the sole purpose of both is to form a gang and tell other people that they can’t join.

The only other ski club of any relevance is the Ski Club of Great Britain. Founded in London by some early downhillers, it started by being very posh, but these days almost anyone can join, which rather defeats the object. You must also be able to talk about two other clubs. The first ever to be formed was the Kiandra Snow Shoe Club in the Snowy Mountains of Australia in 1861, founded by Norwegians. It quickly went the same way as the Tasmanian Tiger (out of existence), so make up as much as you want to about it.

The other notable club was the curiously named Yukki, founded by some young British officers at the St Petersburg embassy in Russia in the late 1800s. Its main aim was to hunt bearskins for the regiment’s hats, but from all accounts the bears remained relatively untroubled by their dashing predators.

HOW SKIING SPREAD

It is generally accepted that mass labour migrations from Scandinavia during the nineteenth century account for the spread of skiing in the USA, Australia and New Zealand. This does not, however, account for how it made its way to Morocco, India, Japan and Chile – but let's not be picky.

Skiing had a more practical purpose in the USA. In California a skiing postman delivered the mail over the Sierras in the 1850s. And in Telluride, Colorado, on payday at the Tomboy mine 3,000 feet above town, the Finns and Swedes would strap on makeshift skis with grim determination and infuriate their co-workers by getting down to the dozen brothels before them.

SKI TERRAIN

SLOPES AND GRADING

Slopes are called slopes or ‘runs’ or ‘pistes’ in Europe, ‘trails’ in the USA, and whatever anybody feels like calling them in Australia and New Zealand. Beginners will be relieved to discover that there are different gradients of slopes. They range from ‘easy’ to ‘absurdly dangerous’ and are graded by colour according to degree of difficulty. Thus a ‘green’ slope is perceived to be easy, a ‘blue’ is less easy, a ‘red’ less easy still, and a ‘black’ is no place for bluffers.

All runs have ‘piste-markers’ – appropriately coloured signs ingeniously placed to cause maximum obstruction. Black runs often have additional signs bearing the legend ‘For experts only’. These prove irresistible to those who fondly imagine themselves to be experts but aren’t. On no account fall victim to the same temptation. There may be opportunities when nobody is looking to paint a blue sign black and transplant the ‘experts only’ sign to a blue run. Later, you can plunge past shouting ‘Geronimo!’ to your startled friends.

In the USA and Canada they don't have red runs. It might have something to do with an unhappy association with the colour of blood. Their absence is compensated for by black runs that in Europe would be graded as red. To complete the North American picture there are two types of black run – 'single' and 'double diamonds'. Double diamonds are the ones to avoid. Some resorts also have two types of green and blue piste as well as off-piste.

The terms 'on-piste' and 'off-piste' have delighted headline writers for years. 'Piste-off' is a favourite for journalists trying to be witty about some calamity that has taken place on their 'familiarisation visits' (free ski trips). This usually has something to do with having to buy their own drinks.



Moguls are big bumps in the snow.
In the USA they are called,
with admirable inventiveness, bumps.

In fact, skiing 'on-piste' involves staying on marked runs that have been prepared ('groomed' in the USA) and made safe by 'piste-bashers' or 'snowcats' – machines resembling a cross between a tank and a combine harvester that emit a bleeping noise to warn of their presence (a noise invariably turned off when they approach blind bends).

Piste-bashers, and other assorted snow-grooming

machinery, earned a certain notoriety in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* when James Bond ski-jumped over one and the baddy following him didn't.* There followed a great deal of grinding and squirting of blood and gristle which had cinema audiences around the world stamping their feet and applauding. Ever since, drivers of these sinister machines have behaved as if they have a licence to mince.

After piste-bashers have done their worst, the surface is like corrugated iron and about as easy to ski on. That's why many people prefer to ski off-piste ('off-limits' in the USA) – that part of the mountain that is ungroomed, unmarked, frequently prone to avalanches and, if it's a glacier, crevasses. An increasing number of skiers prefer to take their chances with these natural hazards rather than take on four tons of metal and a Magimix.

Serious skiers never admit to skiing on-piste, unless as a means of getting off-piste. If you are on your way to ski off-piste, make great show of the fact by shouting loudly to nobody in particular: 'Franz! Have you got a spare pair of powder straps?'

MOGULS

Moguls are big bumps in the snow. In the USA they are called, with admirable inventiveness, bumps. They are caused by successive skiers turning in the same spot, pushing the snow into hard, compact piles. If you hit one of these piles at speed, you will soar about 20 feet into the

* For more 007-related bluffing, see *The Bluffer's Guide to Bond*.

air before landing on your back with your ski in your ear. It is difficult to pretend that you did this on purpose.

There is a certain type of skier who claims to 'love' moguls. Nobody loves moguls, unless they are bluffing, in which case they must be accorded proper respect. This means that you must love them, too. When you fall over, claim that an old ligament rupture (*see Injuries, page 55*) prevented you from 'achieving full absorption'.

PATHS

Paths are generally strewn liberally with rocks and black ice. On one side they have jagged cliff walls which invite your close attention; on the other side they have vertiginous drops through more rocks and splintered conifers. The splintering was caused by skiers.

Take careful note of where paths are and try to plan a route that avoids them. This is most important, because everyone's natural inclination on a path is to adopt the snowplough position, drag their poles between their legs and whimper loudly. Bluffers cannot afford to be seen doing this.

Instructors will tell you that it's all about psychology and that the secret with paths is to pretend that they're not there. Ignore this advice. Instructors don't get caught in the conifers.

PISTE MAPS

Nobody has yet invented a piste map that returns to its original folds. In the USA they are called 'trail maps' and

have up to 148 folds. These are the most advanced types and were allegedly invented by Rubik. Not even he can solve their limitless capacity to outwit.

Piste maps are supposed to show skiers where to go in clear, comprehensive, cartographical detail. Thus they bear little relation to a mountainside. In unfamiliar territory it is wise to allow someone else to take the initiative, then scoff mercilessly when you get lost.

VERTICAL DROPS

An arresting feature of mountainous terrain, the term 'vertical drop' actually describes two different things:

1. what will happen if you fail to stop at the edge of a sheer cliff face; or
2. the distance in height between the top ski 'station' and the bottom (usually the resort).

For some reason the latter usage greatly challenges putative experts. Venture knowledgeably therefore that the biggest 'vertical' in the Alps is down the Vallée Blanche from the Aiguille du Midi to Chamonix (about 2,750 metres or nearly two vertical miles); and, in the Rockies, Blackcomb to Whistler (about 1,600 metres), known as The Vertical Mile.

Don't expect to survive a vertical drop of the first sort much over 10 metres.