



While you were skiing...

I USED TO THINK OF NON-SKIERS AS WALLFLOWERS at the winter ball, sad figures sitting on the sidelines while skiers and boarders dance in the snow. But last winter, as I dangled from a thin steel cable overhanging the Fairy Gorge in Saas Fee, Switzerland, it occurred to me that the scariest/stupidest—and therefore most fun—moments of my last 20 years in the mountains have mostly happened after I took off my ski boots.

Once, and never again, at 2,000 metres in Tignes, France, I strapped on an air tank, squeezed into a wetsuit and plopped down a man-sized hole sawed through metre-thick ice in order to explore the winter underworld of a frozen lake. Aside from a dead fish and some weird ice formations (the underside is not smooth), there wasn't much to look at.

At Flaine, also in France, I was talked into taking the wheel of a Renault rally car equipped with studded tires to race around the snow circuit there. It's open to any tourist who wants to experience the gut-wrenching sensation of sliding sideways towards a clump of trees at 80 kph. Fortunately, the car comes with dual controls, a race-trained instructor and comprehensive insurance.

But it's always scarier to be the passenger. And I still have nightmares from the time in Mammoth, California, when I sat behind my insane ski buddy Mark in a two-man bobsled as he shot us off the banked walls and into a hay bale.

I thought dogsledding would be a dawdle. But out on the Troll Trail in Norway, north of Lillehammer, I was bitten and mauled, not to mention thrown off the sled once the canines determined I was definitely not leader of the pack.

Resort owners are acutely aware of the demographic fact that non-skiers outnumber us by at least 20 to one. That's why they are so desperate to woo the wallflowers with winter walking paths, snowmobile tours and all the other "activities" that most skiers have, in the past, so sedulously ignored.

But in recent years resorts have begun offering more high-adrenaline activities, to the extent that at the end of the day an adventurous non-skier might well experience higher endorphin levels—and win more bragging rights—than we do in the powder fields and on the pistes.

Whether Euros are more naturally adventurous, or just less inhibited by insurance liability hysteria, resorts in the Alps seem to offer a lot more non-skiing hijinks than their North American counterparts. Paragliding, solo or as a passenger, is available, for example, at a number of North American resorts. But in the Alps it's ubiquitous. And I've never heard of anyone outside of Zermatt or Murren in Switzerland bungee jumping, as a paying customer, from a cable car. The Cresta Run in St. Moritz, the fastest most dangerous sled run in the world, similarly has no North American rival.

Putting amusement park rides in ski resorts, something else that started in the Alps, does sound to me like an idea Vail, with its family activities centre on Adventure Ridge, or Whistler could well adopt. In the centre of Verbier, Switzerland, there's a winter fun-fair ride for kids. And Saas Fee has the Feeblitz (a kind of roller coaster) right by the lift station.

Nothing, however, can compare to nature, and gravity, when it comes to getting the blood pumping into overdrive, which is how I found myself while being led down the snow-covered path to Saas Fee's Fairy Gorge. This rock canyon running from Saas Fee to Saas Grund has been kitted out with \$140,000 worth of cables and ladders by the local mountain guides association. It's advertised as the newest adventure activity in the Alps. It's also billed as a "nature walk" with ecological aspects, though the only sign of chamois or other animals I saw were their droppings.

Our afternoon group of 10 was led by three Swiss guides, who doled out helmets and harnesses. Each harness had a large central carabiner. We also had two extra carabiners, each on metre-long safety ropes clipped to the harness. The guides demonstrated how we should never make a move without clipping *both* safety carabiners to something solid.

So equipped and instructed we set off down a dappled path through the snow, slithering down steeper and narrower trails until we came to a small steel platform jutting out of a vertical cliff wall. Within seconds I was zinging across the canyon. Suspended by an overhead cable, I was flying faster and faster towards the opposite wall some 70 metres away.

Adrenaline jitters and plummeting temperatures made it difficult to unclip and reclip the carabiners hundreds of times on the ladders and ledges. Even with the arresting safety ropes, you wouldn't want to fall and be bashed against the rocks. But each slide and swing was more exciting than the last. We shot across at angles and dropped straight down. At the top of one cliff the guides had constructed a water-slide device to scoot us over the rocks and out into oblivion. There were swaying bridges to cross and one wild swing in tandem.

The final obstacle was a series of insubstantial looking aluminum ladders suspended horizontally from thin wires hanging from cables attached to the canyon walls. At each step the entire framework of ladders swayed and rattled perilously. I only really got scared though when I saw the broken rung. My confidence in the equipment plummeted, and I had to take a giant step to clear the empty space.

It was 87 rungs more before the ladders ended in oblivion. There a guide waited to attach a rope for the rappel straight down onto solid ground. It was only 50 metres of vertical. But my knees were wobbling as if I'd put in a full day skiing the bumps. Next time I'll think twice before taking off my ski boots. ☒