

Lads on *la piste*



Day one

Joel

The first day on the slopes is nearly always an early one and we were up at 7am on the dot, much to the annoyance of my fellow journo and first-time skier, Tom, who mumbled something incoherent as I jumped in the shower – I think it was along the lines of ‘no one on holiday should be subjected to such early mornings’.

As I've mentioned, it was Monsieur Edwards' first time on the slopes and I – rather unwisely, I now admit – had taken on the challenge of teaching him to snowboard. This was a bad idea on several levels. Firstly, because I'm not good enough at snowboarding to teach anyone. Secondly, because friends, relatives and partners should never teach each other anything. No one in their right mind would advise you to teach someone close to you to drive, would they? Snowboarding is the same, as we soon discovered as Tom spent the whole day on his backside before dramatically walking, yes walking, down the mountain. I thought he'd actually been doing well. Everyone who learns to board spends the first day or so on their bum. But after questioning his own brute force – ‘Maybe my legs just aren't strong enough’ – he declared that snowboarding was not for him.

Tom

Let's set the record straight, shall we?

Snowboarding is hard. I mean, really hard. Especially if the only-slightly relevant bit of experience you have is going about 10 yards on a skateboard at the age of 12. And even that was 14 years ago and lasted six seconds.

Yes, I did storm off the mountain and, yes, it was shameful. But there you have the first rule of snowboarding: never get your friend to try to teach you. It simply doesn't work and it will make you look like an idiot when you walk off in a huff. I vaguely remember the comment about my legs not being strong enough and what makes it worse is that I knew it was a pathetic excuse at the time. Truth is, I'm an accomplished quitter and I already had my eyes on something else to fail at: I was going to ski.

Day two

Joel

Despite yesterday's problems, I was still eager to teach Tom how to board. He, however, was not too eager to learn. He decided he would instead learn to ski – and be taught by a proper instructor. So I joined the rest of the journalists for a day on the slopes with PR rep Jamie Fox, who had contacted the Guernsey Press about this opportunity to experience and write about Meribel. This was the first opportunity I had to

What do you get when you put two journalists in the heart of the French Alps for five days with a couple of snowboards for company? Chaos, as the daily diaries of reporters **Joel de Woolfson** and **Tom Edwards** show only too well

see the wide variety of runs the resort had to offer. There were six of us in the group and, apart from Jamie who bombs down the mountain at what can only be described as Olympic speed, we were all intermediates so stuck to blue runs with the occasional red thrown in. Just before lunch I was feeling particularly brave – or stupid – and as we stopped halfway down a red run, I noticed what I thought was a good jump opportunity about 100 yards down. It was there, egged on by the rest of the group, that I did something I have been assured will be used in the story written by Northern Echo assistant news editor Owen Mcateer for sheer comic value.

On the approach to the jump I had a feeling that I'd made a big mistake and all I remember is my legs and board flying upwards and the light getting brighter as my goggles and hat flew from my head as it crashed against the snow, leaving me in a crumpled mess. No serious injuries sustained, so it can be deemed a successful first jump attempt, I think.

Tom

Having decided to swap to skiing the day before, following my disastrous attempt at snowboarding, things went from bad to worse.

The guys from Freeride had been round the night before to swap my board for skis, but I got left in the lurch by the company that was supposed to be giving me a lesson (they will remain nameless). This meant a day on my own feeling sorry for myself while the others hit the slopes.

At least the sun was shining and I was surprised to find myself catching a few rays in a deckchair outside the chalet. Beats work.

Day three

Joel

Today was a total white-out. It snowed from 6am until 5pm and it was absolutely beautiful. Freezing, mind you, but gorgeous.

I was out by 10am and got the impression from Tom that he couldn't understand my enthusiasm for throwing myself down a mountain at speed. But I'm sure many readers who have skied or boarded will understand. It's cold, yes, it hurts sometimes when you fall over and it's tiring, but it's also a massive adrenaline rush, there's fresh air and beautiful surroundings and there's nothing like the feeling you get when you land your first jump. A feat I accomplished today.

In fairness, if I couldn't land a jump in today's conditions – about a foot of nice, soft powder – I never would. In the afternoon I had the opportunity to have a one-to-one lesson with Jono from the new instructor-school,

Cab9. That was brilliant.

Jono set up Cab9 last year with a friend. They are specialist snowboard instructors, which is unusual in France, where most ski teachers double up as snowboard ones.

He asked me what I wanted to work on and I told him my left leg sometimes felt like it locked when turning from right to left (or from my toe edge to my heel edge, for the boarders among you). He spotted my technical fault in about 20 seconds and, after an hour's session, I felt I'd improved dramatically.

Tom

Hey, it's all right, this skiing lark. A quick phone call to chalet owners Fish and Pips soon pointed me in the right direction of a complimentary two-hour private lesson from the Magic Ski and Snowboard Academy. My instructor was Patrick – a Frenchman with 20 years of teaching experience and described as ‘totally mad’.

‘How long till I fall over?’ I joked with him.

‘You will not fall, my friend,’ he declared with much eccentric flamboyance and a mischievous grin. ‘If you do, I have failed and I will hold myself personally responsible.’ An hour in and, of course, the inevitable happened. ‘Argh’ screamed Patrick loudly, making a scene. But he was only joking and that had me in stitches and back on my feet. The main thing was that I was skiing – I was loving it. And I wasn't half bad.

Day four

Joel

Tom was back. After the success of his lesson with Patrick yesterday, we both spent the day on green runs, him practising and doing really well – even if it pains me to admit it – weaving down the slopes and me taking every opportunity to practise landing jumps after getting a taste for it yesterday. I find I turn into a big kid when I'm on the slopes. I just want to mess about on my board, which sometimes leads to me trying kamikaze-style tricks and jumps that are way above my ability.

I'm always looking for a path off-piste that takes me through trees and raised areas off which I can jump. When I try these things I usually end up on my backside but I think experimentation is so much of the fun of snowboarding. After yesterday's heavy snowfall the conditions were perfect. The sun was really hot to make it the best day, weather-wise, I have ever experienced on the slopes.

Tom improved loads and had only one comedy moment when, after stopping, he began to slide down the slope backwards. He ferociously dug his poles into the snow and clung on for dear life, before eventually falling flat on his face – brilliant.

Tom

Yes, I still have a long way to go. It felt like I'd never been on skis before this morning, but thanks to the thick layer of fresh snow that remained from yesterday, I got right back into the swing of things. I managed to relax to the point where I could admire the beautiful scenery with the wind in my face. It was usually during such moments that I landed on my derriere, but I was having a great time. I finally see what all the fuss is about.

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■ **STORYBOARD:** Top, Joel displays his snowboarding finesse. Second down, failure to master the craft saw Tom storm off the mountain in a huff and in search of something else. Tom striking a catalogue pose. The evenings' entertainment included an impromptu acoustic rendition of Mamma Mia. Bottom: Tom finally found his forte when he swapped one plank for two and enjoyed the rest of the trip on skis – when he wasn't crippled by a post-vodka hangover, that is. (From top: 0531391, 0531393, 0531392, 0531397, 0531395)



■ **THE ONLY WAY IS UP:** The ski runs at Meribel cater to all levels of experience and ability. (0531394)