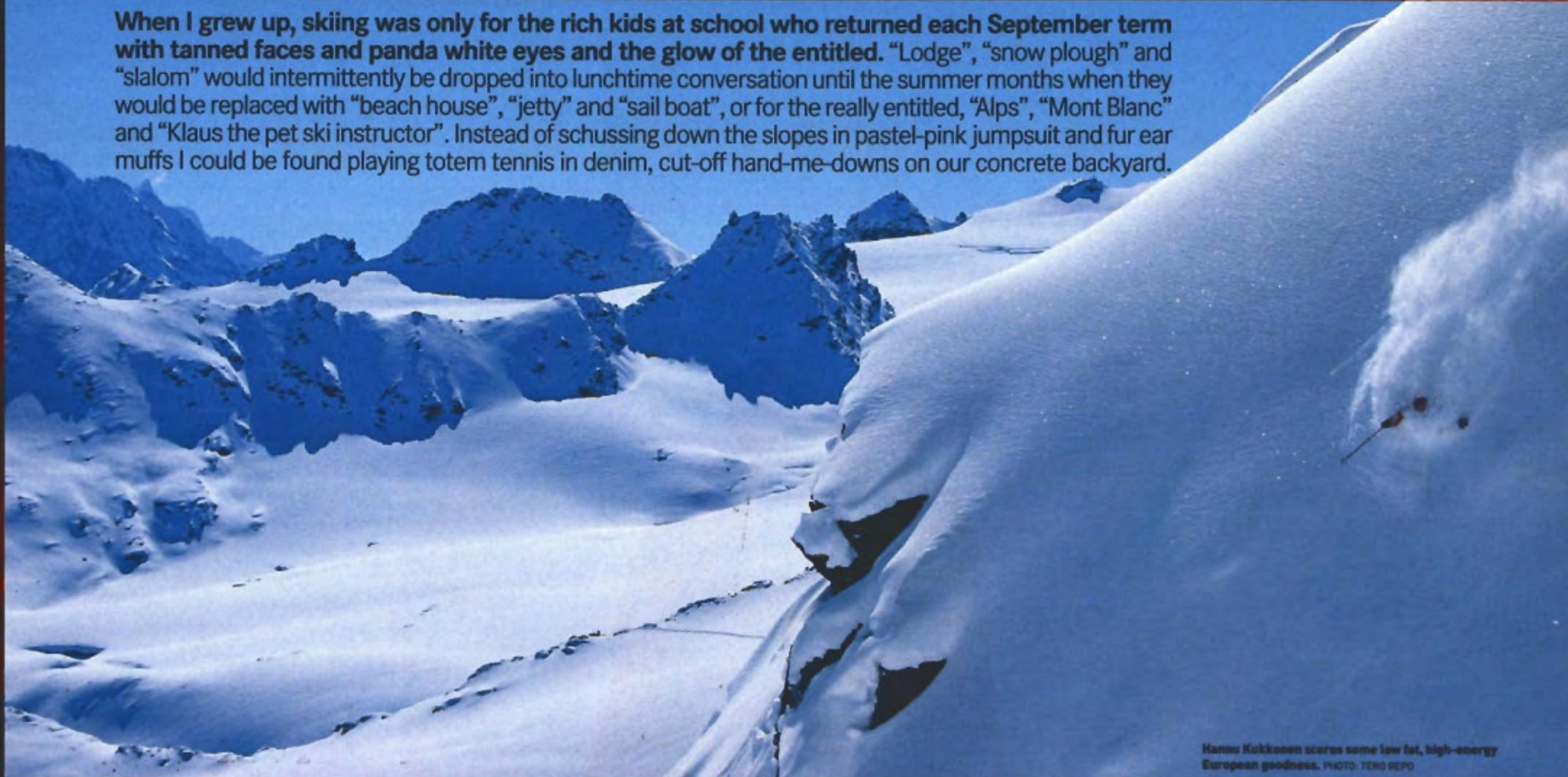


# the life and times of a self-confessed ski snob

AUTHOR/JOURNALIST RACHEL OAKES-ASH DISCOVERS THE HOW JOYS OF SKIING CAN ACTUALLY BECOME LIFE-ALTERING.

When I grew up, skiing was only for the rich kids at school who returned each September term with tanned faces and panda white eyes and the glow of the entitled. "Lodge", "snow plough" and "slalom" would intermittently be dropped into lunchtime conversation until the summer months when they would be replaced with "beach house", "jetty" and "sail boat", or for the really entitled, "Alps", "Mont Blanc" and "Klaus the pet ski instructor". Instead of schussing down the slopes in pastel-pink jumpsuit and fur ear muffs I could be found playing totem tennis in denim, cut-off hand-me-downs on our concrete backyard.



Hanna Kukkonen scores some low fat, high-energy European goodness. PHOTO: TERO REPO



Tignes looks bland, but is actually good for you. PHOTO: OAKES

After graduation I travelled the world, although preferred the summer heat of Mediterranean waters to the cold winter of European Alps. Canada was where I planned to make my first mark on the snow, but a London romance tugged my heart strings on my way to Whistler and I only made it as far as Vermont for a weekend before returning to England across the Atlantic.

Undeterred, I resolved to return to conquer not just the green but the blue, the black and the back runs of Cardrona to save my name. A week back in the Australian resort of Thredbo mid August with 10 hours of private lessons over five days saw me go from green to blue as I took on the Super Trail and learnt how to cling on typical Australian snow - ie. ice.

Hours of weight on the downward ski, face the mountain, look ahead not down, arms in front you're driving a bus, push your bum back, tilt your ankles to carve 'til I could ski in my sleep. On some days it felt like the only place I could ski.

I returned to Cardrona the same winter kitted out with my own skis behaving like the entitled youth of my childhood. The three-hour flight from Sydney to Queenstown was spent advising my fellow plane passengers which runs were best and on what mountains to try them as though my middle name was Miller, and my first Warren.

The best season in 20 years was how the locals described the snow at Cardrona upon my return. I conquered the 200 metres to the Whitestar Express chairlift and went on to explore the

mountain with my new-found skills, managing both blue and black and lamenting the lack of photographers there to prove it.

My day in Vermont was spent with my German travel companion who had been skiing since she was a fetus. A couple of quick tips and a chairlift ride to the top ended in tears and a chair lift ride back down. A morning session with my own ski instructor followed, but his nether regions were damaged when I attempted to snow plough to a stop, falling on my bum and head butting him between the legs in the process. I was not offered an afternoon lesson.

Having decided that alpine snow and Rachael don't mix, I spent the following decade in pursuit of summer pleasures, taking up scuba diving (OK, I did it once) and sipping melon daiquiris at five (which I did more than once). It wasn't until my mid-30s (ouch) that I was reintroduced to my old mate, this time in New Zealand's Southern Alps.

Cardrona is a novice's dream, wide ego runs under the chair lifts for posers to entertain the crowds above. No artificial snow meant little ice, and with a vista to salivate over from every angle on the mountain, this was one happy snow bunny in training.

France was my choice. I could hear piste, powder and pastis winding their ways into my future conversations. A chance pre-departure meeting with Jindabyne local and former ski champion Nolen Oadya ended in him warning me of the crevasses of Chamonix and the Valley Blanche, encouraging me to "settle my affairs" before departing Australia. His mate, Doug, told me tales of wind chill in Val D'Isere to freeze your face off and showed me the scars to prove it. Both said if in doubt ski like a dolphin, up and down, up and down. I wondered how a dolphin could find itself so far from sea.

Four combined weeks of skiing in the southern hemisphere and I was ready to go north.

Tignes has got a bad rap due to its obsession with concrete. A micro Hong Kong minus the harbour, it lacks the exposed wood and stone of its sister village, Val D'Isere, on the other side of the mountain. No doubt this is due to the original site of Tignes village now being underwater deep below the impressive hydroelectric dam at the entrance to the resort.

In 1952 the French national electricity company flooded the valley and took the original ski village with it. The "new" Tignes at 2200 metres is made up of three main villages - Tignes Le Lac, overlooking the lake where ice-diving is on offer during winter and beach soccer during summer, Le Lavachet, where private chalets and spa hotels feature, and Val Claret, where the bars and Blue Girl disco can be found.

It was time for a drink and the folk at Club Med Tignes were more than happy to oblige, dragging me to the water-hole of L'arobaza Café for some Euro muzak, after which I don't remember much.

Two days on the one green run of Coronet Peak followed by two more on the same at The Remarkables and I was convinced I was World Cup material. An invitation to ski with the Prime Minister of New Zealand at the opening of the Whitestar Express chairlift at nearby Cardrona resort followed and I just knew I was being groomed for international fare.

It was here I got the snow bug thanks to a private ski instructor, or sherpa as I referred to him, called Brett, who carried my boots, zipped my jacket, queue hopped at the lifts, poured my hot chocolate and burped me after lunch. Without him I may not have lasted my first full week.

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If only the run down to access the Whitestar Express was not so narrow, not so steep and not so blue then I may have been enjoying the podium pleasures with Zali and Ms Binning. Instead I came a cropper and missed my run with Helen the PM, although I kept my fellow journalists amused for days after as word got round about my triple summersault turn with twist, degree of difficulty 9.9, landing incomplete.



With year-round skiing, visitors to Tignes are serious, and when the sun rises the following morning I can see why. It is impossible to explore this terrain in less than a week, with over 300 kilometres of pistes, with 90 lifts including cable cars, funiculars through the mountain and gondolas above. For an Australian girl who came to skiing later in life, Espace Killy (the combined ski resorts of Val D'Isere and Tignes) was like being at an all you can eat buffet and not knowing where to start.

Thank god for "Aldo" from Evolution 2. Six feet of French-Italian ski instructor complete with green eyes and a killer smile. We could call him a cliché, but Aldo sounds better. He meets me at my hotel and I consider going back to bed for some instruction. Instead he jolts me out of my jetlag, hangover and altitude sickness by starting with a black run, although when I look on my map it is marked as green.

French ski instructors are more like mountain guides than teachers. They ski and you follow. They watch their silhouette to make sure they look good and you watch them because they look good. They order panache (the French equivalent of shandy), wine (the French staple) and chartreuse (the local liqueur) at lunch in one of the 10 on piste restaurants and you pay for the privilege of feeding them. They ski perfectly after said lunch and alcohol and you ski off behind a rock to vomit knowing they won't be watching because you are not their silhouette. I must have enjoyed it because I booked him again for Day Two to explore the glacial skiing of Le Grande



Marja Persson in the tasty stuff. PHOTO: TERO REPO

Motte at 3500 metres.

At the beginning of the ski season it's hard to talk powder and vertical drops when most of the snow is manmade and the vertical drops are yet to open. Glacial skiing is the best as it's a la naturale. As a novice, despite my ability to take on the black runs of Tignes without falling over, when the snow hits with a three-day blizzard it is like learning to ski all over again. Fifty centimetres of fresh powder means soft landings and a toothy grin and I now understand the dolphin reference. This is what I have come for and I don't want to leave. Thankfully I am not going very far.

Club Med Val D'Isere, on the other side of the mountain, is adults only, and after a recent refurbishment sports exposed wood and stone to make James Bond feel at home. Sadly, Aldo does not come with the accommodation, but Claude, Pierre, Thierry and Phillippe do. Ski classes for all levels are offered daily and included in the price, as are three meals a day

with as much wine as you can skoll, which keeps my tender Euro budget happy.

Val D'Isere is the village of champions, spawning Henri Orieller, the first French skier to win a Gold medal in 1948 at the St Moritz Olympics; the Olympic champion Goitschel sisters of the 1960s and Jean Claude Killy, who won three Gold medals in 1968 at the Grenoble Winter Olympics. During my brief sojourn I was fortunate to watch Franz Werner of Austria win the World Cup Men's Downhill races at La Daille in Val D'Isere. I have the photos to prove it, only problem is he's a blur.

OK, so I never went off piste, not intentionally anyway, but I sure developed an addiction that is going to be costly to feed. I have taken up French and left my ski boots with a friend in Paris as incentive to return before the season is out. Now when my school friends mention "poles", "bindings" and "whiplash" I know they're not talking an Eastern European bondage party for I, too, have basked in the glow of the entitled. \*

**WHERE TO STAY:** Club Med Tignes is ski in and ski out, inclusive of meals, ski pass, lessons and accommodation. Club Med Val D'Isere has the same deal but is Adults Only, which means no pesky kids fighting you for the buffet and loads of after-dinner merriment at the cosey après bar. [www.clubmed.com](http://www.clubmed.com)

**WHERE TO DRINK: Tignes:**

Val Claret – L@robaze for a French crowd, Grizzly's Bar for comfy couches, The Blue Girl for after hours.

Le Lac – Le Grotte du Yeti for Euro mix, Le Bec Rouge for convenience

Le Lavachet – Harri's, the only place to go

**Val D'Isere:**

Dick's T-Bar is a must, but beware the toffee English students who spit plums

Petite Danois for Danish beers

Le Chateau du Cret for five-course gastronomy at a price

**Technique:**

Join Evolution 2 for Technique Clinics, Private Lessons and Off Piste Adventures in the Tarentaise Valley.

[www.evolution2.com](http://www.evolution2.com)

\* Rachael Oakes-Ash flew Malaysian Airlines and Virgin Atlantic Upper Class to Europe – the on-board massage was needed on the return flight.