

LIKE A SKIING HOLIDAY. BU

Out of season, take two wheels up the ski lift, and prepare for a bone-rattling, brilliant downhill ride, says Matt Rudd

We had picked a blue run on the grounds that they're classed as "easy" and I'm classed as a "chicken". We could have gone for a red run ("difficult") or a black run ("very difficult"). After all, we have been riding bicycles since a very young age. We have tackled the mighty New Forest, the Brecons and, on quite an inclement day, the South Downs. But it was best, we thought after a long discussion on the flight to Geneva, to start on the safe side. This was the Alps. The Alps are quite steep. And we had nobody not to impress but ourselves.

Looking down from the chairlift, the route didn't look particularly, how do you say, gnarly. There were children on it, laughing and chatting. We would be fine.

We weren't fine. Two minutes down the track, what had been a manageable bit of forested fun dropped off a cliff before turning into an interlaced wall-of-death nightmare of mud, boulders and unexpected trees far, far below. Tim, who has banged his head quite hard numerous times in his middle-aged attempt to become a kite-surfer, just went for it. I got off and walked.

After a humiliating 10 minutes being overtaken by more children, I decided I would go for it as well. Once I'd found a stretch of track flat enough to get back on the bike without falling over the handlebars, I made a determined effort to expel all thoughts of spinal injury.

A long way below, I could see the Alpine resort we were aiming for. I tried to stay relaxed, tried to let the bike find its own path, tried to enjoy the beautiful scenery and pointed the front wheel in that direction. It worked. The theme tune to Hawaii Five-0 came into my head. This was it. For the first time in my life, I was mountain-biking properly. I was cool. I was quick. I was brave. I was, to steal from a handwritten note on the door of a cafe in Croyde, North Devon, living each day like my hair was on fire. And then a child overtook me on an open downhill at a conservative estimate of six times my speed. While chatting to another child. Who was a girl. Several decades later, we got to the bottom of the mountain and watched in silence as a British teenager who had tried to back-flip off a final, ridiculous jump waited for an emergency helicopter to fly him to a hospital to establish, first, that he had a brain and, second, whether he'd damaged it. After that, we decided to reassess.

Here were the facts. Although we'd previously felt reasonably competent at bicycling, it was now clear that we weren't. Everyone else had body armour on. They were all younger than us. We were out of our league. So I made some calls to the people who had set up the trip and explained that (a) when I had boasted about my mountain-biking prowess, I had been lying, and (b) we were pathetic. They advised us to avoid the downhill runs and stick to the cross-country routes until the next day, when a guide would be provided.

Completely different ball game. Oh, the joy of the cross-country routes. Same chairlift up, but instead of having to cycle off a cliff to get back down again, you could take a stunning, circuitous route around the mountains. Yes, we had to cycle up a few bits, but the main trajectory was definitely still down, albeit at a more middle-aged pace. This was the Portes du Soleil — the Swiss-French ski area around Morzine, Les Gets and Champéry that has led the way in converting its winter ski pistes to summer bike

pistes. In the past, it has attracted the adrenaline junkie. Now, they're trying to convince ordinary bikists that this might be fun. And after an over-exuberant start, I was beginning to think they might be onto something.

There are lots of good things about the whole skiing-but-with-a-bike-instead-of-skis approach to the Alps. First, it's a lot cheaper because you aren't going in winter. My three-day lift pass cost £40. A six-day pass would cost £74, a whopping £118 less than it would cost *en hiver*. And by the way, if you didn't have a mountain bike, it would be just 88p a day (including tennis and swimming pools — they're

And third, there is no snow. I know snow is great, but it's also not great. The mountains are much better off without it.

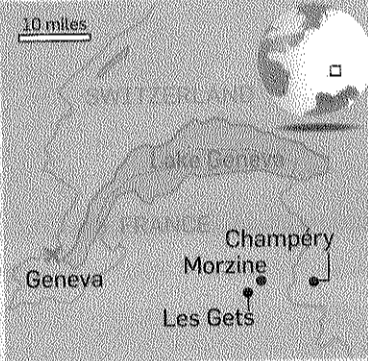
The only bad thing in an otherwise perfect holiday model is this whole can't-mountain-bike-properly issue. And that's where Jo came in. Day two and he was waiting at our hotel with some body armour. It was for us. He didn't need it. He was that cool. We explained the difficulties we had had the day before with riding a bike.

"This is the problem," he replied with a matter-of-fact Gallic shrug. "You wouldn't come skiing and not have any lessons. So why would you try it with mountain-biking?"

And then he proceeded to explain how and why cycling down an Alp is different from cycling along a New Forest. The gist of it all appeared to be that we should look into the middle distance rather than at the horrific boulders in the foreground, we should not brake if death feels imminent, and we should brake if it doesn't, and we should turn corners by turning our heads rather than actually steering. Something like that, anyway. All I can say is, it worked. We didn't die. Our confidence grew — and then shrank again when we asked Jo to list his mountain-biking injuries, but then grew again when we managed a proper blue downhill without crying. We pretty much conquered the Alps for the rest of the day. And when I say "rest of the day", I mean up until a very heavy Haute-Savoie lunch of cheese, bread, cheese, ham, cheese, cheese and a tiny bit of lettuce. And cheese. After which, we decided to say *au revoir* to Jo and to enjoy some wine in the sunshine instead. Just like you do, if you're honest, when you go skiing.

TRAVEL BRIEF

Getting there: Geneva airport is just over an hour from Morzine (lively French biker town) and 90 minutes



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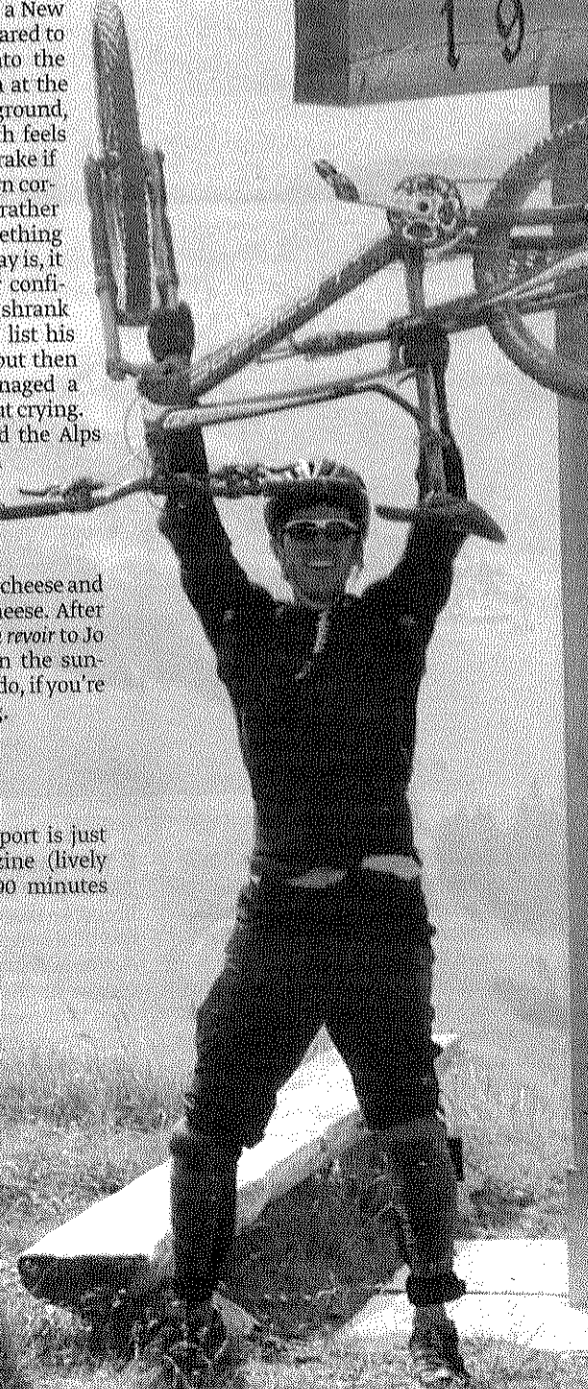
ST Watch a video of superfast, terrifying biking in the Alps: thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel

keen to attract the noncycling "plus-ones", as well). Hotels are cheaper, chalets are cheaper and flights are, on the whole, cheaper too. The only thing that isn't cheaper is the food, but the restaurants tend to wheel out very keenly priced *menus du jours*, which you won't find in deepest January.

Second, it's quiet. Apart from the occasional flying bike-child, you have the tracks, particularly the cross-country ones, particularly when you get up and away from the main stunt parks, to yourselves. The queues for the lifts were minimal if they existed at all.

from Champéry (quieter Swiss village). There are flights to Geneva from 20 UK airports, plus Dublin and Cork. Airlines to try include EasyJet (0843 104 5000, easyjet.com), British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com), Swiss (0845 601 0956, swiss.com) and Flybe (0871 700 2000, flybe.com). A shared transfer costs about £26 (en.portesdusoleil.com).

Where to stay: we did a two-centre stay with one night at the Hôtel Champs Fleuris in Morzine (00 33 4 50 79 14 44, hotel-champs-fleuris.com; doubles from £156, half-board) and one at the Hôtel Suisse in Champéry (00 41 24 479 0707, hotel-champery.ch; doubles from £128, B&B). If you're in a group — two families, say — a catered



TIN SUMMER. ON A BIKE

chalet is much cheaper, especially if they throw in the wine. Visit portdesuoleil.com for chalet options. **Tour operators:** FlowMTB (0845 474 2743, flowmtb.com) has catered weeks from £136pp, not including flights, but including advice and route maps to reduce the chance of bike-related death. Make sure you go armed with a guide, which I cannot recommend enough. Jo Pauly, our very patient tutor, offers private lessons for £35 an hour. A three-hour, £105 session at the start of the trip will make the world of difference. See ride-ability.com for further details.

SKI FREE. MORE SUMMER ACTIVITIES IN THE ALPS

Paragliding in La Plagne

You'll never forget your first tandem paraglide. With an instructor strapped to your back and a great big kite trailing behind you, soon your legs are whirring uselessly in empty space, 3,000ft above trees and rooftops. You'll come back down to earth screaming for more. Try it in the French resort of La Plagne, where Esprit (01252 618300, www.espritholidays.co.uk) has reductions on family weeks in its purpose-built hotel with pool: a week from August 6 starts at £879

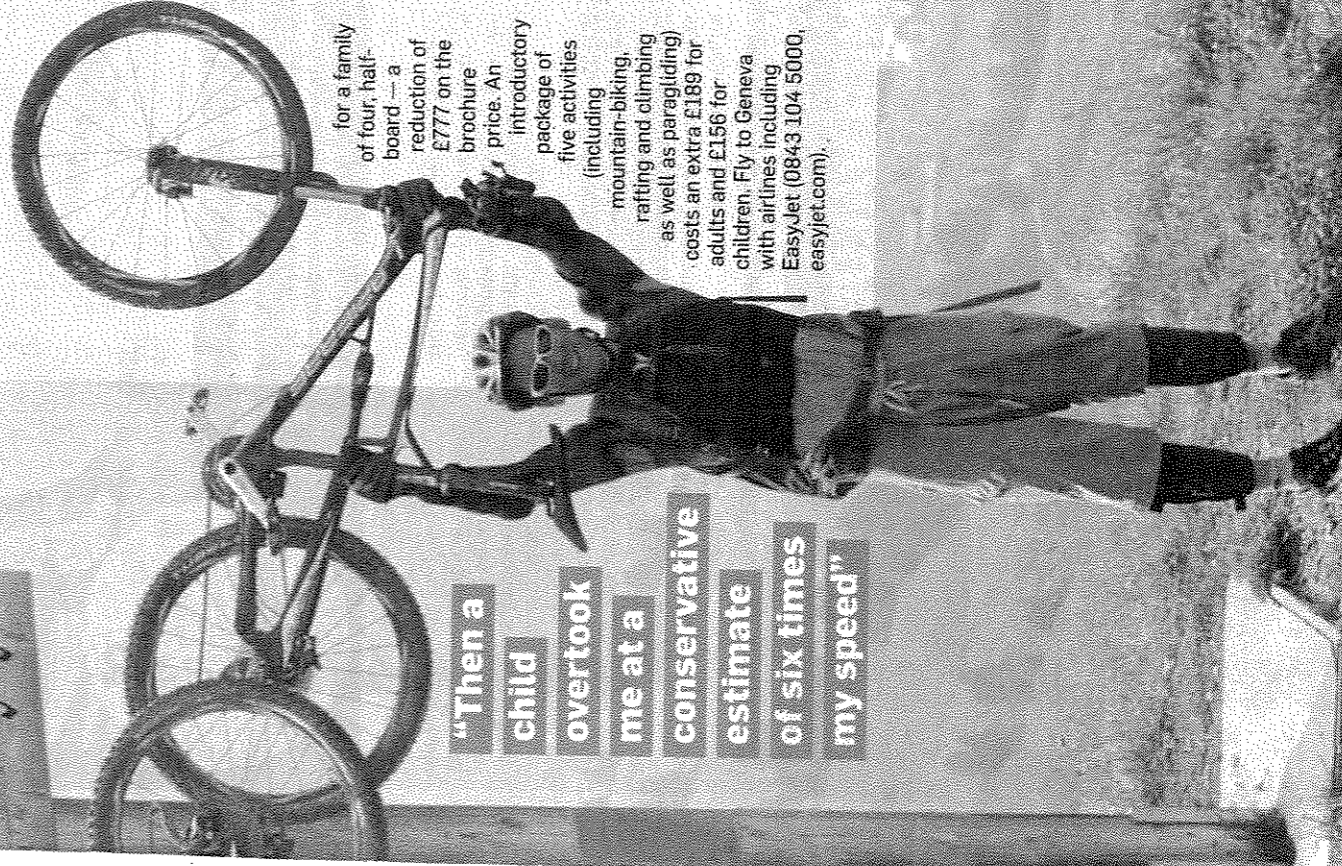
Freestyle skiing in Les Deux-Alpes

You can still ski in the Alps in the summer. A handful of resorts run the lifts on their glaciers, and Les Deux-Alpes — southeast of Grenoble, in France — is home to one of the most vibrant scenes: when the weather's good, there can be 4,000 people up there each morning. This is the time of year to target a particular part of your technique. Les Deux-Alpes is best suited to freestylers, thanks to the glacier's enormous and beautifully maintained terrain park. Marco

Cecamore of the ESI school (00 33-4 76 79 04 21, www.esi2alpes.com) can help hone anyone's acrobatic abilities; he offers open-air trampoline sessions back at the resort in the afternoon. The three-star Le Soulet/Oz hotel, with its outdoor heated pool, is the place to stay (04 76 79 24 69, le-soulet-oz.fr; doubles from £146, half-board). The train from London to Grenoble takes just over six hours; returns start at £108 with Rail Europe (0844 848 4070, raileurope.co.uk). The bus up to the resort costs £9.30 return.

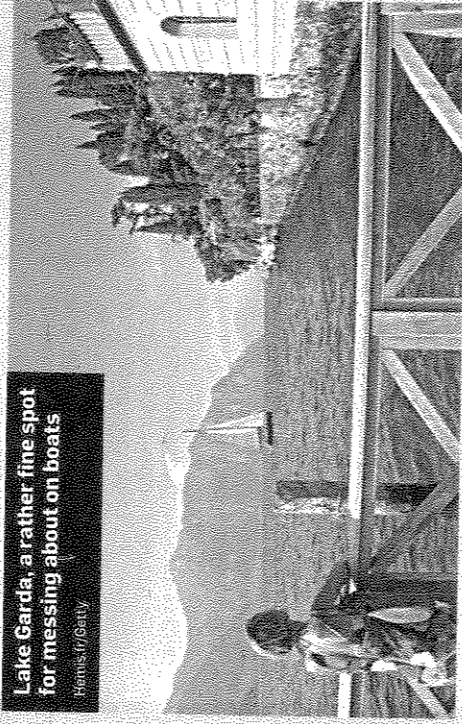
"Then a child overtook me at a conservative estimate of six times my speed"

for a family of four, half-board — a reduction of £777 on the brochure price. An introductory package of five activities (including mountain-biking, rafting and climbing as well as paragliding) costs an extra £189 for adults and £156 for children. Fly to Geneva with airlines including EasyJet (0843 104 5000, easyjet.com).



Lake Garda, a rather fine spot for messing about on boats

Photos: JF/Getty



next trip runs September 3-10. It costs from £1,799pp, full-board, including transfers, all fitness classes and consultations, but not flights. Fly to Innsbruck; airlines flying there include EasyJet (0843 104 5000, easyjet.com).

Golf in Kitzbühel

It's an odd thought, as you tee off at the start of the nine-hole Rasmushof golf course in Kitzbühel, Austria — the sun out, birds warbling, the mountains cloaked in their summer greens — that this is where the most fearsome downhill ski race in the world, the Hahnenkamm, comes to an end, with competitors hurtling towards the finish at 90mph, roared on by a crowd of nearly 50,000 spectators. In summer, the scene couldn't be more different: Kitz is cloaked in green, and is home to three top 18-hole courses. Green fees start at £22, and when you're not pacing the fairways, you can relax in some of Austria's best restaurants and spas. The four-star Hotel Rasmushof (00 43 5356 65252, www.rasmushof.at) owns the course of the same name. In August, doubles start at £174 a night, B&B. Fly to Innsbruck with EasyJet, as above.

Sailing on Lake Garda

Most sailors will tell you that mountain lakes are tricky places to sail on, thanks to fickle winds that ricochet off the cliffs and crags. Light airs are particularly frustrating — sometimes they seem to blow from every point of the compass in the space of 10 minutes. But that's not the case at the northern end of Lake Garda, Italy, where the spectacular local topography creates a reliable north-to-south wind in the mornings and a south-to-north wind in the afternoon. Here, among the marinas and sailing clubs, you'll find Sailing du Lac (00 39 0464 552453, sailingdulac.com), a school with a good range of beginner boats, and a programme of classes that start at £62pp for two hours' tuition. It's hard to think of a more inspiring location to steer your first course. With Crystal Summer (0871 230 8180, crystalsummer.co.uk), a week at the four-star Savoy Palace in August starts at £699pp, half-board, including flights and transfers. The hotel is a five-minute walk from the Sailing du Lac school.

Sean Newsom