



Resorts in the World

By Molly Headley Benkaci Published July 8, 2022

I grew up in Idaho, a state shot through with frosty peaks famously skied by Ernest Hemingway, Marilyn Monroe, and hundreds of Olympians. Yet, my only forays into the ski areas had occurred during summer months when my family hunted for mountain cool.

When I was nine, I began pestering my parents to take me to **Sun Valley**. I imagined myself atop a mountain with a pouffe of blonde hair and massive sunglasses à la Marilyn in the movie "Bus Stop." But for a family with three children already taking ballet, soccer, and theater, skiing wasn't in the budget.

So, we improvised. My sister and I toted our toboggans to the hill near our house and surveyed the terrain.

"What if you stand on two sleds like skis?" my sister suggested. I considered but decided it was best to try it out on our little brother first.

We placed his feet on the sleds, gave him a friendly push, and off he went in a flurry of yelps. When my mother saw my brother's ice-slapped cheeks after he finished face down in the center splits, the toboggans were put in the back of the closet and my skiing career was nixed before it started.

Little did I know back then that one day I would have the dubious honor of not skiing all over the world. From Austria's highest peaks to the depths of fondue pots throughout France, I've made my way from station to station sampling sunshine and blizzards, tartiflette, and schnapps. Yet, I've never learned how to ski. Below, I recount a few of my favorite non-skiing holidays for those of you who'd like to follow in my boot steps.

Not Skiing in Chambéry, France

When I was 28 I moved to France on a whim. I'd been living in L.A. for more than a decade and figured it was time for a change.

I met my future husband on my second day in Paris. Months later, I learned that he was an avid skier. And not only that, the entire country seemed to revolve around winter holidays. Come February, café talk turned from expos at the Musée d'Orsay to whose kids had earned their *flocons de neige* – the first of several badges French children get in ski school.

We decided to visit my boyfriend's brother (BB) in **Chambéry**, an alpine town known for strong cheese and cozy chalets. Upon arrival, I got the gastro, a stomach flu as seasonal in France as skiing. BB offered me a bottle of violently green liquid called "Genepi."

"Mountain medicine," he said, pouring a dose onto a sugar cube. "Glug, glug."

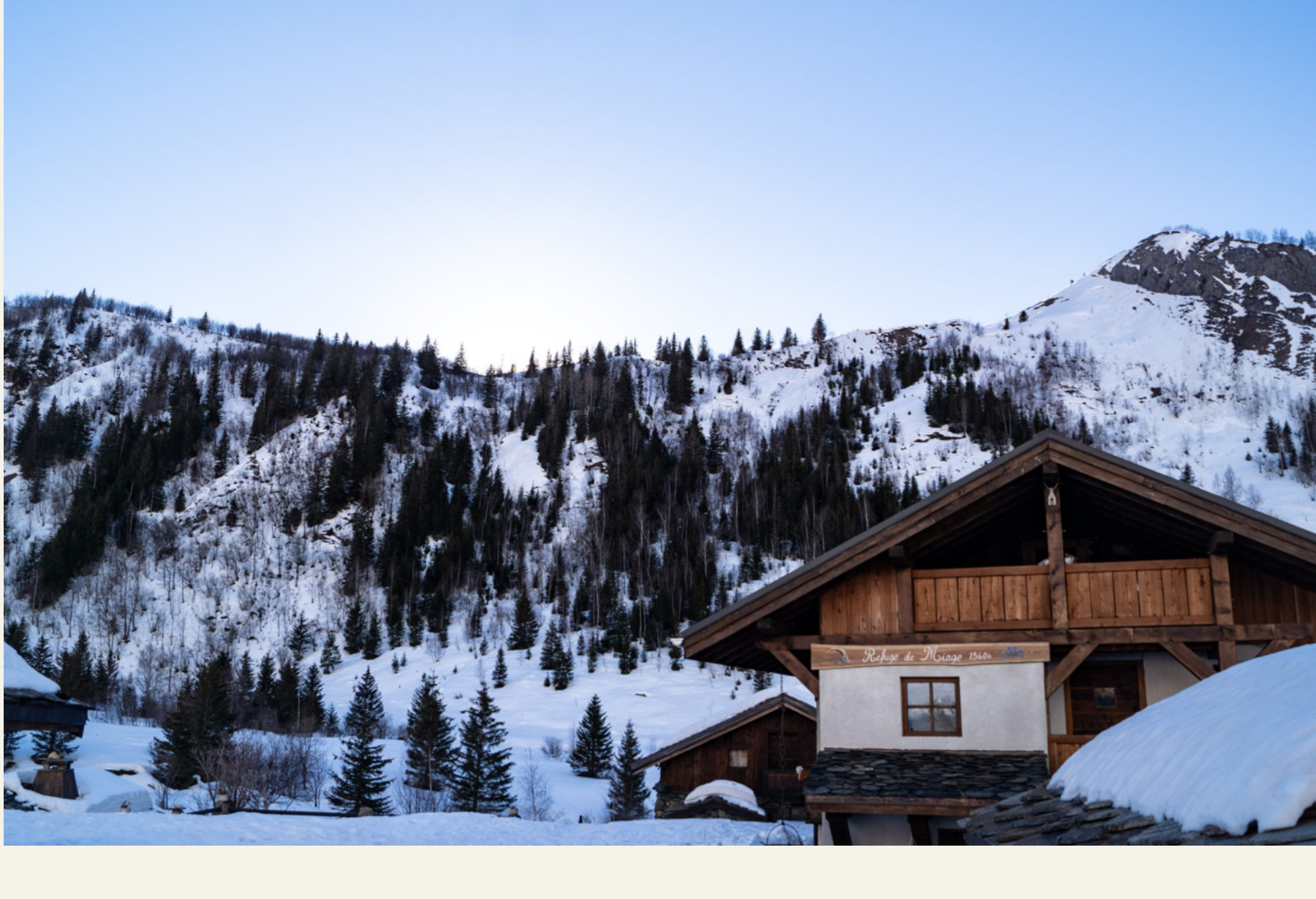
The liquor filled my throat like flaming grass. I spent the next day huddled over the toilet vomiting as my boyfriend and his family took to the slopes.

Two days and five pounds later, my boyfriend pronounced that if I was going to live in France, I'd have to learn how to ski. I let him push me into boots that seemed to require boneless feet and into my first pair of skis.

To his credit, he managed to teach me the basics. Snowplow, turning, how to place my skis like *french fries* or *pizza slices*. As a lifelong foodie, skiing was starting to make sense.

Amazingly, I enjoyed myself...until he decided I'd advanced enough to hang with the cool kids. He helped me onto the chair lift, where I gazed at the miracle of the mountains and the sunshine that seemed to warm everything except the snow.

"I'll guide you," he said when the lift touched down. He stood with his back to me, my skis between his, and placed my hands on his hips as if we were going to do "the locomotion" down the mountain. All went well until I lost control. My reaction was to let go and squat, thinking I could just sit and catch my breath. Instead, physics prevailed. My compact position shot me out from between his legs, gathering cannonball speed as I went. Just as I neared the end of the slope, coming up fast on a group of kids, I saw a snowbank and launched myself sideways, effectively ending my first day learning how not to ski.



Not Skiing in La Plagne, Les Deux Alpes and Arc 1800, France

Over the next few years, I practiced not skiing in **Les Deux Alpes** due to an injury prior to our arrival (I slipped in the train station carrying a cup of hot chocolate and prioritized my drink over my knees.) I even took an actual lesson in **La Plagne**, where the militant instructor spent thirty minutes explaining *the theory* of skiing to me and another thirty having me walk sideways up and down the bunny hill without allowing me to ski at all. She charged me 80 euros for the pleasure.

But things had changed by the time I made it to **Arc 1800**, a Savoyard village facing the fog-kissed peaks of Mont-Blanc. I'd just had my first child and somehow my husband had convinced me that a ski holiday was exactly what I needed (blame the hormones.)

This time, I put my foot down. The birth had been difficult and I was in no shape for more haphazard nonsense on the slopes.

I took the week on glorious sunny terraces stroking the perfect curves of my son's face as *les pistes* glistened in the background. Rather than suspicious glances as I strolled into cafes with no ski gear, I was met with that rare French treat – smiles from strangers.

I'd finally found the answer to the perfect ski holiday – always having a baby strapped to my chest.



Not Skiing in Les 3 Vallées, France and Flachau, Austria

However, babies eventually get bigger. They stop being content to merely coo at strangers in fondue restaurants. Eventually, they even want to strap their feet to death sticks and plummet down hills themselves. *Quelle horreur!*

My husband signed the kids up for their ski baptism in **Les 3 Vallées**, known for the famed stations of **Courcheval** and **Méribel**. They were so proud to put on their tiny skis that I couldn't help but cheer them on. A toenail injury I'd incurred while vacuuming kept me off the slopes.

A few years later we decided to visit our Austrian friends in **Flachau**, a village in the Salzburg province. I'd planned on simply trolling the terraces in search of the best *glühwein* (mulled wine) but somehow I found myself once again at the base of a hill with skis attached to my feet. My child psychologist friend had offered to teach me and I figured if she could calm complicated kiddos she could help me get past my ski phobia.

Her patience was exactly what I needed. By afternoon, I'd progressed from the snowplow to taking the chairlift up the mountain to meet the others for schnitzel. High on my minuscule success (and blueberry schnapps), I was easily talked into trying out a more advanced red slope.

I started down slowly but this was a different beast than what I'd encountered below. The compact snow was like kryptonite to my pizza slice superpower. I slid faster. Too fast. In desperation, I threw myself backward, landing directly on my tailbone. Pain shot through my legs and up my spine but I couldn't just lay there moaning limply. People were torpedoing down the ice highway in my direction. My friend tried to help me up but I took her out too.

Our kids swooped past our pile of limbs, laughing and pointing their little gloved fists in our general direction. I gave up. I unlatched my skis, headed to the side of the slope, and slid down the rest of the way on my bruised butt, knowing that no matter how hard I tried there would always be a seven-year-old who was better than me.

The next day I stood on the top of the bunny slope surrounded by sobby toddlers and madcap six-year-olds. I was reminded of a line in a poem by George Sterling:

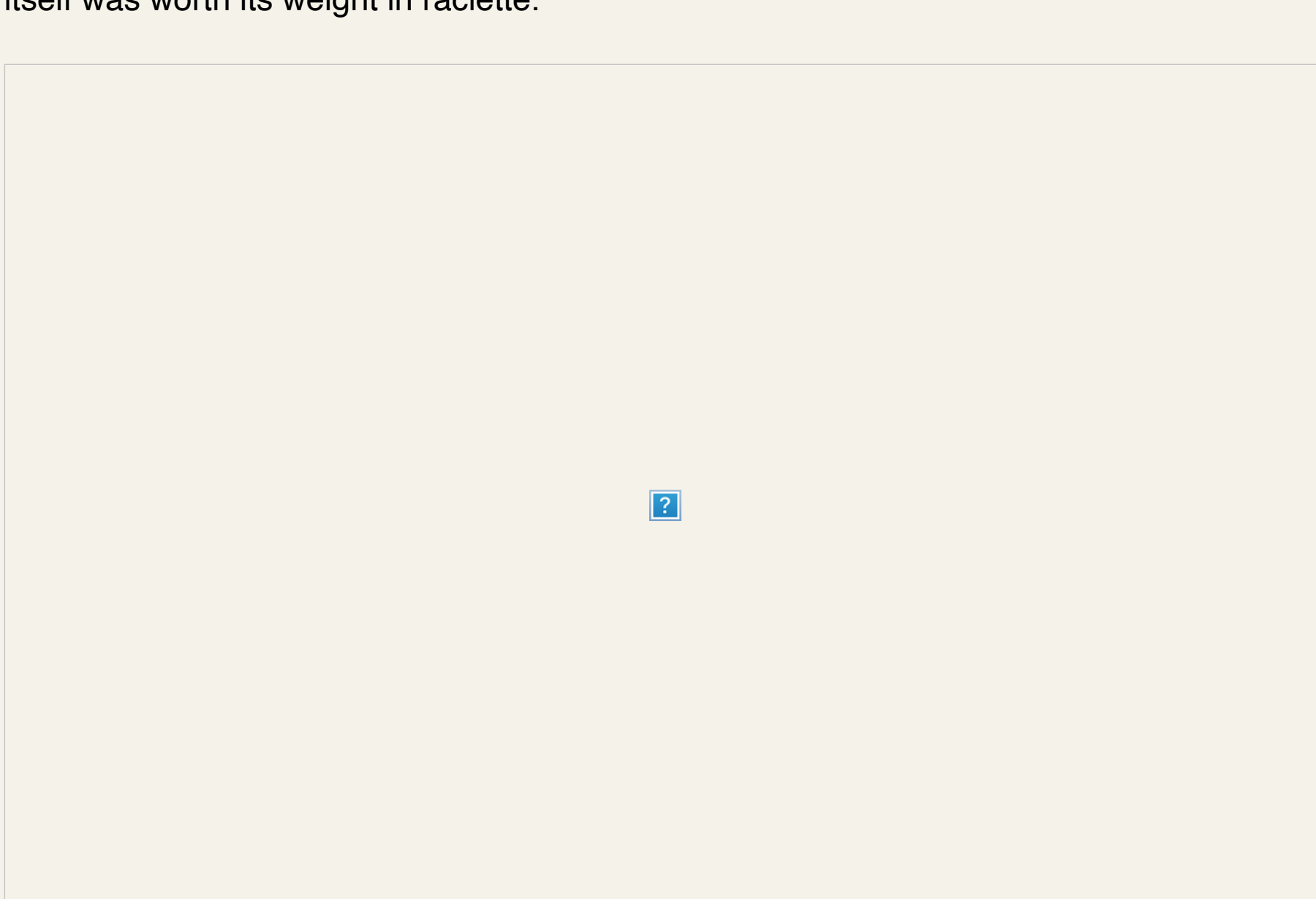
"The mountain seems no more a soulless thing,

But rather a shape of ancient fear..."

A fear I had to get over. I pulled down my goggles and channeled my inner Marilyn.

"You got this, Molls," I whispered. "Death or glory." And I was off.

It was equal parts terrifying and ridiculous as miniature Olympians in the making sped past by my loopy curves and sloppy snowplow, but I was finally willing to try. And that in itself was worth its weight in raclette.



RECOMMENDED READING

Nicole Forrest
The Pursuit of Self on South Africa's Spectacular Otter Trail

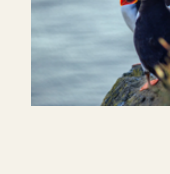
Lisa Templeton
Two Hours From: Reykjavic

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