

# FROM ROES TO RICHES

When a rather pleasant, faceless voice aged twenty-seven says over the phone that he would rather meet to talk about his company than send a load of characterless bumph through ERIL Mail, you're well on the way – especially on a Friday evening – to believing what the brochures say about friendly, personal service. Especially when that entails a private vat of the mellow Deutscher stuff in Sloane's Wine Bar.

Comfortably settled between the jolly bulk of the second-named businessman and the attentive, Michael York-type freshness of Simon Bladon, I began to patch together the young life of Bladon Lines Travel, now a confident 14 month-old beginning to poke its deft little fingers into the snowpies of the ski world.

Bladon and Lines, I rapidly detected, are just the sort of fellows to take their non-pro British brethren skiing. In their own words, "Neither of us is in any way fanatical, indeed we are both the sort of skiers to make foreigners proud to be foreign. We did, however, recognize that for people wanting stimulation rather than relaxation on hols., skiing was the answer.

What had prompted them to quit their 'nice jobs in the City' (merchant banking, no less) to pin their hopes upon the vagaries of the snow? The age-old Tory addiction to doing your own thing in a capitalistic manner of course. Bladon Lines is the third of their joint enterprises since the birth of their friendship at Exeter University in 1971. The first two concerned dragging the

Rowing Club out of, and back into, obscurity, and coming to doctrinal blows with the leftist undergradacy of their Alma Mater. It hardly came as a surprise, therefore, to hear that Bladon Lines, the up-market chalet company, intended to be "providers of ski holidays to the Nobility and Gentry".

Their reason for forging a package a cut above those of all the other companies was, as much as to keep up the side, in order to avoid the strong competition in the middle of the chalet market "where they all seem to be doing their best to produce an identical product." In which areas, I asked, had they managed to alter the chalet party stereotype? The answer came promptly: food, wine and accommodation. Mark elaborated:

"Of the intended improvements to "The standard package" the easiest was the wine. We went to the local booze shop and, by paying about 30% more than the cost of the cheapest plonk, found good red and white wines that did not taste like vitriol and were drinkable from the first glass rather than the third. The formula seems to have worked because, whilst few of our guests took to swilling it around their glass, drawing a deep breath of its nectarean fumes over their taste buds and declaring that 'The bouquet greets the nose like an old friend', it was certainly consistently mentioned in letters of praise.

"The second of the three improvements – getting good chalets – is principally a function of how hard you try and how much rent you pay. However, it also involves finding the scuggy old matrons who seem to own all chalets. Having located them you

then take them out to dinner, gaze into their eyes and tell them how young they are looking. This is actually quite fun and when it isn't I just tell myself that it will all be good practice for handling a mother-in-law (if and when etc.). Again, the formula seems to be working judging by the enthusiasm with which the properties are getting booked up again for this season.

"Improving the quality of the food is, of course, not just a function of the size of the budget which you give the girls. It is really more a question of making the most of the raw materials available and getting the right girls to prepare it. . .

The success of a chalet party inevitably depends upon the girls and there's much truth in that old adage, "Everyone is human", these stalwart upholders of the Cordon Bleu tradition included. A four-and-a-half month season of shopping, cooking, cleaning and being forever "naice", is a tall order for anyone. So as to avoid the droops in one or all of these areas, Bladon Lines do a sort of facelift operation halfway through the season, giving their girls a welcome change of resort scene.

Having thus achieved what they set out to do one lunchtime "while having a Roes on Toast from Mary in Sweetings in the City", Messrs Bladon and Lines seem set to make a success of their latest joint venture – motivated, they confide, by mammon. But job satisfaction, in terms of that warm glow resulting from favourable customer reports, is no less a motivation than jingling pockets.

Judy Brown

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There is nothing exotic or strange or mysterious about the 'new' sport of cross country skiing. It is just that people have short memories. Some 3,000 years ago an itinerant artist in stone drew a picture of people going for some kind of religious walk on skis and some other careless skiers threw their skis away in a bog in Sweden where, not so long ago they were found again - owner unknown. Such were the beginnings of skiing and so it continued for many years until it migrated into the Alps and suffered an irreversible transmutation into 'skiing'. From this moment on there were two kinds of skiing, nordic, cross country, skinny, ski rambling skiing and 'real skiing' which cost a bomb, required incredibly ungainly equipment, became a major source of self-inflicted injury and raised blood pressure due to crowds, costs, ill manners, money, lift passes, ski schools, crowds and still more money.

You can't fool all the skiers all the time. The wise, calm and adventurous have rediscovered nordic, cross country skiing and all the peace of mind and body that comes with leisurely walks across a snowy countryside, totally oblivious of crowds and lifts and accident recovery and rescue. It is high time to stop thinking that those skiers who wander off in light knickerbockers and a pair of pencil-thin skis attached to football boots by means of a thing that looks rather like a mouse-trap and is called a ratrap are something peculiar. Nordic skiing, ski wandering, cross country skiing, has suffered from a distorted public image for a very long time and, unfortunately is threatened with a new one. For sales purposes, and other reasons, it is publicised, rather like jogging, as being healthy. And that is enough to put off most holidaymakers. It also advertises expensive specialist equipment and clothes - which, for the most part are quite unnecessary, tending to portray the activity as being limited to measured oval racetracks of frightening horizontal length.

In actual fact, cross country skiing is nothing more than taking the dog and the family for a country walk, wearing very light skis. It takes about half-a-day to learn, even if you have never been on skis before and the equipment weighs, skis, boots, poles and all, about as much as a single pair of downhill ski boots. You can buy the lot for about £50 and last year Tor Line even gave the equipment away if you went on one of their Swedish cross country holidays.

The technique consists of walking. You push backwards with one ski, pull forward on the opposing ski pole and slide; as the slide slows down, you do the same with the other foot, leg and arm. Sometimes you stand still and push backwards with both skipoles and sometimes you alternate these two methods. Together they produce a slow walk which will cover 7 miles in the hour with no effort. Because the soles now have special 'nowax' preparation which lets the ski slide forward but not backwards, going uphill is simple - you just slide up. Going downhill is a bit more difficult and being able to do a simple stem helps. But most of the time you are in tramline tracks and can just let the skis run.

The real problems downhill skiers have when first trying cross country concern the fact that, quite apart from the unaccustomed lightness, their heels are completely free. (As they were for downhill until safety bindings were invented in the early 1950s.)

So, to keep your heels in contact with the



skis, when sliding downhill, you sort of squat on your skis. It works very well.

There are no age limits to nordic skiing; in Norway or Sweden, on any weekend, you can see a whole family out - granny and mother and father, children and the baby on a sledge - complete with large rucksack and primus cooker and a reindeer skin to sit on. You can stroll for an hour or two, or you can ski briskly for a day and cover 30 miles; you can stay on the marked and measured trails that are to be found in every ski resort in the world now, or you can set off on one of the innumerable cross-country trails in the Auvergne or the Swiss Jura, New England or the Telemark in Norway.

Or you can go to a resort like Geilo in Norway where ample downhill facilities offer both varieties of skiing, a fact that would be much appreciated by younger members of a

family. Many of the more traditional Alpine resorts have made something of a speciality of cross country skiing; foremost of these is Seefeld, a mere half-hour from Innsbruck and within easy commuting distance of the Olympic downhill stadium of Lizum and the popular resort of Igls. St Moritz and Davos have magnificent cross country terrain and the long high-level circuit at Crans-Montana takes a lot of beating. The French Pyrenees have long been a very special hide-out for cross country skiers and can offer some first rate downhill skiing.

For those who have fallen into the trap of once trying this oldest of ski disciplines, beware - you will become an addict for life and a cross-country skier's life is very much longer than that of a downhill-onlier.

Mark Heller



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