

# FALLLINE

## ON SKIING At Your Leisure

Americans and Europeans view skiing—and life—differently. So what's better: good times or busy ones? By James Jung

**LAST FALL, I QUIT** my Manhattan job to become a full-time ski instructor. I'd recently turned 25 and was hitting that pivotal period when a 9-to-5 job turns into a career. Faced with an existential fork in the road, I did what any young, skiing-addicted guy with a propensity to procrastinate would do: I took a six-month hiatus from corporate culture and headed for the mountains.

I'd already put in three seasons as a weekend instructor in Vermont, but my stressed-out clients often made me feel like I was still trapped in Manhattan. So I didn't relocate to a U.S. mountain town to become a ski bum. I relocated to a European mountain town to become a ski bum.

There was family precedent. My father taught skiing in St. Moritz, Switzerland, in the 1970s. As a kid, I was fascinated by his tales of the glamorous alpine life, so heading there seemed as good of a choice as any.

Upon arriving in my new Swiss home, I was struck by European vacationers' relaxed mindset. I taught full-day private lessons out of the plush Badrutt's Palace

Hotel, and though my pampered clients were sometimes demanding, they exuded a laid-back vibe. Instead of obsessively racking up runs on their altimeter watches and fretting over where to find three inches of fresh powder, my clients approached their ski day with the goal of relaxing. They meandered onto the slopes by midmorning, lingered over a bottle of wine at lunch and generally enjoyed a carefree, if also slightly buzzed, afternoon of skiing. They reveled in the natural beauty of the mountains and didn't feel our American compulsion to cram the ski day with bell-to-bell action. Like sharks in the open sea, Americans seem to have a need to keep moving in order to keep their ski vacation alive.

For most Europeans, the American idea of a "ski vacation" is oxymoronic: rising early to catch first chair, short lunch breaks scarfing down food carried on a tray, followed by marathon afternoon runs. And don't get a Euro skier started on our version of après-ski: a few beers followed by quiet nights at the condo and early bedtimes instead of dining, drinking and dancing. *Mein gott*, where's the vacation in that? When I'd escort my clients back to the Palace each afternoon, they'd already be gearing up for the night ahead. And it wasn't only at swank St. Moritz. During my travels throughout the Alps, I witnessed the same attitude at resorts big and small, from Sestriere to l'Alpe d'Huez. Europeans take ski vacations to relax, hang out with friends and enjoy life. It just happens that this takes place on snow.

Or not. Euro skiers' commitment to a good time while on a ski holiday often comes at the expense of, well, skiing. By the time my clients finished sleeping in and wiggling into their one-piece ski suits, it was usually late morning, and any fresh snow had been tracked out. After a few runs, everyone would

head to lunch and a glass of wine; the day's skiing would be virtually over and the only thing left on the horizon was—yup—après ski! For all the fun I had, I missed the pleasure of long, American-style days of endless turns.

What I realized at the end of my six months in the Alps was that Euros view leisure time differently than Americans. Their mission: to relax. Our mission: to experience. But then it hit me. Maybe it's not that European skiers are innately more carefree than their American counterparts, but simply that the Euros are always going "on holiday." The average number of vacation days in France: 37. In Germany: 35. And let's not even discuss Italy (*eight weeks*). The average annual vacation time for Americans: 13 days.

So if Hans spends too much time in the disco and not enough on the slopes, he always has next month to set things straight. Americans, on the other hand, are always watching the clock because they're always punching one. If you're taking one ski vacation a year, first chair is a sound strategy.

This got me thinking. I Googled life expectancy and found the Swiss and the Austrians are near the top of the global list at a robust 80 years, while restless Americans come in at about 77 years. That gives the Swiss and Austrians three more years on snow than the rest of us. I think I'll take a few extra days away from the office this winter to ponder that reality on the slopes. ♦

