

Learn to ski in just



■ **SKIING IN UTAH:** The resort of Alta is said to have, 'the greatest snow on earth' and it is not far from where the Sundance Film Festival is held

I CAN'T ski. Never could. But when a recent business trip to the United States offered two days downtime, I set myself a challenge: learn to ski in 48 hours. The trip was to Utah, home to the Sundance Film Festival, an important event founded by actor Robert Redford. I was there for the screening of our documentary about the Manchester underworld, a unique insight into one of Britain's most notorious crime families. The festival hub was Park City, more of a quaint frontier mountain village, which shakes off its sleepy status for the fortnight that is Sundance. Celebs were aplenty, Justin Timberlake sipped a latte in a pavement diner, actor John Cusack spoiled my view of an excellent film about *The Clash*, redhead rocker Jane Kelly belted Boni Jovi covers from the outdoor stage, while Bono jetted in to catch a couple of movies.

But there is only so much glitz a man can take, so after a few days, I headed further into the mountains where the snow was even deeper. My destination was the prestigious ski resort of Alta where this winter the snow depth was over five feet. Last year was double that, some blame global warming, but still the snow was hugely impressive. But then everything is bigger in America.

DAY ONE – Checking in at Alta's Rustler Resort, a beautiful wooden structure that tends to attract couples and groups passionate about their ski-ing. Interestingly snowboarding is banned here as are billboards along the slopes.

The idea is to offer pure, natural ski-ing and nothing else. They call it "The Greatest Snow

destination UTAH BY DAVID MALONE

on Earth" and they may well be right. Having never skied before, and unsure as to whether this was to be a one-off experience, I decided against buying equipment, opting to hire instead. A friend also lent me a pair of ski pants, while I bought a jacket, hat and gloves at a half price sale in Belfast. On arrival, the resort was willing to hire skis, poles and boots. These are professionally adjusted according to your weight and experience. Any novice is recommended to have at least a couple of private lessons before being let loose on the slopes.

My guide was Angie, a wonderfully patient woman who makes the valid point that this sport is all about technique. When starting

out, the worst thing you can do is go fast and lose control. But speed was not to be this man's problem.

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Within ten seconds of my first ski lesson, I was flat on my backside, face up in the snow. The humiliation continued on arrival at the nursery slopes where the average age of the students was about six. They were of course fearless and brilliant. But thanks to Angie's tuition, I was soon as good as the tiny tots, capable of turning left, right and even stopping. It was time to move on up. The chair lift to the upper slopes was at first quite nerve racking. Seated two abreast high above pristine snow-clad forests over a huge drop to nothing, the experience was topped by the sight of porcupines feeding in the pine trees below. At the top, getting off looks easy, but for this

novice, it took a dozen tumbles before I mastered the technique. Now we were at almost 10,000 feet and could feel distinctly light headed. But after some practice, and under Angie's watchful eye, I zig-zagged down the mountain, falling occasionally but at every run gaining in confidence. At the end of the day, my legs ached, I was exhausted, but I could ski, not very well but I could ski nonetheless. Back at the Rustler Lodge, I joined a group of other skiers in the outdoor pool, a really special spot with very warm water, steam rising into the cold air and surrounded on all sides by the snowy mountains. That evening, I was shattered and chose a cosy bed over a night's partying with the rest.

48 magical hours



■ **PRISTINE PISTE:** The resort of Alta is designed for the purists and below David Malone on the piste

DAY TWO – Dawn and could barely get out of bed. All my leg muscles were aching and my left knee had seized up. But after a few gentle warm-up exercises and a couple of painkillers, I was good to go. Personal fitness is important in this activity. That is not to say that you have to be super-fit, but at the same time severe couch potatoes would find this difficult, impossible, dangerous or all three. In preparing for this trip, I found that occasional cycling built up both stamina and leg muscles, with the added bonus of getting to work for free.

A couple of hours later, I was back at ski school, listening to Angie's patience and

encouragement. With practice, I was able to achieve more with less effort, and began to understand how expert skiers make it look so easy. The slopes are divided into three categories, green runs are the easiest, blues are for intermediate skiers, while black runs are for daredevils. European slopes however have a different colour coding system. Saying goodbye to Angie, I made my way down a few green runs and even a couple of blues, each time gaining in confidence and ability. At the end of the day, and after 48 hours, I was not a great skier, but I can count this as one of the skills I now hold, all be it at a very basic level.



FACT FILE

Getting there: The region is served by Salt Lake City International Airport, which unfortunately has no direct flights from the UK or Ireland, though there are rumours of a service for next winter. Connect at Denver, San Francisco, Dallas or New York using Delta, United, Aer Lingus, Continental or BA. Prices from around £330 depending on season.

Staying there: There is a wide variety of accommodation in Alta ranging from dormitory to deluxe. Check out www.alta.com. Rustler Lodge (001 888 532 ALTA), while quite expensive with rooms upwards of \$95/night is all-inclusive and attracts a regular loyal following.

Ski costs: Ski pass costs US\$52/day, under £30 which allows access to all lifts and slopes. Private lessons cost US\$240 (£130) per half day with group lessons a lot cheaper at US\$45 (£25). Medical insurance with winter sports cover is essential.

More info: Ski Utah www.skiutah.com is a very helpful site with detailed information on the region.

SHORT HAUL

By
James
Stinson



Gap years for oldies

MORE people than ever are taking gap years and a growing number are professionals who want time off work, according to new figures from the organisation, Year Out Group. While the traditional post-A-level gap year remains the most common trip, its popularity has waned. Now nearly a quarter of those heading for a foreign adventure are older than 25. Results also suggest that there is a growing trend towards 'gap months' and sabbaticals.

Some 60 per cent of those taking gap years are women. They are more likely to volunteer for work abroad, while males prefer to go on courses and cultural exchanges.

Take a mud bath

IF you're stuck somewhere without any after-sun lotion, don't despair. There are lots of treatments that travellers swear by. Some recommend smearing honey on to the damaged skin, or covering it with slices of avocado or cucumber.

Most important, as with any kind of burn, is to cool the skin down. Ignore people who suggest a hot bath and particularly those who advocate adding cider vinegar to it! Instead bathe in cool water.

Even applying ice can help if it's not too painful. Some recommend adding oatmeal to your cold bath, saying it has soothing properties. Or, if you have them, try adding pure lavender, chamomile or peppermint essential oils to the bath. It's important to rehydrate the body too, by drinking water or mint tea, or by eating a high-water content fruit, such as grapefruit or watermelon.

If you want to buy a suntan lotion with natural instead of man-made ingredients, look for one with extracts of the edelweiss plant, which grows at high altitudes and has high concentrations of natural UV light-absorbing chemicals.

In his new book, *Born Survivor*, explorer Bear Grylls, recommends a simple solution if caught in a survival situation without suntan cream at all: smear any uncovered skin in mud. *Born Survivor* is published by Channel 4 Books at £18.99.

Book your parking online

WE'VE covered this before but it's such good advice I think it's worth repeating especially with the Easter holiday season nearly upon us – book your airport parking in advance. The savings for doing so at Belfast International Airport can be significant – as much as 33 per cent cheaper than turn up and pay prices.

If you go the airport website (belfastairport.com), you can check out in advance where you should park and how you should book to get the best value. Go to the 'Guide To The Airport' section and then 'Getting to the Airport' and then to 'Car parking'.

Don't use the Short-Stay car park for anything other than picking up passengers. The Long Stay (or holiday car park as readers may better know it) is cheapest for all trips when booked in advance.

Find out more at www.qparkni.com or call 0870 195 9689. Also check out www.mccausland.co.uk (028 9442 2022) and www.cosmoairport.co.uk (028 9442 2777).