

# Me, Matilda and an empty mountain...

Former England rugby player **Will Greenwood** sees his autistic daughter find her skiing feet on a family holiday in the Alps

**W**e might approach most family occasions with the added challenge of having a child with special needs – our

daughter, Matilda, has autism – but our ski holiday starts much like anyone else's: panic buys, four aborted online check-ins, my wife, Caro, sneaking four litres of Rebel Kitchen Mylk into the luggage (certain items are non-negotiable...). Travelling with my family and my eldest son Archie's friends, Locky and Mark, I decide I am more likely to hamper the process than assist, so I escape to Maidenhead Rugby Club for a gutsy win against Camborne in the driving rain. Back at home, the three teenage lads have organised rooms in the chalet in advance and have commandeered the ground floor. Rocco, nine, follows the teenage trio around like a disciple. We genuinely couldn't be more excited about a family holiday. It's lights out at 11.30pm for a 4am alarm call, but the lads are still chatting at midnight!

Having travelled with touring parties of 50 in my rugby days, I am strict on

timings and passport etiquette. It's the only way I know, and a little too David Brent for Caro – but subsequently we arrive without incident. At The Peak Chalet in Sainte-Foy, the team are ready for us, with ski passes and a large bowl of spaghetti carbonara with a twist from Kiwi Luke, our chalet chef. He might not have a Michelin star, but he should have – this meal is a taster of the great things to come, from his hearty breakfasts to melt-in-your-mouth afternoon cakes and incredible evening feasts.

But for now... here comes the trauma. Getting your children ready for skiing ranks alongside going to the North Pole, climbing Kilimanjaro or winning a World Cup. But the pain is worth it. We manage to grab two hours on the nursery slopes and then attempt a blue run – cue falls galore, and smiles everywhere. No names mentioned, but we picked one of Archie's mates out of the slope netting five times in the first afternoon. Our family were as happy as we have been in a year.

At 5pm it's cake time, and our instructors come to say hello. Colin (I have never before met a Frenchman called Colin) is going to be looking after Matilda. Her autism is discussed and met with immediate recognition and understanding – and no small amount of relief for me and Caro.

Then we settle into our first holiday evening. Is it too obvious that the dads went to the pub for an hour while the young lads smashed the Xbox? After drinks and canapés at 7pm, we were exhausted by 9.30pm, kids included. At this point, I allow myself to think that The Peak in Sainte-Foy might be the best holiday we have ever had – after just six hours...

But there is more to come. On our first full day I rip the curtains back – and it's snowing,

snowing, snowing... adding to the already plentiful stock. Fresh powder – the skier's dream.

All 14 of our tour party are out and about. Colin teaches Matilda on a one-to-one basis. Convincing her to slow down is the biggest challenge – Matilda loves thrills. Rocco and some of the lads have an instructor from Ecole du Ski Francais for three hours, as they do each morning. The afternoons are to be all about family time and skiing together.

We meet for the perfect ski lunch at Colennes, a mountainside restaurant. Buckets of pasta and lasagne for the children and tartiflette by the cartload for the seniors set us up for what turns out to be a tough afternoon with a white-out and visibility down to just a few feet. The snow is perfect, but it's tough to ski when you can't see the humps and lumps ahead – a steep learning curve for all of us.

Another, more pleasurable, discovery is of the absolute joy of The Peak's steam room, sauna and hot tub to welcome the aching joints, if you can squeeze in past the youngsters, that is! A hot tub with a cold beer is not to be scoffed at. We're starting to carve out a routine, and from 5pm there is always a couple of hours to chill. On this first evening I want to read my book, but I go to the pub... and get back in time for a spectacular supper of beef eye fillet, sweet potato and mushroom ragu with a pancetta crisp. It's lights out early for everyone, so we're ready to go big again tomorrow.

If skiers like to see snow dumping down, then there is only one thing better; a Blue Bird. A day where the orange glow of the sun appears over the mountain tops with the sky a crystal blue signalling an utterly sensational weather day with glorious skiing conditions. We hit that jackpot. The first lift has hardly fired up and we are pushing each other out of the way to head up the mountain.

Sainte-Foy has only four lifts, so

Many turn up their noses at this little resort, but the slopes are all yours and there are no lift queues

**HAVING A BLAST**  
Will and family enjoying a meal in Sainte Foy, below, and getting to grips with the slopes, right



- ◆ Will Greenwood was a guest of Première Neige and stayed at the Peak Chalet at Sainte-Foy-Tarentaise. From £1,100 per person per week, half-board (0131 510 2525; premiere-neige.com).
- ◆ Ski instruction was through ski-school-saintefoy.co.uk and saintefoy.evolution2.com
- ◆ Ski hire was courtesy of SKISET Sainte-Foy Sports (skiset.co.uk).
- ◆ Première Neige is offering a £100pp discount to all Telegraph readers at The Peak for the rest of this season.

# WINTER

many turn up their noses at this little resort. What it means is that the slopes are all yours, and there are no lift queues. This might be why Sainte-Foy is the only place in the world Konrad Bartelski keeps coming back to.

The kids fly everywhere today, and heading down the slalom run as a group for the last run of the day is up there in my best moments of the year. Rocco will have a go at anything, Matilda is happy following Colin - she has called him Colin the Caterpillar. Archie and pals just keep checking the speedometers on their apps at the bottom of each run. They went above 50mph on the last one!

Back at the chalet, after tea it's time for some personal indulgence and a full-body sports massage. I am climbing the walls with pain as the glutes receive an elbow to loosen them up. Bad ski technique means sore bum. Then, in a flash, I fall asleep.

The key to a good ski holiday is finding your rhythm, the timings that suit you. It isn't a boot camp, but you don't want to waste time sleeping in, and as a group we're mostly out by 9.30am. The second day is my first chance to get to the very top of the mountain, Col de l'Aiguille at 2,622m. There are much higher peaks in the



### SAY SKIS

The Greenwood party pose for the camera, above; The Peak chalet, below

bravery levels increase. My 14-year-old, Archie, is now whooshing past me. When he

which makes for a comedy walk/ski ratio, but we're back in the chalet for a 9am breakfast.

And here we are met with the first break in the rhythm - Matilda is having a difficult start to the morning. Her autism can make life so tough for her. Slowly but surely, we coax her out and are on the slopes by 11am. We squeeze in a quick lunch at 12.30pm and I manage to persuade her to head back up the mountain again after lunch for 150 magical minutes - me, Matilda and an empty mountain. I then

drop her off at the chalet and head back to the top of the Col de l'Aiguille for a solo trip. Small baby avalanches have made the top of the run a little awkward. Slow and steady is the way. That evening, we go out for pizza to Le W restaurant, before more games in the chalet. Energy levels on a ski trip must be managed!

I'm up early again the next morning. Head torch on, I plough a lone furrow at 7.08am. Skinning, it turns out, is addictive. I set myself a hard 40-minute target and am straight up the red pistes to see how far I can get. My only company is the ski bashers making sure the pistes are beautifully groomed. Light slowly dawns. I fly past yesterday's staging post and get halfway up to the top of the next lift, whip the skins off, ski down, and am back for breakfast by 8.30am.

That afternoon is one of the best. Pistes become off-piste practice grounds with snow levels above the boots. The whole crew have their skis closer together, their weight balanced, and float through the powder. Our

tumbles, he's back on his skis and away at breakneck speed again.

We head to the pub slightly earlier - we are buzzing with euphoria. Back in the chalet we eat like kings and queens and then hold the "tour court". Major errors and sensational skiing alike are highlighted and awards given for the biggest wipeout, the most improved skier, the most competitive, the best trick, and the most epic fails, the youngsters' drinking fines adapted to make them feel a full part of the team. No one misses out. Everyone collapses a little later than normal. Alarms are set for 6.50am to go ski touring again with the whole crew. Time will tell who is on the start line.

By now, Matilda is loving it again. It makes us so happy to find something she is keen to try more than once. But life can be really difficult with autism in the family, and Caro and I can be hard on ourselves sometimes. Every now and again, you have to hit the snooze button. Only four adults went skinning and Caro and I were not in the crew. I normally feel guilty if I miss out on any of the action. Not today. I love my extra 90 minutes sleep - and our eventual day on the pistes delivers.

Rocco is keen to try anything. Matilda is parallel skiing - slowly, but she is very definitely parallel skiing. Archie can land a 180 jump. I can be risk-averse on the slopes, so I am totally chuffed to have done some off-piste moguls.

And then, it's time for home and the very real truth that the children have used about 20 per cent of the clothes we packed and our two boys have skied in virtually the same clothes every single day. But the greatest achievement of the week is that, other than a few tumbles, we are coming home injury-free. Best holiday ever? Mission accomplished.



Alps, but it is enough and, with Mont Blanc easily visible in the distance, we pass three cracking fast-paced hours.

The next day, we add a new fixture to our daily routine and, braving a 6.50am alarm call, the adults decide to skin up the mountain - cross-country skiing uphill with skins attached to the bottoms of the skis. When you get to the top, you take off the skins and, hey presto, you can ski down. And it's so, so cool. The 50-minute walk to the top of the first chair lift takes me back to my North Pole trek in April - I feel totally at one with the wilderness. The key is to start cold - most of the group are ripping clothes off quickly. At the top, we sort out the skis and fly back down the slope in three minutes,