

Dragon Ski Trip, Davos 2016

'Yessir'.

4am, blurry-eyed on a coach outside the lodge, two dazed children slumped in a single heap somewhere nearby, I hear my name called. Hugo McNeile, looking perky in a purple polo shirt, is presiding in the aisle, taking registration. 'Yessir', I echo the child who answered before me. So begins the 53rd Dragon Ski Trip. From that moment on, and during the hilarious week that follows, I am perpetually reminded that this is not only a ski holiday, but also a school trip. Yessir. Parents and children alike, almost indistinguishably, we are all on a school trip, and I find myself having to restrain some deep childhood emotions. Most notably, am I in trouble?

But first, in that early morning coach, I feel a surging admiration for Rose Birch – who surely must have been captain of something or other in her school days – who's brought along her husband Henry and their four young children, and is wide-awake and jaw-droppingly organised – individual snack boxes, puzzle books, crayons, drinks, games, patient answers to endless questions. Oh crap. I've just remembered the hamster I forgot to feed.

The beauty of being on a school trip with Dragon staff as organized as these, armed with the benefit of the collective experience of the trip's fifty-three years, is that my lack of organizational skills is not a hindrance. It's precisely why this is the best holiday I could have signed up for this year. The staff – thank heaven – trust the parents no more than they trust the children to organize themselves, or plan anything whatsoever. It took just a few short seconds to realize what a luxury that is. When we arrived in Davos we were shuttled through ski shops and hotel lobbies with military precision, being handed ski equipment, mountain passes, room keys... One's own ability to think could simply shut down. And so it continued throughout the week; get on this bus, off that chairlift, eat now, ski then, drink whenever you like. We could have glided through the week blindfolded. Even Rose Birch lost track of her children by day two.

After years of taking my children skiing on my own (and returning an exhausted nervous wreck) the Dragon ski trip with the total abdication of any responsibility for them – or so it seemed – was always going to be sheer joy. The staff seemed always to be counting them in, or radioing their whereabouts to each other, or finding pieces of kit left lying about on the mountain, organizing their groups, their lunch, their après-ski activities, finding lost passes (Tabitha Bowling won a Smurf award for losing her ski pass twice in different locations on the mountain neither of which turned out to be too difficult for the locating and retrieval skills of the Dragon staff, who prided themselves in tracking the daily whereabouts of 144 of these). All in all it meant the Dragon parents drifted off into a relaxed mode of limited responsibility, and the week rolled on dreamily, punctuated only by hangovers and occasional hamster worries.

In the evenings, the tireless staff found other ways to entertain our children. Night tobogganing, for example. They were marched to the nursery slopes in the dark where it was hard to say who was having more fun, Hugo McNeile who got to push the children two by two down the mountain, or Patch Foster who tried to catch them before they crashed into each other or skidded off into an icy river, or the children themselves, who, in that inimitable Dragon style, were all bristling with excitement by the very prospect of a dangerous crash or an icy river, or by being flattened by the fanatical piste basher careering at top speed round the corner. This kamikaze Dragon spirit prevailed throughout the week, parents and Dragons alike. Children, even usually cautious ones, begged to go down black runs, or pointed their skis at jumps three times their own height, or disappeared off-piste through the trees on uncharted paths, as if willing the accidents to happen. I guess they felt they had handed over responsibility for their own safety (along with everything else), and were testing the impeccable powers of planning and logistics of the staff. Simply put, the Dragons knew there was no chance of any real harm coming to them, because they could be sure that Desmond would be guarding any dangerous precipice, and if they failed to notice his small warning flag and fly over the edge, by the time they reached the bottom Hugo would have already been on the phone to Patch who would have already made it to the bottom of the ravine to catch them...

On the first night parents new to the trip like myself spent much time trying to guess the standard of the different adult ski groups when deciding which one to join the following day. We neither wanted to slow others down, nor be frustrated by wanting to speed up. In retrospect it should have been obvious. Dragon parents claiming to be good skiers are exceptional skiers, and they want to go fast. Desmond's group take a leisurely pace, and also want time over a long lunch to tap into his knowledge of the area (he's especially keen on the list of literary figures who have sought inspiration in these mountains, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Mann... to name a few). Being an OD, foolishly driven more by competition than by leisure, for the first two days I tried desperately to keep up with the fast group - the Richs, the Lamberts, the Clarksons, The Isons, Paul Dunleavy... gulp - and I did not realize until half way through the week I'd been missing a trick: Jean Claude Faudot.

'Oh,' Annabelle Neville declared, one of the four women in this select group clearly thrilled they'd managed to keep him secret for so long already, 'we'd been keeping him quiet'. It was on the third day that myself and Nicole Hubbard jumped ship and joined JCs group. With his prodigious knowledge of the mountains and excellent ski instruction my skiing improved more in two days than it has in a decade, and myself and Nicole found ourselves tackling off-piste slopes that would have had us trembling at the start of the week.

This was not my first Dragon Ski Trip. My first, if my maths is correct, would have been the 21st Dragon Ski trip, thirty-two years ago. There are a couple of ski trip constants over the years - Desmond Devitt and Davos - but apart from that I remember very little about it, or so I thought, until the penultimate day of this year's trip when I had a most alarming flashback. Yessir. There was one thing, a particularly fearful thing, that came flooding back: The Slalom.

We were invited, as a grand finale, to watch our children take on a slalom course. It is (still) huge, (still) steep, and (still) terrifying. And as I watched this year's fleet of Dragons flying past, I recalled my own attempt at the same course thirty-two years ago, and being completely out of control. I also recalled beating my brother. In truth this was my overriding memory of the slalom, and sure enough, today's Dragons were all admirably intent on winning.

A special dinner was held in the hotel on the last night. The lumpy yellow mixture that arrived as a starter was difficult to identify. Helpfully, the accompanying menu described it as a 'mélange of curry, pineapple and mayonnaise.' To help take our minds off the food, Desmond handed out his famous Smurf Awards – best wipeout, Will Hammersley; best at losing oneself, Nicholas Lewey; best behaved Dragon, Oliver Lewey (who is not a Dragon); best tweed on the slopes, Christopher Neville; and so on... I might have had a glass or two of white by then (and very little to eat) but I seem to recall there being an actual stuffed Smurf (blue, cuddly, a little bit dusty) squished high up on a ledge in the corner of the hotel's restaurant. I remember wondering for how many years it had been there, awaiting its annual Awards ceremony, or whether Desmond had somehow clambered up before dinner to position it, and if so, where it spent the rest of the year. What was the origin of these so-called Smurf Awards? Who came first, the Smurf or the Awards? Clearly I'll have to go again next year, just to find out.

So, what did I learn? Book early, don't come for the food, on the slopes follow JC, off the slopes follow the purple polo shirt. A hamster can live a week without food, Desmond can touch his toes (bar, second night). And - I hope - I'm not in trouble.

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