

“TAKE A LOVELY SKIING VACATION; TAKE YOUR LIFE IN YOUR HANDS”

By Dave Barry

Here’s a fun winter vacation idea: Why not go skiing?

If you answered, “Because I don’t want to spend the next two years in a full-body cast,” then I have good news. Thanks to modern, high-tech ski equipment originally developed for use by U.S. astronauts, 72 percent of all skiers are able to walk with assistance in less than 10 months.

Yes, things have really changed since the early days of skiing, a sport that traces its origins back to 16th century Switzerland, where, according to legend, a man named Hans lived with his family on top of a mountain.

One day Hans’ daughter became very ill, and his wife, Bernice, told him to go down to the village immediately and fetch the doctor. Hans, knowing that it would take him hours to walk down the mountain, noticed two loose barrel staves that happened to be lying around and suddenly an idea struck him.

Using some leather tongs that also happened to be lying around, he attached the staves to his feet, looked down the mountain, and gave a shove. Within a matter of seconds, nothing had happened.

“Hans, you moron,” said Bernice. “It’s July. There’s no snow.”

And so Hans had to walk down the mountain to get the doctor, who cured the little girl in five minutes by threatening her with leeches.

But this incident got Hans to thinking, and the next day he started tinkering with some chairs and huge steel towers and powerful motors and several thousand feet of cable that happened to be lying around. By dusk he was finished.

“Look, Bernice!” he said. “A person can ride all the way up the mountain on chairs dangling precariously from this cable!”

“If you think I’m getting on that,” said Bernice, “you’re crazy.”

“I’m not talking about us,” said Hans. “We’ll stay safely on the ground and collect large sums of money.”

And thus the modern ski industry was born. Today there are thousands of ski areas, and as of 8 a.m. today every single one of them had excellent skiing conditions, as measured by the Official Ski Area Rating system, in which each area objectively rates its own conditions on a standardized scale that ranges from Superb (defined as “snow or at least cold mud clearly visible in places”) all the way down to the lowest ranking: Very Good (defined as “this ski resort is located in Puerto Rico”).

Because different skiers have different abilities, ski resorts offer a variety of slopes, which are color-coded according to degree of difficulty, as follows:

Green – Steep
Blue -- Steep
Black – Steep

If you’re a beginner, you want to avoid the steep slopes. I would rule out Colorado altogether. One time I went skiing at the swank Colorado resort of Aspen, and the ski slope there turned out to be a cliff. Not coincidentally, Aspen is the home of world-class knee-injury clinic. It’s located right at the base of the mountain; the surgeons just stand around the operating room, scalpels in hand, chatting about golf, and every few minutes there’s a scream, and a new patient comes crashing through the roof.

Of course, to reach that level of expertise, you’ll need to take lessons. Most ski areas have ski schools, where an instructor will assign you to a class of students who are of approximately the same age, skill level and athletic ability as you, except that they are all secretly members of the Olympic slalom team.

You’ll see what I mean. The instructor will get you all up on top of the mountain, then say, “Follow me!” and start skiing sedately down, making graceful turns, totally under control. Your classmates, after exchanging the secret Olympic wink, will appear as though they have never done anything like this before. Some will even fall down, but they’ll get right up again as though it’s no big deal.

You’ll think, “How hard can this be?”

So you'll push off, and within seconds you'll be going so fast that your ski outfit will burst into flames from friction with the atmosphere. You'll hurtle straight down the hill, a human comet, penetrating the ski lodge directly through the wall, rocketing past the wise veterans who have elected to spend their ski vacations indoors, and coming to a violent halt in the cafeteria when you slam into the salad bar with such force that surgeons will later find individual chickpeas embedded 2 inches into your forehead.

As you're lying there, face down in the vinaigrette, you'll hear, from way up on the mountain, hearty Olympic laughter, plus your instructor's voice advising you: "Next time, keep your knees bent!" They encourage this because it makes you go faster.

The important thing is not to be discouraged. Remember: Everybody falls at first. The real winners pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and signal for the cocktail waitperson. Remember to keep your elbow bent.