

# The Telegraph

## Travel

### ‘I did a black run’: How my nine-year-old son became a better skier than me, in just a single day

Our writer learned to ski in Méribel 20 years ago – now the same slopes provide a playground for the ultimate father-son competition

By **Chris Leadbeater**, Travel Correspondent

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My son returns to the hotel just after 3pm on our second afternoon in [Méribel](#), exuding all the swing and swagger that a nine-year-old can muster while wearing a pair of hired [ski](#) boots. As he clump-clump-clumps down towards the equipment room, he updates me – amid breathless yelps of excitement, and general glee – on the successes of his day so far.

“After lunch, Denis and I did a black run,” he says. “Three times, actually. So yes, I’m already on the black run. Did you think that would happen? A black run? Just like that?”

My silent pause – as I fumble for the correct words – betrays me. Before I can voice my doubt, Hal has launched into a vigorous defence of his purported triumph. “We did! We did a black run!” he half-shouts, a wet sheen of frustration – of disbelief at my disbelief – forming on the surface of his eyes. “We did a black run. Ask Denis! Ask him! Ask him!”

I do not need to ask Denis. For Denis is Denis Gacon, the instructor with the Méribel branch of the [École du Ski Français](#) (ESF) who has been handed the brief of teaching my son the basics. I have met him only momentarily: yesterday morning, and again today. And we have spoken little, other than for me to explain that, when it comes to [winter sports](#), Hal’s experience amounts to a single morning of skating at a municipal ice rink in east London.

But in the course of our conversations, I have deduced a couple of things: that Denis, in spite of his classic Gallic gruffness, is an excellent tutor of absolute beginners. And that, with many winters of Alpine professionalism behind him, the chances of him taking my child to the top of a black piste after two sessions on the nursery slopes are less than zero.

Hal is still offended and insistent as I navigate the tricky path of explaining that, while his big achievement is not quite the big achievement he thinks it is, it is still a big achievement; that to be skiing so fluently (as Denis will later describe it) less than 48 hours into his first time on any mountain is something of which to be considerably proud.

He will not hear it. “It. Was. A. Black. Run,” he asserts, all youthful certainty. And as he storms upstairs into the body of the hotel, the small, peevish part of me that I never like whispers: “Well, that would be typical. And he’d be doing better than you, wouldn’t he?”

Because I have been here before – two days into a learn-to-ski week in Méribel, and its neighbour [Courchevel](#), contemplating a black run. Twenty years ago, the beginner was me. And I had tears in my eyes too. Although it was probably just the wind.

Back then, in the mists of the early Noughties, I was a young-ish writer in the feverish world of men’s magazines. It was a different time, of dubious jokes, scant regard for health and safety – and articles based on the grand wheeze of taking a twentysomething ski virgin to the Alps to see if he could manage a black run after a few hours’ instruction.

Unsurprisingly, in my case, he could not. Barely able to stand upright, I made my way to the top of one of Méribel’s most formidable challenges – La Face, the near-sheer descent which hosted the women’s downhill events at the 1992 Winter Olympics (not to be confused with its namesake La Face de Bellevarde in Val d’Isère) – and made a fool of myself.

Terrified of the gradient, I hesitated, hemmed and hawed, then sat down on the snow and refused to move, provoking shouts of French from those whose skill level gave them the right to be there. Finally, I stomped back to the Olympic gondola, retreated into the valley, and spent the next couple of hours in a bar. This proved to be for the best. I did not die. And much hilarity ensued when the group caught up with me. Many jokes were cracked over many beers – and ultimately, my failure made for a far more entertaining story than had I somehow proved to be the new Hermann Maier.

But why, you might ask, would I decide, two decades on, that the scene of such ignominy would be the perfect location for my son to take

his first lessons?

Well, because – despite this embarrassment – I *did* learn to ski in this splendid section of the [French Alps](#). Leaving the black runs to more accomplished colleagues, I spent the rest of the week practising at a more plausible pace – further instruction, plenty of pottering on Méribel's pleasant greens, and, after taking the gondola over the ridge, a few cautious forays down Courchevel's beautiful broad pistes.

I didn't become a flawless skier (I'm not to this day), but by the trip's end, I had falteringly finished a Courchevel red, heading home in the knowledge that these Alpine twins are an ideal playground for those starting from scratch. Cut to 2023, and Hal's requests to learn, and I knew where I could take him.

Not, admittedly, to a luxury chalet with a fridge stocked with little more than vodka and schnapps, but to somewhere rather more suitable. The Hotel Le Mottaret is such a place – pinned to the mountainside in the village of the same name, with the nursery slopes just beyond its door, and a long, easy descent to Méribel proper (La Truite) tapering below it.

Part of the portfolio of properties run by winter-sports experts Ski France, the hotel is a mid-sized three-star (of 77 rooms) geared to breaks with children – a swimming pool in the basement; a different sort of pool, a table, in the lobby. Hal forgets his fury when he has a chance to clatter a few balls on the latter; even more so when we step into a hotel restaurant where the evening buffet caters to all tastes.

On one hand, there are steaks of a requisite rareness to please the most demanding French chef; on the other, platters of sausages, chips and chicken nuggets designed to fill junior stomachs. Breakfast is a similar feast: heaps of crêpes and waffles – but also delicate slices of charcuterie. Over four days, I do not hear a single young voice moan, in any language, that it is still hungry.

After three days where I retrace my tracks across the pistes of twenty years ago, and my son completes his lessons with Denis, Hal has reached a level where he can ski with me (in truth, not an overly difficult task). Still baffled that I will not accept his black-run mastery with paternal grace and amazement, he takes me in search of the site of it. To what, inevitably, does not turn out to be La Face.

Rather, it is “La Piste Des Animaux” – a side-route off Méribel's gently green Blanchot run, which picks a meandering path through the treeline. It proves to be an enchanting trail, an Alpine Narnia. Each of its snowy curves is embellished with a sculpture of a creature of the forest or mountains – some of them moulded from (vaguely) black plastic.

“See!” Hal says, gesturing at the wolf which waits at one turn. “The Black Animal Run.”

I do not point out the extra word that he has suddenly added to his story, nor correct him on his wider misconception. He is so thrilled at being able to slip between the trunks with a reasonable element of speed and control that the truth, whatever that is, isn't important.

Instead, we continue past this strange menagerie – its golden eagle, its ibex, its fox – then return to glide past a further four times. And there is a magic to it, the winter sunlight slanting through the pine trees, their lightly frosted branches gleaming gold. Life throws you a few experiences that, for all their wonder, can happen only once.

And while your first ski run with your child is not quite a first word, a first footstep, a first Christmas present from a mythical benevolent Scandinavian, it is a special moment nonetheless – this thing whose nappies you changed, whose scraped knees you cleaned and plastered, now agile and alert; sliding and turning where, only recently, it couldn't even really walk.

There is one last spellbound moment. At the bottom of Blanchot, the Altiport de Méribel offers 15-minute sightseeing flights which show the whole picture with remarkable clarity. From the sky, there on the right is Courchevel. There, following a dip of the wings and an about-turn to the left, is Méribel, its slopes alive with Alpine ants in their bright clothing. And there, too, is La Face; still too much for my skiing nerves, but maybe, at some later juncture, not Hal's. Perhaps, at a push, at some point in the near future, we could tackle it together.

## Essentials

### Staying there

A week at Hotel Le Mottaret costs from £701, B&B, (from £829, half-board; from £1,000, all-inclusive) with [Ski France](#) (020 3475 4756). Children (under 18) stay free on the same board as their parents. Flights and transfers not included.

### Skiing there

Ski lessons cost from £219 for a week with the [ESF](#). Six-day [Les Trois Vallées lift passes](#) start at £258 per person for a family of four (children aged 5-17).

### Flying there

[Jet2](#) and [British Airways](#) operate winter flights from the UK to Chambéry, a one hour and 20-minute transfer from the resort. In-resort sight-seeing flights cost from £60 per person with [L'Aéroclub de Meribel](#).

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Chris Leadbeater

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