

## Beginner

# Virgin, transatlantic

Nervous about your first time on the slopes? The last thing you want is pals taking pics of your pratfalls. **Laura Goodman** leaves them far behind, going solo in Canada



'm standing up, and I'm supposed to feel pleased about it. My personal instructor, Sylvain, applauds. Other things I have achieved today include walking from the rental shop to the

beginners' slope. Nobody prepared me for this cumbersome task. There's so much to carry (skis, goggles, poles, hat, water), I've got bulging gloves, and ski boots aren't made for walking. I also mastered putting on the skis, an infuriating bother. I spent the next hour or so sliding backwards, sitting down and fighting back tears.

My next challenge? Looking up. I'm moving on the skis, but Sylvain doesn't want me to stare at my feet, so he skis ahead, backwards, eyeballing me all the way. As we go down the bunny 'slope' (it barely descends), we play a game of 'Sylvain Says'. I must rub my face, clap my hands and do the Macarena. I don't want to play.

Sylvain is 6ft 5in, a hulking great man who slips around with grace. 'Do you look at your feet when you walk?' he shouts.

'I don't have these on when I walk.'

Aged 28, I'm putting myself through this because friends ski and I don't like to miss out. I also didn't want to learn in front of them – or, worse, in front of their iPhones. Canada seemed safely removed. The green runs, I was told, really are easy and the instructors are equipped to handle nervous-nelly adults. I made for Mont Tremblant, near Montréal, which a friend described as 'Disneyland for grown-ups'.

In the event, I'm swamped by toddlers kitted out in snappy jackets and the latest

in goggle technology, none doing the Macarena. We're at the base of the peaks, near the traffic-free village. A cute travelator whisks the little 'uns, and me, to the 'top', as long as we can manage to stand on it. It's fun, but just as I hit my stride, it's time for the next learning curve – getting into a moving cable-car.

To help me out, Sylvain gives me his lightweight poles, takes my skis, and we climb inside the car with minimal clatter. It's a blissful ride above thick, snow-coated pine forest – a pick-me-up after the trials of the bunny slope. P'tit Bonheur is a green run that's as agreeable as it sounds. It's smooth, easy to join and free of any vaguely scary drops or bends, but still we approach it methodically, making big, slow turns.

Sylvain plots pathways he knows I can manage and makes sure I don't get in anyone's way. When I fall, he glides over, offers me a pole and heaves me up again. When we get on chairlifts, he halts disaster with a swift, calm prod. He points out waterfalls, a glittering lake and splendid

## I START TO RELAX. THEN WE RISK A BLUE RUN AND I FALL OVER 11 TIMES

pine trees. As I relax, I clutch my poles less tightly, letting them dangle by my sides. Then Sylvain decides we should risk a blue run, Nansen – and I fall over 11 times. 'I'm tired,' I moan. 'I know,' he says. We rattle down, shake hands and call it a day.

I'm staying in a suite at Ermitage du Lac, so I can use the ski valet free. I hand over my skis and poles in exchange for a ticket, then I am light-footed again. Other things I love about the Ermitage are the hot tub and my enormous bath. I soak in both, easing my sore limbs.

The village really does recall Disneyland: cobbles, multicoloured houses, restaurants serving *raclette*, tacos, noodles and everything in-between. For me, only a giant plate of carbs will do – at Coco Pazo, I go giddy over a glass of Italian red, linguine with duck confit, and mascarpone cheesecake with maple butter. I'm thrilled at how well people eat when they've been on the slopes all day.

Next morning, instead of Sylvain, I'm to be taught by the lovely Louise, an instructor with a soothing approach. (She later tells me not to be afraid to specify the kind of teacher you'd like. If you'd prefer a woman, or you think you might require lots of patience, just say so.) Louise's husband is also an instructor and their son is a freestyle pro; we bump into her friend, whose son is a champion >

### ❄️ Dr Snow says... Beginner-trip feedback from Sean Newsom, ski travel editor for *The Sunday Times*

● 'Laura, well done. You chose well – North America is a great place to learn, if you have the time and the budget. I'd suggest flying on a bit further, to Colorado. There you'll find the service culture even stronger – and, in towns such as Breckenridge and Aspen, the atmosphere is a lot less Disneyfied.'

● 'You seem to have got tired quickly. It never ceases to amaze me how many people think they can just turn up for a ski holiday without any fitness work. After all, you're at

altitude. It's cold. You're using lots of unfamiliar muscles. At the very least, you should go for a few runs, do some sit-ups and ride a bike two or three times a week in the month before you go. Complete ski-fitness programmes are available online, too.'

● 'Another great way to soften the impact of your first ski break is to take lessons at an indoor centre beforehand. Then, on the first morning on a real mountain, you'll know what ski boots feel like, and you may even have

mastered the basic snowplough turn. Cue a day of smugness as your fellow beginners flounder.'

● 'You did well for braving it out, but where's your helmet? OK, the sort of freak accident that killed Natasha Richardson in a beginners' lesson in 2009 is very, very rare, but it's easy enough to get a knock when you fall. It's just the kind of thing to throw you off your game completely if you're struggling.'





downhill skier. The ski folk up here really live their sport.

Louise taps into my (rather more sedentary) yoga experience and gives me some breathing techniques, which turn out to be the key. I start moving much more smoothly – gliding, even – and letting those poles hang loose. She's encouraging, and when she says 'Really nice, Laura', she seems to mean it. I begin to enjoy myself.

After a while, I'm able to bring my skis to a parallel position, rather than skiing in a state of terrified snowplough. I imagine I look swisher and more impressive than I probably do. Near the village there's a bridge under which you can pick up some speed, so I crouch down, point my skis and zoom to the end. If this is being a beginner, then I'm a winner. ■

## GO INDEPENDENT

The nearest airport is Montréal-Trudeau, a 90-minute drive away. The Express shuttle costs from £160 one-way for a van carrying three passengers (0800 028 3476, [www.tremblant.ca](http://www.tremblant.ca)). **BA** (0844 493 0787, [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies from

Heathrow to Montréal from £445. Or try **Air Canada** (0871 220 1111, [www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)).

## WHERE TO STAY

**Ermitage du Lac** is a cosy suite-only hotel, two minutes' walk from the slopes (00 1 877 966 6873, [www.lessuitestremblant.com](http://www.lessuitestremblant.com); doubles from £125, B&B). **Fairmont Tremblant** is ski-in, ski-out, with steam baths and handsome rooms (00 1 800 257 7544, [www.fairmont.com/tremblant](http://www.fairmont.com/tremblant); doubles from £138, room only).

**Tour des Voyageurs**, in the village, is a classic (details as Ermitage; doubles from £94).

## GO PACKAGED

**Crystal Ski** (0871 231 2256, [www.crystalski.co.uk](http://www.crystalski.co.uk)) has a week in Mont Tremblant from £841pp, B&B, with four-star accommodation, flights from Heathrow and airport transfers.

**Inghams** (01483 791111, [www.ingham.co.uk](http://www.ingham.co.uk)) has a one-week package from £864pp, B&B.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

**Bonjour Québec** (0800 051 7055, [www.bonjourquebec.co.uk](http://www.bonjourquebec.co.uk)); **Mont Tremblant** (0800 028 3476, [www.tremblant.ca](http://www.tremblant.ca)).

## FOUR MORE BEGINNERS' RESORTS

### Passo Tonale, Italy

In a vast high-altitude bowl in the Alps, above Lombardy, Passo Tonale has sunny but snowsure skiing, with a top station above 3,000m and excellent snow-making should the largely south-facing slopes wear thin at the season's end. Experts should probably look elsewhere (there are only 90km of pistes, and blacks are hard to come by), but with six lifts from the village, serving a plethora of gentle slopes, intermediates and beginners in particular will have a field day. The relatively modest network of slopes keeps pistes and lift queues quiet, too. *Thomson Ski* (0871 971 0578, [www.thomsonski.co.uk](http://www.thomsonski.co.uk)) has seven nights at the three-star, family-run *Hotel Eden* from £485pp, half board, based on two sharing and including flights from Bristol to Verona and transfers.



### Tignes, France

Linked by lift to the 300km or so of piste which is Espace Killy – with slopes between 1,550m and 3,456m, and thigh-burning circuits begging to be skied over into neighbouring Val d'Isère – Tignes has a vast variety of skiing for all abilities. However, with superb nursery slopes right beside the village, and sweeping 'motorway' blues a little higher for when you progress, the resort is particularly great for beginners – especially if they like their après as much as their ski. *Mark Warner* (0844 273 6769, [www.markwarner.co.uk](http://www.markwarner.co.uk)) has seven nights at the *Hauts de Tovièrè chalet hotel* from £518pp, half board, based on two sharing and including dinner, wine, ski hosting, evening childcare, flights from Gatwick to Grenoble and transfers.



### Sainte-Foy, France

With only a handful of lifts and around 35km of pistes, this bite-size Tarentaise resort might frustrate even intermediates (and party animals), but as a beginner, why pay a premium for endless runs (and queues), then snowplough down the same two or three all week? Better still, there's a 'magic carpet' and a beginner slope right in front of the village cafes, then, when you've found your feet, an achingly inviting blue/green route winding almost a vertical kilometre back to the village. *Venture Ski* (020 7558 8278, [www.ventureski.co.uk](http://www.ventureski.co.uk)) has a week at *Chalet Les Charmes* – a beautiful shared chalet with a 10m pool and sauna – from £1,193pp, half board, based on two sharing, including private airport transfers and six-day ski pass. Airlines serving the nearest airport, Chambéry, include *Flybe* ([www.flybe.com](http://www.flybe.com)) and *Jet2* ([www.jet2.com](http://www.jet2.com)).



### Obergurgl, Austria

Hidden high in the spectacular Otz valley, Obergurgl is super-friendly and wonderfully unspoilt, with atmospheric *bierkellers*, and traffic banned in the village at night. Sitting at 1,930m – particularly high for a resort at the eastern end of the Alps – it has a superb snow record that all but guarantees a good, long season. No queues, a great ski school, a free lift from the village to the top of a nursery slope, so you don't even need a lift pass to practise after school – what more do you want? Nightlife? OK, it's not wild – this is a low-key resort with oodles of thigh-slapping charm. *Ski Total* (01483 791933, [www.skital.com](http://www.skital.com)) has seven nights at *Chalet Christophorus* from £439pp, half board, based on two sharing, including flights from Gatwick to Innsbruck and transfers. This shared chalet is right by the main lift and has a fab sauna.

