



From sand dunes to ski slopes

SOMETHING is wrong, I can feel it. Or rather, I can't. The vibrating and jarring that has woken me every morning for the past 10 days has stopped. Ah. We must have docked at Suez. I peer out of a porthole to see the dun-coloured hills of Egypt, dappled with shadows in the morning light. There's an urgent clanking coming from deep within the bowels of the ship as it prepares to disgorge us onto the waiting harbourmaster's launch.

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We've been steaming through the Gulf of Aden and up the Red Sea on a massive merchant tanker, filming how seafarers cope with the threat from Somali pirates. We've had a few close brushes with 'pirate action groups', the clusters of innocuous-looking fishing boats loaded with ladders, grappling hooks and AK47s, but no shots have been fired in anger. The vessel's protection team, all former Royal Marine Commandos, have a well-established drill that keeps any potential pirates at a safe distance. Now, they're locking away their rifles and ammunition and bidding their goodbyes.

We transfer from the deck of this 800ft leviathan down to the bobbing launch, with me being carried piggyback down a steep gangplank with the minimum of dignity. In the Suez customs house, we come up against the full force of Egyptian bureaucracy. The delays are endless and I'm running out of time.

I have committed to spending the weekend competing in the Momentum Ski Championships in Crans Montana in Switzerland,



Desert skiing has yet to catch on—probably because it's rather too hot to wear a Lycra one-piece

but, at this rate, I'll miss my flight. The minibus driver guns the engine and we race westwards along the desert road to Cairo. A billboard appears, in Arabic, depicting a beaming and rather shiny David Cameron, a leftover from his Arab Spring visit last year. I catch my flight with minutes to spare, and then wake up in Switzerland.

Late into the night, I'm still changing trains and crossing the country before meeting up with my friends in the Alps. 'What kept you?' asks Steve. I discover that he's been telling Heston Blumenthal, one of my fellow skiers on the trip, that he taught me to ski. This is plainly untrue, and I set out to clear my name at the slalom event. Stitched up by my friend Amin, the event organiser, I find I'm first down the slope in my sit-ski, with everyone watching. It's a World Cup Giant Slalom course, and it looks truly terrifying, but a kindly figure appears at my side. 'I first skied this course in 1971,' he says. 'Just take the gates wide and slow and you'll be fine.' It's Konrad Bartelski, one of Britain's fastest-ever skiers. I make it down in one piece in time to watch

another legend, Graham Bell, hurtling down behind me.

That night, there's a comedy night in the ski resort, introduced by Marcus Brigstocke. A young comedian, Rufus Hound, picks on the man next to me in the front row, Bell himself. 'So what do you do?' challenges the comedian. There's a muffled gasp from the audience; to all these people, Bell is a god, even if a lapsed one. 'I'm a former Olympic skier,' he says. 'A... former... Olympic... skier,' mimics Mr Hound. 'How sad is that?' The crowd is in shock, Mr Brigstocke is waving frantically, but Bell is loving it. After a lifetime of adulation, this must be quite refreshing.

Back in Britain, it's back to work. The British tourist Judith Tebbutt has been released from Somalia for a sizable ransom. It's the same day that I'm due to collect our daughter from boarding school. Some tricky juggling, a hectic day of broadcasting, then my wife and I go out to dinner with the German defence attaché and his wife, who introduce us to the unexpected delights of German burgundy from Baden-Baden. German reds—who would have thought it?

The following night, our wedding anniversary. Fifteen years. What is it aluminium or something? descend below ground to convivial commotion of Ch Tang, where a homely la carves us exquisite slices Peking duck. On a fleet visit to the loo, a male vo purrs in my ear: 'They seek I here, they seek him the What? I whirl round, but words are coming from a spea embedded in the ceiling. Pi poetry in the lavatory—th a first for me.

Sated, we lie back on couch only to see our friends bu into the restaurant, having fo out where we are. Roman evening over, we head on c to Morton's, a club in Berke Square. Briefly baffled by wheelchair, the staff bend c backwards to accommod it and, within seconds, w inside being served espre martinis by an Estonian h ess. It's been quite a week. 4

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Next week: William Kend.