



ARNIE WILSON

→ Don't **panic**

But they did panic! And, as usual, the snow had a mind of its own and turned up in spades.

THE SKIING and snowboarding fraternity in the now hugely expensive Alps (and Britain is in that fraternity as we provide them with over 1 million skiers) get very twitchy if there's no sign of snow by early December. Which is absurd.

Those with short memories ignore the fact that in the late 1980s (when climate change was barely mentioned) there were some terrible snow years and we all agreed then that we had no right to demand or even assume there'd be much in the way of decent snow before Christmas, never mind earlier in the month.

But once we were into December 2011 and no snow had appeared, the ensuing panic made you wonder whether it was the end of skiing as we know it. Then, when tour operators had hardly had time even to contemplate hari-kari, the snow arrived. And kept arriving.

Day after day it fell and the Alps buckled under its huge weight. From the famine, came the feast. And so it goes. The previous winter it had been the Rockies that celebrated major falls while Europe struggled. This year, with a few exceptions, the Alps stole the snow and the show.

I arrived in Courchevel, France – a gateway to what is arguably the largest ski network in the world, the Three Valleys when the snow had arrived (although not quite yet in *abondance*) but more importantly, the people hadn't. By the time I got to Les Gets in mid-January (in arguably the *second* largest resort network in the world, the Portes du Soleil, which straddles France and Switzerland) the snow was near perfect.



→ Mad dogs and Englishmen go out for the City Ski.

INTO THE VOID*

* The void is the incomprehensible. Infinity. The place where everything stops – and yet everything begins. Where the ordinary becomes exceptional. It is also a metaphor for a certain type of human being who continuously strives to get closer and closer to the absolute ultimate.



Sportswear since 1982

Photo: Mattias Fredriksson

Next stop was Sochi, the Russian city at the far end of the Black Sea which will host the 2014 Winter Olympics. Not quite Europe perhaps, but then not quite Asia either (depends who you ask!). I'd been there three years earlier and the progress was remarkable. Of the four ski areas based around Krasnaya Polyana, Rosa Khutor, the main location for the alpine events, is up and running and skiing impressively well.

The big question is whether the infrastructure will be ready. Certainly when we arrived in Krasnaya soon before dawn, we watched, fascinated, as teams of workers laboured under arc lights on all manner of building projects, especially the new monorail linking the city with the ski areas. The skiing here is impressive, with strong, steep and challenging slopes. One snag about regular visits from Vladimir Putin and/or Dmitri Medvedev

(both keen skiers) is that security is so tight some supply routes get inadvertently closed down in the process. During my visit in late January the white wine ran out in my hotel. And then the red. Leaving just vodka to drink if you wanted anything alcoholic! You might think this part of the world (being Russia) might have Siberian temperatures. Not a bit of it. It could be quite a warm Winter Games. Sochi, a not unattractive city sprawling for an

extraordinary 140 kilometres along the Black Sea coast is actually sub-tropical. It was Josef Stalin's favourite summer haunt. Somehow, in winter, the snow still arrives in good measure in the Caucasus Mountains just 55 kilometres away. The coldest snap of my winter was not in Russia but back in the French Alps, in a visit to Paradiski – arguably the *third* largest ski area in the world, which combines the major ski areas of La Plagne (itself comprising 10 ski villages) and Les Arcs (which includes the villages of Peisey, Nancroix and Vallandry). The two main ski areas are linked by giant double-deck cable cars that operate independently of each other as they cross the huge ravine dividing the resorts. Don't miss the last one or you could find yourself stranded on the wrong side. And in the daytime temperatures of minus 25 that we were skiing in, that would be no joke! I've visited Zermatt many times, but this year was the first time I'd been able to stare, entranced and enchanted, at the crystal clear Matterhorn, uninterrupted by the merest wisp of cloud for six consecutive days. Snow conditions were again ideal, but the prices – with the Australian dollar pretty much on level pegging with the Swiss franc – were brutal. Picture paying \$A100 or more for lunch for two, with wine!



The horn that matters, down Zermatt way. picture: ARNIE WILSON



↑ Heston Blumenthal (left) asks Konrad Bartelski for the winning formula.

Crans Montana, not far from Zermatt in the same canton or county of Valais, was no cheaper. I was there for the annual City Ski Championships, when bankers, traders and insurance brokers from London's financial community battle it out in a "radar trap" speed race, a dual parallel slalom and – the main race – a giant slalom. After days of spring sunshine, conditions were not easy, with slush developing during the dual parallel slalom (when celebrity TV chef Heston Blumenthal was one of many skiers who wiped out, in spite of some pre-race coaching tips from former Olympic skier Konrad Bartelski) and freezing again the following day for the early stages of the giant slalom, when there were sometimes two wipe outs on the course in the same race. All in all, a great winter in the Alps. I think we can safely say there'll be some skiing in Europe next season, even if there's no snow on December 1.

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*Conditions apply please contact Mogul Ski World for details LIC31304

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