

## On the chairlift with...

# Frank Gardner



BBC security correspondent and president of the Ski Club Of GB Frank Gardner, 51, was left partly paralysed after being shot six times by al-Qaeda gunmen in Saudi Arabia in 2004. But the attack hasn't dampened his passion for the slopes

### When did you take up Alpine skiing?

I didn't go near a downhill slope until I was 22 – I'd only done cross country before – and then it was a baptism of fire. I was in Val d'Isère with a group from university who'd all skied before. There's an icy red run called the Matisse, which they shot down with ease, and which I slid down painfully, sometimes face first.

### Tell us about your last skiing experience before the ambush

It was in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Bavaria. It was late in the afternoon, and I said to my wife and two daughters, "Just give me 30 minutes, I'm going to have one last run." I thought, you never know when you'll get the chance again so I bombed down until my legs were screaming for respite. Totally exhilarating. Four months later, I was shot through the nerves connecting my legs to the spinal cord. Fortunately, somebody has invented sit-skis, so I still get to go down the mountains in a moulded bucket mounted on a carving ski, but just using half my body to steer.

### How did you find learning to use a sit-ski?

The hardest part at first was squeezing myself into it. A sit-ski has a curved lip you have to get your hips past. Plus, I had to get used to it forcing me into a bent-double "W" shape. A day's training with a Paralympic instructor was enough for me to get the hang of controlling the thing, though.

### What about using lifts?

It can be a real challenge, especially if the liftie is choosing to look the other way. I've had some narrow escapes on t-bars when I've missed the release catch on my sit-ski and nearly got dragged back down the mountain.

### How similar is it to being on two skis?

I'm not going to pretend it's as good – you're only using half your body, so it can be very frustrating not being able to shift your weight on to another ski when you're gathering speed. But you're still in the mountains, still in the sun – sometimes – and I've got this fun thing where I flick my hips to turn. I've been told this is all wrong but I like it, so I'll carry on doing it.

### What's your favourite resort and why?

I prefer more rustic ones like Bormio in Italy or Mayrhofen in Austria, where you have a sense of being in a mountain village community.



### You've skied in Iran and Lebanon. How did it differ from being in the Alps?

Lebanon's slopes in 1992 were still patrolled by heavily armed soldiers. But from the summit it was thrilling to look down, and in the distance being able just to make out the Mediterranean. Iran in 1999 was also a great experience. There was a big poster that bore a picture and a quote from an ayatollah saying he approved of skiing.

### You've cross-country skied in the Arctic Circle – what was that like?

When I was 18 on my gap year I took my cross-country skis up to Rovaniemi in northern Finland. I took a bus to the geographic Arctic Circle, then skied north in search of reindeer, which I found loads of. No bears, though, disappointingly.

### Did you enjoy racing down a GS course in a sit-ski at the City Ski Championships

#### in Crans Montana this year?

The thought of hurtling down a race course was terrifying. Until I actually started. Going first was the hardest part but Konrad Bartelski [Britain's most successful World Cup downhill racer] was at the event and did his best to relax me. "I first skied this course in 1971," he said. "Just take it wide and slow."

### How do you feel about being made president of the Ski Club Of GB?

It's a real honour, although this has nothing to do with ability – I was a very average skier even before my injuries. I see it more as an inspirational thing, to encourage others to get out there and enjoy the thrill of the mountains, however fast or slow they go.

### What are your plans for next season?

I've already committed to competing again in the City Ski Champs in March 2013, which is part of the Momentum Ski Festival, and I harbour ambitions to ski in the Rockies.

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Frank at the City Ski Championships with mentor for the day, former British World Cup downhiller Konrad Bartelski

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