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CONTENTS

The Slippery Slope	5
In the Beginning	7
Ski Terrain	13
Gearing Up	19
Going Up	37
The Art of Survival	47
Getting Down	59
Snowcraft	73
Variations	77
The Deadly Dozen	87
The Right Resort	97
On Your Marks	107
Champions to know about	111
Ski Types	117
Glossary	122



All skiers, irrespective of their age, sex or ability, like to pretend that they are better skiers than they actually are.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Skiing requires a commitment to pleasure of the sort endorsed by hedonists, layabouts, ne'er-do-wells and philanderers – in other words, a single-minded approach to absolute self-indulgence. Skiers are deeply flawed people, so it will come as no surprise to learn that most of them are also extremely proficient bluffers. All skiers will remember that triumphant moment when they first skied down to a crowded restaurant terrace without falling over. Flushed with pride, they will have puffed up their chests in the fond belief that onlookers were bursting with admiration. In fact, onlookers were doing nothing of the sort, waiting patiently instead for someone else to fall over so that they could point at them and jeer. But in that brief moment of triumph, the discerning novice will have discovered a profound truth about skiing. All skiers, irrespective of their age, sex or ability, like to pretend that they are better skiers than they actually are. That axiom lies at the root of the sport, and from that root flourishes the most luxuriant verbiage of preposterous declarations about imagined skills and expertise. There is no easy

explanation for this curious masquerade, but consider the following theory: for the majority of skiers a winter sports holiday is one of those few occasions when their level of athleticism is brutally exposed to the scrutiny of friends and family. Previously dormant motor functions like balance and coordination have to be taken out and dusted off (assuming that they were present in the first place) and – arguably worse – bluffers are required to demonstrate unfamiliar qualities of fortitude and resourcefulness. All in all it's a recipe for unimaginable humiliation, which is why despite a breathtaking level of incompetence in all relevant areas of mental and physical proficiency, many skiers feel the need to impress a receptive audience with tales of their prowess.

And that is where this short but definitive guide comes in. It sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about skiing, and to equip you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimize the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and methods that will allow you to be accepted as a skier of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and advice – without anyone discovering that, before reading it, you didn't know the difference between an abfahrt and a vigorous fartage.

IN THE BEGINNING

The British always claim to have invented alpine skiing, a remarkable feat bearing in mind the paucity of Alps in the British Isles. But let's not split hairs. Alpine skiing, the most popular variety of the three main forms of the sport, is that particular discipline that involves skiing downhill. Skiing along on a level gradient is known by those who find it tedious as 'poling' or by those who find it interesting as 'cross-country' or 'Nordic' skiing (possibly invented and, unaccountably, enjoyed hugely by Norwegians). Uphill skiing is widely described either as 'ski touring' or, by those rash enough to attempt it, as 'absolutely bloody exhausting'. The British did, in fact, invent alpine skiing – but were not the first to spot the potential of binding wooden planks to their feet as a means of transport. That responsibility lies with the Swedes, or possibly the Finns, or possibly the Laps, or the Norwegians, maybe even the Russians. The Mongols and Turks are also keen to state their own case for having invented it. So too are the Chinese. Sinologists will happily produce ancient manuscripts that mention