

Adventures with Tom – on skis

Skiing with Tom was always an adventure, from the day we first met on the slopes of Cairngorm in 1977 to the last ski holiday I shared with him the year he died. Here are just a few that I will never forget.

The Forbidden Crevasse

When I was 7 months pregnant with Emily, in 1981, Tom went off skiing in France with a group of friends, leaving me behind. I was a bit upset but we both agreed that as I couldn't ski that was no reason why he should not. So off he went – but with one stipulation – ‘You are not to go near any crevasses!’

I have always been scared of crevasses since my sister and I had to jump across one in ski school in Zermatt. After we'd crossed safely, a woman in the class fell 40 meters down and we had to wait for hours until she was finally dragged out, covered in blood. Tom laughed happily and said that there were no glaciers and hence no possibility of crevasses where he was going.



So what happened? On the last day of his holiday all his friends left and he stayed an extra day. Doing what one is always told never to do, he went skiing way off piste, on his own, without telling anyone where he was going. He found what appeared to be a wonderful cornice to jump off into deep snow, headed over it and in a moment had fallen. The snow had cracked away at the edge, creating what must be the closest thing you can get to a crevasse short of being in a glacier.

So there he was, several meters down, hanging upside down from skis wedged against the vertical sides. He was still listening to his Walkman (Dire Straights was it?).

How he got out sounds implausible but he described very slowly inching each ski up a few inches at a time until eventually he reached the top and clambered out – music still playing.

I was not best pleased to hear this story! But I was glad my baby was, after all, going to have a living father.

The Landslide

The kids were young, and strapped in the back of our old estate car for the journey home from Reberty in the Trois Vallées. As always on a Saturday in ski season, the traffic was dreadful going down the mountain road to Moutiers. So after some time tediously waiting, Tom decided that we'd take a side route down the opposite side of the valley. It might be narrower and steeper but we'd be sure to avoid the traffic jam.

So we set off. Almost immediately we saw a sign saying “route barrée”. But Tom was not going to be stopped by something as simple as that and on we went – for many miles. The road was indeed steep, narrow and winding but we did fine until we met another sign. And there, right ahead of us, was the reason. There had been a massive landslide that had swept away 10 or 20 meters of the road, leaving a mass of mud and rocks in its place.

We could see there was a track across the debris. A few vehicles must have passed that way before us, but were they as heavy as ours? Did they have four wheel drive, snow tyres, chains? (we did not). Did they have small children in the back?



‘You try walking across,’ suggested Tom helpfully. So I got out of the car and walked carefully across to the other side. It looked solid enough. It felt solid enough, but what about the children? What if we all died slithering down the steep mountain side into the valley far below? Tom wasn’t bothered. ‘We’re not going back now,’ he said ‘It’s miles and miles and we’d just have to join an even worse traffic jam’.

And so on we went, straight over the landslide and on down to the main road, way ahead of all those other people, left behind in the traffic jam.

My legs don’t work anymore

Tom, Emily, Jolyon and I had some wonderful family ski holidays in the Trois Vallées, often setting off in the morning for long adventurous days right across the Mottaret-Meribel valley and into Courchevel. We always went as far as we could, risking the dreadful possibility of missing the last lift back from Mottaret into our own valley.

One day, when Emily must have been about 6 or 7, we cut it too fine. To try to make up time we took what we thought was a short cut across a mountainside, finding the going far too hard for us, let alone for a tired little girl, and when we finally got near the bottom, Tom found himself on a high wall with a road beneath. Emily and I were stuck up above in a patch of deep snow and struggling.



It was then that little Emily, brave as she was, said something none of us ever forgot 'I can't. My legs don't work any more.'

I cannot remember how we got back, except that somehow we all got down the wall and, having missed the main cable car link, caught a series of chair lifts that got us back to our own valley. Amazingly this kind of adventure did not put either Emily or Joly off skiing and they are both terrific skiers still. Indeed, as they got older, they used to take it in turns to plan the day's adventurous route across the Trois Vallées.

But I'm so sorry Emily! We should have been kinder to our brave little skier.