

passions

SKIING

Skiing has been a lifelong sport for **Chris French** and one that led him to found the world's largest club for LGBT skiers, Ski Bums. Here he tells us the joys of hitting the slopes and about some of the best ski resorts in the world.

My parents taught my sisters and me to ski when we were very young; I was probably seven years old. They had first learned to ski on their honeymoon, which is so romantic, and they wanted to pass it on to their kids. It's the only sport I was really any good at and I guess it came naturally to me.

I love the fact that skiing is purely about having fun. I've never really liked competitive sports, so I was never drawn to ski racing, but skiing is just a personal challenge between you and the mountain. You can take it easy and feel like you're flying down the slopes, or push yourself to try steeper, more challenging terrain. And when you overcome a new challenge, it's a serious endorphin rush.

Generally, the rule of thumb is that it takes three days to learn to ski or snowboard. After three days though, most people can navigate down easy terrain and have a super fun time doing so, but if you want to make quick progress then it is best continuing with regular lessons from licenced instructors. I have friends who began their winters as total beginners and after five ski weekends have advanced to expert slopes, but they all took lessons throughout the winter to help them achieve their goal.

If I'm lucky to be on a wide-open, newly groomed steep run, there's no greater exhilaration than skiing at speed down a black slope – it literally feels like flying! You do, of course, still have to think about maintaining form and keeping your centre of gravity over the front part of the skis. And you have to stay within eyeshot of whoever's with you, so if you take a sudden fall, someone will see it and hopefully send over a hunky ski patrol.

Some people see skiing as an elite sport for the rich, but this is not true. With today's economy and the downturn of the travel business, many ski resorts rely on affordable daytrip visitors to meet their expenses, so there are a ton of discounted lift tickets and equipment rentals to keep things very affordable. You can spend about as much for an entire day of skiing and snowboarding as you'd spend on a dinner out at a restaurant and a movie with friends. That's if you live within a few hours drive of a ski resort. If you need to hop on a plane to ski, things naturally get pricier.

Back in 2004, I was growing tired of the gay nightlife scene in New York City, and I wanted a healthy, fun-loving way of meeting cool gay

folks with similar interests. I'd always loved skiing, so I started hosting get-togethers and parties for gay skiers and riders. From these meetings Ski Bums was born, and I had no idea that six years later we'd have nearly 800 members from all over the world, or that I'd be skiing in the kind of resorts I'd always dreamed about visiting.

Ski Bums is now the world's largest club for LGBT skiers and snowboarders and we host affordable group trips – complete with lift tickets, transportation, lessons and a party bus on the way home – to all the world's best ski resorts in Europe, North America and South America.

In recent years, we've hosted trips to resorts like Chamonix, St. Anton, Cortina d'Ampezzo, Whistler, Aspen, Vail and Argentina, and we've just returned from two amazing weeks in Chile. In 2011 we're travelling to Courchevel, France, and hosting our very first heli-skiing trip to Riksgränsen, Sweden, which I for one am so looking forward to.

I've been lucky enough to ski in lots of different countries around the world. Although European ski resorts are often more scenic and charming, North American ski resorts in the West receive a massive amount of the dry, fluffy snow that creates some of the world's most desirable ski conditions. With this in mind, resorts such as Jackson Hole, Wyoming; Courchevel, Les Trois Vallées, France; and Banff and Lake Louise in Alberta, Canada, are three resorts that I think really stand out, and three that Ski Bums will also be visiting in early 2011.

There are hundreds of gay members at Ski Bums but, to my knowledge, no competitive skier or snowboarder at the Olympic level has ever come out publicly during his or her Olympic career. Joan Guetschow is an American women's biathlete who competed in 1992 and 1994, and was discretely out to her team at the time of competition, but didn't talk about it in the press until years later.

At the Vancouver games in 2010, an organisation hosted a pavilion for LGBT Olympic attendees. I believe only one Olympian visited the pavilion – a straight gold medalist from Canada who was there with some friends. We're still waiting for a courageous skier or snowboarder to make history by being the first out LGBT winter Olympian in our sport, and when that day comes we've got a massive group of people who are ready to shower them with enthusiasm and support.

I have a pretty frenetic life and skiing has helped me in life for many reasons. I love the great outdoors, I love a personal challenge, and I love how refreshed and energised I feel when I get home from a ski trip. Even though I love to ski fast, when I go to the mountains it always helps me to slow down and put things into perspective. And the time I've spent with friends on ski trips have led to some of my closest friendships and fondest memories. There's something very rewarding about being with friends, doing something you love and feeling like you can really be yourself, and for me, skiing encapsulates all these qualities.



Chris French
at Valle Nevada
Chile

**'There's no greater exhilaration
than skiing at speed down a black slope
– it literally feels like flying!'**

• Check out all upcoming Ski Bums trips at www.ski-bums.org

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The Boyz name is used under licence by
DB C. (London) Ltd.
Boyz is published by Consort Media Ltd.
Printed by Benham Goodhead Print, Bicester.