

THE CHALLENGE

Each month we're sending a
writer on a different travel
adventure

Task № 05 March 2013

SURVIVE A GIRLY SKI HOLIDAY *in the Alps*



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I'M NOT WHAT YOU'D CALL AN ESPECIALLY MANLY MAN.

Nor, exactly, a girly boy. I'm better at cooking than DIY; I wear deodorant, but not guyliner; I know the offside rule in football, but am not unaware of *Dancing On Ice*. If you had a sliding scale of effeminacy with, say, Rupert Bear at one end and Bluto from *Popeye* at the other, I'd be just left of middle, ahead of Bagpuss, but behind Barney Rubble.

Which is why, when I was tasked with being the (very) odd one out in a group of five 25 to 45-year-old professional females visiting the ski and spa resort of Méribel in the French Alps, I wasn't particularly fazed. After all, I've got a girlfriend, friends who are girls, a mum. My friends-who-aren't-girls' predicted that it

would either be an emasculating endurance test or a Benny Hill-esque romp of speeded-up sauciness, but I was out to prove them wrong. Turns out I had much to learn.

In recent years, luxurious and ultra-modern spas have been popping up in growing numbers across the Alps. Instead of slipping out of their boots and sliding over to the bar after a day on the slopes, many skiers are now opting for a treatment or two; and the offerings available today, at resorts such as Méribel, are a world away from the wellness offerings that have been popular since Victorian times.

We're here to check this out first hand, but getting down to the pampering, we've skiing to do. After checking in at the central, three-star Le Savoy (hotel-savoy-meribel.com), a vision of modish manliness, we get the free shuttle through the handsome, woody resort to Altiport, an actual airstrip above the main village. As a helicopter lands behind us, Michel, our ski instructor, tells us he has been teaching "since dinosaurs crossed the road". His sexual politics date from roughly the same era. "I'm not a spa guy," he tells me. "I know it's very cool, but it's for women."



Over the next few hours, a mutually supportive atmosphere develops between the ladies and me, as we bond over mild outrage at Michel's Jurassic jokes and our own enthusiastic inexperience. At the bottom of a gentle green run called Blanchot, a middle-aged woman from another party slips over. Despite my burgeoning status as honorary girl, the rules of chivalry still apply and I do my best to get her upright.

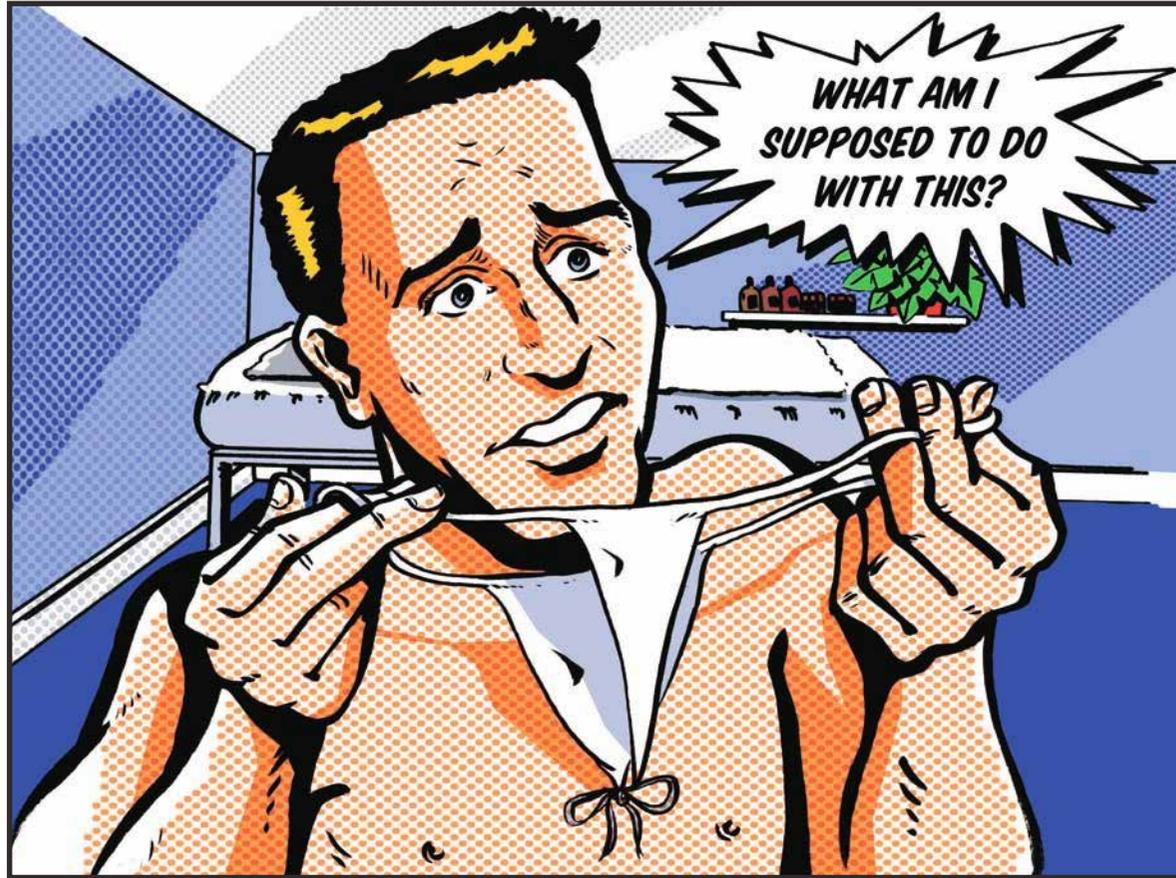
A five-minute dance of icy slapstick (slipstick?) ensues, during which it becomes apparent I am comedically ill-equipped for the job and the youngest member of our group (also the best skier) helps her up instead. It is a *tiny* bit emasculating and I'm determined to prove myself on the final section of the day: a lethally steep, downhill burst. Sensibly, four out of five of my companions ditch their skis and walk. One – and you can probably guess who – aces it. With Michel's words of encouragement ("You're scared like a girl!") echoing in my ears, I push off and drop like a stone. Time for the spa.

As we arrive at the Cinq Mondes spa in Parc Olympique (tinyurl.com/b7xouap), Méribel's municipal leisure centre

that also houses an ice rink and a swimming pool, I start to feel nervous. Unlike the ladies, I'm completely out of my comfort zone in an actual 'comfort zone', and I have that nagging male fear that this will somehow turn into a weird sex thing – I've seen *Hostel*. Hoping condensation will spare any blushes, I head straight to the steam room. My companions are charming, but I don't think hanging out together without any clothes on is going to improve cross-gender relations – it rarely does.

The moment I enter, the two women inside immediately stop talking and stare as if I've committed the most atrocious faux pas. Is this a private room? Have I broken some unspoken code? Are my shorts on properly? I nip into an adjacent – and empty – room instead, a menthol-scented chamber that resembles torture by Vick's VapoRub, and exit just as quickly. Where next? Other than an elderly couple in the corridor, there are hardly any guys here and it's another 20 minutes 'pampering' time before my massage.

I follow the old folk to the hot tub, and am soon joined by a young couple, who immediately start necking. It's >>



difficult to know where to look, so I choose upwards. Unfortunately, the ceiling is mirrored, making it the single worst place of all. The couple keep snogging. Is pampering always this awkward?

As massage time nears, I make my excuses and leave. As long as the masseur isn't a distractingly attractive lady (too weird) or a massive bloke (too painful), I can relax. A young, unthreatening-looking gent starts prepping towels. *Perfect!* I think, until he wanders off down the corridor. "Please come with me," says a breathy voice behind me. It belongs to Véronique, who is to be my distractingly attractive masseuse. She takes me into the treatment room and gives me a little package. "Take your shorts off and put these on," she says, leaving the room. This is not a good sign.

Inside is a paper thong so infinitesimal as to be practically nonexistent. Not only is there no way that these two scrunchy triangles will cover either side of my anatomy, I have no idea which way round to put them on. I picture the scenario from Véronique's POV:

if I was staring down at my own backside, I would definitely want the bigger triangle covering the view. I would also want a new job. I slip the pants on one way, but it's impossible to preserve my modesty, let alone avoid arrest. When I try them the other way round, it's all acorn and no pouch, so to speak.

With time running out, I go back to plan A, then lie face down on the table, flinching with inward laughter as Véronique re-enters and begins the awkwardest, most intimate massage of my entire life. In fact, I haven't been this thoroughly touched up to panpipe music since Glastonbury 1997. Véronique's hands glide right up to my rear and it occurs to me I'm meant to be wearing the pants the other way round, freeing up the most buttock area for this poor lady. I would find this weird even I wasn't wearing tiny paper Speedos – after all, I've got a girlfriend, friends who are girls, a mum – and I fail to see what's so relaxing about institutionalised indecent exposure. Thirty excruciating minutes later and it's finally over.

I may be new to such extremes of male grooming, but there's no denying it's a massive – and growing – business. According to market researchers Mintel, the European market alone was worth €6.6 billion in 2010 and is estimated to hit €7.2 billion by 2014. Meanwhile, a report from Baronesse Cosmétiques suggests 29–35% of Canadian spas' total revenue comes from blokes, a figure backed up by the UK's Bath Thermae Spa (34%) and the Verbena Spa in Helmsley, North Yorkshire (35%). How those chaps reacted to the slip of paper that seems to pass for pants in these parts was not reported.

At dinner later – all pumpkin soup, fluffy cushions and flowing Pinot – my companions offer both mockery and motherly concern, and I go to bed determined to man up for tomorrow's spa. The next morning, Charlotte, our lovely new ski instructor, suggests gender might be holding me back on the slopes as well. "Women force it less than the men. Because they are less strong, they try to use more technique. You are more proud than a woman. Relax!"

It's advice that works, and after a far more successful ski session, I resolve to follow her advice at the Spa des Neiges in four-star Allodis hotel (hotelalodis.com). It's a more luxurious offering than the previous day, with amazing mountain views and décor that Gok Wan might favour if he became a Bond villain. The ladies still stop and stare in the steam room, the menthol still stings >>



my eyes, but I begin to enjoy myself anyway, partly because there's more space and fewer people, and partly because yesterday's traumas have broken down my defences. I'm even joined in the pool by another chap, although he is five and learning to swim with his mum.

The icing on the cake is a massage with Fleur, who: a) lets me keep my shorts on – the pants are for hygiene, she explains, and entirely optional – and, b) doesn't breach my buttocks. This is where I would return if I had

to, although I still can't imagine coming to a spa without my girlfriend or with my friends-who-aren't-girls.

That evening at L'Escale, the restaurant in the four-star Altiport Hotel (altiporthotel.fr), the mood is celebratory – think chocolate-bomb desserts and pink Champagne – and conversation flits easily from missing our partners to discussing that paragon of male grooming, George Clooney. I feel very much part of the group now and, as we happily gossip our last night away, I realise that what divides us isn't so much gender, or sense of humour, or even skiing ability... but simply whether we enjoy wearing little bits of paper. meribel.net

**AND THEN I ASKED GEORGE
DOES MY BUM LOOK BIG IN THIS?**



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