

Skiing the womanly way

By Sandra Lane, Evening Standard (London)

I'm standing on the mountainside, absolutely frozen. And it's nothing to do with the temperature. This is bunny-caught-in-the-headlamps terror. I'm at the top of a mogul field and every bad day I've ever had on skis has been distilled into this single, excruciating instant. They're not even big bumps - though they might as well have been the size of houses.

Until that moment, everything had gone right. I had come to Steamboat, Colorado, for a women-only ski clinic. Could three days with a bunch of females really iron out 16 seasons of half-learned technique, defensive tactics and bad habits that kept me stranded on the infinite plateau of "quite strong intermediate"?

We'd started this brilliant blue-sky day just like we might have at any ski school - assigned to our (female) instructors in eight groups of four to six, according to our putative abilities. I joined Andrea, Megan, Mary and Sucheda and it soon became apparent, in myriad little ways, that this wasn't a regular ski class.

First there was Marty, our teacher, all-American sunshine and smiles. "Now, ladies, this is all about you. Not what you think you should do or what anyone else thinks. Just you." Then there was the instant bonding. This was no place for cynicism and we were soon deep into chairlift chats (children, men, travelling, shopping, work, hopes, dreams), self-deprecating jokes (Andrea: "I'm crushed! For 15 years I've been skiing flat out to keep up with my husband and daughter - and now you're telling me to ski slowly?) and living our new group mantra: "We're girls ... of course we want to ski pretty."

Marty deconstructed our turns - taking us right back to snow-plough ("Don't worry, your reputations are safe. This is our little secret."); then rebuilding them ("OK, now, hit the magic turning buttons: one o'clock on your left foot, 11 o'clock on your right"). Mary said it for all of us: "Oh, that's so simple. Why didn't anyone tell me before?" Before we knew it, we were skiing groomed blacks - revelling in our controlled, elegant, newly relearned turns.

With none of the disconcerting undercurrent of competition that often comes with mixed classes, we celebrated each other's little victories. Forget being competitive or cool. We were having fun. And even in my moment of mogul-humiliation, I got empathy and encouragement. It's a girl thing.

We so badly wanted each other to succeed that nothing fazed us. Not even the next morning's blizzard when, in pea-soup fog and howling wind, Marty taught us "Patience Turns": slow and perfectly formed. No fear. No wipeouts. Only a massive sense of celebration when we met the other groups for lunch. "Hey, if we can do that, we can do anything."

And so, an hour later, I stood at the top of "Surprise" - bumps all the way to the bottom - and Just Did It. Surprise, all right. Whoops of delight all around and what seemed like a domino effect as we spent the afternoon conquering more of our personal demons.

This was a life-enhancing week - and not just on skis. There was the laid-back charm of Steamboat (crowdfree slopes and the downhome honesty of a town where my glove was returned to lost-and-found two days after I dropped it). And there was heart-wrenching beauty: the aspen trees, petrified in ice after the blizzard and silhouetted against a china-blue sky, and the transcendental silence among the fir trees and deep snow of Morningside.

There were new-found pleasures, too: snow-shoeing - the hypnotic rhythm of our "phslock-phslock-phslock" footsteps, the stillness as we paused to identify animal tracks among the trees. A floating Watsu massage at Steamboat's natural hot springs - lying on my back, sound deadened by water, seeing only forest and snow all around us and a half-moon in the velvet-black night sky.

Above all, though, was the breakthrough skiing: once-reserved Megan, perma-smiling and exclaiming, "Let's do another!" as we did bumps and trees and deep snow on Day Three; Sucheda starting to master her fear of ice and "stupid left leg"; Mary skiing anywhere and everywhere and Andrea, no matter how slow (or fast) she skied, looking like a true champion.

It was a perfect end to a week of turning fear into fun.

Way to go

Sandra Lane travelled with Crystal Ski (0870 160 6040; www.crystalski.co.uk). Seven nights in the Alpiner Lodge from £578pp, including flights. Three-Day Women's Ski Clinic, US\$330 (£124), includes lunch but not lift ticket, \$64 (£42). Held four times a season, next dates 11-13 March (via www.steamboat.com/winter).

For other women's ski clinics, see www.skilikeawoman.com.

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