

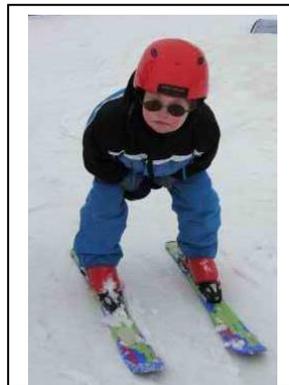
Family freedom in Switzerland

Don't be put off. If you enjoy ski-ing, there's a good chance that your disabled child will too. With cheap flights like Easyjet to Geneva, it's worth trying a few days. We did, when Daniel was small, and ski-ed like many continentals, with Daniel between our legs. Leukaemia put paid to ski-ing for several years. When we tried again, with Daniel aged 8, our backs told us that if we were to continue, we'd need expert help.

Where do you go to find a ski instructor for a child with Down's Syndrome, Autism, in remission from Leukaemia and who doesn't speak or sign? Daniel doesn't play with other children or toys, has limited comprehension and does not copy.

Villars: December 2010

On the Internet, we found Claude-Alain Hofer of Association Handiconcept offering ski lessons in Villars for people with a wide variety of disabilities. We booked one lesson with him. He held Daniel by the hand and immediately they were gliding and turning. We stopped for coffee and Daniel was making sounds and gestures to start ski-ing again. Within a few hours, they were doing a gentle zigzag down a short blue run, and Claude taught me how to take Daniel up on the button lift. Daniel was elated and vocal.



When we returned home, Daniel's Headteacher, Chris Rollings was so impressed by video footage of Daniel on skis, that we obtained a grant to take 5 children from Hadrian School, Newcastle, aged 7-9, all with learning disabilities, on a 5 day trip to Villars in March 2011. All the children loved it, with the highlight being zoomed down the mountain in a tandem ski. School is now preparing for a trip with 7 children in March 2012.

Gstaad: January 2012

Melvyn wanted to try somewhere new and I wanted Daniel to have the exhilaration of a tandem ski again. The problem was where to start? The Ski 2 Freedom website offered a glimmer of hope when I read that there was a sit-ski at Gstaad. I contacted Catherine Cosby, and she was such a great help. Even though that sit-ski was for an adult, Catherine was able to let me know who in Switzerland had a child's sit-ski. After discussing the options, Catherine arranged for Daniel to have lessons with an expert instructor, Dominik Jonas of Active Therapy, who would travel from Crans Montana and bring his sit-ski.

Catherine was also able to give us the benefit of local knowledge when we were looking for accommodation. We needed 2 bedrooms as Daniel isn't the best sleeper, and we wanted to be close to the slopes. We chose the Hotel Alphorn next to the Wispile lifts.

The holiday itself - an honest appraisal

Travel

In January, we travelled by Easyjet to Geneva and by train from the airport to Gstaad. It was an easy journey and through fabulous scenery. However, it would have been better to have hired a 4x4 at the airport as the ski areas around Gstaad are sprawling and not interconnected.

Hotel

The Alphorn was a lovely hotel; smart, clean and friendly. We were made very welcome, and the breakfast was excellent. Melvyn & I enjoyed the variety of cereals, fruits, breads, cheese and meats. Daniel loved the toast and boiled eggs, a good start to ski-ing. We didn't take the 4 course Half Board option, thinking we would eat out. We had two excellent Swiss meals - one ten minutes walk away in the centre of Gstaad, another in a restaurant attached to a dairy where we overlooked the cows being milked. The other 4 evenings we enjoyed meals in the hotel.

The Alphorn has a lift, but probably would not be the best for wheelchair users. It has a wellness centre, but no pool and nothing special for children in the evening. It is a good 10 minutes walk from the centre of Gstaad. They were not problems for us. After a full day's ski-ing, we didn't feel the need for anything extra in the evening.

Wispile ski area

At the back of the Alphorn is a ski hire shop and a gentle Nursery slope with magic carpet (travellator). That was ideal for us for Day 1. Other benefits were the igloo café at the bottom of the magic carpet and toilets a few metres from the top of the Magic Carpet. The beginners area is excellent for absolute beginners. However, the next stage is up a button lift - no problem for Daniel's instructor Dom, but the blue run was not an easy one, and had several fall lines. To progress, Daniel would need another area. Also, the beginners areas is right beside the road, not quite the remote beauty I enjoy with ski-ing.

Schonried

Catherine & Dom drove us the 15 minute journey to Schonried, much easier for us than the Ski bus. Schonried has much more to offer. The Magic Carpet leads up a slightly steeper slope, which has more scope for teaching. The lessons given by the local ski schools for young children looked excellent, imaginative, colourful and fun - good for siblings. There was also the chance of progression to a rope tow. A short walk from the rope tow was my favourite café - eating homemade soup, sitting on hay bales covered with sheepskins.

We had two problems with the area - it snowed heavily, causing the magic carpet to keep stopping, and the fact that the only toilets were up in the café. There were no hotels very close to the Snowpark. However it was a lovely area, and the chair lift led to some glorious runs with the sit-ski. We came to this area twice.

Sanaanmoser

It snowed and snowed, the pass from Crans Montana was closed, so we gave Dom the day off. We decided to go by ski bus and train to a new area, Our experience was coloured by the fact we tried to be too independent. While the train journey was pleasant, walking with our skis and Daniel's to the snow park was not fun.

The slopes either side of the magic carpet were a good gradient, but for us there was a big problem. At Gstaad, it was flat at the top of the magic carpet, at Schonried there was a gentle slope down, making it easy to get off. At Sanaanmoser, it sloped upwards, making it virtually impossible for Daniel to get off without being carried or stopping the lift. The nonstop snow caused people's skis to slip back on the magic carpet, sliding into the person behind. Daniel decided he had had enough and headed towards the carpark.

Sanaanmoser was short of facilities too. A Portacabin served hot drinks and small snacks, but the nearest toilets and a bistro were 5 minutes walk away.

We went to the Bistro, caught the train back, then, to our surprise and pleasure, Daniel headed for the magic carpet and spent an hour on the nursery slope outside the Alphorn.

Eggli

Only 3 or 4 minutes from the Alphorn, a gondola leads to a Panoramic restaurant with spectacular views on good days. For us, it was....snowing. However, we had some great runs with Dom, Catherine and the sitski.

Daniel loves the feeling of motion, and having the sitski meant we could ski together as a family.



Dom

An excellent instructor and a lovely guy Dom is an instructor of instructors, who really knows his stuff. The constant snow meant he wasn't able to do as much as he had hoped. However, he was able to teach Daniel to be more independent as he got on and off the magic carpet and began to tackle the major problem of teaching Daniel to stop. He brought a 'wedgie' to keep Daniel's ski tips together, and a 'bra' pole attached to the bindings to keep the skis in a snowplough.



Since Daniel didn't really need the wedgie and disliked the 'bra' pole, Dom used a variety of techniques to help Daniel get the feel of the snowplough position. I don't think we were there long enough for Daniel's muscles to commit snowplough to memory. When doing short sections on his own, Daniel's skis glided back into parallel.

However what was most important was that Daniel enjoyed it. Even on the day when it was not only snowing heavily, it was wet snow, Daniel was excited and animated. Each day, he was keen to go again, and he loved the exhilaration of the sitski.

Despite the fact that it hardly stopped snowing, we had a very good holiday. Melvyn enjoyed ski-ing new areas, Daniel had fun and made progress, and I had the adrenalin rush of following the sit-ski at speed down some lovely long runs. A big thank you to Catherine for helping us make the arrangements and being such a help while we were in Gstaad.

We're going family ski-ing again next year. Why don't you give it a try?

Maureen Wallhead
or as many people refer to me - Daniel's Mum

February 2012

Useful contacts:

www.ski2freedom.com

www.activetherapy.eu

www.gstaad.ch

www.alphorn-gstaad.ch