

Beneficiary Experience

Skiing as an Amputee

“My name is Alistair Spearing, in 2011 I was blown up whilst serving in the Royal Engineers in Afghanistan. In that one second everything I had known or had planned to do changed, and my life took a completely unexpected turn. Everyday throws up new challenges just to get the run of the mill things done. At first these were all consuming and at times felt insurmountable, but every day got a little bit easier and it actually became quite good fun re learning how to do things from a wheelchair or prosthetic legs. Looking back now I can laugh at how helpless I was when I first got in the wheelchair and how restricted and trapped I felt by it. Unfortunately despite my wheelchair skills coming on a fair amount in the last few years there are still endless situations where I am reminded of just how unfriendly the world is for a wheelchair user. These times are so frustrating not just for me but for friends and family as well.

I was used to living a pretty active lifestyle in the Army and the Military rehabilitation Centre at Headley Court understands this and is quick to encourage us to keep our energy levels and activities up by incorporating a huge range of sports and hobbies into our daily rehab routine. It was here that I first heard about adaptive skiing and had spoken to a few of the guys who had been away on the annual ski trip from Headley. They had absolutely loved it and were so positive that I felt I had to give it go. I had already taken up a bit of wheelchair basketball, tennis and kayaking but my fiancée has always been an addicted skier and she was desperate for me to try it out so we booked a couple of hours coaching at the Hemel Hempstead indoor slope and went up one weekend.

The instructors there were fantastic, really friendly and obviously knew what they were doing. By the end of the session I was managing to go down the baby slope and put in a few turns but have to admit that while I enjoyed it, I wasn't completely overwhelmed and felt slight disappointment. For this reason I actually didn't pursue it any further until my birthday this year when my fiancée determined as ever, booked us flights to Geneva and informed me that we were going skiing for three days. I was excited but apprehensive at the same time. If I was crap or hated it then three days was going to be a long time. I put my doubts to one side and went and did what everyone else does before a ski trip, I went and spent a load of money on gear that I didn't really need I even bought some Salopettes and got my sister to cut them off at the knees and then sew them closed, thus all kitted out we set off to Switzerland.

We were staying with friends who live near Nandez (Valais – Switzerland) and by a stroke of luck have a completely accessible bungalow. I say stroke of luck because I have to warn you Switzerland is easily the worst place I have visited for wheelchair or disabled facilities, they are pretty much non-existent after you leave the airport. But I don't want to sound negative because I had just the best three days I have had in a long, long time. We picked up a hire car from the airport and picked up the rental sit ski for skiing the next day. We were skiing in the 4 valleys resorts and on the first day went to meet my instructor a lady called Mano who seems to have made it her life mission to make the resorts of Switzerland as accessible as possible for disabled skiers. We hit it off straight away and wasted no time in getting up onto the slopes.

As I said the access was not perfect but with help it is perfectly manageable. We started on the baby slopes which we soon got bored of and so after an hour or so we made our way onto the blue runs. I will not bore you with details of the three days but, at the risk of sounding big headed I took to it like a duck to water and by day three I was flying down some pretty tricky reds. The one to one coaching obviously was a great help and again we were lucky there because Mano is actually a

friend of a friend and had given up her time for the price of some après beers. The feeling I got was just euphoric, that sounds excessive but it really was the first time I think ever since being injured that it didn't really matter. I could ski as fast as anyone else and down the same runs and once I felt confident it just became an absolute joy that I didn't want to end. I'm not going to lie, the first day and half were hard work with plenty of falls and frustrations. By the end of the first day I was exhausted but as my technique improved and the falls became less frequent and as I could get down the slopes faster the enjoyment and freedom is just all consuming. Another thing that I noticed was that people still stare at you but in a good way. Its not like when people stare at you in your wheelchair going down the street but like they are just interested and impressed and think it's actually really cool. By the end of the third day it's safe to say I was completely hooked.

In terms of difficulties faced, the biggest thing I found was the lack of accessible toilets, I have a pretty small manual wheelchair and I still didn't find anywhere on the mountain or even most restaurants I could get into. Also when I went to pick up the rental sit ski they were in a rush and told me that it would all be fine, I stupidly didn't insist on trying it out at the rental place and the seat was actually far to big and the out riggers far too long. We managed to borrow a spanner from the ski lift and shortened my out riggers but I was stuck with the chair and so we did our best by padding it out with a blanket. I am also quite a high amputee and on a couple of occasions after crashing, actually came completely out of the chair. This was a massive pain in the arse as getting back in whilst half way down a slope is tricky. When I was injured I also lost most of my right bum cheek and I found that this was effecting the way I turned, I ended up folding up my beanie and using it as a pad to sit on which made a dramatic difference. So if you do go, take a bottle to pee in (for the boys, girls I don't really know what to suggest.) and make sure you fully test any hire kit before taking it away.

I can't really quantify what skiing means to me just now because I have really only just started. But I do know that I went on a pretty sceptical ski holiday and have come back fully converted. I also know that flying half way down a steep slope at a racing bike angle feeling my ski edge cutting through the snow and surrounded my towering snow covered mountains is, to me at least, complete escapism from everyday life and is as exhilarating and challenging and enjoyable as anything I have ever done with or without my legs. It means a huge amount for my relationship with my fiancée as well. She loves skiing more than anything else and with practice this is something we can participate together in at a genuinely similar level with no compromise from either of us.

I am nothing if not impulsive, when I returned from that trip I researched and bought my own sit ski which should be arriving a few weeks. We have already booked another long weekend skiing in March opting for France this time, and have rearranged our honeymoon plans to include a couple of weeks skiing in Canada next December. I currently have no aspirations for greatness but I just want to get out on the slopes as much as I can and to continue to improve and maybe one day beat my fiancée down a slope."

As written by Ali Spearing and in his own words – February 2015

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