

The hills are alive with the sound of music
With songs, they have sung for a thousand years
The hills fill my heart with the sound of music
My heart wants to sing every song it hears
-Rogers & Hammerstein

Chapter 5: Mountains, Moonlight & Magic

We'll Always Have Paris

On the winter solstice 1991, the five of us, brother-in-law Tom, sister-in-law Linda, Lori, myself and wee niece Margaret, along with 15 suitcases, 3 steamer trunks, 2 pairs of skis, a stroller, and an actual sled – boarded the train in Toulouse, bound for the Austrian Alps. We changed trains in Paris, which entailed changing train *stations* in Paris. So Lori and I put the baggage and the other 3 people into a large taxi bound for the Gare d' Est and jumped on the Metro. We had about four hours until the next train left. Lori had never been to Paris before and I decided to wow her with a 4-hour power tour. We emerged from the Metro right underneath the moonlit Eiffel Tower and I was off to a good start in the wowing department. We walked the Seine to the Champs-Elysees. The city was lit up with Christmas lights covering the streets and buildings. Every tree along the Champs-Elysees was ringed with colored lights creating a magical scene when viewed from the Arc De Triomphe. We walked for hours taking in all the magic The City of Lights had to offer. Finally, we reached the Gare d' Est and boarded the train for the overnight journey into Austria.

Dream Time

We each had a *courette*, which evidentially must mean a small bunk bed on a French train *en Francais*, and drifted off to to the romantic klickity klack music of train travel. We woke to the most

beautiful mountains in the world going by our windows as we passed beneath the towering peaks of the Swiss Alps. Just seeing the Alps covered in winter snow was the first dream to come true for me that week. All the way to Innsbruck, I stared awestruck out the window at the sheer white dappled peaks. From there we caught a smaller train up the valley to the little town of Seefeld. Seefeld is my storybook ideal of what a cozy, alpine village ought to look like.

In Europe, not everyone is in town to downhill ski as was generally still the case in the U.S. at that time. Alpine skiing accounted for only a small percentage of the leisure pursuits taking place. There were Winter sport practitioners of every possible stripe: nordic, curling, skating, sunning, wearing fur coats and walking little doggies, sleigh riding, and of course drinking (they had the cutest little snow bars set up throughout the village).

We stayed in a beautiful hotel, courtesy of Tom and Linda. We only had to eek out the groceries and whatever sporting activities we wanted to do from our meager trip budget. It had been cloudy the day we arrived and when I stepped out the door the next morning with my rented snow skis to a cloudless blue sky day, I nearly wept with joy at the awesome sight before me. Mountains so powerful and majestic as to make you wonder why modern religions worship ourselves and not nature. The jagged, glacial-cut peaks shimmered pink in the morning sun. I was about to live a lifelong fantasy. No, not to bed six Austrian ski bunnies at once, but I was going to snow ski in Europe! I still felt a bit like Bond, despite the absence of Bond bunnies.

I rode a funicular train partway up the mountain and took a gondola the rest of the way. The panorama from the top at about 7000 feet was quite simply the most beautiful I have ever seen. In the distance, I could see the town of German town Garmisch-Partenkirchen site of the 1936 Olympic Games. In another direction was the towering Zugspitze, the tallest mountain in Germany.

Beneath me Seefeld was the perfect little Austrian village nestled in the valley.

The character of downhill skiing in Europe is very different. Instead of lots of lifts all together, each little village had 1 or 2 lifts that could be reached with short train rides or by cross-country skiing. And rather than ski company run lodges on the mountain, there are unique little privately owned restaurants and beer stubes scattered here and there. Many Europeans will ride the lift up to one of these places just to sun and gaze at the view for the afternoon. Americans do this too but allways under the pretense of doing some actual skiing. The Europeans often just dispense with the pretense and wear comfortable shoes.

Better Living Sans Clothing

While I skied, the ladies took a horse drawn sleigh ride through the woods. For après ski we went to our hotel spa. This was not your converted storage room with a creaky exercise bike and a hot tub type spa, which might pass muster at a mid-tier hotel in an American ski villa. This was an Austrian Alpine Spa with all the trimmings. After having visited Bath England and learning all about Roman baths, I was excited to go Roman. This involved taking off all your clothes, men and women together, sitting in the sauna until you are dripping with sweat, then submerging in the ice cold water pool, back to the sauna or Turkish steam bath, out into the snow, etc. etc. Eventually, after a few repetitions of this, your pores becomes thoroughly cleansed and clear feeling, at which point you lie down on wooden slats with a sheet wrapped around you. We weren't really sure what this was for but we didn't want to miss anything. It did seem to have a soothing, finishing effect to it. Finally, you shower, dress and head for the cocktail lounge.

The week went much too fast. We skied nordic and alpine for 3 days, always followed by the spa. One afternoon, out on borrowed nordic gear, it was so clear and beautiful that I had a

peak experience skiing through the woods and hills, coming upon vista after vista of those incredible mountains. On the fourth day we had a romantic snowfall of big puffy snowflakes. We skated on the ice rink, people watched, drank schnapps, and ate schnitzel at outdoor bars built into the snow banks. It was definitely one of the better weeks of my life. We spent a few more days in Innsbruck and then caught the train home. We toasted the New Year with Champagne on the midnight train passing through Basel, Switzerland. We had to change train stations in Paris again, this time at 6AM on New Years day. We walked hung over and happy through the deserted dawn streets of Paris. As we crossed the Seine, we looked over to see the first full moon of 1991 rising like a golden globe right over Notre Dame against the cobalt blue sky. We took it as a good omen for things to come.

Back in Toulouse, Tom and I set up his new mini Satellite dish just in time to catch my alma mater, the Washington Huskies, rout the Iowa Hawkeyes in the Rose Bowl 28 - 0. Lori and Linda are from Iowa, so maybe had a small rooting interest for the vanquished, but since the game started at 11 PM local time they were mercifully asleep for the majority of the carnage.