

## **South Jersey Ski Club – Cervinia, Italy-Paris, France – 16 to 29 January, 2015**

45 excited travelers, skiers, boarders and friends met at Newark Airport in the early afternoon on Friday, 16 January. Little did we know that our projected 11 day trip would turn into a 13 day adventure in travel flexibility, but more about that later!

Our vendor had arranged a group lounge for us with a location quite close to the International gates and a plethora of bars, shops and restaurants. That made gathering the group and taking note that all had arrived very easy. Thanks to Jamie at Alphorn Tours for that perk.

Although there was a suspect issue with “windshield wiper repair” that delayed our take off by over an hour as we sat on board, our flight was comfortable and quick thanks to strong tailwinds. We landed in the fog at Milan Malpensa right on time. Our bus driver was waiting, and everyone headed to board the bus for the 3 hour drive up to Cervinia. Unfortunately, there was a slight delay again due to the non-arrival of Thomas A.’s bag. Once that claim was made, we hit the road toward the Alps.

We were delighted to see that snow was falling as we made our ascent into the mountains, and Cervinia was a vision of white as we pulled up to the Sertorelli Sporthotel, our wonderful home away from home for the next seven days. Check-in went smoothly with excellent service from Reception, and that service only set the tone for what was to come. The hotel, the delicious food and the friendly personnel exceeded our expectations! Gian Franco and Co. provided a spread for our “Welcome Cocktail” in Olympic Bar that had many thinking it was dinner. Bianca M. gave a detailed briefing about the hotel services, ski pass purchase, spa privileges and more before everyone headed to the dining room for our first four course meal of the week. After dinner and despite travel fatigue, many also made the acquaintance of Gian Luca in the bar. He would become the new best friend of most of the group before the week was over.

We were greeted by sun on Sunday, and almost everyone set out to enjoy the slopes and the gorgeous views. Snow conditions were excellent and an amazing time was had by all. On this trip, almost everyone skied or boarded in groups of 6 to 12 to 14. No one skied alone unless by personal choice after being asked to join a group. Lori D. was back on skis after 25 years. John Scz., Michelle J. and Roseann C. were making their first European turns. Cervinia’s mild Plan Maison slopes plus run #5 were perfect for them and a few others who were feeling tentative due to injuries. As the only first day mishap, Tom J. and Joe D. found themselves in Switzerland that afternoon without an international pass. That expensive mistake would not happen again!

At dinner, Roseann C. was presented with a beautiful cake for her birthday, and we all provided her with a celebratory serenade. After dinner, Mark R. arranged for the Seattle Seahawks- Green Bay Packers playoff game to be shown on the large screen TV in the Olympic Bar. A crowd of 25 watched the game, and a few, Mark R. included, stayed up to witness the wild final moments. There were some tired eyes at breakfast on Monday morning.

A change in the weather was in the air on Monday with a little bit of sun, some snow showers, high clouds and low clouds, but overall the conditions remained optimum. Beth B. and Melanie F. were skiing

with an iPhone app that allows for the tracking of vertical, distance, speed and more. Dale and Bianca M., Chris and Steve S. and Marty and Ken C. joined them for a couple of hours Monday afternoon and were astonished by the over 11,000 feet vertical and 11.5 miles of distance covered during that time! Beth also captured us with her GoPro camera and gave us an opportunity to view ourselves in action when we stopped for a pit stop in the beautiful, new and aptly named *Il Pitstop*. This new addition to Cervinia's delicious mountain eateries won top marks from all of us for its absolutely amazing food and beautiful restrooms located on the same level! Bob and Lorraine S. had a Shrimp Pasta special there one day that all deemed worthy of being served in the finest of big city restaurants.

Tuesday morning dawned to lightly falling snow and rather flat light. The clouds were high enough, however, that by 11 the sun broke through over most of the area. Sean O., John B., John Sa., Ginny and Nicole T., Devin O. and Bill G. set out with their backpacks bulging for an overnight trek to Zermatt. Tom J. was out of commission due to an injury he had suffered the previous afternoon while cruising into a mountain bar for on slope *Après*. He was hobbling about with a very sore calf. Thankfully, his would be the only injury of the week.

A large group of us including Don B. and Gene Z. set out for the La Salette area above Valtournenche, and we were treated to some of the most jaw dropping views of the week as the sun burned through the clouds. A heavy snowfall during the night had brought so much fresh powder to the area, and the billowing whiteness was amazing. We vowed to return with others to that location later in the week.

Dinner was again a celebration as we feted Janet D.'s birthday and Ken and Marty C.'s wedding anniversary with more beautiful cakes and copious quantities of bubbly. The bar was bustling that night as we toasted to friends and falling snow. Flakes were flying thick and fast. While we were looking forward to a powder day on Wednesday, there was a little bit of concern that the intrepid seven in Zermatt could be trapped in that VERY costly ski paradise.

Snow continued falling heavily on Wednesday morning, but that did not stop Dale and Bianca M., Michelle and Eric T., Mark R., Janet D., Bob and Lorraine S., Gene Z., Don B., Debbie L., Judy and Richard R., Judy and Dennis S. and Charlie N. from venturing out to float down the slopes around Plan Maison and Pancheron. Matt D. and Thomas A. were up there, too. Thomas was sporting a brand new ski outfit no thanks to the fact that his previous new outfit had been "lifted" from his missing bag before it was finally delivered to him the evening before! Betsy B., Amy S., Beth B., Sandi G., Melanie F. and Dianne D. opted for fun in town that day, and their legs no doubt thanked them for it! Bill J., Gayle E., Maryellen N. and Erica B. joined them in "coffee" bar hopping from one cozy locale to the next. Bombardino drinking was becoming a regular habit!

After such a snowy day, Bianca and Janet could not have been more delighted when the Zermatt trekkers appeared in the dining room for dinner! It had been a bit hairy returning from Zermatt in deep powder and complete whiteout on the upper slopes, but they were full of enthusiasm after their adventure crossing the border. We were happy to have them back safe, sound and smiling!

What excitement was in the air on Thursday morning when we woke to clear skies and glistening powder snow. This was going to be one of those real powder days that don't come along all that often in

the Alps. Big groups set out early to ski as much of the mountain as possible. Our group of 12 plus Italian friend, Stefano M., set out at 9:15 for La Salette with the intention of skiing the long #1 run down to Valtournenche. 10 of us made it all the way down there on one of the most beautiful runs of the week. It was a truly marvelous day! When we finally made the final run down to Cervinia at 3:30, we realized that we had traveled close to 30 miles on skis during the course of the day. No wonder the Happy Hour at Grivola was calling our name. Steve S. and Eric T. two fistbumped those two for one beers with big grins on their faces.

Another lavish "Welcome Cocktail" preceded dinner tonight thanks to the arrival of a large group of young attorneys from the United Kingdom. We had met some of them in the spa earlier, and they definitely added to the already festive atmosphere that the 45 of us had managed to generate. The bar was a very happening place all evening and into the wee hours!

Friday was to be the day for a huge group of us to ski across the border into Zermatt. The sun was shining, the sky was clear and the new snow beautifully groomed. However, even the best laid plans can be blown away by the wind. Upon arrival at the main lift station, we discovered that all of the upper lifts were closed due to winds as high as 70 kmh. International passes to Zermatt were not being sold. We were very disappointed, but what could we do.

As the day progressed the wind blew even stronger, and for most of the day only 3 lifts were running, the lower quad and six pack and the upper bowl Pancheron six pack. That latter lift had the disconcerting habit of undergoing wind stops every few moments, and after the second harrowing ride, many of us decided to call it a day. We had skied so much all week that enjoying a leisurely lunch in town, taking some photos and doing some shopping proved not a bad way to bid farewell to gleaming Cervinia. It allowed for a relaxing long early evening in the spa and plenty of time to pack, too.

Dawn had not yet broken on Saturday morning when our transfer bus pulled up outside the hotel. Bags were packed and in the lobby, and everyone was ready for our newest adventure. We were headed to Torino's Porta Susa railway station where we would board the TGV train for Paris. It was another clear and windy morning, and the views were gorgeous as the sun rose over the Alps during our long drive down to the valley and along the Autostrada into Torino.

Boarding the TGV with 45 people plus their large bags, at least one ski bag and 5 (or was it 6?) snowboard bags was not an easy task. Thanks to the strong guys (and they know how grateful this trip leader is for them 😊) who had been helping with the luggage all week, the job was done efficiently and without an undue delay of the train! We were well fortified with bag lunches from the hotel, lots of snacks plus bottles of wine and beer, and the trip passed quickly and comfortably as we passed through the Alps into France and on to "The City of Light".

Our hotel, Mercure Gare de Lyon, was attached to the Gare de Lyon arrival station, and it did not take more than 45 minutes for all to be off the train, at the hotel, checked in and ready for Parisian explorations! Much prior research had been done on board the train, and everyone had a plan for Paris. Groups set out to savor French cuisine and/or visit Notre Dame, Montmartre, Sacre Coeur, Le Tour Eiffel, L'Arc de Triomphe and even a jazz club in a cave on the Rive Gauche. There was so much to do

and so little time, or so we thought! Dianne D. and John Sa had opted out of the Paris portion of the trip, so they spent their evening preparing for an early Sunday morning departure.

Special thanks were in order for the French teacher in our midst, Judy S. Early Saturday evening she led a large number of people on their first foray into the fabulous Paris Metro system. That group ended up admiring the lights of Paris from beautiful Sacre Coeur followed by a fun evening wandering the streets of Montmartre. Thanks to Judy, they were left with plenty of confidence to continue explorations on their own. The weather was very helpful to us as well, and the temperatures hovered in the mid to upper 40's the entire time we were in Paris. There was only a little wind and a minimal amount of misty rain on the last day. Wandering about the city was quite pleasant all five days.

During the week in Cervinia, many of us had been keeping an eye to The Weather Channel app, primarily for the temperatures or snow chances, with only an occasional glance at what was happening stateside. Conditions for our return on 27 January had been looking good until Sunday, 25 January, when all took an abrupt turn for the worse. After a wonderful day visiting L'Arc de Triomphe, La Marais and Musee Carnevalet followed by dinner at Tour Eiffel 58 with Mark R., Janet D., Dale M., Michelle and Eric T., Bianca received a weather warning e-mail from her daughter. Quickly she took another look at The Weather Channel app. Yes, a massive snowstorm was now being forecast for the Mid-Atlantic/New York/New England area! It could be a storm of historic proportions said a commentator on BBC World News. Would a contingency plan be necessary?

Early Monday morning Bianca received an e-mail from United Airlines with the information that all Tuesday flights had been cancelled. Immediately an e-mail went out to our vendor as to how to proceed. With the knowledge that nothing could be done stateside until dawn, everyone headed out for some morning touring, particularly at The Louvre where many an SJSC member was encountered. After lunch on the Seine aboard Bateaux Parisienne Cristal II, Bianca M. and Janet D. returned to the hotel to set up their "office" under the stairs in the lobby. Calls from Alphorn Tours were coming fast and furious. A few glasses of wine, many calls, some hand wringing, more questions and over 3 hours later, everyone on our trip had been rebooked for flights on 29 January! In addition, the group had been rebooked for a new hotel, Ibis Bastille Opera, because the Mercure was completely booked for 27 and 28 January. It was also necessary to rebook all airport transfers. With everything arranged and organized as best it could be under the circumstances, Dale and Bianca M., Janet D., Mark R. and Dale and Bianca's first exchange student and Parisian friend, Anne C. headed out for more much needed wine and a delicious Alsatian meal at Taverna Karlsbrau.

Our Tuesday morning transfer to the new hotel less than 1 km away had us there before 10 AM. Only rooms for Bianca M. and Janet D. were available at that point. In addition, the hotel did not provide baggage storage. Therefore, the trip leaders' rooms became storage rooms for ALL the bags! With check-in not set until after 3, what else could one do but head out to enjoy an extra day in Paris? It was hard to imagine a better place to be stranded than in one of the greatest cities in the world!

As word came in later in the day that the forecast "snow of the century" was now becoming the "no snow", a group that had been scheduled through Chicago on their return, decided to take matters

into their own hands and make their own arrangements for an earlier return. Seats were opening up on United Airlines Flight 905 for Wednesday morning, and by the time everyone had checked into the Ibis and retrieved their bags at 6 PM, eight of our group had been rebooked on that flight. The remaining 31 had no complaint about staying in Paris an extra day and/or were unable to find a seat on the earlier flight for unknown reasons. Matt D. and Betsy B. and Thomas A. and Amy S. were no longer in the equation as they had already arranged to return home much later in the week.

Thanks to the extra time in Paris, a group of us were able to travel out to Versailles on Wednesday. We had not even considered such an excursion to that incredible palace when we first arrived. However, more time had allowed us to visit most of the museums on our lists on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. How delighted were we with this turn of events! We had a lovely lunch at Le Lyautey in the town of Versailles then took the RER C back for shopping in the city.

Outside Le Bon Marche' Bianca placed a call to the transfer company to find out the name and contact info of the Thursday transfer driver. She was informed that: a. the transfer had not been paid for and b. we did not have a transfer as a result. What!? E-mail confirmation of the transfer had been sent on Monday! More phone calls to Alphorn Tours followed, and after a tense 45 minutes, the problem, a result of internal miscommunication, had been solved and Bianca's off the charts blood pressure began to return to normal. Phew! A delicious and relaxing dinner with Debbie L., Ken and Marty C., Dale M. and Mark R. at Le P'tit Breguet near our hotel finally lifted the remaining mantle of stress from Bianca and Janet's shoulders, at least for the time being.

With the early return of most of the group booked through Chicago on Wednesday, only Richard and Judy R. and Dale and Bianca M. were still scheduled through Chicago instead of direct to Newark with the others. Jamie, our vendor, had recommended that they travel out to the airport early with the others and get on standby for Thursday's Flight 905. Therefore, we were all on our transfer bus to Charles de Gaulle at 6 AM on Thursday. At first standby did not look good for the four of us because the flight was "sold out". However, lady luck was on our side. At 8:30 AM, as the boarding groups were lining up, Kareema, the gate agent, called up "Mr. and Mrs. Rinck" and "Mr. and Mrs. Mandel" and....WE GOT ON THE FLIGHT!! By 3 PM on Thursday, we were all at home! A beautiful, memorable, unpredictable and exciting trip had come to a very happy ending.

Thanks to an amazing group for everything they did for the trip leaders, for their fellow travelers and for themselves to make this a fantastic experience. Wonderful memories were made, exciting adventures were had, beautiful sights were seen and many new friendships were forged. We pride ourselves on providing the best possible experience, and we hope that you will join us again and spread the word among your friends.

**Until Next Year...Al Anno Prossimo...A l'Annee Prochaine!**

