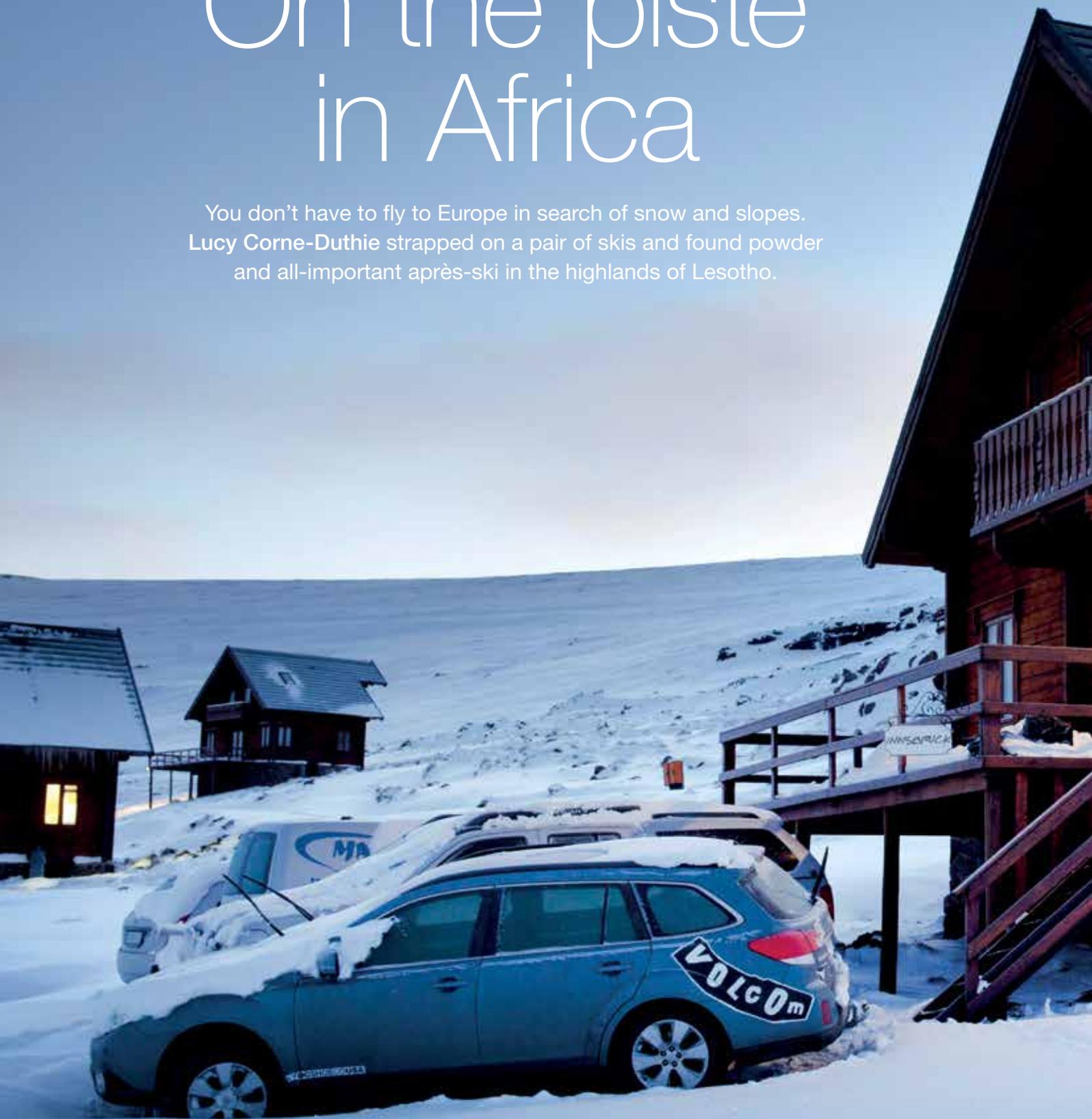


On the piste in Africa

You don't have to fly to Europe in search of snow and slopes. Lucy Corne-Duthie strapped on a pair of skis and found powder and all-important après-ski in the highlands of Lesotho.





hadn't expected to end the day hanging upside-down from a snowboard fixed to the ceiling. But then, the entire weekend had been full of memorable moments – the snow-dusted moon-scape, the surprise victory in my first bumboarding race, being the sole skier on a pristine piste. Oh, and the fact that this on- and off-piste action all happened not in Europe nor Canada, but right here in sub-Saharan Africa.

Afriski is the feather in Lesotho's Basotho hat. Opened in 2004, the resort sits at the end of a long, winding and rutted road in the Maloti Mountains. The 80-kilometre road from the border starts flat and sunny, and it's tough to imagine that in a couple of hours, you'll be swapping sunglasses for goggles and hitting the slopes. The road climbs, leaving quintessential Africa behind as the back-to-back hairpin bends of Moteng Pass lead towards the first smattering of snow.

From the highest point of the drive, the Mahlasela Pass at 3222 metres, the ski slope is finally visible – a pristine swatch of snow on a rock-strewn mountainside. We jump out to take photos of what feels like the whole of Lesotho laid out before us and the brisk mountain air makes us realise we've made a rookie mistake. On approaching Afriski's reception, we're forced to acknowledge we haven't packed

proudly overcompensates for in character.

The Gondola Café, the on-site bar, is where you'll find most of the character ... and the characters. Inside, professional-looking skiers sip glühwein and booze-laced hot chocolate as the sun dips behind the mountains. The resort is secluded and driving to find dinner or drinks isn't an option, so a great effort is made to ensure you're happy to be stuck here. Après-ski – activities that take place once the slopes have closed for the day – is important and the ski instructors moonlight as entertainers after dark, with starlit torch parades on the slopes, Caribbean singalongs and a 'snow dance', loosely based on the Haka. The entertainment has an air of a bunch of mates putting on an impromptu show, and you somehow feel a part of the team just by being there. With space for 232 people to sleep over, the resort appears intimate and you quickly feel like you know everyone.

After a few glühweins, it's time to head in for dinner, stopping for a spot of speed stargazing on the sub-zero shuffle along icy paths to the Sky Restaurant. The restaurant has almost everything you'll need: a roaring fire, a pile of board games and a well-priced wine list. What it does not always have is a great deal of food. While intermittent snowfall brings smiles to those on the slopes, it doesn't do much for the roads, and sometimes deliveries don't reach Afriski for a few days.

There's a comical air to ordering, as each item we choose runs out almost as soon as the request leaves our lips. But no-one really minds and somehow it all seems to add to the air of camaraderie.

The real reason no-one cares, though, is because they haven't wound their way up the potholed pass to eat; they're here to ski. Early the next morning that's exactly what I do while hubby, a non-skier, makes it his personal goal to explore the 'off-piste' action (which essentially means drinking a lot of Maluti beer and 'researching' which spirit makes the best addition to hot chocolate).

He doesn't know what he's missing. Skiing in Lesotho is wonderful. After learning in busy ski schools in the French Alps, my only other downhill stint was on

If you've ever fancied a side of serenity with your snowplough, you're going to love this.



well for the weather. Although the powder on the slopes has had a helping hand from snow-making machines ubiquitous in ski resorts, that which lines the paths between the chalets, restaurant and bar is the real thing and it's cold. Very cold.

Afriski boasts just one main run, a kilometre-long slope suited to beginner and intermediate skiers and snowboarders. There's also a small space for first-timers to perfect their snowplough (see our beginner's guide on page 72) before catching the button lift up the main trail. But what Afriski might lack in size, it

South Korea's dangerously crowded slopes. Never have I skied alone, but that's how I spend the first hour at Afriski, taking the button lift to the top of the slope and traversing back down without passing a single person.

The run isn't too challenging and if you're after some double diamond action (that is, some truly hard-core pistes), it's probably not the resort for you. But if you've ever fancied a side of serenity with your snowplough, you're going to love this. It's not always quiet, of course; the start and end of the season are the best times to visit, since they fall outside of school holidays. Early morning is the time to ski solo – or at least without worrying about lift queues. By lunch, day trippers have joined overnight guests and things begin to get busier.

The slopes attract all sorts: a Joburg couple whose pricey quilted jackets belie the fact that this is their first time on the piste; a French family living in Cape Town who are so thrilled with the empty slopes that they make a pact to return each year instead of making the pilgrimage home – there are even a few blanket-clad Basotho shepherds watching from the foot of the slope. I feel like I complete the melting pot – a lone skier in a ridiculous makeshift skiing outfit of combat pants, sunglasses and a multicoloured woollen jacket.

Most of the skiers, snowboarders and après-skiers are South Africans, here for a chance to experience what is often an unaffordable adventure. Even before you factor in the cost of getting to an overseas resort, skiing is a pricey pas-time. But spending time on Lesotho's slopes, including equipment hire and lift passes, will set you back R645 – and less per day if you stick around for a while.

Alas, our trip was coming to an end, but before nursing the aches that two days on the piste will inevitably bring, we have a few other aches to acquire.

The sport of bumboarding is an under-reported one. Its rules are simple: hitch a ride up slope on snow plough, sit on butt-shaped piece of plastic, hold handle for dear life, pick feet up and zoom downhill at break-neck speed (or at least break-bum speed). In hubby's case, you can



add 'squeeze eyes shut' to the list too, as he has nothing to protect them from the snow spraying up. In the absence of goggles, I don my sunglasses and it seems that this added dose of cool (it's dark outside) helps my bumboarding technique. It's so disorienting that I have no idea I won until we're heading back into the Gondola Café to warm up.

It turns out that the drink I'll be warming up with won't be the glühwein I'd envisaged. It also transpires that there's one last activity on the agenda: the even lesser-known sport of upside-down shooters. The 'prize' for winning an event is to be hoisted into the bindings of a board fixed to the ceiling and to take a swig of the house shooter – a thankfully gentle affair. The multitasking employees hoist participants right-side-up to take the shot and I find I'm not too terrible at this 'sport' either. At least, I don't spray it out of my nose as I thought I might. But to be honest, the community spirit at this resort, where fun and games are as much a part of the experience as scenery, is so strong that I feel no-one would mind too much if somebody snorted Cherry Sourz at them from a great height. And I think that's something pretty special. ■

➔ Travel planner overleaf

ABOVE: Visit at the start or end of the skiing season and you're likely to get the slopes to yourself for a while.

LESOTHO

PLAN YOUR TRIP

GETTING THERE

Afriski is a five-hour drive from Joburg, via Bethlehem in the Free State. Enter Lesotho at Caledonspoort Border Post (open daily from 06h00 to 22h00). There is a R30 toll for light vehicles.

Liphofung Cave, which harbours San paintings, is a worthy stop, sitting just off the main road about 40 kilometres from Afriski (look out for the sign). Deeper into Lesotho sit two superlative parks, Bokong Nature Reserve and Ts'ehlanyane National Park. Both are adored by hikers, but in winter the biggest draw is the former's Lepaqa Waterfall, which freezes solid.

STAY HERE

Accommodation in the resort covers a range of budgets, starting with basic bring-your-own-bedding backpacker rooms from R190 a bed. En-suite double rooms start from R1 200 a night and there are six-sleeper apartments from R3 600 a night. Three- and four-day package deals are available at discounted rates.

Day visitors are welcome. To find a place to stay in Lesotho, turn to the Getaway Guide on page 125.

WHEN TO GO

The 2013 ski season runs from 6 June to 1 September. At other times of year, the resort offers adventure activities such as hiking, abseiling and quad-biking.

ON THE SLOPES

A one-day snow pass, giving access to the slopes and snowboarding park, is R350, while daily equipment hire is R295. Daily rates decrease if you opt for a multi-day stay. Lessons are compulsory for first-time skiers, with half-day group classes costing R300 a person. The Pudi Ski School caters to those aged four to 14 (half-day course R250).

CONTACT

Tel 086-1237-4754, email bookings@afriski.net, www.afriski.net.



TACKLE YOUR FIRST SLOPE

IN THE SKI SHOP

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Beginners are advised to rent gear as it's expensive to buy. Afriski hires it out at hourly and daily rates; Tiffindell includes gear in its packages. Resort rental shops should be your first stop; be prepared to spend an hour finding suitable gear.

GET THE RIGHT SIZE

Boots need to be cosy, but not restrictive. You must be able to wriggle toes and your heel mustn't move when you lean forward.

ON THE SLOPE

MASTER THE MOONWALK

Walk around to get used to the boots. They're heavy and shaped to keep legs bent and bum out so you lean forward.

GET USED TO THE SKIS

Start on a small slope (called a bunny hill) or flat ground and place the skis horizontal to the slope. Step into one ski at a time for stability, clipping on the one closest to the bottom of the slope first. Get used to the gliding sensation with just one ski before putting on the other.

THE SNOW PLOUGH

Start with skis together facing forward and slowly edge yourself forward. When you're on the move, change into the basic position called the snow plough: angle your feet to form a V-shape with the skis, keeping your toes pointing towards each other with a gap between the front of the skis. Splay your heels to widen the gap at the back, then lean forward, rolling your feet inwards. This position lets you go forward, but gives you the most resistance and speed control.

YOU WILL FALL

Skiing is easy if you remember the basics: start small, don't panic, look ahead and not at your skis, lean forward, make a very wide snow plough to stop, and be patient.

Melanie van Zyl

WHERE ELSE TO GET YOUR SKIS ON IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

After a long absence, the Eastern Cape's Tiffindell will make a comeback this winter. Plagued by financial troubles, the downhill ski resort closed in 2010 and sat vacant until ski enthusiast Lew Campbell snapped it up last year. Like Afriski, it features a main piste and a beginners' slope, plus Alpine-style accommodation, ski and snowboard lessons and one of Southern Africa's highest pubs. Tiffindell's season begins on 2 June 2013. Go to www.tiffindell.co.za for more information.
