



## Ski bikes: Letting you hit the slopes, sitting down

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Comments

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Looking down the ski slope, the village of Vail appearing very far below, I felt a sudden surge of fear.

Which wasn't like me. I had bungee jumped, parasailed and gotten my scuba-diving certification ... all before becoming a teenager. There are plenty of things in life that make me anxious, but the prospect of an adrenalin thrill, generally speaking, is not one of them.

More than that, though, the slope I stared down was one of the easiest that Vail had to offer: Born Free, a gentle blue-signposted trail that we would experience for only a moment before taking a sharp turn onto a catwalk that, as a green, was even easier and flatter. I started skiing when I was 4. I raced in high school and college. Normally, I would not be paused at the top of a beginner slope, looking worried.

The difference was that this time, I wasn't skiing. I was ski biking.

Also called skibobbing, ski biking is said to go back to 19th-century Europe, when it was used more for utilitarian transport purposes than, one assumes, providing a new thrill for snow-lovers. But it wasn't until the 1960s and 70s that ski biking became popular internationally – the FISB (International Skibob Federation) was formed in 1961 and the first World Championships were held in 1967. If you haven't heard of it, though, you're in good company. Its popularity seems to have faded again in the last few decades, and although some resorts, Vail included, are trying to introduce it to a new generation to add variety to their winter offerings, it remains a fringe sport. (It's worth noting, however, that it's not nearly as fringe for athletes with disabilities: particularly for people missing limbs who want to get back on the snow, ski bikes have been popular, and successful, adaptation devices).

Some of ski biking's difficulty in gaining an edge – pun intended – on skiing or snowboarding is that many resorts won't allow you to do it, or only allow it in restricted areas. But another part of the issue may simply be how goofy it looks. Even before getting on my ski bike, I look ridiculous: I've stepped into a pair of extremely short, twin-tipped ski boards, the kind that had their heyday in the 1990s, and attached a mandatory headlamp to my helmet (Vail only runs its ski-biking tours in the evening, after the rest of its more traditional, and sane, snow-lovers have left the slopes). And that's before I get on the contraption itself, a banana-yellow bike frame with the suspension and handlebars you'd expect but where, crucially, skis have replaced wheels. That's the other thing about ski biking: Even compared to the other equipment-intensive alpine sports, it requires a fairly awkward-to-carry piece of gear. I can already imagine the bemused faces of airline personnel in the sport luggage section.

But I wasn't in the market to buy a ski bike. I just wanted to try it out. Which I did, under the relaxed but watchful tutelage of two of Vail's ski-biking guides.

They started with a patient demonstration of the basics: how to turn and how to stop. "Remember, it's all in the hips," one of them said to me as the other one arced big, lazy Cs down the hill in front of us. "You want to swish from side to side. To stop, it's just a hockey stop. Like on skis, but with your bottom."

He made it look ridiculously easy. And slow. "Great," I said, and gripped the

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handlebars, getting ready to push off.

And then I looked down the slope. This was a beginner slope? In 25 years of skiing – and racing – how had I never noticed how steep a blue could be? It looked practically perpendicular! Plus, that snow was so smooth and ... slippery. Wasn't this dangerous? Wasn't this dumb?

In that moment, for the first time, I understood – in a way I hadn't before – just why the idea of skiing can be so frightening to people who take it up at an age in which reason and logic have started to come into play. Like, six.

And then I pushed off.

My instinct had been right: It was a little scary. In the best of ways. I'm pretty sure a "Wheeeee!" actually escaped my lips in that first foray down the hill. Ski bikes, it turns out, can speed up pretty quickly: The current speed record for ski biking is a screaming 200 kilometres an hour. To handle that kind of speed, of course, you need to turn. Automatically, I tried to turn like I would on skis – angulating my knees, edging from my feet – and almost fell over. Right: The bike was supposed to be doing most of the work, and to get it to do that, I had to swish my bum. If sitting while going down a hill didn't already feel very foreign, all of this hip-swaying certainly did.

I tried again. This time, I got it. Sort of. But enough that, three turns in, I'd gained enough confidence to take off down trail and turn onto the catwalk, passing one of the guides, grinning ear to ear. I no longer cared how silly I looked or how bad my technique was. I was flying! The speed! The thrill! I felt like I was going 125 mph! I'd never felt more daring.

Until, that is, I looked up at the trail sign ... and remembered we hadn't even left the bunny slope.

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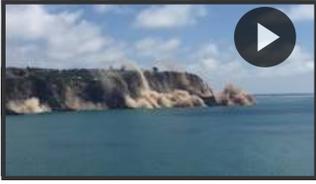


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