

Board Room Politics

Snowboarders were edging out jumpsuited skiers by the mid-1990s, but *Rachael Oakes-Ash* finds that old school is new again

For most of the last century skiers dominated the ski hills. Donned in woolen hunting jackets and wooden skis in the 1920s they trekked to the top of the mountain to ski down. The 1950s saw the introduction of stretch ski pants adding fashion to the snow and chairlifts meaning no more trekking.

James Bond skied in the '60s and his girls lounged around log fires sipping mulled wine. It was all so terribly fabulous, and expensive.

Then along came snowboarding and old-school ski folk complained into their cognac nightly. The ski establishment was appalled and banned them from the hill. This only encouraged them more.

The devoted trekked the mountain after dark and ran the runs back down. Resorts eventually offered their lift passes to these unruly snowboarding hooligans and by the 1990s it had come into its own, making the Winter Olympics in 1998. Now pro competition snowboarders such as Sean White earn the big bucks.

Snowboarding may well have saved the sports industry (though skiers may tell you otherwise) but there are pros and cons to both sports. Skiing is more technically challenging but as a result takes twice as long for a skier to advance to expert level. The most common joke from skiers is: "What's the difference between a snowboarder and a snowboard instructor?" Answer: "Five days."

Ski jumping, or getting air, has become more freeform than the rigid aerials of the Olympic games and free style skiing has made skiing sexy again. Fatter skis called 'twin tips' with funky graphics mean skiers can cruise the terrain park with pride. K2 ski company leads the field in the new style of skis with quirky names to reflect your style – think Phat Love, One Luv, Burning Luv, Miss Demeanour and Nancy free style skis, or twin tips.

Ski fashion has finally moved on from the skin tight pants and tailored jackets to include



In Aspen, book ski instructor Phil Le Roux

more street style wear. For the high end fashion conscious skier in the French Alps and Canadian Rockies it's all about Prada, Bogner, Chanel. For the technical skiers of Crested Butte and Utah it's SOS, Marmot and Spyder. The casual freestyler has 686, Nikita and Burton to choose from with a looser fit that is less restrictive.

Once fitted out with sticks and clobber, where does the cool new skier head? In a word: Aspen. Known for its hefty après scene, high end members-only Caribou Club and the infamous Little Nell boutique hotel are where you're likely to meet Elle, Tiger, Goldie and other celebs that need only one name. Four

mountains means everyone has a run, and ski valets and butlers ensure your skis arrive waxed, tuned and boots warmed on your mountain of choice each morning.

Come sun down it's spa time at Remede Spa with its oxygen bar and hydrotherapy, then it's après drinks at the Sky Hotel before dinner at Montagna and cocktails at Jimmy's. If you want a private instructor guide, then put your name down for Guernsey (Phil Le Roux) a year ahead and stand in line. He skis with the Hollywood A list taking them through their paces annually.

In Canada the top spot is Whistler Blackcomb, the largest ski resort in North America and home to the 2010 Winter Olympics and the equally international Bear Foot Bistro. Andre St Jacques set up this dining institution nine years ago with a wine cellar to rival the world's best. A recent wine heist of a mere 10 bottles gave burglars a US\$250,000 haul. Something to ponder as you rest your weary head on the Four Seasons pillows in town.

Those with a penchant for fondue and schnapps, head to Europe and swan around the foyer of Badrutt's Palace Hotel during Cartier Polo winter week in St Moritz. Take your Amex and make it black as the shopping in St Moritz almost rivals the skiing.

But the true quiet achiever in the snow stakes is New Zealand. Austrian legends such as Herman Maier (gold medal Olympic downhill) train here during their off season, hand-picking the slopes of Treble Cone and Mt Hutt. The South Island resort town of Queenstown has hosted Bill Clinton, Stephen Spielberg and John Travolta, and both Shania Twain and Sam Neill own property nearby. There's kudos all-round when one says, "I spent summer heli skiing in New Zealand."

No matter where the slopes, you're likely to find a scene that resembles the 1970s golden era of skiing more than the puffy-jacket boarding days of recent years: schussing, not shredding. □