



# Maluti muti

PICTURE LUKE PATTERSON

You don't need to go all the way to Chamonix to fall on your bum in the snow. The Afriski resort in Lesotho is only a five-hour drive from Joburg. **Trevor Sacks** spent a long weekend in the mountains.



PICTURE XXXXX

LOOK MA, I'M SKIING! Seconds later, Trevor Sacks (above), was face-down in the snow... Afriski is a great place to learn how to ski. There are easy slopes for beginners and the instructors are keen to help.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS. If the skiing gets too technical, you can always go bum boarding. Trevor's advice: "Don't plant your feet even once to brake or change direction. Trust me."

The weird thing about Lesotho is that it feels like another country. I didn't expect it to, since it's just a little bubble in the middle of the South African map. But the air is thinner and the mountain vegetation is nothing like the Highveld I've left behind.

Then there's the frozen waterfall. If there's anything to signal you're not in Benoni any more, it's that.

There's more snow than I've ever seen in Africa. Who cares how cold it is when you get to be in a place this dramatic looking?

To ski or not to ski but to snowboard instead, that is the question. Our group is split between the two beginners, of whom I am one, three veterans and one intermediate.

We beginners are advised by our experienced companions to start with skiing. Apparently, if you have a limited amount of time, it's easier to become a passable skier than to become a passable snowboarder.

I have no problem with this advice – the skiers appear to be more stylish. We've got a retro-chic thing going on. Snowboarders look a little scruffy and dirty. There are dreadlocks involved. Our veterans are snowboarders, and good luck to them.

We head to our chalet and it's not long before we're steaming windows with dinner activity. All through our dinner and while we're sleeping, it snows.

## Bunny slopes and Woolly Mammoths

The next day it's still snowing. It's whiter than a Kenny Rogers concert out there. We head over to the ski-hire shop and pick up our boots and skis, and then report for our lesson. Our youthful instructor has the requisite snow tan sported by the entire crew at the resort.

He has blonde dreadlocks so I take it he's a snowboarder. Nevertheless, he knows more than enough about skiing to make sure we don't fall. He's professional, friendly and has us all skiing in no time.

The lesson is over in an hour, but I feel nowhere near ready for the main slope. The instructor advises us to spend some time on an intermediate run to hone our technique.

After another hour I feel as graceful, poised and fluid as a Winter Olympian. Then my snowboarder-friend shows me the video he's just taken of the lesson: I look more like a master of the Zimmer frame than the slalom.

I have another lesson in the afternoon, with a different instructor. She must have seriously low standards because she declares that I'm ready for the main slope. From the bottom, the gradient of the main slope looks like the rakish angle of a traditional Lesotho hat. The instructor shows me how to use the T-bar lift, and before long I'm nearing the halfway jump-off point.

Okay, fair enough, she was right. I make it all the way down without even falling, following the instructions of cocking the tips of the skis together and taking it slow. Still, my speedy heart rate is at odds with the leisurely pace of my descent.

Later, my group of beginner skiers meets up with our more-experienced snow-people and they suggest a break at the Gondola Café. This is my kind of sport – at half-time the players retire to a bar for a drink before returning to the slopes.

Here we concoct a fitting drink for the trip. We name it the Woolly Mammoth: hot chocolate and Kahlua. It warms you in a most satisfying way.

My intention was to spend the rest of the day gaining confidence and analysing my technique on the intermediate slope, but my partner is gung-ho and decides that we should end off the first day with a descent of the main slope – from the top.

I do my best to stall, to squirm, but



WINTER COCKTAILS. Most of the action at Afriski is centred around the main slope and the Gondola Café, where you should definitely try Trevor's made-up concoction – a Woolly Mammoth (hot chocolate with a shot of Kahlua).

PICTURE: LUE PATTERSON

eventually I agree so as not to appear like a wuss. I pass the jump-off point I took earlier and continue upwards on the lift. The gradient rises steeply.

At the top I push off the lift with an inelegant side-swipe thrust and slip and stumble to the starting position. Right. I'm at the top and there's no way down except to ski the 1 km to the bottom.

Ah... it's not so bad. Left and right loops bring me almost perpendicular to the direction of the slope so I'm managing to go really slowly. I'm serene and graceful, and the view up here – if I stop concentrating so hard – is spectacular.

Whoa! Where did that drop come from? I'm speeding up! Turn! Turn harder! The slope is much steeper here and it's driving me faster and tilting me forwards on my skis. I know that's not good, not because my instructor said so, but because I feel myself leaning over, off balance. I manage to correct and, while I'm going faster than I'd anticipated, I'm handling the pressure.

I make it all the way down, my partner just behind me. Neither of us has fallen, but I think that's quite enough for one day, thank you.

## The light-bulb moment

The next morning snow lies two-feet thick in places, but it's clear and sunny. I'm stiff. It's mostly in my arms from those damn ski lifts, though. I decide to spend more time on the intermediate slope, trying out a few things. Skiing involves technique, and I'm all about analysis.

At one point I encounter a man who has been skiing all day, at high speed down the main slope, with a baby strapped to his back, with all the nonchalance of an afternoon stroller. I take the opportunity to ask him a few questions and that's when I have my light-bulb moment. Suddenly I get skiing. (It's hardly worth mentioning here, but if you must know, it's about lifting the uphill ski leg to bring both skis parallel.)

So off I go to the ski lifts again and down I come, down the big slope, slower than desired at first, then much, much faster.

I'm skiing. I'm a skier. I ski.

Then the edge of my ski digs into the snow and I'm not skiing any more, I'm tumbling. My skis come off completely and I'm flat on my stomach in the snow.

Yes. I still have a lot to learn.



PICTURES XXXXX

WHITE OUT. Yes, it really does snow in Lesotho! During Trevor's visit to Afriski, the cars in the parking became impromptu ice sculptures (top). When the sun comes out, you can thaw on the deck of your chalet (above).

## SKI ESSENTIALS

You can hire ski boots, skis and ski poles at Afriski, but it's worth buying or borrowing some good warm stuff. This is what you'll need.

**Ski pants.** Not jeans, because they'll get wet and you'll freeze. Ski pants are relatively waterproof and have a layer of insulation for warmth.

**Thermal long johns.** They're ridiculous but they're warm.

**Fleece zip-up top.** The thicker the better.

**Ski jacket.** A ski jacket is thick and waterproof. Or you can layer and wear a thin rain jacket over your fleece top, like I did. You can remove layers if you get too hot.

**Scarf.** Or a ski mask for the pro look.

**Ski goggles.** They make you look like you know what you're doing. Also, it's bright out there with all that white stuff.

**Sunscreen.** Snow-covered peaks are nature's sunbed. Don't overdo the tan. Apply sunscreen to any bits that stick out of your layers.

**Gloves.** Not grandma's knitted kind; some weather-appropriate ones.

**Hiking socks.** Thick and warm.

**Snow boots.** I was lucky enough to borrow some and they saved me from freezing my toes off. It's horrible walking around in ski boots because they're made of fibreglass and cause trauma to your shins. My snow boots were fleece-lined – like teddy bears hugging your feet – and rubber-soled. Don't even try to walk through snow in Converse takkies.

**Basotho blanket.** Not an essential, but a nice-to-have memento.



## KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

**When should I go?** Ski season is June to August, but there are other activities available at other times of the year, including pony trekking and hiking.

**How do I get there?** Afriski is about 430 km from Joburg and about 510 km from Durban. You access the resort via the Caledonspoort Border Post – the resort is about 80 km into Lesotho, along a tar road. Remember to fill up in Fouriesburg or Butha-Buthe and don't expect much cellphone signal over the border until you're at the resort.

**Do I need a 4x4?** Technically, no – there were a number of ordinary cars at the resort – but a 4x4 is recommended because the narrow, snaking roads can ice up. The roads may be closed due to snowstorms – check the website for a weather report before you leave.

**What's the accommodation like?** The resort offers various accommodation: free-standing chalets that sleep up to 12 people; lodges with rooms that sleep 2–5 people; apartments that sleep 6–8 people and a rough-and-ready backpacker lodge. Rates vary from R190 to R810 per person per night.

**What if there's no snow?** The resort has snow machines to provide the right level of snow to ski on. It's real snow – it just comes from a machine.

**Other costs?** Full gear hire costs about R500 per adult for two days on the slopes; R350 for kids. You also need to purchase a ski pass, which gives you access to the slopes. A two-day pass costs R600 per person; a season pass costs R2 200 per person.

**More information:** [www.afriski.net](http://www.afriski.net)



**NO SNOW, NO PROBLEM.** Afriski has huge snow machines to keep the slopes operational if there hasn't been a natural snowfall.

