



Clockwise from left: Competing in the Brazilian Jungle Marathon, kayaking in Tasmania, and off-piste skiing

► Snow limits

Venturing out onto virgin snow for some off-piste skiing could be a daunting experience, says MELANIE SIMPSON. But with a dashing Italian guide taking care of you, it will be downhill all the way

High above the clouds in the Italian Dolomites, Diego Zanesco glides effortlessly down the steep mountainside, making off-piste skiing look anything but difficult. According to Diego, the soft, powdery snow absorbs all the noise and the silence can, in fact, be eerie. Indeed, he goes as far as to say that, 'You could scream and nobody would hear you.' Diego, 43, works as a mountain

guide for the Hotel Rosa Alpina, in the village of San Cassiano, leading off-piste skiing, rock climbing, hiking and ice-climbing expeditions.

When the snow is good, Diego describes skiing off-piste as 'floating on feathers', and his clients, he says, come up with the same description time and time again — that it's 'a lot better than sex'.

Diego also spends much of his time climbing, often with clients but also a lot on his own — barefoot and without any ropes.

Interestingly, despite the extreme nature of these activities, Diego claims not to get scared. 'I feel in my element when I'm in the mountains,' he says. 'In fact, rather than feeling fear, I instead have huge respect for both the

A minibus into the cold drizzle of the Tasmanian rainforest, we were warned to take our warm clothes with us, because where we were heading it was going to be cold — really cold. I couldn't help thinking that the adventurer in me wasn't properly engaged. We had just lunched on oysters and cheese, washed down with an excellent sauvignon blanc, so a siesta seemed more appropriate than the three-hour slog up a freezing wet mountain that was in store for us.

But adventure is what Tasmania is all about. So, determined not to be labelled a 'whingeing Pom', I hoisted on my backpack and stepped out into the cold.

Our trek was to take us up to the national park known as the Walls of Jerusalem — a range of sheer mountains 1,400m (4,600ft) above sea level in the centre of the island. It is a trek back in time. The flora is largely unchanged since Tasmania split from the Gondwana supercontinent 50 million years ago and the landscape looks like it could still contain dinosaurs — the BBC's *Walking With Dinosaurs* series used this area as a backdrop.

Instead of dinosaurs it has bouncing wallabies, wailing Tasmanian devils and ambling wombats. Watching a wallaby hop is an otherworldly experience, so different is it from all other forms of locomotion. By the time we reached camp, thoughts had long turned from natural history. Each 100m (328ft) of vertical ascent represents a fall in temperature of 1°C and spare fleeces were mercifully produced by our guides for ill-equipped city slickers.

Tasmania's air is the purest recorded on the planet. Before cocooning myself in my warm

was 12 again. The descent begins at Mt Wellington's rocky summit, 1,270m (4,166ft) above sea level. Snow is not uncommon for most of the year and, impressive though the panoramic view is, the novelty of the Antarctic blast soon wears thin. Once below the tree line, though, aching ears and fingers rapidly thaw out. Should your chain come off, or ambition catastrophically exceed ability, it is worth taking a few minutes to listen: either the birds in Tasmania have a source of natural steroids in their diet, or there are amplifiers installed in the eucalyptus trees — the volume and variations sound like the improvisations of a feathered Jimi Hendrix.

All Tasmania's environs are challenging and none more so than the water, charged, as it is, by the Southern Ocean. But it is worth squeezing into a thick wetsuit to scuba-dive, as the cold currents bring nutrient-rich water that supports some of the best cold-water diving in the world. For those who balk at a dip in the 11°C water, high-powered boat tours offer an Attenborough's-eye view of the coastline. Whales, seals and albatrosses are a common sight, and the boats themselves are as hair-raising as any rollercoaster. Unfashionable ankle-length red kagouls are supplied to keep passengers dry — and to provide embarrassing holiday snaps.

Tasmania is an unforgettable experience. Part of me remains there after I had reluctantly returned to the world of unsolicited telephone calls, reality TV and public transport. *Return flights from Heathrow to Hobart, via Melbourne, cost from £860, visit www.qantas.co.uk or tel: 08457 747 767. For tailor-made itineraries, visit www.statravel.co.uk or tel: 0871 230 0040.*

mountains and nature as a whole. While some people might think the activities I do are crazy and dangerous, they aren't really and they can be done safely. You just have to be in tune with the elements as much as possible — whether that is snow, water, frost, rocks, wind or heat.'

You have to stop and wonder what it is that draws people to participate in such extreme activities. According to Diego, it's all rather spiritual. 'I think people like to do these kinds of things because they have to concentrate so hard on what they're doing, everything else becomes less important and is put out of their minds. So it almost becomes like a kind of meditation. Plus, it's an adrenaline buzz.'

Even so, surely being hundreds of feet up a rock face with nothing but a harness for support is quite frightening. 'Quite often people "freak out" on me, especially during climbs,' Diego

says. 'They don't find their grip properly, or they might slip and then they realise how high up they are. That often throws them into despair, and they burst into tears. They tend to freeze and don't want to move at all, either up or down. In those situations, I tell people to slow down, breathe deeply and then I encourage them to carry on. Their bodies are capable of carrying on — it's just their heads telling them to stop.'

I know one thing for sure — if I was ever going to attempt to either ski off-piste or climb sheer vertical faces in the Italian Dolomites, I wouldn't want to do it with anyone but Diego by my side.

Winter room rates at Hotel Rosa Alpina start from £138 per night B&B, based on two people sharing. Tel: 0039 0471 849500 or visit www.rosalpina.it



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