

DASHING THROUGH THE SNOW

Barry, D. (1997). *Dashing through the snow. Dave Barry is From Mars and Venus*. Crown Publishers.

Skiing is an exciting winter sport, but it is not for everybody. For example, it is not for sane people. Sane people look at skiing, and they say: “WAIT a minute. I’m supposed to attach slippery objects to my feet and get on a frozen chair dangling from a scary-looking wire; then get dumped off on a snow-covered slope so steep that the mountain goats are wearing seat belts; and then, if by some miracle I am able to get back down without killing myself, I’m supposed to do this AGAIN??”

As I get older--which I am currently doing at the rate of about five years per year--this is more and more how I view skiing. I’ve been looking for an alternative winter sport that does not force a person to become so intimately involved with gravity. And so I recently went to Idaho (official state motto: “Convenient to Montana”) to experience two winter sports that seemed better-suited to the mature sportsperson in the sense you can do them while sitting down. In an effort to make my trip as tax-deductible as humanly possible, I’ve decided to write a two-part series about these sports. This week’s Featured Winter Sport is: snowmobiling.

A snowmobile is a high-performance motorized vehicle mounted on a track and skis that enable it to travel rapidly deep into remote snow-covered wilderness areas, where it gets stuck. Of course I didn’t know this when I rented one. I knew nothing, which is why I also rented snowmobiles for my fifteen-year-old son, Rob, and his fourteen-year-old friend Ryan. It was going to be a fun thing for us three guys to do together; that is what I was saying to myself as I signed the legal release form (“...the undersigned further agrees that he has not actually read this form and just wants to get on the snowmobile already and would in fact cheerfully sign anything placed in front of him including a document granting us the right to keep both his ears as souvenirs”).

We rented our snowmobiles at a place called the Smiley Creek Lodge, which is in a place called Smiley Creek, which pretty much consists of the Smiley Creek Lodge. We also rented helmets and jumpsuits so that we would look as much as possible like the Invasion of the Dork Tourists from Space. A very nice man showed us how to make the snowmobiles go. He seemed extremely calm, considering that he was turning three powerful and expensive machines over to two adolescent boys and a humor columnist. I thought he’d give us detailed instructions regarding where we should go, but basically all he said was that we should make an effort to remain in Idaho.

This did not prove to be so easy; not with Rob and Ryan at the controls. They are wonderful and intelligent boys, but they have the common sense of table salt. It’s not their fault: Their brains

have not yet developed the Fear Lobe. If you give them control over a motorized vehicle, they are going to go at the fastest possible speed, which on a modern snowmobile turns out to be 14,000 miles per hour. They were leaving trails of flaming snow behind them. I tried to exercise Adult Supervision by yelling “HEY! GUYS! BE CAREFUL! HEY!” but they couldn’t hear me, because sound travels only so fast.

So off we went, into the snow-covered wilds of Idaho, with the two Flaming No-Judgement Blurs roaring ahead, followed at an increasing distance by the Rapidly Aging Shouting Man. We would have been inside the Arctic Circle by nightfall if Ryan had not driven into the creek. It was not his fault. He didn’t see the creek. Some idiot failed to put up the freeway-style sign with fifteen-foot-high letters saying “CREEK,” and so Ryan naturally drove into it.

Since your model snowmobile weighs as much as a freight locomotive, we were unable to pull Ryan’s out, so he got on the back of mine and we all rode sheepishly back to the Smiley Creek Lodge. There we learned that another tourist party was also having problems: A man had gotten himself and his son stuck in deep snow, and they couldn’t get out. The man’s wife, who had not been wild about the snowmobiling idea in the first place, was informing the lodge personnel that she wanted her son back, but as far as she was concerned, they could leave her husband out there. (She was kidding.) (Sort of.)

While this drama was unfolding, *another* group of tourists returned and announced that they, too, had planted a snowmobile somewhere out in Idaho.

None of this bothered the nice snowmobile-renting man. He calmly called in some local Idaho men--soft spoken, strong, competent-looking men, the kind of men who never get their snowmobiles stuck and could probably survive for weeks in the wilderness by eating pinecones. They went out and rescued the father and son, and then they went and pulled out all of the stuck snowmobiles. I realized that this was routine for them; on any given winter day, probably two-thirds of the Idaho population is busy pulling tourist-abandoned snowmobiles out of creeks, snowbanks, trees, mine shafts, condominiums, etc.

So it all ended well, and the boys thought snowmobiling was the coolest thing we could have done short of blowing up a building. I, on the other hand, was looking for a more restful mode of snow transportation, and I’m pleased to report that I found one: It requires no gasoline, it goes at a nice safe speed, and it doesn’t get stuck. On the other hand, it emits an amazing amount of weewee.

NEXT WEEK: Dogsledding.