

Snow business

Yolanda Carslaw recruits her nephews for toboggan testing



The author's sister, Teresa Wood, with her sons Jed and Patrick and their toboggans

MY maternal grandparents once had a sledge made that was long enough for all their farmhands—a baker's dozen—to ride at once, but it looked so swift and fearsome that they refused to climb on. Instead, my grandparents tested it themselves, thundering down Tan Hill on the Wiltshire Downs, over sheep trails and molehills, towards a barbed-wire fence at the bottom and bailing out just in time in a tangle of limbs, snow and hilarity. In a similar era, my father and his teenage siblings sped down Gloucestershire vales on a door, to which had been fastened a sheet of metal with an upturned lip. The penalty for not stopping in time was to pile into a stream.

Their descendants, my sister Teresa's children, Patrick and Jed, are seasoned tobogganers like their great-grandparents. In the October half-term (in Zermatt), they jumped at the chance to assess four sledge designs—on a *piste* at 9,600ft in a blizzard, as well as in rather more British conditions, a fresh but fast-melting 2¾in layer on the lower meadows at Furi.

We began with a snazzy new Swiss design, the Zibob, a super-light plastic box that you sit on, holding on for dear life to a handle between your legs. It flew over the cold stuff, but really came into its own on the shallower snow, skimming over rocks, streamlets and tussocks. Leaning from side to side made it slalom stylishly, braking with your feet brought it swiftly to a halt, and sitting



Super sledging spots

○ Greenwich Park, London

From the statue of Gen Wolfe by the Royal Observatory. Pick the right course and you might find yourself crossing the Meridian Line

○ Butser Hill, Hampshire

A snowsport-friendly section of the South Downs, at Queen Elizabeth Country Park. Easy access from the A3

○ Corstorphine Hill, or Blackford Hill, Edinburgh

Great views of the city from decent-length runs: try them on a moonlit night for maximum exhilaration

○ Burton Dassett Hills, Warwickshire

Long, variously pitched runs and a beacon tower to get your bearings

○ Box Hill, Surrey

Near Dorking, this part of the mostly wooded North Downs is gloriously open and grassy, with a gradient that will get even the most sluggish sledge going

○ Carisbrooke Castle, Isle of Wight

A favourite on the outskirts of Newport

○ Lickey Hills, Worcestershire

Beacon Hill, south-west of Birmingham, is popular, but beware wild types

○ A friendly golf club

Being typically undulating and grassy, golf courses are ideal. When they're snow-covered, some clubs open sections especially for sledgers

○ Anywhere that's hilly and grassy

Think much of Wales, Scotland and Cumbria, the North York Moors, the Dales, the Chilterns, the Mendips, the Brendans or the Cotswolds. But do beware of trespassing

○ Llandudno

If snow doesn't appear at Christmas, head for the town's 'dry' half-pipe—Britain's longest toboggan run

so close to the ground guaranteed a good powdering from head to toe. 'Snow,' declared Patrick, impressed, 'is quite a nice thing to get in your face.'

Less happy bumping over stones and undergrowth, but excellent on hard-pack, was the Davos, named after the Swiss town that hosted the first international sledging race, in 1883. This was Teresa's top choice. 'You can take very young children on with you and all stay fairly dry, as it's well above the snow,' she said. 'It also makes a brilliant bench for a breather.' The Ghosky, a modern take on the Davos with ski-shaped runners, which is for hire each winter on Zermatt's Gornergrat sledge track, proved its worth on the gentler slopes, but was heavy to transport and gathered rather

Above Sledging is a winter sport that every member of the family can get involved in—even the dog. *Right* Donald Carlsaw, the author's uncle, bombs down a hill in Chedworth, Gloucestershire, in 1961 on a door





Family tobogganning on fresh snow as the sun sets over the Derbyshire Peak District—the end of a perfect winter afternoon

too much momentum on steep sections.

Top marks from the boys went to a colourful, very plasticky, sit-in Snow Fox sledge with a steering wheel, handbrake and go-faster stickers. ‘You’re safe, but you can do amazing turns,’ said Jed. Patrick added: ‘You never feel out of control—you can steer properly and you can brake without using your feet.’ My sister noted that rarely has she seen little girls in these mini-motors.

Out on a British hill, there’s far more of an array of sledges than we tested, and the great thing is that the fun factor doesn’t necessarily rise in proportion to the amount you spend. Screams of joyous terror are just as loud from children on carrier bags, dust-bin lids, rubber rings, £4.99 ‘pan’ sledges or £12.99 ‘flying saucers’ as they are from those riding a Lillehammer Rodel or a Porsche Bobsleigh. To boot, pan sledges (for which you need strong tummy muscles and determined heels) have a triple purpose, also working as shovels for building snowmen and shields during snowball fights.

If, however, you baulk at all the plastic and can’t resist putting your little ones—or yourselves—on something beautiful, don’t worry. One ski shop in Uxbridge sources vintage wooden sledges from Switzerland and Austria from as early as the 1920s. Also available in Britain are elegant old-style models by the Colorado-based maker Mountain Boy Sledworks, whose models have names such as Royal Flyer, Bambino Classico and Double Kicksled. I have a feeling the design that would appeal most to my grandparents, were they here to test out 21st-century toboggans, would be the Mountain Boggon eight-footer, made of steam-bent planks. Although it can’t quite accommodate 13 farm hands, it’s built to carry an almighty 900lb.

Ten terrific toboggans

Cutting-edge

Zibob Compact, light, single-passenger box with a handle to hold onto. £49 (CHF59.50, about £41 + CHF10, or £7, for delivery) (00 41 81 507 0004; www.zibob.com)

Bobskis Flat but flexible, takes up to three and goes like a rocket, even on scant snow. From £45 (01785 811443; www.bobskis.com)



Porsche Bobsleigh (above)

Sleek and curvy, with a low centre of gravity. £215; children’s model, £100 (0845 791 1911; <http://shop3.porsche.com/uk>)

Classics

Family Rodel single seat Austrian-made in ash laminate, with webbing seat; solid and stylish. £139.99 (01479 861253; www.sledges.co.uk)

Mountain Boy Ultimate Flyer (below)

Handmade, with plastic floats, a pivoting front section, a beech crossbar for precision steering, birch seat-planks and willow side-rails. Head-first, or seating up to two. From £140; seat pad £25 (02380 513300 for stockists)

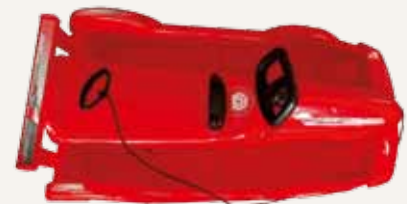


Davos 115 (above) Traditional design with beech-wood slatted seat, laminated frame and skids with grippy steel runners. Also available in foldable, easy-to-carry form. £94.99; folding version, £99.99 (05601 190133; www.supertrampdirect.co.uk)

Vintage, various designs Up to 80 years old, from Switzerland and Austria, these lovely, traditional sledges are beautifully made and full of history. From £78 (020–8848 0040; www.skibartlett.com)

Oldies, but goodies

Hot Sheet pan or shovel sledge Super-light to carry and easy to pack, and flies on a decent gradient. £11.99 for a pack of three (01479 861253; www.sledges.co.uk)



Snow Fox (above) Sit-in plastic toboggan with steering wheel that operates two mini-skis underneath, and handbrake. £49.99 (01884 821340; www.toboggans.co.uk)

Alpina Alpha Cheap and cheerful, moulded-plastic sit-in design that’s ideal for pulling along children or shopping. £14.50 (01479 861253; www.sledges.co.uk)

