



Skiing in the Czech Republic

A new adventure sparks
memories of home

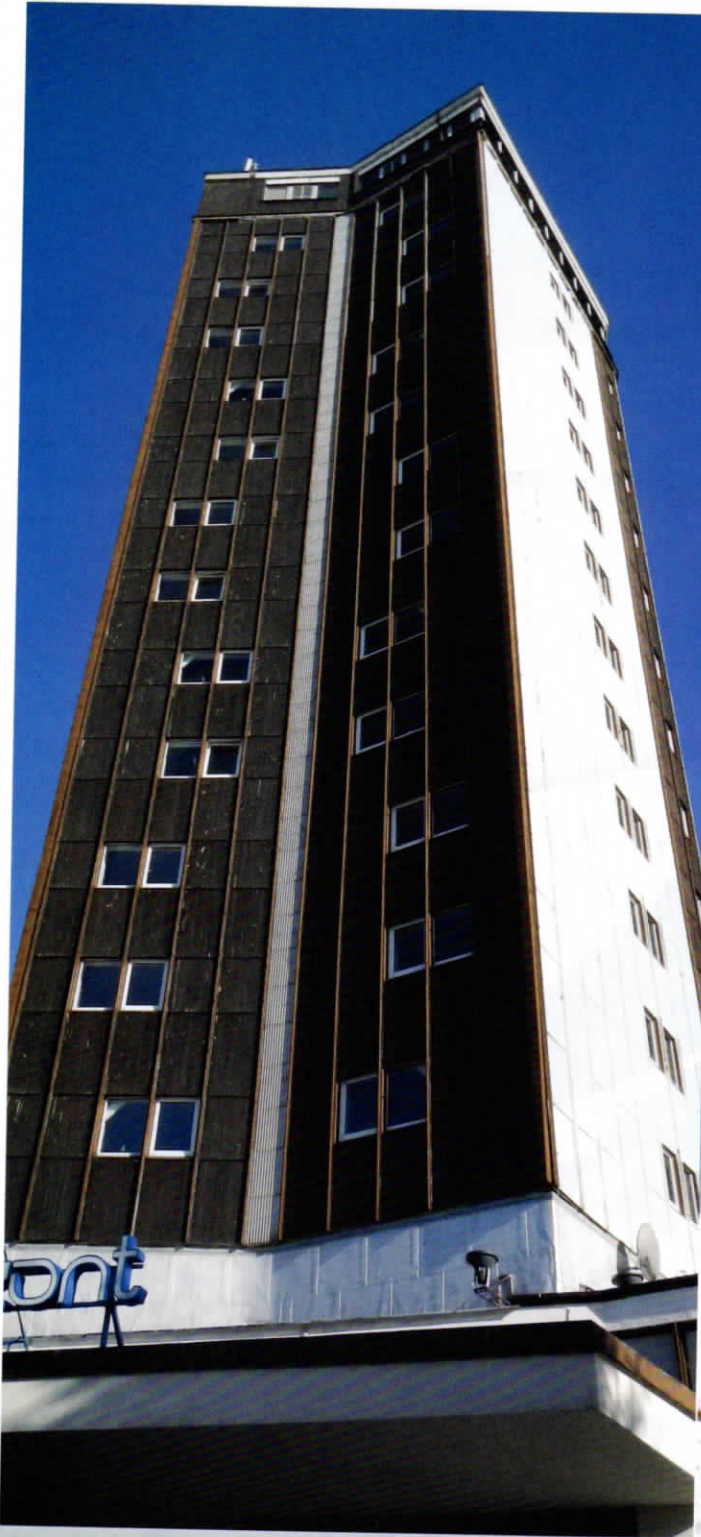
Story and Photos by Lisa Ballard

Last March, when the opportunity arose to ski in the Czech Republic, my first reaction was, “Of course! It’s Europe.” A couple of fast-skiing friends I race with on the masters circuit came from the Czech Republic. Sarka Zahrobska, the 2007 World Slalom Champion, did too, so the country must have some decent skiing, I reasoned. It might not boast famous international destinations like St. Anton and Cortina, but chalk that up to marketing. No ski area in a former Eastern Bloc country was at the top of most Americans’ minds, but they sure sounded like interesting places to make some turns.



A skier arcs some fast turns on the slopes of Pec pod Snezkou. Inset: Skiers start down a Czech-style terrain park.







Clockwise from top left: The Hotel Horizont. The author samples Pec's ski trails, which are uncannily similar to those in New England. An instructor on a snowboard leads a group of kids on skis. View down the slopes from a popular lunch spot in a hilltop inn. Ski chalets speckle the hillsides. Center: Kids on sleds are as common as skiers.

I chose to ski in the Czech Republic primarily because I wanted to see Prague as well. When I mentioned this to my Czech friends, they unhesitatingly suggested Pec pod Snezkou as the place to go, about two hours northeast of the city near the border of Poland and the largest ski resort in the country. The resort was located in a national park in the Krkonose (Giant) Mountains, the highest range in the Czech Republic.

When I think of skiing in Europe, jagged snowcapped peaks surrounding quaint mountain villages come to mind. Steep runs swoop between rocky outcroppings. Cable cars whisk skiers up dramatic cliffs to dazzling glaciers and remote, cozy restaurants where one can gulp *glühwein* and gorge on fondue. However, these are signatures of the Alps, not the Krkonose Mountains. Skiing in the Czech Republic turned out to be a decidedly different alpine experience than in Western Europe, starting with the accommodations.

THE HOTEL HORIZONT

Though the village of Pec pod Snezkou has a number of hotels and smaller inns, the Hotel Horizont was the hot spot, a legendary monolith among Czechs. "You can't miss it," said our taxi driver in Prague.

He was right. Built in 1970 when the Czech Republic was part of former Czechoslovakia, the Hotel Horizont towered an imposing 16 stories above

the modest village. Undoubtedly a showcase when it opened, by today's standards the rooms were small and basic. The elevators were even tinier for such a large hotel, squeezing in three skinny people if they didn't eat too much breakfast.

When I arrived, the hotel was abuzz with families, couples, retired folks, and ski racers. My trip coincided with a vacation week in the region. I checked in, then took shelter in my room, where my first move was to open the blinds for a bird's-eye view of my surroundings. To my surprise, the landscape looked like Woodstock, but with a downsized Mount Washington rather than a verdant Mount Tom dominating the surrounding pastureland and forests.

Pec pod Snezkou translates loosely as Pec (the village's name) under Snezka (the highest mountain in the Czech Republic). The snowcapped summit of Mount Snezka, elevation 5,259 feet, was even shaped like Mount Washington, only 1,000 feet lower.

Below Snezka, the rolling hills resembled a Grandma Moses painting. People frolicked everywhere in the snow, and not just on alpine skis. Chalets painted in bright colors to perk up the unadorned Soviet-era architecture speckled the white meadows. Some people hiked. Others cross-country skied. Parents pulled their youngsters through the snow on sleds or pushed them in carriages. Older kids hooted as their saucers spun down the slopes. It was a winter playground.







Clockwise from top left: Mount Snezkou behind kids waiting to get on a poma lift. The “magic carpet” takes new skiers to the top of a beginner slope, similar to ski areas in the US. T-bars are more common than chairlifts, similar to the 1970s here. A girl negotiates a kids’ obstacle course. The village of Pec from the Hotel Horizont’s imposing tower. Center left: An inn near the top of the ski area. Center right: Standard transportation in a mini-groomer to the many inns scattered across the ski slopes’.

THE SKI AREA

Pec pod Snezkou is just one part of the larger Cerna Hora-Pec Resort, which also includes the cable car to the top of Mount Snezka, but no ski trails down it, and the ski slopes of Velka Upa, Cerny Dul, Janske Lazne, and Svoboda nad Upou. These smallish areas combine to form a ski resort the size of Okemo Mountain, but more spread out and only partially connected to each other by ski lifts or trails. Since the Hotel Horizont was closest to the slopes on Pec pod Snezkou, I started there.

Whenever I explore a ski area I’ve never visited before, I immediately head to the top. At Pec pod Snezkou, getting there proved a wonderful tour of the mountain, requiring two T-bar rides connected by a trail through the woods, then a chairlift to the highest point. When I got off at the top, the number of people far exceeded those riding the lift. Then I saw what drew them. A lookout similar to the fire towers atop many of the Green Mountains, only newer and sturdier, stood a couple hundred yards from the chairlift terminal.

The tower, called Hnedy vrch or “brown hill,” was as much a destination as its counterparts in New England. Completed in 2009 at a cost of \$700,000, it was built to enhance the region’s tourist infrastructure. The tower’s 138 steps gave access to three viewing platforms, the highest 100 feet above the snow. The view from the tower included not only Mount Snezka but also a sweeping 360-degree panorama of the surround-

ing peaks and forested valleys.

After spending the rest of the day cruising down Pec pod Snezkou’s moderate slopes, all groomed and most of them shared by nonskiers heading to the various pensions and restaurants that speckled the broad, manicured trails, I returned to the Hotel Horizont happy for the chance to experience skiing in a different country and one unlike any I had visited before. Well, that’s not entirely true. The topography, the elevation, the lookout tower, the trails . . . many aspects of Pec pod Snezkou reminded me of home. How funny to travel thousands of miles to a country with a different history, language, and culture, and to find so many similarities surrounding my favorite winter sport! 🐾

Lisa Ballard (formerly Lisa Densmore) has skied and competed throughout Europe, first on the US Ski Team and most recently on the masters circuit. Last winter, she became the first American woman to win an FIS Masters Cup Super G title. She is certified by both US Ski & Snowboard and the Professional Ski Instructors of America and hosts ski clinics throughout the United States. To ski with Lisa or to order a copy of her book, *Ski Faster! Guide to Ski Racing and High Performance Skiing*, go to www.LisaBallardOutdoors.com.

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