



The author returning to the piste at Zinal-Grimenz, Switzerland, just before the avalanche. **Courtesy Ellen Massey Leonard**

# INSTINCTS MATTER

In Switzerland's Valais canton, an avalanche offers lessons in intuition

by ELLEN MASSEY LEONARD

**In hindsight, my first—and last, I hope—avalanche resulted from ignoring my instincts. There were a lot of compounding factors on that February day, but, ultimately, ignoring that inner voice got me in trouble.**

**It was my second day skiing last season, and my husband Seth and I were in the Swiss Alps, where we'd lived for six years and where we'd left our skis before moving onto a sailboat several months earlier.**

Switzerland had experienced a dry winter until a blizzard arrived at the beginning of February. We were skiing the sidecountry of Zinal-Grimenz in Switzerland's southern Valais canton, and we knew there had been some avalanche activity on the steepest pitches bombed by ski patrol. So we chose mellow slopes around 10,000 feet, where we expected cold and fairly stable snow.

But after spending the morning up high, we made our first bad call. Tempted by a continuous 5,000-vertical-foot run from summit to village, we forgot how much warmer and less stable the snow would be lower down. The first 4,000 feet skied perfectly. Then came the lower portion to the run-out.

The slope looked like a little chute through some trees. And everything had gone so well until that point that it didn't occur to me to dig a pit, do a ski cut or think about the slope's warm, southeast aspect or its steep rollover. I've taken avalanche courses and have a methodical approach in the mountains, and these red flags should have

jumped out at me. Maybe six years free of mishaps had made me complacent, or maybe I was out of practice, having not skied all winter.

At the top of the pitch, I froze. All my instincts screamed at me to stop. I should have listened. I should have backed off, put on my skins and trudged back to the flatter, north-facing route I'd passed earlier. But I didn't.

Two turns in, my legs were swept from beneath me, and my ears filled with the thundering of snow rumbling past my head. I flew down the chute, my skis and lower body so trapped in the concrete that I couldn't move. I accelerated faster than I thought possible, panicked and screaming. I tried to calm myself; I tried to pull the trigger on my airbag but was too contorted to reach the handle. It took all my strength to twist myself so I could get at it, and the balloon inflated in time to keep my head above the debris.

I was shaking with shock when everything stopped. The avalanche had only taken about 10 seconds, but I'd slid 500 feet.

Fortunately, not all of my calls that day had been bad. Seth and I always carry shovels, probes, beacons and airbags, and it's second nature to ski one at a time. So he skied right behind the slide, keeping me in sight. And, wrong as our choice to ski that pitch was, we'd chosen a slope that wasn't exposed and didn't funnel into a terrain trap. It was treed—one of them torqued my left leg, which, I later learned, tore my MCL and meniscus—but it didn't have boulders.

Still, I'd made three bad calls that ended in a terrifyingly fast slide and a busted knee. Obviously it could have been a lot worse, and I was thankful that it wasn't. As I later iced my knee, I considered why I hadn't listened to my instincts. My inner voice had been bellowing at me. What had drowned it out?

I simply didn't trust myself. I decided. I learned to ski at age 22, and I sometimes still struggle to differentiate between fear that's warning me of real danger and leftover "beginner's fear" of pitches I can now ski easily. My conscious voice had told me to get over it, that it was an easy chute down to the nearby piste. But my instinct had yelled that it was truly dangerous.

Had I been on my sailboat, on the open ocean, I would have acted on that inner voice: I've been on boats since before I could walk, after all. Just because I learned to ski as an adult doesn't mean my fears aren't telling me something real. That February day taught me that it was time to start trusting my instincts in the mountains, too.

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