Skiing Without the Lift

By Matthew Kaminski

Monetier, France

Every spring, all parents in France with children aged 3 to 18 (as far as I can tell, without exception) jump Onan Alps-bound bullet train. Upon arrival at the chalet, they stick their little loved ones in ski school. We're not talking about fooling around on the bunny slopes for a few hours. It has to be l'Ecole du Ski Francais, or ESE—ski school. We're not talking about fooling around on the bunny slopes for a few hours. It has to be l'Ecole du Ski Francais, or ESE.

Friends outside the Gallic hexagon may wonder why I don't buck the ski herd of an adopted, vacate-to-be Ecole du Ski Francais, or ESE. It's how French public schools are run. Holistic philosophy. His "method" isn't unique to him or ESE. The approach has much to recommend it, too. France is steeped in national tradition. Confronted, Jean-Jacques had no patience for our protests about his rough touch. A younger instructor rolled her eyes in sympathy but wasn't about to speak up to the big boss. Nor was an apology forthcoming, which wasn't surprising. As far as memory serves, I've never in five years in France received a warm welcome. Liberated from the memory of Jean-Jacques, our now 5-year-old focused her affections on her new teacher, Denis. He was one from a waiter, store clerk or anyone else in a service profession. We took a different tack. Our daughter so looked forward to this first ski lesson, we said. We heard so many good things about him, and so on. You have to flatter French authority figures, even (or especially) if you happen to be paying them. The old goat agreed not to shove our child into the snow again.

By the end of that week, she got her cute Piou-Piou medal without any visible trauma. She never, however, mentioned Jean-Jacques again. My wife, a veteran of French public education, came up almost nightly in the anticipatory weeks before, took on a mythic status. For us too. We were told that la methode de Jean-Jacques was renowned for making kids into skiers.

On the day of the first lesson, the snow is falling heavily. The legend in the flesh turns out to be a shortish middle-aged man with a bushy mustache. "Time for you to go," Jean-Jacques tells us quickly. "We have our methods." An anxious, abandoned little girl in a green-and-yellow suit is put in a long line with some two-dozen other debutantes. Not a few minutes later, ours makes a ten- or two pick of classes, tending to the next set years, get first pick of classes, tending to the private track as long as we stay here.

And in ski schools, it turns out, France also offers a choice. This year, at Serre Chevalier, we came across a rebellious (another side of the French character) establishment called ESI, or Ecole du Ski Internationale. These upstarts made a sales pitch tuned to our anti-ESF prejudices, promising "human class size," "conviviality" and "a warm welcome." Liberated from the memory of Jean-Jacques, our now 5-year-old focused her affections on her new teacher, Denis. He was one of six ESI guys, compared with some 80 employed by giant ESF in this little village alone.

ESF need not worry. Old ways pass slowly in this conservative country. The traditional approach has much to recommend it, too. France is full of good, solid skiers. And thanks to their regimented educational system, the French are spared the Anglo-American disease of excessive nostalgia for happy and carefree school years. Adulthood is liberating, and not just on the slopes.

Mr. Kaminski is editorial page editor of The Wall Street Journal Europe.