

OFF THE EDGE

It's all downhill from here for Wanaka-based twins Janina and Maria Kuzma.



From the tropical jungles of Borneo to the near-vertical drops found at big-mountain skiing and snowboarding venues around the world, it's been a life of extremes for 23-year-old twins Janina and Maria Kuzma.

Raised in remote parts of Papua New Guinea and Borneo, where their father worked as a mining engineer, their passion for the snow was sparked when they were taken to the Canadian Rockies at the age of five on the first of many annual winter holidays.

Now based in Wanaka, the sisters are using skills honed in the Southern Alps to take on the world's best – Janina on skis and Maria on a snowboard – as they line up in the Tyrolean Alps of Austria on February 15 for the first qualifying event of the Freeride World Tour.

With a total prize purse of \$300,000 and the likelihood of lucrative sponsorship deals for strong performances, the international circuit of the FWT is a magnet for the world's top skiers and boarders. Competing on steep and rocky off-piste terrain, contenders are judged on factors such as speed, technique, difficulty of line, and jumps or cliff drops during their descent.

Janina, the more seasoned competitor of the two, has won every major freeskiing title in New Zealand in the past couple of years, as well as the prestigious Canadian Open. Rated as having the potential to become one of the top female big-mountain skiers in the world, she was selected last November for the New Zealand freeski team.

Maria started competing more recently but has already racked up wins in big-mountain, slope-style (freestyle snowboarding) and big-air events both here and in North America.

Before each competition, the pair inspect the terrain together to plan their descents and “amp each other up”. But hitting the European circuit together – and looking forward to it – is something they could never have imagined as squabbling sisters who once saw each other as their biggest rival.

“We’d be put in the same [ski school] group and we always ended up arguing, so Mum and Dad were, like, ‘Maria, you try snowboarding,’” says Janina, who spent last winter as a freeskiing coach at Cardrona, resembling an on-snow pied piper with a loyal following of young diehard skiers who’d literally follow her off the edge of a cliff.

Playing beach volleyball together in their teens had similar results. “Mum would try to pair us up and it was a disaster,” laughs Maria. “We’d have the biggest fights on court and end up just screaming at each other in important games. Mum would be so embarrassed.”

Now they’re no longer in direct competition, the sisters are a tight unit and have spent the past four years based in Wanaka, escaping to the slopes whenever they could. “It’s fun because we have that connection,” says Maria.

Despite suffering some inevitable injuries (an injured hip in 2007 for Maria and a broken hand for Janina last year after falling during a 20m practice jump), both had back-to-back wins at the Ruapehu Export Extremes big-mountain event and the Turoa Big Air to finish the 2008 season.

It’s an experience they’re keen to repeat overseas. Says Janina: “[It’d] be really cool to have the two of us on the podium at the same time.” **+**

Top left: Maria and Janina (right) airborne. Left: Maria provides the pedal-power.



Janina Kuzma launches from a quarterpipe.