

Cross-country skiing isn't just for scarily-fit twenty somethings says Simon Birch

If you think that cross-country skiing requires the stamina of an Olympic athlete, think again. "No you don't have to be super-fit to enjoy cross-country skiing," says Edna Hunter. "People who think that have only seen cross-country ski races on the telly."

No Olympian herself, Edna is infact an active 70 year old who has been cross-country skiing every winter for most of her adult life.

"The thing about cross-country skiing is that you go at your own speed and as far as you feel like going," points out Edna reassuringly, "you just take your time."

For the past 12 winters Edna has been skiing in Norway, staying at the Venabu Fjellhotell and which is where Headwater Holidays has been sending guests for many years.

Situated in eastern Norway, the hotel occupies a commanding position on the edge of a large treeless plateau just to the south of the dramatic mountains of the Rondane National Park.

With few scary slopes to worry about, the plateau makes ideal terrain for first-time cross-country skiers.

To get started, you'll be kitted out in the hotel's ski-room where you'll be measured up for boots, skis and poles.

If you've been downhill skiing before you'll immediately notice that cross-country skis and boots are far lighter than their downhill equivalents. The boots are also much more comfortable and unlike down-hill boots are only attached to the ski at the front.

This free heel enables you to walk with your skis on allowing you to ski not only on the level and downhill but uphill too.

Once you've been sorted out with your kit it's just a short walk to where your Headwater rep will give you your first lesson.

All beginners start by learning on trails, the machine-made 'tram-lines' into which your skis snugly fit.

The basic cross-country technique is the glide. This is the surprisingly satisfying movement you get when you kick down on

your back ski which then swooshes you forward in one smooth glide along the tracks.

Most people find this straightforward, even those who haven't skied before. "Within half a day or so we felt confident to go out on the straight and level trails," says 62 year old Edward Howells who only began skiing with his wife seven years ago.

Sure, you'll fall over but because you never really go that fast, it's far safer than downhill skiing where you're always going at a much greater speed. "Besides," adds Edna, "downhill boots are much harder and come higher up your leg so when you fall over there's a greater chance of injuring yourself."

Once you've mastered the all important glide you'll be ready to venture out on the vast network of prepared trails that run around the hotel and criss-cross the sparkling Norwegian countryside.

Headwater reps take you out for short trips whilst you're still finding your skiing legs, but how far you go is very much up to you. "The great thing is that you can go entirely at your own pace," says Edward's 64 year old wife Gwen, "you're not obliged to whizz along like a 20 year old."

Many people such as Gwen and Edward enjoy Venabu's isolation. "We love the absence of crowds and the fact that there's none of the noise and pollution that you get with downhill resorts," says Gwen adding that, "when you're out skiing it's just so beautiful and peaceful."

Pat Salaman agrees adding that, "One of things that I love about cross-country skiing is being able to look at all the wild animal tracks in the snow. This is something that you'd never see if you went downhill skiing," says 63 year old Pat.

Now if all this fresh air and exercise sounds a little too healthy, don't worry, the hotel's chefs will soon have you piling back on the calories.

The friendly family-run hotel prides itself on its good, traditional Norwegian food, of which there is a never ending supply, served in a dining room that has spectacular views of the surrounding mountains.

Things kick off in the morning with the buffet tables groaning under the weight of a suitably Scandinavian smorgasbord breakfast with its infinite number of crispbreads, freshly baked bread, cheeses, meats and cereals.

In the unlikely event of you going hungry after such a mammoth breakfast, guests are encouraged to cut sandwiches to take out with them on their ski trips.

After three or four hours of light skiing, upon your return you'll find that the buffet tables are again filled to capacity for lunch.

The afternoons are then spent either back practising your skiing technique or more likely than not, snoozing off your morning skiing and lunch before the dinner gong is rung again at six.

Evenings are a fairly sober affair, thanks in no small part to the mountain-high price of alcohol in Norway. However you'll find that all that fresh air and exercise - not to mention food - is very soporific leaving you with just enough energy to chat by the fireside with some of the many German and Dutch guests that the hotel attracts.

So what kind of people go on a cross-country skiing holiday?

"If you enjoy walking, then you'll enjoy cross-country skiing," says Pete Downing, an ex-pat Yorkshire man who now lives and works at the Venabu Fjellhotell.

Pete's point is backed up by the fact that virtually all of the British guests at the hotel are indeed keen country walkers back in the UK.

As for Edna, well she plans to keep on cross country skiing for many more years to come, "I love the silence of the countryside and the spectacular scenery," says Edna explaining why she enjoys the sport so much, "the whole thing is just a beautiful experience."

Headwater Holidays: www.headwater-holidays.co.uk

Look at this too:

Find out more about cross-country

The Venabu Fjellhotell has its own web site which provides more information on the hotel, gives you an idea what the surrounding landscape looks like in winter plus it contains a very useful introduction to cross country skiing:

www.venabu.no

www.venabu.no/ski

A good way to get more information on what cross country is all about is to talk to people who've already done it.

The English Ski Council operates a dozen local groups across England whose members are happy to share their cross-country experiences and offer valuable advice.

To find out where your nearest club is contact Paddy Field, the Director of Nordic Skiing, tel: (01252) 626339 or by email:

paddyfield@ski-nordic.co.uk, alternatively visit their website:

www.escnordic.org.uk

In Scotland contact Snow Sport Scotland tel: (01529) 497007
www.snsc.demon.co.uk There is currently no cross country ski contact for Wales.

What to wear

If you've downhill skied before then the best advice is to leave your padded ski jackets and trousers at home.

When you're out cross country skiing you generate a considerable amount of your own body heat. Consequently if you wore your favourite ski jacket you'd quite simply cook.

The guiding principle here is to think layers, something that country walkers will be familiar with.

The idea of this is that it's easier to adjust your temperature by taking off or putting on a relatively thin layer of clothing, so three or four layers of clothing is better than just one or two bulky jumpers or fleeces.

Begin your layering system with what's called a 'base layer' of thermal underwear next to your skin. What's important here is that these garments

can 'wick' away the moisture that your body produces when you're skiing - there's nothing more uncomfortable than having to wear a damp, claggy cotton t-shirt.

On top of this base layer you should be wearing a medium fleece or woolly jumper. You'll be surprised though how quickly you do warm up, so when you get too hot, pop these in your daysack that you'll need to bring with you.

To keep the wind out you'll need a good quality windproof jacket. If you're a country walker you'll doubtless have already got one of these. If not, any good quality outdoor shop will have a large range of jackets to match your budget.

For your legs, a pair of thin track suit bottoms will be OK so long as you have a pair of good quality waterproof trousers to put over them.

You will of course need the usual winter clobber consisting of gloves, hats, scarves, sunglasses and sun block.

Five top tips for your trip

* A small insulating mat that you can sit on is invaluable when you come to make a stop whilst out skiing. Either pick one up from an outdoor shop or use a large piece of bubble-wrap packaging.

* A warm drink when you're out skiing is a great morale booster if you're starting to feel the cold, so don't forget to bring a thermos. The unbreakable steel varieties are much better than the older glass-style thermos flasks.

* Come to Venabu stocked up with films, spare camera batteries or anything else that you think you might run out of or need during your holiday as there's only one small shop close to the Fjellhotell.

* Use the quiet evenings to catch up on your reading so bring a good book. Alternatively bring a board game, scrabble for example would go down a treat with the other guests too.

* Don't forget that Norway isn't a member of the EU so take advantage of the duty free at the airport, especially if you'd like a quick tot whilst you're out skiing.