

TIME FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT? SAM BALDWIN TRIALS
OUT CROSS COUNTRY AND GETS INTO THE GROOVE..

goodbye back country

— hello cross country



Cross country
enthusiasts in
Japan

“Are you a gimp or something?”

This was the less-than-encouraging response I got from my friends when I first told them that I wanted to try cross country skiing. For those unfamiliar with the sport, the image of ‘skin-tight-lycra-clad athletes’ with rifles slung over their backs, skating along narrow trails is what comes to mind, and in the cool world of winter sports, cross country skiing is lukewarm.

As the grandfather of all skiing, the cross country discipline has about the same kudos that your cardigan-wearing grand-pops does; but perhaps we should respect our elders a little more? Sometimes called Nordic skiing, as the name suggests, it began in Scandinavia and is commonly hailed as the ancestor of all snow sports. Rather than a recreational activity, it was simply a method of transport through, or over, snow-covered terrain and was much quicker than snowshoes. For centuries it was how the snow people of Norway, Finland, Sweden, Northern Russia, Siberia and Mongolia would get around in winter, enabling them to hunt, fish, farm and even fight in snowy landscapes.

Too Cool for Snow School?

Cross country skiing hasn't always been overshadowed in the “cool league tables” by its bastard offspring, downhill skiing and snowboarding. In fact, when downhill skiing first appeared, many Norwegians were very scathing of downhill racers, deeming them weaklings who simply lacked the strength and stamina to compete in what they believed was the only true snow sport - cross country. Even today, when a Norwegian says “skiing” they are generally referring to cross country rather than downhill.

But to the modern generations of winter sports enthusiasts, it's not hard to see why cross country skiing at first glance, doesn't have the same appeal as its downhill



A new technique takes
time to adjust to

cousins. For starters, cross county skiing is a fairly low speed sport and doesn't have the same “extreme” associations that both skiing and snowboarding enjoy. There's no feeling the wind in your hair as your scream down black runs at break neck speed.

Secondly, there isn't much in the way of freestyle moves in cross country skiing – you won't find cross country skiers sliding rails, pulling backside 360s or misty flips in the halfpipe. Thirdly, it's a lot more tiring than its downhill brethren; there's no sitting on lifts whilst supping on your camel back and shouting “yard sale!” at the guy who just stacked it. Cross country is hard work and gives your body a good work out. So – why would anyone want to bother with this seemingly rather dull and tiring sport?

Skiing on Tooth Picks

Well, I used to feel the same way. Then I found myself living in Japan where there was snow on the ground for months, and my desire to add another string to my snow cannon was piqued. However, it was easier said than done. Despite ►



Keep to the speed limit please!

6 REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD TRY CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

1. Learn a new snow skill
2. Excellent form of exercise – works your legs, arms and heart
3. Much cheaper than downhill skiing or snowboarding – no lift pass needed
4. Ideal for when conditions on the hill are icy or slushy
5. Perfect for younger or older people who still want to get out and enjoy the snow
6. High fun factor and ideal for exploring scenic winter wonderlands

being a proficient snowboarder, it seemed my seven years on snow counted for nothing as I strapped into the narrow toothpick-like skis, picked up the long poles and then proceeded to fall over repeatedly, much to the hilarity of my students. However, perseverance pays and although I was still getting lapped by 13 year-old girls by the end of my first winter, I had at least got to the stage where I could ski along - albeit in a slightly wobbly fashion - and more importantly, not fall over too much.

Though I would never completely turn to the dark side and devote all my snow time to cross country skiing, I find it compliments snowboarding perfectly. There are many good reasons to cross country ski. For starters, it's a superb workout. In terms of aerobic effectiveness, cross country skiing is ranked one of the best forms of exercise in the world because you use your arms almost as much as your legs, plus all the other main muscle groups, so it's ideal for toning that tum and bum. And if you had the choice, where would you rather get your exercise? In a dull, sweaty gym, or whilst gliding through a frozen forest, on a cool crisp day?

Cost is another huge advantage to Nordic skiing. Cross country trails tend to be fairly flat and hence do not need any

lift infrastructure. Many cross country trails are simply snow covered foot paths, bridle ways or cycle tracks. Sometimes there is a trail entrance fee of a few pounds but you won't have to shell out for an expensive lift ticket.

Cross country skiing gear differs from alpine ski equipment and is considerably cheaper. The skis are very narrow and lightweight. The boots are just ankle high, are soft and supple, and are fixed to the ski only at the toe. This means the heel is free to lift which allows you to ski along flat or uphill sections. They are also as comfortable as slippers compared to rigid downhill ski boots, and you won't resemble Robocop whilst walking around in them.

Skiing in the Chill Out Zone

The cross country skiing experience is more leisurely and relaxed than the downhill experience. It's unlikely to provide you with the same adrenaline rush of downhill sports, but that's why it makes the perfect partner sport. Cross country skiing is a more tranquil snow activity, which gives you time to absorb your beautiful surrounds. A frozen forest, an icy lake or perhaps a snow covered rice paddy if you ever ►



Finding peace in Slovakia



ALMOST ALL SKI RESORTS HAVE SPECIALLY GROOMED CROSS COUNTRY TRAILS WHICH TEND TO TAKE IN SCENIC PARTS OF THE AREA

try cross country skiing in the land of the rising sun.

There are two main types of cross country skiing – classical and freestyle. Classical is easier for beginners as you simply slot your skis into a continuous groove that has been carved into the snow by a trail groomer, and then start pushing. There's no need to steer as your skis simply follow the grooves, as if you were a tram on a track.

Nordic freestyle, unlike downhill or snowboard freestyle, involves no aerial trickery. It is simply the name given to the skating style of cross country skiing which takes outside of the "tramlines", and uses similar moves to roller blading or ice skating. Cross country ski trails tend to have a classical "get into the groove" circuit, alongside a freestyle circuit, so you can try your hand at both. Almost all ski resorts have specially groomed cross country trails which tend to take in scenic parts of the area, for example a floodlit loop around a lake, which makes the perfect romantic soirée for the amorous couple.

Like downhill skiing, cross country trails are graded for

difficulty, with the short flat sections being the easiest, and the long undulating courses more challenging. Downhill sections are more difficult to negotiate because cross country skis don't have metal edges and the boots afford less support making stopping quickly quite a challenge; a basic snow plough is your best bet for controlling your speed.

Cross country skiing is never going to have the same rebellious fad factor like that of snowboarding or freestyle skiing, yet those who've tried it find themselves drawn back to it time and time again. So next time the snow conditions on the hill aren't looking great, or you just feel like trying something different, why not ditch your "too cool for snow school" attitude and add a new string to your snow cannon by heading for the cross country ski trail. 📍



Sam Baldwin is the editor of www.SnowSphere.com – the travel magazine for skiers and snowboarders featuring articles on the more mysterious pistes of the planet, from China to Chile.

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