

Snowshoeing

It's a new take on an age-old technique – much easier than skiing and kinder to the environment too

WORDS ANNE SMITH IMAGES TRACK AND TRAILS



Do you fancy the thrill of being high up in the mountains on a clear, crisp winter's day, enjoying the peace and tranquillity, but fear you'll never experience it because you aren't a mountaineer and don't ski?

Well, now you can, thanks to one of Europe's fastest growing winter activities: snowshoeing.

Quite simply, if you can walk, you can snowshoe and if you can snowshoe you can hike in virgin snow which would otherwise be inaccessible on foot. It might be regarded by some as a trendy new sport, but it's actually an ancient practice which has been used for thousands of years by those whose livelihoods depended on getting around the mountains in winter.

Today snowshoeing is enjoying a huge, recreational revival around the world.

New shoes

Courtesy of my Scottish guide, Lindsay Cannon, I was introduced to my new footwear, or racquettes as the French like to call them.

OK, snowshoes might originally have resembled wooden tennis racquets like the ones worn by 18th century North American explorers, but modern day versions are lightweight and colourful and made of hi-tech material. They are wide and flat and are simply a platform to attach to your walking boots.

This helps you 'float', making it easier to walk in deep snow. They also have studs on

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Clockwise from far left:

Taking to the slopes on high tech shoes; en route to the Tete de la Sallaz in the French Alps; Mont de l'Arpille, Switzerland.



the base and three front claws like crampons to give you grip and get up steeper climbs. 'It's basically hill walking on snowshoes in winter and is non-elitist. You don't have to be a skier or have any technical ability and it is much less expensive than skiing,' Lindsay enthuses.

Our chosen venue was France's Vallorcine valley, just a short hop from the Alpine mountaineering capital of the world, Chamonix, and offering spectacular views of the Mont Blanc Massif for which the area's so famous. Starting from the pretty little village of Le Buet, we headed towards Mont Buet, a popular summer 3000 metre walking route near the Swiss Border. As we set off, it didn't take me long to adapt to my super-size new shoes, and we quickly made progress through the Alpine forest.





We wound our way along a gorge, the eerie winter silence only broken by the soft swish of the shoes. Lindsay showed me what would happen if we weren't wearing them. She took her shoes off, tried to walk and was immediately knee deep in snow with little hope of making much progress. I was beginning to understand the attraction.

Stopping for a breather gave me a chance to appreciate the unspoilt beauty of this winter mountain. We were truly off the beaten track now, and it had taken us no time to reach this remote terrain. Unlike skiing, where you'd normally have to keep to a defined area, snowshoers have freedom to explore.

A challenge

Lindsay's a keen ski mountaineer, winter climber and a snowshoe enthusiast. But she's keen to point out she's not spending time snowshoeing because she's incapable of any other winter activity! 'The challenge can be as easy or as aggressive as you want to make it. It's also a very environmentally friendly sport. Unlike downhill skiing, snowshoeing has little impact on the landscape.'

Snowshoeing certainly does have a boisterous side. Nowadays there are even snowshoe races if you're feeling competitive, but it's also a fantastic way to keep fit and have fun in the snow with all the family.

Lindsay and her colleague Julia Tregaskis-Allen run a company called Tracks and Trails which offers walking, cross country skiing, Nordic walking and snowshoeing trips.

Chamonix is an extremely busy mountain resort, attracting over two million visitors every year, so the girls get extra satisfaction using their local knowledge to introduce clients to what they describe as 'hidden gems' in the landscape.

As we began to descend down the Berrard Valley towards Le Buet village, it was my last

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From top: Stunning views across to Verbier in the Swiss Alps; The 305 Escape snowshoe by TSL.

chance to enjoy the magnificent views of the Aiguille de Loriaz and have a little fun by sliding down to the bottom of the slope...just in time for a very welcome packed lunch and hot chocolate.

After such an exhilarating adventure, it was then time to retreat for a little pampering at Chamonix's newest chill out spot. The Deep Nature spa at the Aiglon hotel was just the thing to relax my rather aching muscles.

Fortunately I hadn't far to stumble to my chalet. When I opened the door I was greeted with a roaring fire and cosy homely atmosphere, and there was the most the most delicious aroma coming from the kitchen. What more could you wish for after a day in the mountains? Chalet Les Pelerins is stylishly comfortable without unnecessary fuss and has magnificent views of Mont Blanc. It's owned by another passionate Scottish mountain addict, David Robertson, who uses it as a base for his company Action Outdoors.

After our tasty meal (I've already asked chef Jim for the recipe!) it was time to retire by the fire to reflect on a rather wonderful day, exploring the Alps in a new way.

After years of trying unsuccessfully to improve my skiing skills, I have decided to pack away my skies for good, as I contemplate who I can snowshoe with in Scotland instead! ☺



FIELDFACTS

Tracks and Trails www.tracks-and-trails.com offers independent tailor-made snowshoeing, walking and cross country skiing days out in the Mont Blanc valley for £140 for groups of up to eight. Price includes tuition and equipment.

WHERE TO STAY:

Chalet les Pelerins www.chalet-inchamonix.co.uk
Prices for a week's stay start at £375. The price includes transfers from the bus, airport or train station, 7 breakfasts, 6 dinners, resort guiding on the first day, assistance with both booking ski hire and lessons plus transfers to the slopes.