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## There's nothing unsexy about cross-country skiing

Why you should swap Alpine skiing for the thrills and spills of cross-country adventures – especially if you're in midlife and beyond

By Shane Watson

13 February 2022 • 5:00am



Shane Watson (pictured, left) believes that the gentler sport of lang lauf is cool, just in a different way | CREDIT: Foto: Mattias Nutt Photography/Mattias Nutt

"Why would you want to do that?" were my husband's exact words when I suggested that we go cross-country skiing in Switzerland in January. "How long have you got?" was my response, knowing I'd get push back – this being a holiday that would take the place of his beloved downhill skiing, also known as the only skiing a pre-geriatric British male is interested in – and because I have been mulling over the reasons why I'd like to give cross-country a try for a couple of years.

Why? Partly because we are older and downhill gets riskier every year. Alpine skiing is a bit like stepping out on a motorway on skates in rush hour. Love it, don't get me wrong, but the last few times I've been I have more than once thought, "Yikes that was close," and recent headlines confirm that the slopes are getting far more dangerous.

You can ski well into old age – but should you? Perhaps it is more sensible to consider something closely related: a classic winter sport that has the benefit of being in nature. No lifts! No queues! No crowds! I get it: downhill is the sexiest sport, the one with va va voom, glamorous gear, the decadent après-ski shenanigans. But I have good reason to believe the gentler sport of lang lauf is cool, just in a different way.

Back in my university days my parents lived in Oslo so we cross-country skied out of our front door onto the Holmenkollen mountain every day in winter. In my early twenties I learnt how thrilling it can be slipping through the trees, freer than a hiker, and I was for a while extremely fit. Every so often you would come across a couple of young women skiing topless or just resting against the bank at the side of the track wearing light reflecting foil collars. There is nothing unsexy about cross-country – and it's great for your figure.

## Top tips for first-timers

This was my thinking even before I got wind of the charms of the Engadine in south-east Switzerland and a particular hotel in the forest on the side of a mountain overlooking a frozen lake. The reputation of The Waldhaus filtered through from a friend who goes every year: "It's a beautiful place and it's south facing so it's sunny even in January," she said.

The last time I was skiing, high winds closed lifts and confined us to our hotel for two days, and that was in March. And so we boarded the flight for Zurich with one of us in high spirits and the other presenting very much like someone who had been told he was going to a silent vegan retreat in Baden-Baden.

The first bonus of this new sort of skiing holiday is that it begins not with crowding onto a bus full of powder hounds fuelled by duty-free, but with slipping quietly onto a shiny red train bound for St Moritz. Although the next leg takes a bit over three hours, it is one of those journeys travellers take just for the experience. A fellow passenger told us to sit on the west side to guarantee the best views, but the conductor assured us there was nothing to choose between them – and she was right.

It is all breathtakingly pretty – frozen waterfalls, castles in the clouds, gold onion-domed churches and endless lakes – blue green at the start and then frozen and snow-covered as you approach St Moritz. From the station it is just a 20-minute drive to the hotel above the tiny town of Sils Maria – worlds away from the flash and fur of SM, just in case you were worried.



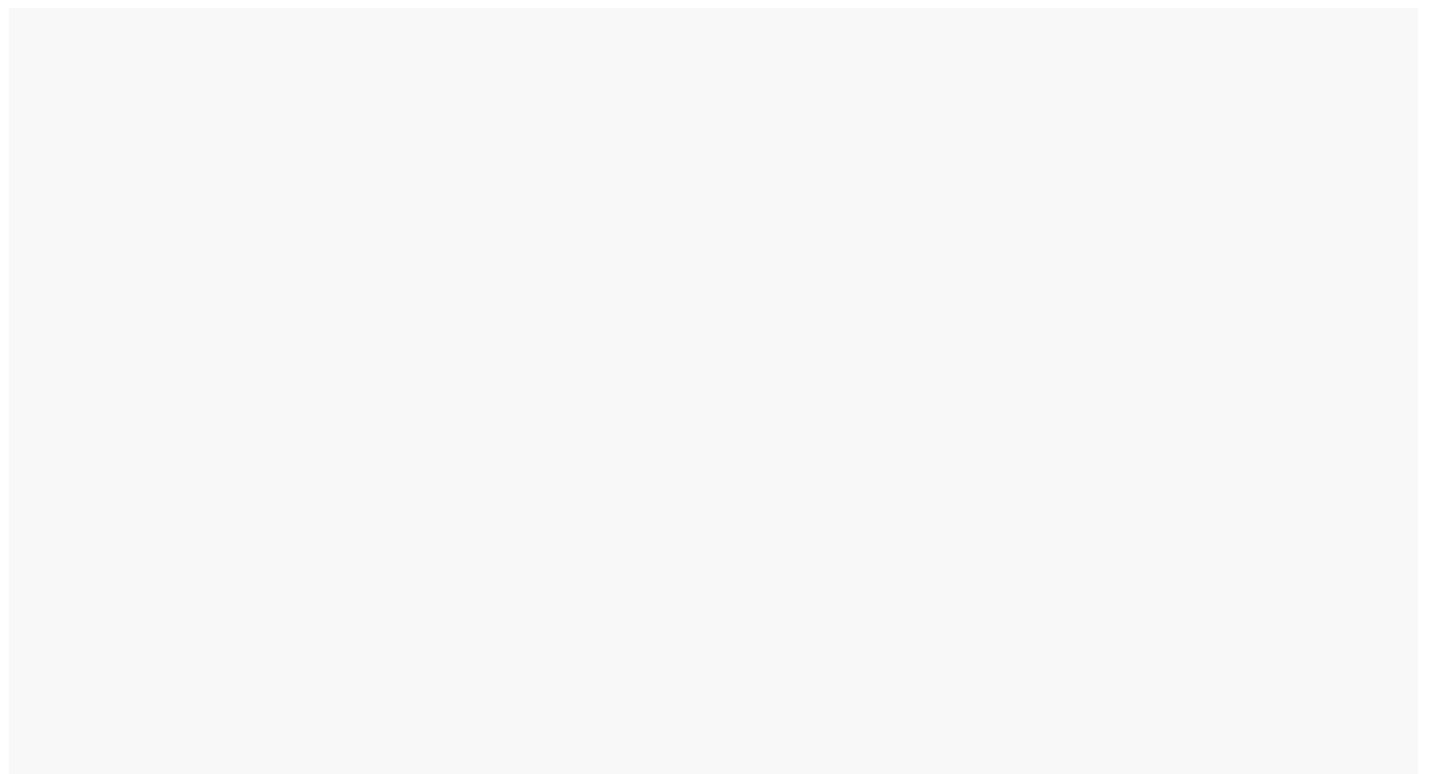
The tiny town of Sils Maria, in a breath-takingly beautiful part of Switzerland near St Moritz | CREDIT: Mattias Nutt/Mattias Nutt

Built in 1906 The Waldhaus is a grand, old-school family-run hotel with mountain style – which is to say it is luxurious without a whiff of pretension or fashionable trimmings. Fans of Wes Anderson's fantasy *The Grand Budapest Hotel* will be immediately at home. It is similar in location and in scale – 140 bedrooms, corridors you could drive a car down, cathedral-scale windows through which you can watch the mountains change colour – though it is hardly Anderson's "enchanted old ruin" (enchanted though it is) and the only sign of eccentricity is a self-playing piano (shut up for winter because damp effects the workings).

Many of the guests – most of them Swiss and German – have been coming here for decades, with their dogs and their children and now grandchildren; the children do their homework in the bridge room while their parents take tea as a harpist plays. We skip straight to cocktails and a dinner of chateaubriand and crepes suzette in the cosy stubbe accompanied by a Brancaia Ilatraia red (we are only 40 minutes from the Italian border, so you can just as easily order a light risotto). Our bedroom has parquet floors, views of the frozen lake, and the taps in our giant bathroom provide icy spring water. Vivien Leigh, I discover, stayed here in 1936 just before she met Laurence Olivier. It's perfect.

It is well known that the first thing you do every morning on an Alpine skiing holiday is fling open the curtains and check the weather. Particularly if you are, like me, a fairweather skier who has one too many memories of sitting frozen stiff on a chair lift in a blizzard. I have been a "Strictly in March" skier for years but this place gets the sun year round, so they say, and sure enough we wake up to a Lindt blue sky, sun shining – and it is mid January.

Once we have picked up our boots and skis in Sils Maria (no wax needed this time! No awkward boot laces, just a zip!) we head out to the frozen lake for lesson one. Our ski instructor, 23-year-old Sebastien, is unfazed by my husband's early attempts to get him to admit that downhill is the way better sport – which is impressive considering Sebastien was, until an injury two years ago, a pro downhill racer, ranked number five in the world in his age category.





Built in 1906 The Waldhaus is a grand, old-school family-run hotel with mountain style | CREDIT: Copyright by Gian Giovanoli / KMU FOTOGRAFIE 2012/GIAN GIOVANOLI, Gian Andri Giovanoli

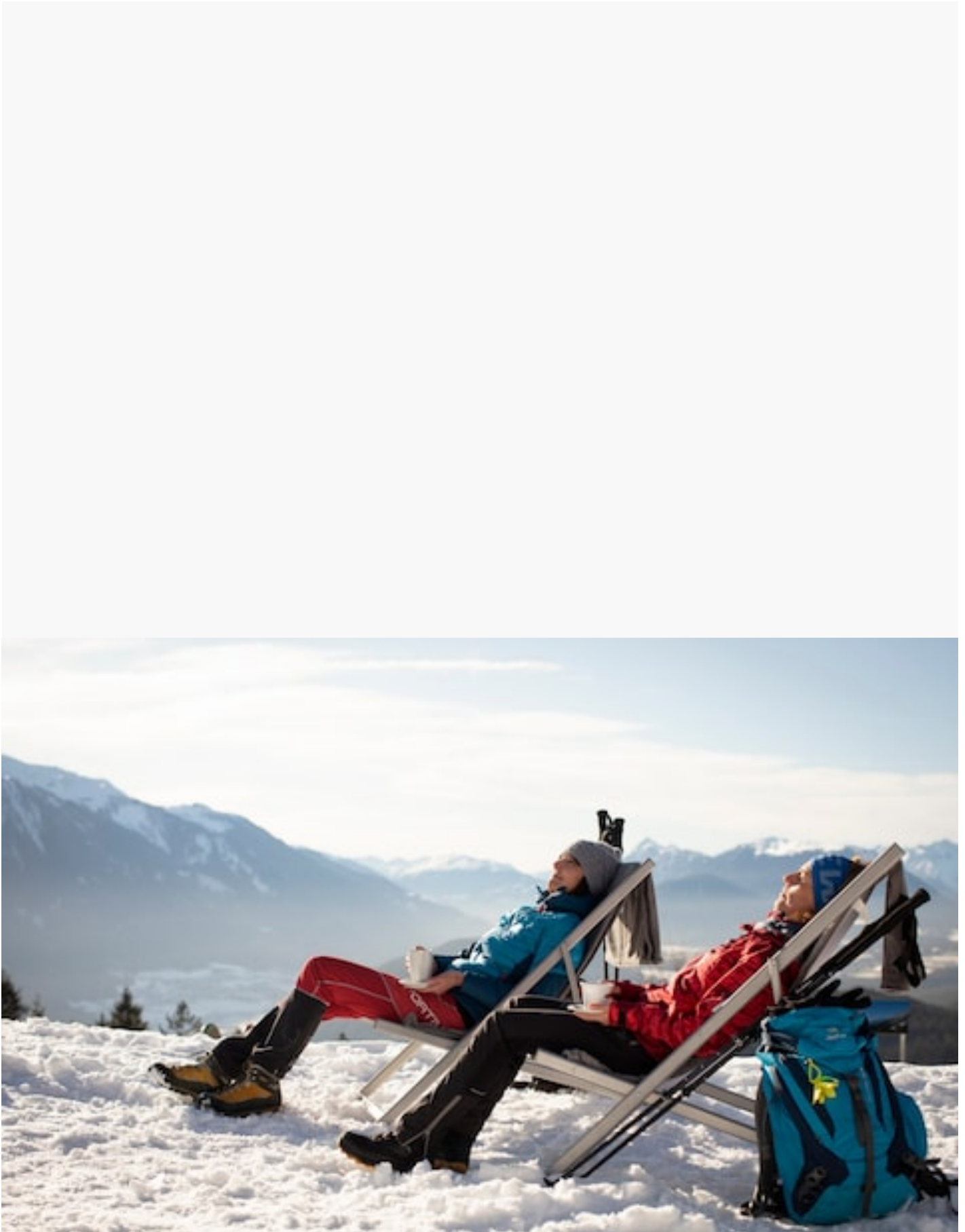
I fall flat on my face five minutes in. It is quite an odd sensation to be on skis as narrow and light as celery, lifting and sliding one foot and then the other forward along twin-track grooves that circumnavigate the lake. And it's hard to get back up – apparently the key is to shuffle onto your knees – but pretty soon I'm upright and back on track, eyes on the horizon.

The only sign of human life is the occasional empty bench in the middle of the lake, put there as a sign that the ice is safe to walk on. Sebastien – who vaguely resembles James Blunt, only with warmer eyes – is patient, easy, not too chatty, and full of interesting factoids about the area, plus he knows the best routes and places for lunch.

I had almost forgotten the joy of a good professional guide. It doesn't always work out well: there have been those (usually Austrian) who have roared at me to respect the mountain and gone ballistic if I so much as unzipped my jacket. Sebastien is more carrot than ski stick and instinctively knows the older skier's day will be made by the phrase "looking really good!"

In reality, I am looking okay. However, I should be fitter. Ideally as fit as Pippa Middleton who, you may recall, once raced in the 47km cross-country rave which happens right here every March. (Frankly, I would settle for Carole Middleton). "No. Do not say this," says Sebastien. I'm in heaven.

It is not, it must be said, quite the same story for Him. Forty minutes in and he has ripped the crotch of his trousers (mysterious, since they are brand new and roomy and we are basically walking). He is also staring rigidly at his feet, having developed trust issues with his skis and boots.



The great thing about cross-country skiing is that you can't do it for long

"Relax and look at the view," suggests Sebastien. "I can't," my husband replies without looking up. "My legs have gone Bambi." It turns out that a downhill terminator boot locked onto a plank gives him total confidence whereas this feels like "trying to balance on a jelly".

Fair enough. It is definitely not as easy as I remember (Sebastien says a certain wobbliness is normal at first and we/he must be patient) – and I'd forgotten how physically demanding it is. Even on the flat. Before you get to the uphill bits (oof!) and the downhill bits ("eeee"), but all that was for tomorrow.

The other great thing about cross-country skiing is that you can't do it for long, nobody does. It's three or four hours at most and then you're back to the hotel where you have really earned tea, an hour or two in the spa, maybe a relaxation massage (I'd recommend Maria... quite something). For all the old-school charm of The Waldhaus, the spa – built in 2016 – is as slick and modern as the best but, refreshingly, without any woo woo whale music or faux-mystic frills. Then you can have dinner (there are three restaurants) perhaps a schnapps nightcap listening to a classical concert in the lobby. If you're looking for Jaegerbombs and hard-partying Brits, you are definitely in the wrong place. But we are definitely not.

The next day we venture further and take a horse-drawn sleigh (just for fun) to ski in the Fex valley up above the hotel where no cars are allowed and the villages are protected. It's not much of a surprise to learn that the TV series Heidi was filmed in this picture-book Alpine scenery. This time there are more short downhill runs to navigate and, as we pick up speed, we have to learn to lift one ski out of a track and perform a one-legged snow plough. This, it turns out, inspires terror in my husband – the fearless downhill racer. Sebastien has to take up position alongside him to slow him down – one arm outstretched across his chest – an experience that makes him feel "like a giant baby" but nonetheless a cheerful one.

### The two cross-country skiing techniques

Later, he will admit that a downhill run on cross-country tracks has all the thrills (and spills – he fell five times) of Alpine skiing. And where else can you ski the length of a valley that marks the retreat of the Morterastch glacier, then take off your skis and walk into a stunning ice cave? This, Sebastien pointed out, was something exceptionally beautiful that we had to see, not least because it wouldn't be there next year. That's how fast the glacier is melting.

I know what you are wondering. Yes, I lost 2lbs and ate like Henry VIII! As for the question "will we do it again?" For me, it's a no-hesitation Yes. For him? Will he give up downhill for lang lauf? "Why would you want to do that," he says, "when you can do both?"

*By Shane Watson*

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## Where to give cross-country a go

It's not just about a fast, downhill dash when returning to the slopes – cross-country skiing is an exhilarating sport which is often both overlooked and underrated but provides a great way for skiers to gently rediscover their snow legs or perhaps try something different. Whether you're after an entire week exploring the trails or an occasional alternative to the downhill pistes, it also offers a chance to experience the quieter side of the mountains and the peace and stillness of the snow-fields and forests, away from the ski lifts and crowds. Here's

our pick of 11 great destinations for cross-country skiing.

## Seefeld, Austria

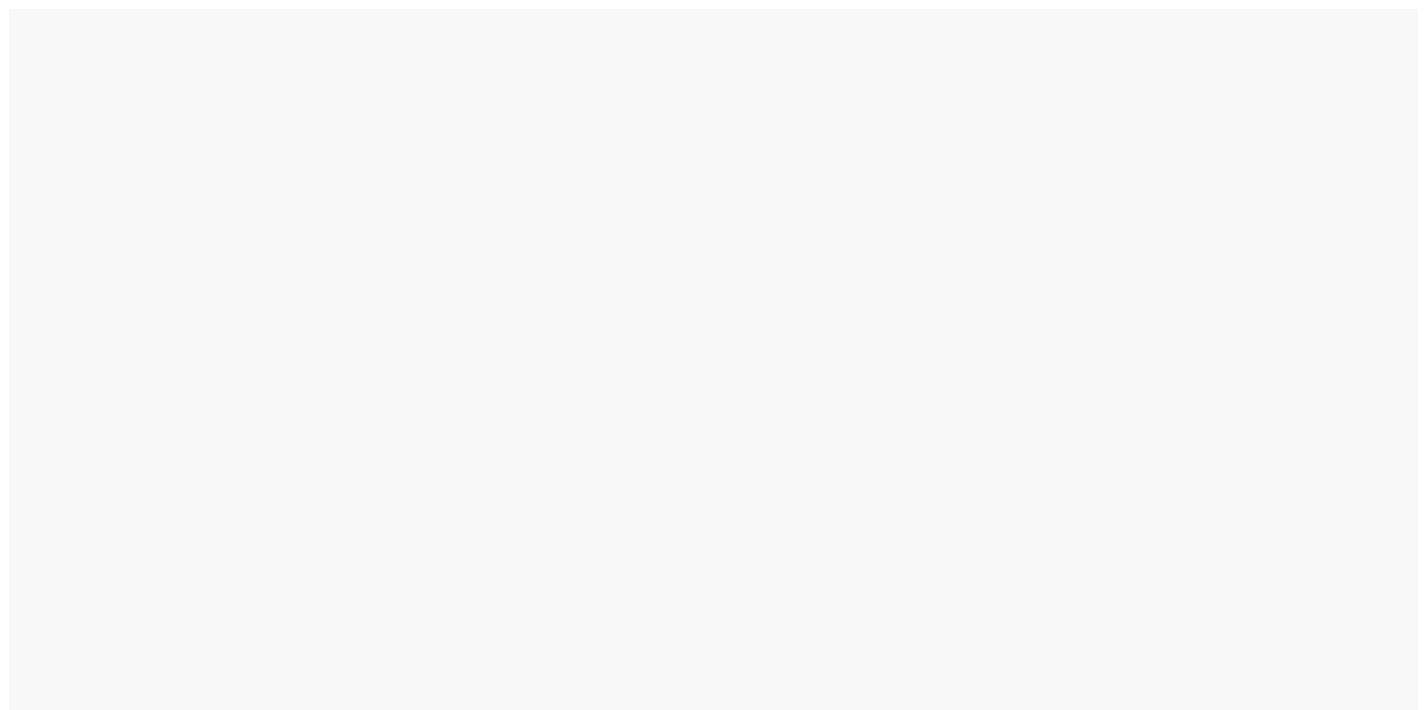
Surrounded by around 250km of trails, the Austrian ski resort of Seefeld in the Tyrol is also one of the world's top places for cross-country skiing. Looping around the woods and villages of the high, snow sure plateau rising to 1,560m, and dotted with small mountain restaurants serving Tyrolean specialities, nearly 40 circuits vary in length and difficulty, catering for all abilities and are groomed daily. There are two floodlit trails including a 3km stretch between the villages of Seefeld and Mösern, which open until mid-evening. Use of the cross-country tracks starts at €7/£6 per day (free for under-15s) and passes include travel on local buses.

**Book it:** Crystal Ski Holidays (020 3451 2821; [crystalski.co.uk](http://crystalski.co.uk)) offers four-star Hotel Residenz Hochland, ski-in/ski-out on the Geigenbühel slopes in Seefeld, with a pool, wellness area and views over the valley. From £990. Departs March 5.

## Bernese Oberland, Switzerland

The forested mountainsides around the pretty village of Kandersteg in the Swiss Bernese Oberland are criss-crossed with 52km of gentle trails, which make ideal terrain for beginners and intermediate cross-country skiers. The more advanced can take the cable car up to Sunnbüe to find steeper, challenging terrain. Other winter activities in the area include ice-skating, curling and snow-shoeing, and tobogganing on a 4km run from the glacial lake of Oeschinen.

**Book it:** Headwater (01606 369121; [headwater.com](http://headwater.com)) offers a seven-night 'Cross Country skiing in Kandersteg' break, staying at three-star Hotel Alfa Soleil in Kandersteg, five minutes' walk from the village centre with a restaurant and cosy guest lounge. On the first evening guests are given trail maps and local information over a welcome drink. From £1,419, including most meals and pass for unlimited travel on local buses. Departs March 12.





Gentle trails criss-cross forested mountainsides in the Swiss Bernese Oberland | CREDIT: Switzerland Tourism/Andre Meier

## Venabu, Norway

On the edge the Rondane National Park, a region of plunging gorges and high peaks to the north of Lillehammer in central Norway, the small hamlet of Venabu is a gateway to around 140km of groomed trails on the snow-sure Venabygdsfjell plateau. Local activities also include dog sledding and sleigh rides.

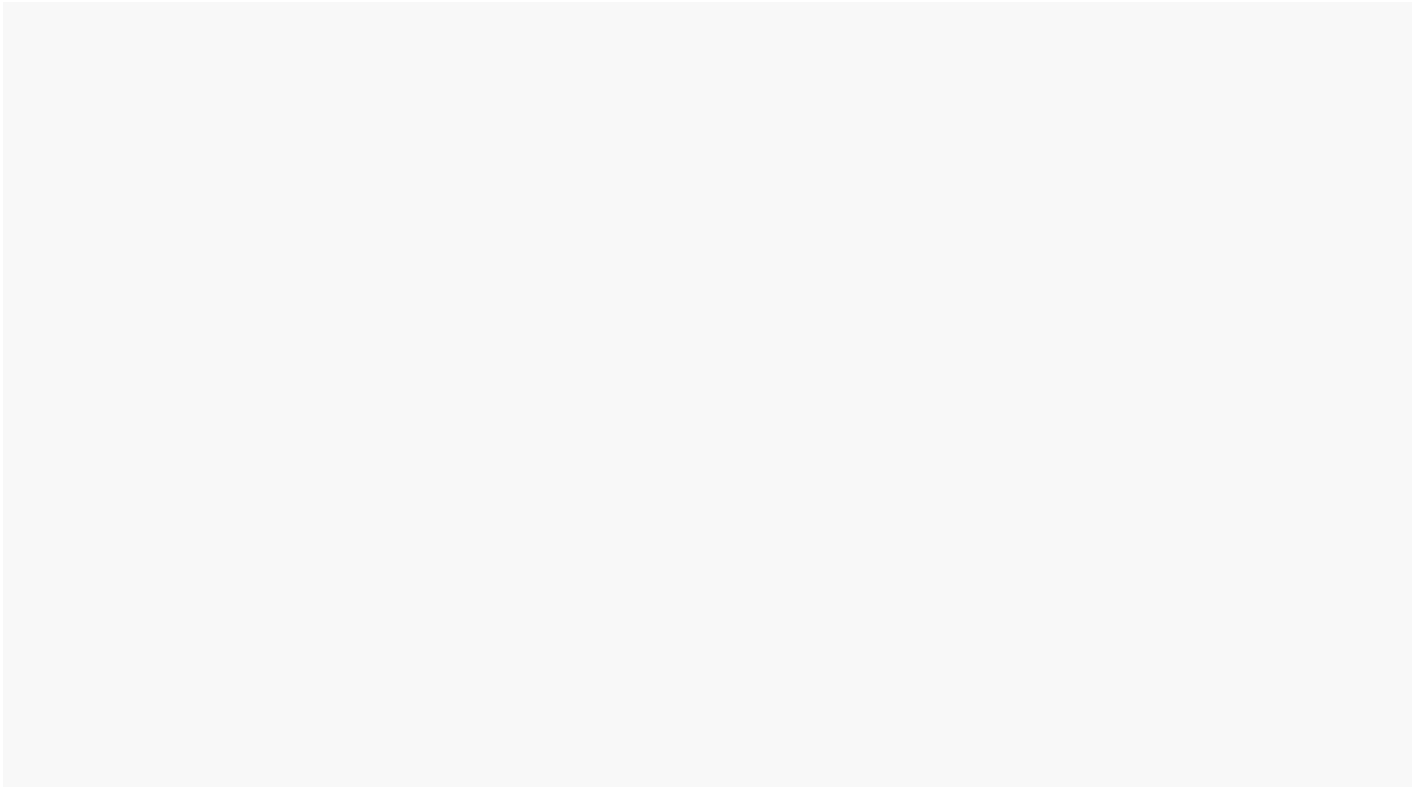
**Book it:** Exodus (0203 553 1669; [exodus.co.uk](https://www.exodus.co.uk)) offers seven-night 'Cross-Country Skiing in Venabu' in group sizes of two to 30 people suited to beginners and intermediates, with a minimum age limit of eight years. Guests stay at the simple, family-run Venabu Fjellhotell. From £1,679, full board, including five days of tuition and guided cross country skiing, equipment hire and one yoga or pilates session. Departs March 5.

## Le Grand-Bornand, France

Cross-country skiing Olympic medalists Roddy Darragon and Sylvie Becaert trained on trails through snow-laden forests and meadows in this Haute-Savoie terrain of the Bouchet Valley. Le Grand-Bornand offers 58km of maintained runs, with a weekly pass at €44 (£37) giving access to 12 circuits ranging from one to 15km in

length. There are also four free loops which start in Grand-Bornand village.

**Book it:** Peak Retreats (023 9283 9310; [peakretreats.co.uk](https://peakretreats.co.uk)) offers seven nights in a two-bedroom apartment at Le Village de Lessy in Le Grand-Bornand, with pool and spa. From £240, self-catering, based on five sharing, including Eurotunnel crossing for one standard car with free FlexiPlus upgrade. Departs March 26.



Le Grand-Bornand offers 58km of maintained runs and has access to 12 circuits

## Ylläs, Finland

This is Finland's biggest downhill ski resort, 150km north of the Arctic Circle, but the exceptionally large

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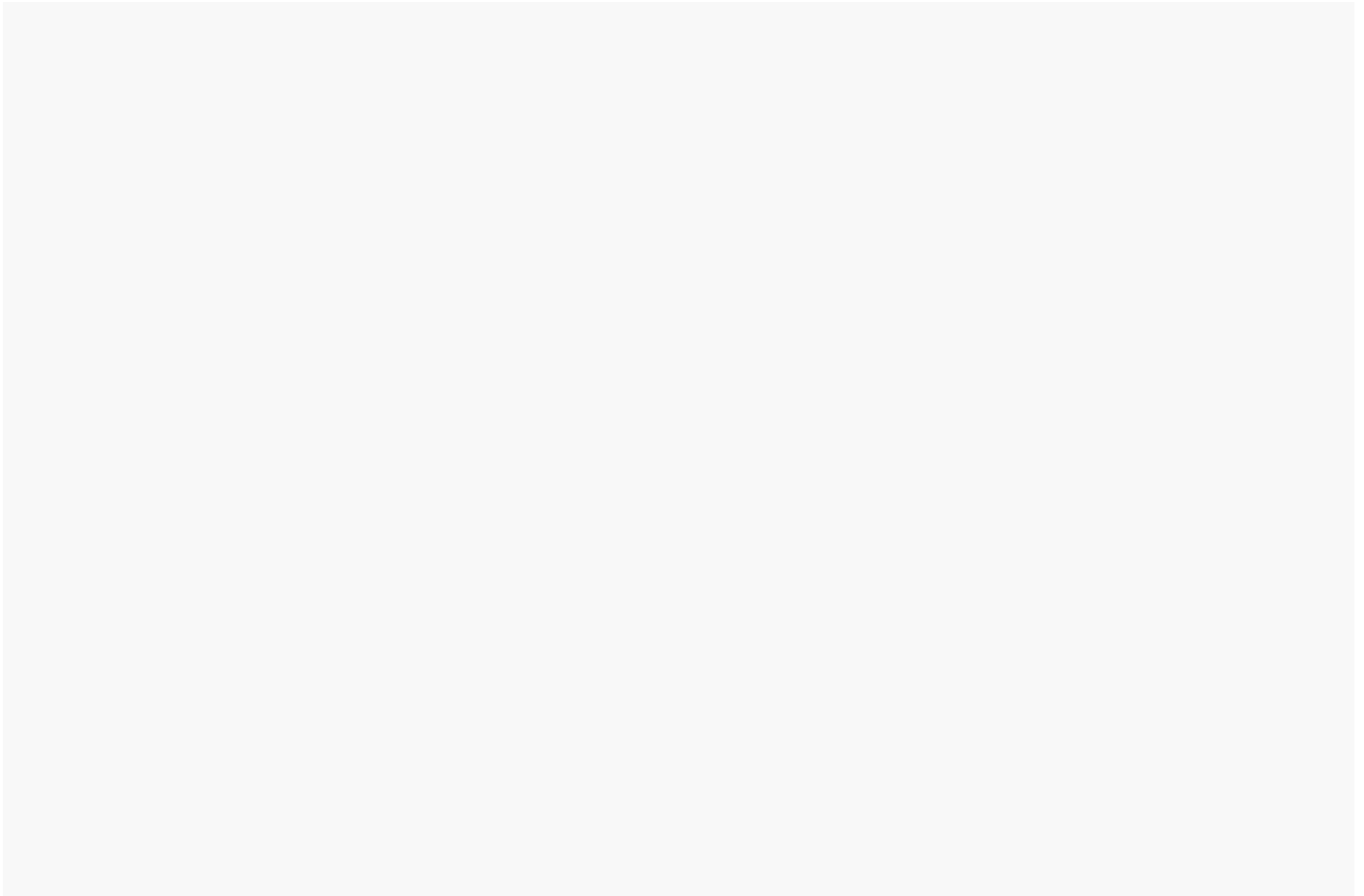
network of maintained trails also makes it a popular destination for cross country. Extending some 330km, the tracks lead through forest and across open fells, some through the Pallas Yllästunturi National Park, and small cafés serve hot drinks along the routes. On non-skiing days you can choose from a range of activities including dog-sledding, reindeer safaris, snowmobiling, snow-cycling or ice-fishing - and by night there's a good chance of seeing the northern lights.

**Book it:** Inntravel (01653 617000; [inntravel.co.uk](http://inntravel.co.uk)) offers stays at lake-side Ylläshumina Hotel, a wood-built cluster of cosy cabins with a restaurant, sauna and open-air hot tub to the north of Ylläs Fell and a 20-minute walk to the village centre. From £1,445. Equipment hire from £87 per person. Departs March 23.

## Levi, Finland

Like Ylläs, the resort of Levi is also high in the Arctic Circle and a big destination for cross-country skiing with 230km of prepared ski trails. By contrast, however, it's a more compact resort, with less in the way of nightlife – although cross-country enthusiasts can carry on skiing on 28km of floodlit trails until 10pm or 11pm in the evening. If you want to give the sport a go without committing to a full week, the resort's cross country ski school offers two-hour introductory sessions on basic techniques, including equipment and hot drinks, or a three-hour forest skiing experience (from €73/£61; [levi.fi](http://levi.fi)).

**Book it:** Inghams (01483 319565; [ingham.co.uk](http://ingham.co.uk)) offers stays at the Crazy Reindeer Hotel in Levi from £999. Six days' cross-country ski, poles and boot hire from £113 per person. Departs February 20.



Resorts in the Arctic Circle are big destinations for cross-country skiing

## Val di Fassa, Italy

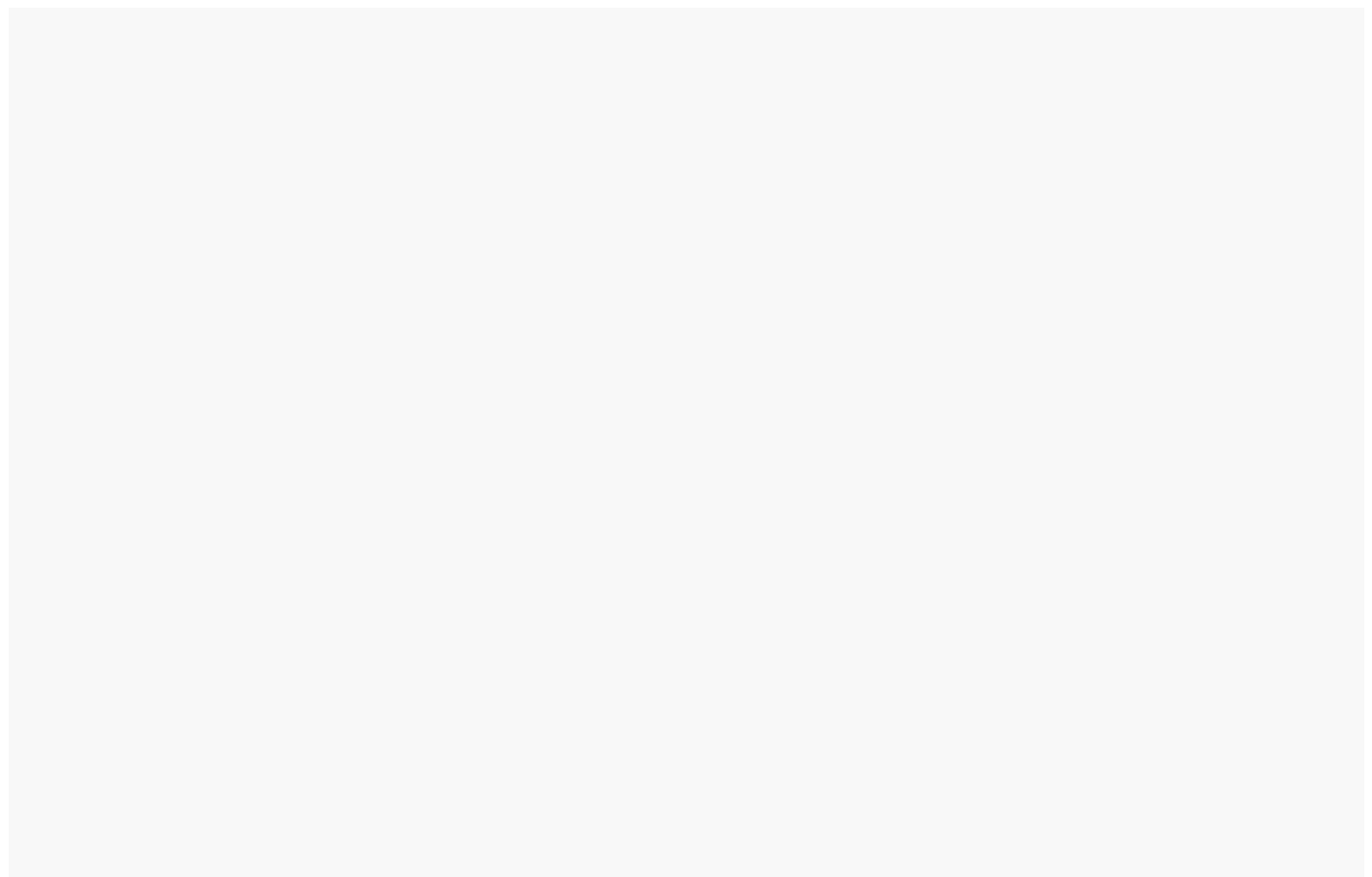
Dominated by the snowy peaks of the Sella Massif and Marmolada glacier, the Val di Fassa is part of the vast Italian Dolomites ski area. Alongside an extensive downhill ski terrain, it offers up to 50km of trails in four areas including the resort of Canazei at 1,460m where a cross-country centre offers introductory lessons to beginners. From here you can progress to the Ciasates loop and tackle the Soreghes-Sot Ronch area which links the village to nearby Campitello di Fassa.

**Book it:** Neilson (0333 014 3351; [neilson.co.uk](http://neilson.co.uk)) offers Neilson Chalet Hotel Dolomites Inn, a 29-room hotel in traditional Tyrolean style with small wellness area, close to the Alba-Col Dei Rossi lift, in Penia di Canazei in the Val di Fassa. From £789. Departs March 13.

## Lenzerheide, Switzerland

Linked to Arosa by cable car, and with a total of over 200km of downhill piste, Lenzerheide in Switzerland's western alps offers 56km of cross-country trails of which most are easy or moderate. These include the scenic stretch between Parpan and Mittelberg and along the shores of the Heidsee lake. For more challenge, La Pala is a demanding 5.4km route with an incline of 133m. A 4km track, part of the Lantsch/Lenz trail from Lenzerheide is illuminated until 9.30pm for night-time excursions.

**Book it:** The Swiss Holiday Company (0800 619 1200; [swissholidayco.com](http://swissholidayco.com)) offers seven-night stay at four-star Sunstar Hotel in Lenzerheide, with indoor pool, spa, sauna and direct access to the cross country ski trail, from £1,523. Departs March 12.





Lenzerheide offers 56km of cross-country trails of which most are easy or moderate | CREDIT: iStock Editorial/makasana

## Abisko, Sweden

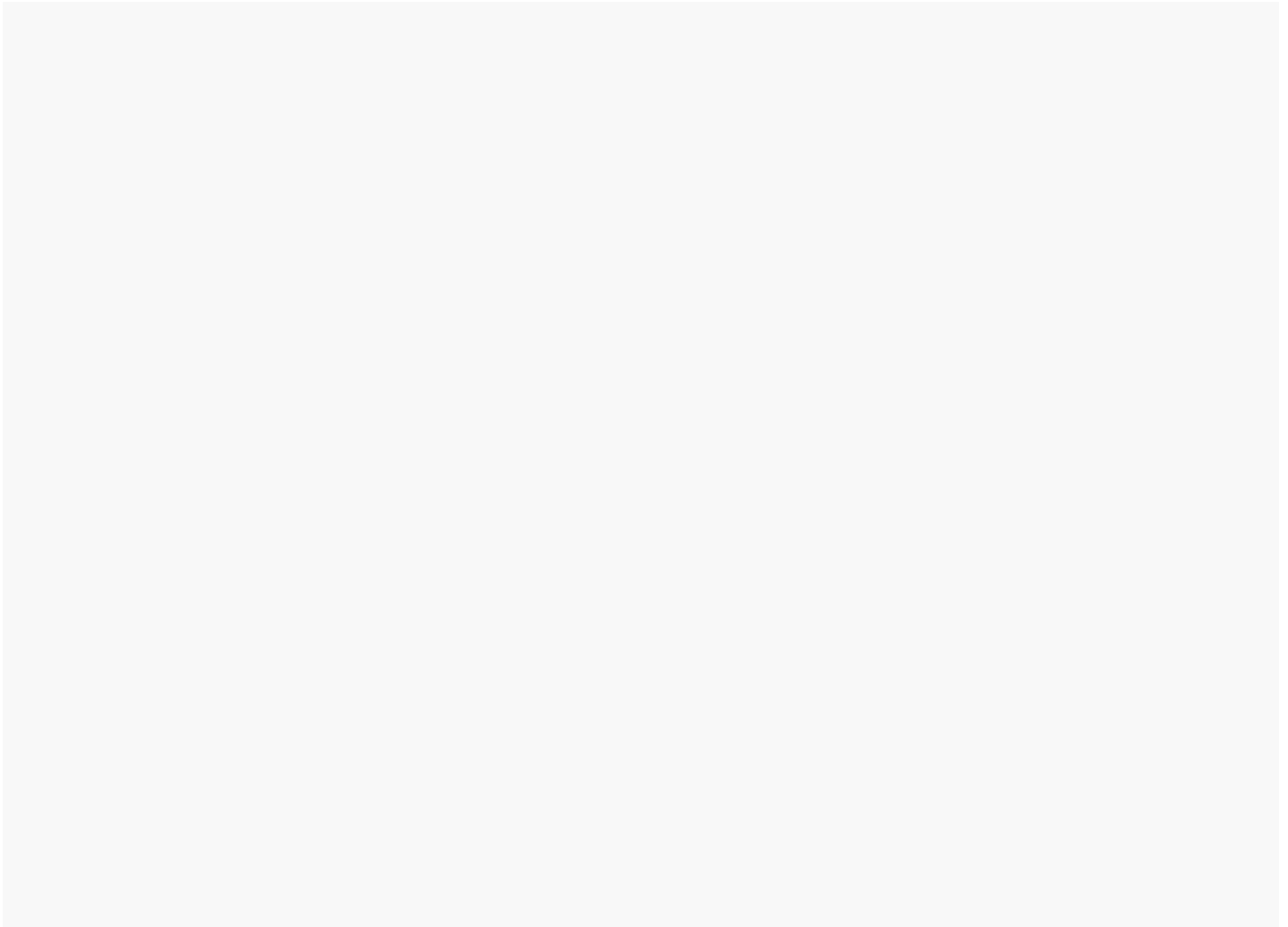
Ski touring isn't for the faint-hearted but does offer a great opportunity to venture even further into the remote, icy wilderness. The King's Trail stretches 440km from Abisko to Hemavan, in northern Sweden, a two-hour drive from Kiruna airport. The route divides into three sections, with the most beautiful northernmost section, Abisko to Kebnekaise, taking a week to complete. Accommodation is simple, in staffed mountain stations, huts and refuges with no electricity or running water.

**Book it:** KE Adventure Travel (01768 773966; [keadventure.com](http://keadventure.com)) offers an eight-night "Inside the Arctic Circle - Skiing the Kings Trail" in group sizes of five to 14, from £2,495 full board. The price includes seven days of ski touring with snowmobile support. Excludes equipment hire. Departs March 3.

## Aspen Snowmass, USA

Colorado's most glamorous resort, which marks its 75th anniversary this year, offers 60km of free cross-country ski trails alongside its extensive downhill terrain. These loop between the resorts of Aspen, Snowmass and Basalt, and the Aspen Cross Country Centre ([aspennordic.com](http://aspennordic.com)) offers private or group lessons and tours of the local trails. One of the most popular is Owl Creek, a nine-mile stretch which runs along the south side of the Roaring Fork and Owl Creek valleys, while 20-mile Rio Grande Trail, best suited to beginners and intermediates, follows the old Denver and Rio Grande railroad track.

**Book it:** Ski Solutions (020 3944 2669; [skisolutions.com](https://skisolutions.com)) offers condominiums at The Gant, room only, with pools and restaurant, from £2,620. Departs March 5.



## Geilo, Norway

If there's anywhere to learn nordic off-track cross-country techniques, it's surely Norway in the company of a BASI-approved Nordic ski instructor. The Hardangervidda National Park, a vast mountain plateau, makes great terrain for an introduction to these skills with a chance to put them to practical use on an adventurous journey into the arctic wilderness from the nearby ski town of Geilo.

**Book it:** Tracks and Trails (020 8144 6442; [tracks-and-trails.com](https://tracks-and-trails.com)) offer eight-night "Introduction to Hut-to-Hut Touring" from £1,975 full board including rail travel from Geilo to Finse and instructor services in group sizes of four to eight, with a minimum age of 18 years. The itinerary includes three nights in Geilo and five nights in hut accommodation. Excludes flights, transfers, equipment hire and obligatory Norwegian Trekking Association (DNT) membership (740NOK). Departs March 5.

*By Sophie Butler*

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### Need to know

Seven-night prices are per person and include flights, transfers and half board, unless otherwise stated, and are subject to availability. For full details of entry requirements and in-resort Covid rules for your favourite ski destinations, including those listed here, our [ski holiday tracker page](#). Refer to [gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice](https://gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) for further information.

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