

Winter Workout

Cross-country skiing offers great exercise in spectacular settings.

“I guess my skiing days are over,” a friend of mine recently lamented after surgery on a knee he blew out on the downhill slopes at Mammoth.

He was surprised when I suggested an alternative - cross-country skiing. My husband and I are recent converts. And we are not alone. Cross-country skiing is the fastest growing winter sport in America. Over the past few years, cross-country ski centers have reported nearly a 25% increase in visitors. There are reasons galore why this sport is gaining popularity.

Picture yourself on an alpine trail. You are surrounded by snow-covered hills and meadows. The air is fresh and filled with the aroma of pines that border the trail. The quiet is broken only by the soft scrunch of your skis on the path and the breeze through the trees. This is the experience of cross-country skiing. The scenery you can access from trails is nothing short of breathtaking - snow-covered mountains and meadows, frosty lakes, streams and forests that will put the most beautiful Christmas card to shame.

Good for the heart

That's just for starters. You can't get a better workout. Cross-country skiing uses every major muscle group. It's the number one aerobic exercise; a better

workout than even swimming or running. For example, a 175-pound man can burn as many as 800 calories per hour skiing at a moderate pace. It also provides winter cross training for such sports as biking, running and swimming.

The sport's origins date back 4,000 to 4,500 years ago to Scandinavia where cross-country skiing provided the only mode of transportation for snow- and ice-bound travelers. Today, two types of the sport are practiced. The Classic Style, also known as Traditional or Diagonal, which consists of a straight ahead, gliding motion, and the less popular Ski Skating, also known as the Free Style, which uses a V style glide and edge motion similar to rollerblading or ice skating. Both downhill skiing and snowboarding can find their roots in Cross Country Skiing - but with a significant difference. Cross-country skis attach only at the toe, leaving the heel free. Unlike downhill skiing and snowboarding in which the skier is limited to the downhill range only, cross country skiers can climb, descend and traverse terrain. And more good news - you won't spend hours waiting in lift lines or dodging skiers on crowded slopes.

Injury-free alternative

Cross-country skiing offers an excellent alternative for those

who want to keep skiing but avoid the sports injuries associated with downhill skiing. Cross-country skis are more narrow and light. The boots fit like comfortable running shoes or hiking boots. So there is less strain on your ankles and legs. Because the sport uses movements that are non-jarring and easy on the joints, cross-country skiers are much less prone to injury than downhill skiers.

Cross-country skiing has a fast learning curve. The sport uses natural movements and does not require any special skills to get started. The best way to begin is with a lesson at a cross-country skiing facility that affords groomed trails also known as packed trails. These trails have two grooved channels the skis are placed in thereby increasing speed and glide. As in downhill skiing, facilities offer beginning, intermediate and advance trails. For most beginners, taking a 90-minute lesson will equip them to hit a beginning trail and enjoy a half-day or day of skiing fun. Cross-

country skiing can be a pleasant glide for an hour or so or the best workout of your life.

Cross-country skiing is a sport the whole family can enjoy. Whether you are looking for speed or you want to spend the day gliding quietly along, this sport has appeal for the young as well as the senior skier. Avid fans enjoy the sport into their eighties. On the other hand, many ski instructors encourage parents to start youngsters out cross-country skiing because of the lightweight equipment and freedom of movement. Teenagers who want more speed can graduate to ski skating. Even toddlers can be included. Many facilities rent pulks, a sled parents can tuck their toddlers in and pull safely behind them on the trails. Want to bring the family dog? Not a problem. Many cross-country trails allow well-behaved dogs off lease on designated trails. And if your Golden Retriever or Black Lab is especially well tempered and trained you can try Ski Joring, a sport in which the human is pulled on the trail by their dog.



BY ANN SCHULTZ

roadtrip

A word of warning - this is best tried by an experienced skier!

It's cheap, too

As a bonus, cross-country skiing is surprisingly affordable. The average fee for a lesson, rental of skis, boots and poles and an all-day trail pass on groomed trails is about \$40 - less than half the cost of a day of downhill skiing. After you've learned the basics you can try the many free trails around areas like Mammoth or go off track where the possibilities are limitless. Once you are ready to buy equipment skis, boots and poles can be purchased for around \$300.

You can cross-country ski on every continent in the world. For Orange County skiers there are several easily accessed facilities. Nordic Rim and Green Valley in the Big

Bear area are only a few hours away. Tamarack Lodge at Mammoth offers a ski school managed by ex-Olympian Nancy Fiddler, along with 52 miles of beautiful, groomed trails. Nearby Rock Creek also offers miles of trails in a lovely setting. Altogether there are hundreds of cross-country ski areas in the United States and Canada. Some, like Tamarack, even offer moonlight ski excursions! Lodging options range from rustic log cabins to country inns to luxurious resorts.

In short, cross-country skiing is the total package - a safer alternative to downhill skiing, a terrific workout, a way to see unforgettable scenery and an experience for the whole family. So the next time the snow beckons, hit the trail! **OCM**

Cross-Country Trail Tips

- ~ **Get off to a good start.** Learn the fundamentals by taking a lesson at a reputable facility.
- ~ **Rent quality,** right-sized equipment the first few times you go skiing before you buy.
- ~ **Dress for freedom of movement.** Avoid bulky clothing and gloves, and big goggles. Stay away from cotton that absorbs moisture and can have a chilling effect. Opt instead for polypropylenes, synthetic fleece and similar insulated fabrics.
- ~ **Wear layers.** Cross-country skiing is like a jog or power walk in the snow. You'll generate lots of internal heat so be prepared to peel off a layer or two.
- ~ **Wear plenty of sunscreen** whether it's sunny or not. You can get sunburn even when it's hazy.
- ~ **Don't forget your sunglasses.** Sun glare can cause snow blindness and damaged corneas.
- ~ **Wear headgear** - hats and headbands. Up to half your body heat can be lost from an uncovered head.
- ~ **Carry water** or a thirst quencher like Gatorade.

PHOTOS: ROBERT SCHULTZ

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