

# OBSESSIONS NORDIC SKIING

## Cold Comfort

Cross-country skiing gets to the heart of winter's wonderlands

By Stephanie Pearson

**N**orthern Minnesota is beautiful and punishing in winter. The crystalline snow crunches underfoot. Every naked birch is illuminated by the distant sun, and the silent world is drenched in white. Some days the snow is so cold that it sounds like squeaking Styrofoam. On the best, subzero bluebird days, I have one clear purpose: to Nordic ski as fast and far as I can before my face freezes off.

People who live in more temperate climates think we northern Nordic types are masochistic nuts, cross-country skiing through winters that can last from October to April. I prefer to believe we're practical, with a built-in survival compass that points toward sanity by way of burning calories and staving off cabin fever.



CARLOS PINA (FOREST), STEPHEN MATERA (SIGN)

It's true there's a steep learning curve to Nordic skiing, both the centuries-old classical form where skis glide straightforward in tracks as arms pump along in synchronicity; and skate skiing, the faster technique brought to the world's attention by Bill Koch when he glided in a V-formation to the 1982 World Cup Nordic title. When mastered, both styles provide a rush akin to human flight.

A descendant of Swedish immigrants on my maternal and paternal sides, I grew up in Duluth, a hilly, forested city on the western edge of Lake Superior. Almost every Saturday in the winter, my parents would bundle their five kids in patched snowmobile suits and my grandmother's knitted hats and scarves. Off we'd trudge to 660-acre Hartley Park at the top of our dead-end street, where we would buckle our boots into three-pronged bindings and stride off on pine skis, shuffling behind Dad like overstuffed elves.

On the coldest days our breath would freeze our scarves into bricks. But if all five kids made it through the morning without a meltdown, mom and dad would treat us to breakfast at the local café. I ordered pancakes, but my sister never failed to order a Reuben sandwich. She went on to become a vegetarian, a competitive high school Nordic ski racer, and eventually, an elite-wave competitor in the 50-kilometer (31.1-mile) American Birkebeiner, the largest and longest ski marathon in the United States.

I, on the other hand, fled south to Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1995. But I still needed my Nordic fix. The closest groomed trails for skate skiing were two hours north at the Enchanted Forest, where most trails were free of dogs, snowshoes, or snowmobiles. This spidery 20-mile trail network winds through towering ponderosa pines and tops out at 10,040 feet.

The driving distance to the trail didn't deter me. I would rise before dawn, stop at the roadside stall El Parasol, in Española, to order a green-chile breakfast burrito, drive north past the Texas-meets-Switzerland town of Red River, then ski until the sun turned the snow into a puddle.

Everything about Nordic skiing—the difficulty, the still wonder of the woods, the powerful efficiency required of my body—connects me to a joy I've had since my childhood. I seek out that feeling when I travel in the winter, purposely choosing destinations within close proximity to ski trails.

In the Midwest I head for the rolling 62-mile Nordic superhighway network of trails between Hayward and Cable, Wisconsin, where more than



The snow show in Washington State's Methow Valley and Alaska's Kenai Peninsula (opposite)

## Nordic Trails for Beginners

Rule number one of cross-country skiing: Don't let the sport intimidate you. In addition to the ski spots mentioned in the story, the ski areas below have trails for every ability. Most offer lessons.

### CANMORE NORDIC CENTRE, ALBERTA, CANADA

A couple miles up the mountain from the town of Canmore, this well-marked 40-mile trail system runs parallel to the Canadian Rockies. The center has a biathlon range, full-service ski shop, and a roomy chalet. [albertaparks.ca](http://albertaparks.ca)

### DULUTH, MN

It's no wonder that Duluth—with one of the most extensive and densely wooded park systems in the U.S. and a winter that lasts seven months—has more than 30 miles of ski trails. The new Grand Avenue Chalet offers a two-mile lighted trail system and access to 12 miles of existing trail. [duluthxc.com](http://duluthxc.com)

10,000 skiers descend every February to participate in the aforementioned Birkebeiner, lovingly known as “the greatest show on snow.” On a weekday in mid-January, however, I can have that corridor to myself. In the Southwest, I prefer Durango, Colorado, where Purgatory Nordic Center is nestled within view of Engineer Mountain. The groomed 12-mile trail network sits at 9,000 feet, which makes skiing here lung-bustingly challenging, but the surrounding beauty goes a long way toward dulling the pain.

Few places showcase Nordic skiing more beautifully, however, than Montana's Lone Mountain Ranch, a century-old former cattle farm founded in 1915 and now a National Geographic Unique Lodge. Like a snow-globe fantasy, the ranch maintains its rustic charm but has been transformed into a world-class playground for Nordic skiers, with more than 50 miles of classical and skating trails.

After nearly two decades of living in New Mexico, I've moved back to Duluth, where the average mean temperature in January hovers around five degrees. My dad, the grounding force in my life, died last winter. Nordic skiing has been my saving grace. I've made a habit of leaving my fancy, faster skis in the closet and instead I use my Dad's sturdy, 40-year-old fish-scale skis. As I glide over the calming trails, I remember how he taught us about the importance of squeezing every last drop of joy out of northern Minnesota winters.

**STEPHANIE PEARSON** ([@stephanieapears](https://twitter.com/stephanieapears)) is a contributing editor of *Outside* magazine.