

Tyneside Loipers - Club Holidays

Norway 2006

Yes, we will definitely be organising another hut touring holiday in Norway, around Easter 2006. Anyone interested should contact Charlie Fisher (0191 261 7719 or e-mail apdh05@dsl.pipex.com). Our previous holidays have been absolutely excellent and you are recommended to come along to Charlie's house (date to be arranged) to find out more about it.

Charlie will be organising a Norway Slide Show with slides from our past 2 years' hut touring trips and we will be talking about plans for Norway 2006. Amongst other things, we intend to discuss the dates and location for next year (at present we are reasonably flexible with dates and location and it is hoped that we can cater for the majority of members who may wish to come along).

Hope to see you there!

Chamonix 2006

This one is still at the early planning stage. Several people have expressed interest in a club holiday to the Alps and it seems that Chamonix is a good venue. It is accessible from Geneva, with EasyJet direct flights from Newcastle, and it has a number of downhill ski areas suitable for telemarking, as well as a reasonably extensive track skiing network.

More details and suggestions are given on a separate sheet being sent with this newsletter. At this stage we urgently require some feedback from TL members... Would you be interested in such a holiday? And are the suggested arrangements (given on the separate sheet) suitable for you?

The cheap flights are only available if we can get the details finalised and book reasonably early. Likewise, booking early will give us a good choice of accommodation.

Please do respond promptly to Alan Mitcham or Paul Gaines (contact details on front cover).

Next Newsletter due 1st January 2006

Please send your contributions no later than end of December.



TYNESIDE LOIPERS

The NorthEast's Specialist
Cross Country Ski club

Newsletter
September 2005



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Club Events

Thurs 13 Oct from 7.45pm	Tyneside Loipers AGM, Alasdair's house (see page 2)
November TBA	Norway 2006 planning meeting, Charlie's house (p. 16)
Friday evenings, Oct - Dec	Skiing at Silksworth - contact Paul Gaines.
14-18th November	Club discount week at Wildtrak (see page 4)
19-27th November	Club discount week at Nevisport (see page 4)
December TBA	Xmas Meal - Contact Jackie Paice.

Alasdair Wilson (Chairman/Race Officer)

Paul Gaines (Secretary)

Paul Jameson (Treasurer)

Alan Mitcham (Membership/Newsletter)

Jackie Paice (Committee member)

Heather Dickinson (Committee member)

awilson.craw@blueyonder.co.uk

paul_gaines@lineone.net

pjameson@globalnet.com

alanmitcham@metronet.co.uk

jackiepaice@gmail.com

Heather.Dickinson@newcastle.ac.uk

(0191 2662327)

(01434 607881)

(0191 2661875)

(01661 823960)

(0191 2515324)

(0191 281 0495)

Editor's Musings

My first ski holiday of the coming season is already booked (downhill/telemark skiing in Colorado in February) and I am looking forward to the winter even more than usual. That is not to say that the Loipers haven't been busy during the summer—we have had a couple of enjoyable outings, biking and walking, and a number of good roller ski sessions. More of that later in this newsletter.

There are predictions of heavy snowfall and bitter temperatures to come this winter. You have to believe it – it was in the Guardian (20/9/05). Apparently the Met Office has a long-term prediction, which relies on other things in small fluctuations in temperature of the North Atlantic (something called the North Atlantic Oscillation) based on which they are issuing a severe weather warning for this winter. Let's hope that they are right and that we get loads of snow in Northumberland and the Pennines.

This issue has a great article by Dorothy Wilson about her trip to the World Masters XC championships with Alasdair and another interesting article (as usual) from Frank following his latest Waymark holiday. Thanks to contributors and also to Ellen-Ann Finnighan for her contribution on her roller ski outings with other clubs.

Tyneside Loipers AGM – Thursday 13th October

This year's AGM is particularly important one for Tyneside Loipers and it is hoped that as many members as possible will turn up at Alasdair's house from 7.45pm onwards to support the club. The main business is our affiliation to SnowSport England and the related issue of Tyneside Loipers membership subscriptions.

As usual, the AGM is a social affair – please bring some food items to share and bring along any photos (skiing or otherwise) and enjoy a glass or two of wine (provided by the club). Alasdair's house is at 14 Victoria Avenue, Forest Hall (instructions on the attached notice, or phone Alasdair 0191 266 2327 for details).

After last year's AGM, at which it was decided we would re-affiliate to SSE, your committee decided that this is only practical with a substantial increase in membership subs to cover the cost of affiliation. Historically, we have always been affiliated to SSE, or its predecessor the English Ski Council, but we defaulted at the end of 2002 (due to an oversight).

There are a number of reasons why we should belong to our national governing body (SSE). They are the policy makers for our sport and they administer the training programmes and coaching, which we as a club benefit from (at the moment,

SnowSport England Events

All highly recommended. But you will need to act very quickly to get on the Race Training Week in Bruksvallarna and the Roller Ski Weekend at Lancaster.

1st and 2nd October 2005

Roller Ski Tuition and Fun Race at the Salt Ayre track, near Lancaster.

Accommodation and roller ski hire available.

Contact Grahame Aspinall (01484 846490 or graspinall@netscape.net)

11th to 18th November 2005

Race Training Week at Bruksvallarna in Sweden (coached by Mike Dixon and Patrick Winterton).

Contact Fiona Crossley (01274 562998 or fcross@waitrose.com)

1st to 8th April 2006

On Snow Nordic Skills course and SSE Coaching Awards course.

Contact Helen Bell (01274 875680 or helen@hebell.fsnet.co.uk)

Looking for a Cross Country Ski Holiday for 2005/06?

by Martin Appleby (by permission of the Yorkshire Dales XC Ski Club)

Waymark Holidays are under new ownership but still as innovative as ever. Their brochure lists many tried and tested resorts throughout Europe and Scandinavia and some new destinations. Their holidays are predominantly track skiing but also on offer are some tours and several courses to improve your skills.

Inn Travel have expanded their XC ski programme and are now offering a wide range of holidays in Europe, Scandinavia and North America. Most of their holidays are suitable for alpine skiers as well as cross country. Accommodation is usually at the top end of the range. Holidays do not have the benefit of a leader but instruction can be arranged.

Exodus organise a wide range of winter activity holidays including cross country, ski mountaineering, dog sledding and snow mobiling. Some of their holidays are in unusual locations such as Greenland, Spitzbergen and Siberia!

XCuk are a new company this year, set up by ex Waymark director Stuart Montgomery. They have a good choice of resorts but all of their holidays are based in Norway. They also do summer holidays (in Norway) featuring the latest craze, Nordic Walking!

Norsc Holidays is an independent company who will organise holidays anywhere in Norway (some resorts I have never heard of). Holidays can be organised with or without flights, often at short notice.

Headwater Holidays offer skiing with 'haute cuisine' (sounds like the right approach for Tyneside Loipers!). They offer trips for beginners with a full daily programme to keep people occupied. Great emphasis is placed on accommodation and high class dining, so if it is luxury you are after this company is worth a try. They also do snow shoeing.

The Telemark Ski Company specialise in mountain skiing, with courses in telemarking (on and off-piste) and also mountain tours in the Alps and Scandinavia. It is run by BASI Telemark instructors John Eames and Bonny Masson.

HF Holidays and Ramblers Holidays both offer winter XC ski holidays in Europe and Scandinavia, in addition to their walking holidays.

All of these companies have good websites and brochures and it is worth browsing to see what they have to offer.

(Ed - I have spare copies of the Telemark Ski Company brochures for this year.)

albeit unofficially). Specifically they run the roller ski training (several over the year), on snow XC race training and telemarking at Kvitavatn, early season race training in Sweden and the artificial slope nordic downhill (this year at Pendle in Lancs). They also provide third party insurance, which protects the club in the event of an accident. The downside of affiliation to SSE is that we have to pay a levy of £6.50 per TL member, most of which is to cover the cost of insurance.

The proposed subscriptions for the new year (subject to agreement at the AGM) are:

Full members	£14
Joint members	£22
Juniors	£10
Country members	£5 (newsletter only)

New Loipers Website

A new club website is taking shape, thanks to Charlie Fisher who has spent some time collecting material and building up the site at www.contraflow.com/loipers. Charlie is aiming to have the site fully operational in the next few weeks. Contributions (photos or text) would be much appreciated. Please contact him directly on apdh05@dsl.pipex.com

Club Contacts by E-mail

Most members of Tyneside Loipers are on e-mail and this is a very useful way to keep in touch and to keep you posted of things that are happening at short notice. Therefore please do make sure I have your latest e-mail address. Mine has changed recently alanmitcham@metronet.co.uk (let me know of any changes to yours).

Some members do have interesting e-addresses and it is easy to tell which are the most passionate skiers... How is this one for new member Ellen-Ann Finnighan? - Spindrift1952. And recent member Richard Johnson? - anutonski (hotmail)

A few members have asked if they can have the newsletter delivered by e-mail. Consequently I am intending to produce a version of the newsletter in PDF format. This should result in a reliable and professional version suitable for e-mail distribution. If you would care to have the newsletter in this form, let me know. Distribution by e-mail will save the club money but the regular hard copy newsletter will continue to be available for those who want it.

Alan Mitcham (Newsletter and Membership)

Club Discount Weeks (See also front cover)

Please remember to take your TL membership card for these reductions.

Wildtrak, in St Andrews Street, Newcastle, are giving a 20% discount to members during the week 14th to 18th November. Wildtrak now has a good website which is worth referring to before you go shopping www.wildtrak.com Many items in the store are already discounted, so be aware that the 20% reduction relates to the full price and that discounts might not apply to books and maps and electronic gear.

Nevisport, in Saville Row, Princess Square, Newcastle, are offering 20% discount between 19th and 27th November. www.nevisport.com

Tiso, in Grainger Street, Newcastle, are now holding club discount evenings from 6 till 8pm on the first Wednesday of every month. See www.tiso.com Some goods are discounted by up to 25%.

Wildtrak and Nevisport (and also the LD Mountain Centre in Dean Street) offer a regular 10% club discount at other times, as long as you have your membership card. Regular discounts may also be available at Tiso (it's worth asking).

Films and Lectures

Fri 14th & Sat 15th October, 8pm - 'Everest the Hard Way', lecture by Chris Bonington to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the ascent of Everest SW face, at Rheged, near Penrith. www.rheged.com

Tuesday 1st November, 8pm - Alan Hinkes lecture, at Newcastle University, sponsored by Tiso. To celebrate Hinkes' ascent of Kanchenchunga, which completes his round of the world's 8000m peaks (a seriously amazing feat). Phone for tickets 0191 222 0020 (may also be available at Tiso).

If you miss this one, the lecture is being given on other dates all over the northeast incl in Sunderland and again in Newcastle (on 30th January, tickets from LD Mountain Centre).

12 to 20th November - Kendal Mountain Film Festival at the Brewery Arts Centre. See www.mountainfilm.co.uk The one to go for is on Thursday 17th including guest speaker and mountain guide David Hamilton and film action from a number of ski films and a look at the psychology of the best skiers in the world. Tickets £7. (Having met David a couple of times, I expect it to include some telemarking!)

25th November, at 8pm Gateshead UCI - the new Warren Miller film 'Higher Ground'. Tickets available from Nevisport. Expect the usual all action, extreme skiing and snow boarding with the usual Warren Miller humour thrown in. And free goodies given away on the night. (Also being shown at Rheged on 5th November.)

centrated on classic technique. I have always found this a much harder technique on roller skis - but I was amazed to find that I was having some success with Adam's coaching.

I can really recommend these SSE coaching weekends. A similar weekend is being held at the Salt Ayre Leisure Centre in Lancaster on 1st and 2nd October, with coaching by Mike Dixon and Patrick Winterton. Hire of roller skis can be arranged. Please contact Grahame Aspinall (01484 846490 or graspinall@netscape.net)

Alan Mitcham

And these 2 reports are from Ellen-Ann Finnighan who has been enjoying some of the roller ski days organised by the Lakeland XC Ski Club.

June 2005 Chester There were ten of us who assembled at Connah's Quay in Flintshire at 10.00 am thanks to the wonderfully clear instructions from Michael and Helen of the Lakeland club who led the tour. In the bunch was one Merseyside member, moi from Tyneside Loipers, and the rest from the Manchester and Lakeland clubs. We set off towards Chester 7 miles away at a leisurely pace, some doing roller skating and some classic. The weather was balmy and more importantly the tarmac was wonderful! We sped along the bike track until the border and then I'm afraid there was a distinct difference in the tarmac quality and the Anglo side was a bit more bumpy! Lunch was in a lovely little cafe in Chester and the talk was about skiing and skiing gear and races and holidays ..and not much else! We started back with a definite post prandial fullness. On the way we saw 3 gliders being towed into the air and sailed back to the carpark in a slight drizzle, the first of the day at about 4 o'clock! A great day by anyone's standards!

August 2005 Cockermouth Ten intrepid roller skiers and 2 patient cyclists under the leadership of Mike and Helen Smith met up at Camerton just to the West of Cockermouth at 10 o'clock. It was overcast but cool. This was no harm because they set off down the cycle way fairly smartly. The tarmac quality was on the whole excellent - downhill to Workington but gradual and easily managed and then fairly flat to the coast. The sun came out and there was a gloriously surreal stretch as we skied by the sea on to Whitehaven. There was one tricky bit of navigation where the track came to a gravelly stop just before the final descent to the sea and it was necessary to leg it up the road about 30 metres and then take the path down a steepish short downhill to the road and eventually to the coastal tarmac track with limited vehicle access to Whitehaven. We had lunch (bought at the local Tesco) on the pier and finished the feast with Martin's birthday cake. The return journey was easier than we thought it would be. I must say though that a large ice cream from Thornton's in the Arcade at Workington helped me up the last hill!

Ellen-Ann

Roller Skiing

TL members have been spending the summer on roller skis! We have been out on most Thursday evenings either at Hetton Lyons Park in County Durham or on the Hadrian Way near Byker.

Roller skiing is yet to become a majority sport in Tyneside Loipers but the regulars, Alasdair, Heather and Alan, plus new members Stuart, Brad, and Ellen-Ann, have been enjoying the evening sessions and spending up to an hour and a half on the track practising classical and skating technique on roller skis.

Now that the evenings are drawing in, we are hoping to continue with winter sessions on a Saturday or Sunday (either at Hetton Lyons or at the Derwent Riverside Park). We may also try some evening sessions if we can find a suitably lighted venue.

Others are welcome to join us. The club has roller skis and boots for use by members (at a small charge). Roller skiing is great for practising technique and also for developing those ski muscles before the beginning of the ski season!

SnowSport England Roller Ski Weekend - 3-4th Sept, Hetton Lyons Park

This was an excellent weekend of roller ski training, run by SSE and attended by Alasdair, Heather, Ellen-Ann and Alan. The Hetton Lyons track was a good venue and very convenient for those living in the NE. The weather was good - to the extent I even got a sunburnt head through the vents of my cycle helmet!

The coaching was by Mike Dixon and Adam Pinney, both of whom were very good. Mike is Britain's most successful biathlete, having competed at a high level in six Olympic Games, most recently at Salt Lake City in 2002 (and also in thirteen world championships). His coaching was really inspirational.

Because of family commitments, I could only attend on one day. On the Sunday morning, I was one of a small group of the less experienced roller skiers being coached by Mike Dixon (while the larger group were skiing very proficiently with Adam). Mike's lesson was on skating technique, focusing particularly on 'Skate 2' which is very efficient technique on flat or slightly uphill terrain. We got some good video feedback which helped enormously. By the end of the session, he had us skating fairly proficiently up the steepest hills on the Hetton track. (Heather and I returned to Hetton on the following Thursday evening and spent much of our time repeating some of Mike's exercises and practising 'Skate 2'.)

On the Sunday afternoon, we had a coaching session with Adam Pinney and con-

Midsummer Walk - 21st June 2005

Eleven people (including a sprinkling of non members) set off along the Roman Wall at 7pm to celebrate the midsummer solstice. Except for the rather cooling breeze, it was a beautiful sunny evening.

Starting at Housesteads car park, we climbed up onto the wall and headed west along the new national trail and across the crags at Crag Lough, where there were a couple of groups of climbers roped and tacking the climbs. Jane Forster joined us shortly before Steel Rigg.

At Windshield Crag (the highest point of the walk at 345 metres), we stopped for a picnic. Alan and David supplied the champagne and the glasses and we toasted the summer (all of which seemed very appropriate looking into the low evening sunshine). At about 10pm (after 6½ miles walking) we arrived at the car park at Cawfields Quarry, where Nuala had left her van for our return journey. But first we indulged in another drink at the Milecastle PH. It was all very sociable and a great way of celebrating the Solstice. Many thanks to Nuala for organising the walk.

Summer Bike Ride Sunday 17th July

This was another successful outing with thanks to new member Stuart Mavin who had sussed out an excellent biking route around the disused railway lines of County Durham.

Five TL members met at the car park near Consett, at the crossing of the C2C and the Lanchester Valley Walk. We started off to the east, along the Lanchester Valley (towards Langley Park near Durham) and then we went south on the on the Deerness Valley Walk (both are lovely cycle friendly routes with easy gradients) before hitting a number of minor roads which led us to our lunch stop at Harperly.

Harperly POW camp was an ideal lunch stop. The weather was ideal (warm and sunny) and we sat outside having soup and tea and gateaux to the accompaniment of 2nd world war music - Vera Lynn and Glen Miller! I am told that the POW camp was lost for many years until the farmer/owner started clearing back the trees and rediscovered the Nissan huts and all of their lost history. The camp is still under restoration but you can now go on guided tours and there is also a museum (to be opened shortly).

After lunch we cycled through the town of Wolsingham and then towards Tunstall Reservoir. Here we had the steepest hill of the day - a really steep track leading up to the Waskerley Way at Salter's Gate (with wonderful views back down to Tun-

stall Reservoir). A short diversion later to avoid some private woods guarded by an unfriendly sign No Admittance, plus an interesting section of rough technical riding, brought us back onto the Waskerley Way proper. Then it was just a few miles from the finish at Consett (about 40 miles altogether).

Thanks to Stuart for a great bike ride. The disused railway lines offer some excellent biking a while world away from the old mining villages and industrial archaeology nearby. At the time we went there were loads of wild flowers and at one point along the Waskerley Way a beautiful stretch of orchids. (Stuart has offered to do a repeat run of this route or similar, if anyone else is interested. I would be keen!)

Alan Mitcham

The Big Fridge Telemark Festival - Castleford, 25/26 June 2005

Skiing on real snow in the UK at the end of June!? Yes - this event was organised by Telemasters (www.tele-masters.co.uk) who are a small group of BASI telemark instructors based at the Xscape snowdome (Milton Keynes and Castleford). The programme was put together by Telemasters lead instructor Richard Parrott and consisted mainly of group telemark instruction sessions. The slope was also in use by the general public but there was plenty of space for us telemarkers.

Unfortunately I was only able to attend on the Saturday. On the Sunday, one of the teaching sessions was given by our own Paul Gaines.

We registered on arrival on the Saturday morning and were invited to sign up for one of 4 groups from beginner to expert. I felt in need of some revision and signed up for an intermediate group. But having not got a great deal from the morning coaching session, I promoted myself to the advanced group for the afternoon. This was taken by Richard Parrott - his was an unusual approach to telemark teaching and we spent most of the session working on a technique called 'braccage' (useful for telemarking down steeper slopes using the minimum of slope width and turning with flat skis and rotation of the ankles).

Before the afternoon session, I fitted in some coaching with Paul Gaines which got me doing carved telemark turns and feeling much more proficient than I had done in the morning. We also had a fun session doing a telemark slalom competition. Unfortunately the fact that the slope was in use by other skiers meant that the slalom course was quite confined and required very tight turns.

Overall verdict - good fun and very worthwhile. I would recommend this to anyone else who wants to learn/practice telemark skiing.

Alan Mitcham

cloud, or when fog is affecting the more open and generally higher areas. Of particular interest is the Stor blå (Big Blue) track which loops west out of Skei to Toftomssætra and then south through varied and open mountain landscapes, falling to 800m at Vestlesætra lake adjacent Austlid Fjellstue. This section is about 8k and has what the track description refers to as 'refreshing' downhill sections – I can certainly vouch for that! The return to Skei is about 6k through wooded and fairly flat terrain.

The northern tracks are mostly above 900m and as they are well above the tree line the views can be expansive in all directions. Part of the Peer Gynt Løypa is one of these and the southernmost section ends at Skei. For a good day out, it can be followed north as far as Fagerhøi returning on an alternative loop via Fyksesætra and Nisjuvatnet. Another high route well worth a visit follows tracks to the west of Skeikampen and then north skirting Prestkampen to Skardbua. After a well earned rest here, it is due south passing Prestkampen, Avlundkampen and Skeikampen before returning to the start. If your downhill skills are good enough you can ski to the top of Skeikampen and return via the downhill pistes.

The tracks in the area were kept in first class condition with most being groomed twice a day. There was a good range of facilities at Skei only a short distance from the Hotel – in addition to the supermarket mentioned earlier, there was a well stocked ski gear shop at the bottom of the downhill slope which provided a good range of clothing, skis and waxes. Skis and boots were hired from 'Ellen and Franz Ski Rental'. Franz, who was Austrian, insisted on supplying boots which were one size more than asked for – this to allow for extra socks he said. Needless to say several pairs of boots were changed during the week. The Hotel was clean and comfortable with excellent food - copious amounts of tea and coffee were also available in the late afternoon after a strenuous day on the loipe.

Frank Cauley

Note The Peer Gynt Trail passes through Peer Gynt's Kingdom on the west side of the Gudbrandsdalen valley. It starts at Espedalen about 80km north-west of Lilliehammer and ends at Skeikampen which is 40km north of Lilliehammer. With a length of 75k, it is not a difficult route but there are magnificent views of the Jontunheimen and Rondane for most of the way. There are also some challenging side trips such as the one to the top of Ruten (1517m) to the east of Espedalen.

Web Sites: www.waymark.co.uk
www.skiingnorway.com
www.skiinginfo.no

Skeikampen with Waymark March 6th – 13th

Climbing up to about 6000ft just after leaving Newcastle Airport, the views to the west indicated considerable amounts of snow on the hills and here was I was on my way to Norway via Heathrow for an XC holiday with gallons of the white stuff on the doorstep! Ah well, there should be plenty at Skeikampen, my final destination - and so it proved with great mounds of it when we arrived at the hotel that evening. The wax thermometer at the hotel entrance indicated that blue extra was required and this was backed up by the air thermometer which showed -10°C, so prospects looked good for the next day. The restaurant had stayed open late to provide the party with an excellent set meal, however the imbibers in the group received a bit of a shock at the cost of a 0.33L bottle of beer – 50kr (£4.36). This was remedied the next day when we found that the local supermarket was selling the same bottle at 16kr – relief all round!

An Aussie couple who had come over specially for this and another Waymark holiday, two doctors, a solicitor, a member of the Scottish Whisky Board, a vet, a physiotherapist, and a systems analyst gave a flavour of the occupations of group members which subsequently made for good conversation during the rest of the week. There was also someone who had done two tours with the British Antarctic Survey so the -10°C temperatures must have been somewhat of a heat wave to him.

Skeikampen translated literally means the hill of Skei (pronounced 'Shy'). Rising to a height of 1124m it is not the highest in the area as Prestkampen 4km to the north is at 1244m, but it certainly is the most dominant due to the sheer cliff on the east side. It provides all the slopes for the downhill pistes and over 200km of cross country tracks radiate from the base – and with links to the systems at Gåla and Kvitfjell, the amount of track is increased to 600k.

Skei itself is at 800m above sea level and there are two distinct XC areas. To the south are the tracks centred on Austlid Fjellstue which has an excellent cafeteria (waffles highly recommended). To the north are the higher tracks - these include the Peer Gynt Løype which links to Gåla, Fefor and beyond, and other tracks to Kvitfjell and to the tops of Skeikampen and Prestkampen.

The tracks centred around Austlid are in the region of 800 to 900m and mostly through woodland and by lakes but with some fairly challenging ups and downs. The area is ideal when the conditions are windy and/or with low

The World Masters XC Championships - Feb 2005, Krasnagorsk, Russia by Dorothy Wilson Craw

Finding myself in Krasnagorsk, 23 Km west of Moscow at the World Masters Cross Country Skiing Cup in the middle of February was rather a shock to the system.

With a foot of snow, between -21 and -6°C and living in an ex-pioneer camp in the middle of a forest miles from the town, I wondered what on earth had persuaded me to come to support my partner in the British team.

The price and inevitable bureaucracy in getting to Russia, the expected problems with the language and supply of typical food - usually high protein, low carb - had put many of the international regular Cross country skiing teams off; or maybe it was the threat of superhuman Russian competition. Last year in Lillehammer, Norway, there were around 1200 participants from many countries between 30 and 90 years of age (150 of them Russian - selected by the National Team). Here, out of a total of 900 participants, 600 were Russian, many competing for the first time at this level and some of whom had travelled from all ends of the country much further than we had from GB.

As a contrast to the enthusiasm shown by the GB team in seeing so much snow with an expected life of at least 50 times that of any snow at home, there seemed a distinct lack of joie de vivre or merriment in the faces of the locals, dressed in black or grey, long coats, fur hats and boots. How wrong to judge people by appearances. Having no desire to watch XC skiers in a snowy forest and no knowledge of the Russian language, but with quite a sense of adventure, I ventured on the local bus to explore Krasnagorsk. On the first bus I was helped to find the bank by a visiting Belarus skier with whom I conversed in broken French. He had been working in Mali and Rwanda several years ago with a Russian engineering company. In the second bus a woman started speaking in halting English until we discovered we were both Spanish teachers and she finished explaining to me the whereabouts of the internet café giving instructions to the driver of the third bus to find someone to guide me once off the bus.

While slithering along the snowy paths amongst the monotonous and monolithic high rise blocks following a bundled up babushka I imagined the tough lives they lead, the lack of colour, extreme temperatures - minus 13C that day - constant effort to accomplish daily tasks with so much solid ice and snow and only the extremely cheap alcohol or choices of gambling outlets to alleviate the boredom. The Internet guy had perfect English and all the people I asked about getting back again couldn't have been friendlier.

The Cross-Country Ski Stadium (a 5km ski from where we were staying, or else a

free bus ride) although not finished on the outside, was an oasis of warmth and comfort on the inside. Each country had their own changing rooms with attached waxing room. The Brits had a team of 7 and shared with Spain (4) and Canada (10). Around the stadium people of all shapes and sizes could be seen practising on the tracks for their races – 10km, 30km and 45km (10km, 15km, and 20km for the women and over-60 men). I saw grey perm-haired housewives gossiping together as they carried their skis back home, flushed after a few circuits of practice. Many Russians would have started to ski at a very early age through necessity as the simplest way to get from place to place. George, a 90-year-old Canadian hobbles with a stick but once on skis glides like a swan. Guido, an 80-year-old Italian with dyed hair, looks like a mischievous elf. Most over 80s should be in a home wrapped in blankets or playing bingo, but to see these characters with their extraordinary vitality, strength and determination makes you want to leap with joy.

All participants are amateurs but several of the international teams evidently get sponsorship seeing their jackets and ski suits sporting the sponsors' names loudly. The TV coverage of cross-country skiing on Russian TV is enthusiastic, extensive and amazing: it's obviously an increasingly popular sport, both the classical style and freestyle (skating).

The British team are self-supporting and could really do with a sponsor. The British team is a motley crew, 2 women and 5 men, all equally passionate about their sport – well, you'd have to be if the main ingredient is usually lacking for 360 days of the year and you need to fund yourself. They train predominantly by cycling, running and roller skiing. Norman Clark 75, originally from Aviemore, who used to work as a ski instructor in Glenmore Lodge, lives in the US and can ski 52 weeks of the year. He won a silver medal for 20km freestyle – that's the first men's medal GB has ever won in cross country skiing. The same day the team captain, fancying himself as a far better skier than he actually is, came a cropper at the bottom of a steep decline, dislocating and fracturing his shoulder. Thankfully he knows the Russian organizer of the whole championship and got extra special treatment in the local hospital as a result and had no need to call on his insurance company. The rest of the team are realistic about the competition and they calculate their percentage of the winner's time for their satisfaction. Skiing against fearless Finns, nasty Norwegians, awesome Austrians and kamikaze Ukrainians as well as the ruthless Russians will never be easy. There was endless chatter about eating the right kind of food and carbs in preparation for the race, choosing the right kind of wax according to the snow, temperature and humidity, the added advantage some competitors might have by using 'fairy dust' (whatever that might be), the likely wind chill, preferences for classical against freestyle skiing - all rather waring for non racers like me. However the mutual support and camaraderie in boosting morale when necessary is very special amongst the GB team.

This is the Masters' 25th year and, as in the past, individuals have met up with old international friends a bit balder, greyer and wrinklier, perhaps less strong and less fit but as enthusiastic as ever. The Krasnigorsk delegation was an excellent host and the banquet extravaganza on the final evening was unforgettable. We had ballet, opera, rock, folk music, gymnasts and even a dancing bear while we ate caviar, a variety of meats and fish and lashings of vodka. The faces of next year's delegation – Brusson, Italy – fell as they tried to imagine how on earth they would follow this.

Dorothy

Editor's note:

Alasdair competed in the over 50 class starting with the 30k classic.

"I started and struggled round the first 15km, which was very hilly, in 1hr 22 and I hardly managed to get warm. But having lost a fair bit of training in the run up to the event I decided that I'd save myself for the next races. The next day was the 10k freestyle (the 15k course without the flat bits!) which I did finish - last in 47.47. The previous year in Lillehammer I did that race in about 36 minutes, so I was still obviously not very fit. The last race was 45k freestyle, and having had a couple of days relative rest, I managed to get round in 3hrs 15, a fair way behind the winner but I did do better than the six people who didn't finish and wasn't so far behind the person who finished in front. My skiing gets better each time. More time on snow will make all the difference - anyone who wants to join me on a two month sabbatical in the Rockies let me know..."

Snow conditions were pretty good but cold temperatures and high humidity made it difficult to wax optimally."