

# Making Tracks

*Forget skis and snowboards, when it comes to exploring the pistes simply attach tennis rackets to your trainers and off you go. Alf Alderson goes retro*

PHOTO: © GETTY IMAGES



**T**HE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF SNOWSHOEING INVOLVES BEING ABLE TO COME UP WITH A WITTY RESPONSE TO THE INEVITABLE

quips about the fact that you're wearing tennis rackets on your feet. Indeed, the French term for snowshoes is actually *raquettes de neige*.

Despite the jokes, snowshoes have been an essential means of locomotion in the snowy regions of the world for thousands of years. Native Americans utilised them long before the arrival of Europeans on their continent, with each tribe having their own particular design made from a hardwood frame connected by a leather lattice network, and raw-hide lacings to attach them to their feet.

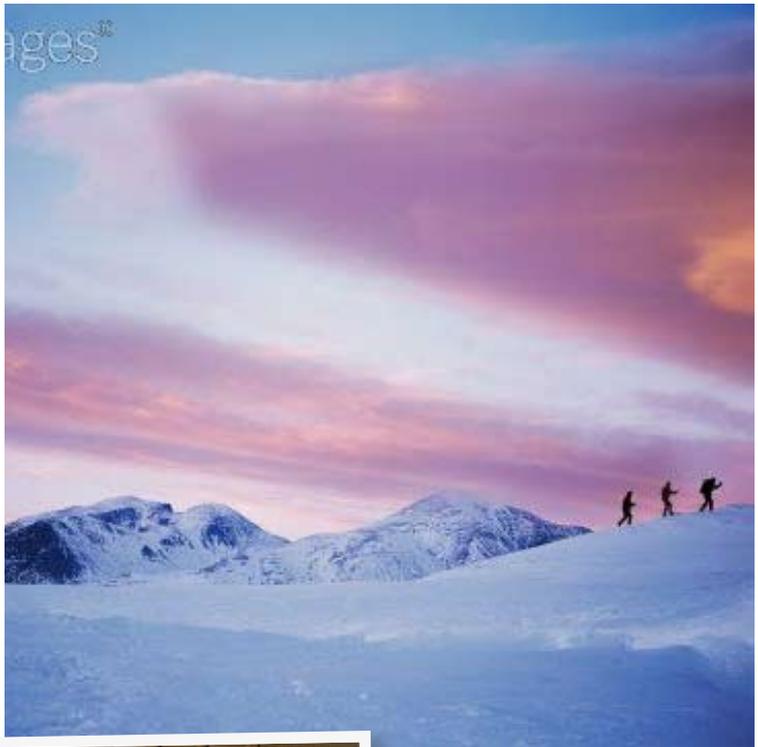
French and British settlers in North America were quick to take to snowshoes, developing their own specific designs: trackers would use massive objects almost two metres long, while lumberjacks used smaller snowshoes around a metre in length, which were less unwieldy in tree-packed forests, and snowshoes of one type or another have been used in snowy climates ever since.

The idea behind them is simple. The large surface area that snowshoes create beneath your feet allows you to "float" when walking across deep snow that you would otherwise sink into. And in recent years there's been a huge boom in their use recreationally, along with huge improvements in design. Forget intricate leather works and fiddly straps and buckles—my own snowshoes have lightweight aircraft-grade aluminium frames and quick-release bindings for easier use with gloved hands.

You can wear your regular hiking boots with most snowshoes along with the clothes you'd wear for skiing or a winter walk in the mountains. Other than that, the only other accessory you need is a pair of walking or ski poles to aid your balance on slopes, and you're away.

So where should you go on your *raquettes de neige*? In theory anywhere that gets a reasonable amount of snow each winter; although, not surprisingly, ski resorts are the best bet since they offer hire facilities, guides and marked trails.

A great option is the Tarentaise Valley in the French Alps, easily accessed from Lyon or Geneva and the location of numerous world-class ski resorts such as Les Arcs, Val d'Isère and La Rosière,



**Sole searching:** above and left, "The large surface area that snowshoes create beneath your feet allows you to 'float' when walking across deep snow"; traditional wooden snowshoes with intricate webbing

## French and British settlers in North America were quick to take to snowshoes

all of which have snowshoe trails. But if you want to get more of a feel for the isolated frozen northern latitudes that are so often associated with snowshoeing, try Sweden or Finland where gently rounded whaleback hills, vast forests and the Northern Lights offer a true wilderness experience—the new airline routes to Stockholm and Helsinki will help to answer your call of the wild.

If you were to head off on one of the snowshoe trails from La Rosière you would very soon enter a world far removed from the buzz and hum of the nearby pistes. It'll take just a couple of minutes to get the hang of your new super-size footwear, and then you're away, trudging behind your guide into what would be knee deep snow were you not wearing your snowshoes.

Don't be under the impression that this is just going to be a tedious plod through deep snow for an hour or two. If you're breaking a new trail that's fun in itself—who doesn't like leaving



**Snow joke:** above, this type of trekking allows adventurous travellers the chance to find unspoilt slopes and unrivalled views

All this freedom of movement allows you to get way off the beaten track and discover a world that few recreational skiers are ever likely to see.

The beautiful silence of deep winter forests is occasionally broken by a soft “whump” as a pillow of snow slips from a tree branch, but despite this almost eerie lack of noise there is still plenty of life out there. Look out for the tracks of squirrels, rabbits and deer and see if you can figure out their direction of travel (it’s not as obvious as it may seem), and listen for the occasional tweet of the few small birds tough enough to survive winter in the mountains.

Emerging from the forest you can enjoy superb mountain panoramas, perhaps even more so in the Nordic countries where the high mountains are more plateau-like than in the Alps; take a picnic along and eat out in the snowbound wilderness; or stop off en-route for a *glurchein* in a small lodge along the way.

And at the end of the day, there’s nothing quite like heading back to civilisation as an icy dusk descends, and enjoying a well-earned cold drink and hot bath. Pity those poor squirrels who are out there all night though...

## Just leap up in the air, land on your bum and slide elegantly down the slope

fresh tracks in deep, smooth powder? And there will be hills to negotiate, too. Climbing up them involves kicking the small, crampon-like underside of the bindings into the snow—these will bite into the snow and, with your ski poles to help, they make even the steepest of slopes negotiable.

Coming down is way more fun though—just leap up in the air, land on your bum and slide elegantly down the slope like you did when you were eight years old, using the shoes as brakes. When you get more confident you can *glissade*; slide downhill while standing upright on your snowshoes, a little like skiing.

## Shoo in



There are three types of snowshoe and three basic types of snowshoeing:

- ▶ **AEROBIC** These are small, lightweight models, around 65cm long, in which you can actually run along packed trails and get a good workout.
- ▶ **RECREATIONAL** Larger snowshoes designed for longer walks, such as half-day expeditions into the hills.
- ▶ **MOUNTAINEERING** Still larger, high-tech models up to 75cm in length, designed for long-distance backcountry trips and steep-hill climbing.

## Where to do it

- ▶ **TREKKING IN THE ALPS** is an organisation offering guided snowshoeing around Chamonix. [www.trekkinginthealps.com](http://www.trekkinginthealps.com)
- ▶ **TRACKS AND TRAILS** This company take guided snowshoes treks in both the French and Swiss Alps. [www.tracks-and-trails.com](http://www.tracks-and-trails.com)
- ▶ **EXODUS HAS SNOWSHOE TRIPS** in various parts of Finland [www.exodus.co.uk](http://www.exodus.co.uk)

## Top tips

- ▶ **ENSURE YOUR BOOTS** are comfortable and broken in—blisters will ruin your day. Start on easy, short, flat trails.
- ▶ **CONSIDER A GUIDE** who can give tips on techniques, terrain and wildlife.
- ▶ **DON'T GO OFF-TRAIL** unless you're sure you can find your way back. In theory you can simply retrace your tracks, unless it's snowing...

