

WINTER SLIDING

Colin Nicholson
dons his skates
for a slide on
the dramatic
Weißensee lake
in Carinthia



For a unique add-on to your Freshtracks break to this region, try skating on the Weißensee lake

Photo: DW Müller

Photo: weissensee.com

Austria's southerly province of Carinthia is growing in popularity now that you can fly direct to its capital, Klagenfurt. And the Ski Club is keeping pace, offering Freshtracks excursions to Heiligenblut, on the flanks of Austria's highest mountain, the Großglockner, as well as a Learn to Ski Tour weekend coming up on 7 March to Innerkrems.

However, for a unique add-on to a trip to Carinthia's biggest resorts, Nassfeld and Bad Kleinkirchheim, try skating on the Weißensee lake, which is what I did...

The Club has historically pioneered all forms of winter sliding. Its archives – now online at De Montfort University – show amusing pre-war photos of Members skiing with sails, skjoring and ice skating, and I found gliding on this lake almost more addictive than skiing. I'd never realised how far you can glide on skates. In rinks back home I am always busy ducking and diving to avoid collisions. Here, on Europe's biggest ice rink, I had no obstacles. A couple of steps was all it took to send me shooting off towards the horizon.

The lake is one of nature's marvels. It's mostly fed by underwater springs, rather than streams, and is shielded by the mountains from wind, so is mirror-like in

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TWO MORE TO TRY...

While long-distance, multi-day skating treks across lakes and marshes in the Nordic countries and Canada are gaining popularity, the logistics of 'wild skating' can be challenging. The Weißensee is one of a number of accessible options...

Albula Valley, Switzerland

Remarkably, the Albula valley, in eastern Switzerland, gets no sun from November to January. After cross-country skiers complained their trail there was always icy, a local club created a unique 3km ice skating trail through the woods. You can start at the village of Surava, which is on the railway line between Chur and St Moritz.

Rideau Canal, Ottawa

In winter, the Rideau canal freezes to create a rink that stretches from near the Canadian parliament, built to resemble our own, to Victorian suburbs 4km away. Recreational skaters are well served by wooden huts sitting on the ice that offer skate rental and refreshments. Many commuters use the canal to skate into work, briefcases in hand.

its stillness. This means that in summer the water is so warm it's a magnet for swimmers, and in autumn the ice forms so fast they often start preparing the 25km circuit in November.

I signed up to a lesson in long-distance skating, which is gaining appeal. As with speed skating, you learn to simply shift your weight to propel yourself forwards efficiently. In time, I clasped my hands behind my back like an Olympic skater.

Not all my fellow skaters focused on technique. I passed young mothers pushing baby buggies, beginners using Zimmer-style frames, and ice hockey players. In what seemed like no time I had done 14km on my long-bladed touring ice skates, which smooth out any lumps and bumps on the ice. It was time to stop at one of the café-bars spread out along the circuit.

Many skiers opt to do the skating as a day trip from Nassfeld, which is a free, 45-minute bus ride away. With 30 lifts and 110km of pistes, it can claim – at a push – to be among the globe's 100 biggest ski areas.

It also advertises itself as having 100 sunny days in winter. Though I was there in a blizzard and was grateful that most of the runs were below the treeline in the white out.

Weißensee itself makes for a good base for those with non-skiing partners. It has a small but charming ski area, where beginner slopes intersect with walking, snowshoeing and cross-country trails at the top of the mountain, all offering spectacular views of the lake. And you can do a thrilling sledge run from the summit.

The cross-country skiing is also magical, but harder work than ice skating, and the hotel's shoreside spa felt divine afterwards. From there I even tried a dip in an open section of the lake. They say this is how they test pain thresholds in clinical trials: a test I mainly failed.

I just loved the way the ice freezes everything into timelessness – like the reeds sticking out of the frozen water around me, which must bide their time for their release. The ice should stay until March; summer will have to wait. ■



Photo: weissensee.com



factfile

Colin travelled as a guest of Weißensee and Nassfeld (nlw.at), Carinthia (visitcarinthia.at) and Austria (austria.info).

He stayed at Hotels and Chalets Regitnig (+43 4713 2225; regitnig.com), which offers double rooms from €168 a night, B&B. The season for ice skating usually runs from mid-December to mid-March.

For info on skating at Weißensee visit weissensee.com/en/winter-world/ice-world.