

Ski
TIMECarlton Hotel
St Moritz

Seeking movement, mountains and the last of the snow, Travel Editor Emma Winterschladen heads to Switzerland and Norway to learn to ski – both downhill and cross-country.

DOWNHILL**Carlton Hotel St Moritz, Switzerland**

The mountains of the Engadin valley wrap themselves around St Moritz and sunlight bounces off its namesake lake, which remains frozen until around April every year. Naked larch trees sit on its banks, looking across at the famous alpine resort's skyline, with its mix of cutting-edge architecture and imposing, historic hotels.

It's from the balcony of one of these hotels, the Carlton St Moritz, that I enjoy this view – a bright painting of blues, greys and white. The Carlton Hotel St Moritz is a glamorous ode to a bygone era. Built in 1913 by Swiss architect Carlo Rampazzi, it became a high society playground in the

20th century. Today, having undergone extensive recent modernisation, it's also home to a vast award-winning spa, and four dining options (including the Michelin-starred Da Vittorio). It retains its old world drama. The decor is at once flamboyant and serious: ornate stone fireplaces, heavy curtains, dark mahogany wood, patterned carpets and crystal chandeliers abound. It's an extravagance you quickly get used to – especially when you learn that since 2019, the hotel has been 'climate-neutral', which does ease the conscience in the face of such luxury!

Open for just four months of the year (from 12 December), the hotel captures St Moritz at its snowiest peak. And the skiing in St Moritz has a world-class reputation for a reason. At 1,856m above sea-level, the resort – known as the birthplace of winter tourism and twice home of the ➤

Winter Olympics – provides snow-sure conditions over a long season, as well as over 300 days of sunshine a year. But if you, like me, are a novice to the slopes, don't let its credentials put you off. There's plenty of skiing on offer for all abilities and, even more helpfully, the Carlton offers a ski butler, Othmar Baggenstos.

It was Othmar who took me out for a day of one-on-one skiing on the slopes of Corviglia, the resort's home mountain, which boasts over 1,337m of downhill tracks. We were chauffeured up to the lifts, where I arrived feeling intimidated by a sea of stylishly-clad skiers. 'The mountain doesn't mind how good you look!' Othmar said, before easing me back into the basics. There were lots of falls and a few frustrations along the way, but over the course of a day I built up confidence in my technique. I learnt to trust my body, push up from my legs, lean forwards, straighten my ankles, knees and waist and, most importantly, enjoy the experience. Othmar was invaluable: he taught me technique, yes, but also encouraged and helped me be present in the day, so I could focus on the feeling of the wind kissing my face as I flew down my almost-red slope at a reasonable speed.

The evening was spent celebrating with a tasting menu in Romanoff, the hotel's second restaurant (where we also had breakfast – turns out caviar, Champagne, cured salmon and buratta is the best way to set you up for a day's skiing). For me, it was a celebration of getting over 'The Fear' I'd carried around since a ski accident a decade ago. For my partner Tom, it was celebration of completing the famous Engadin Cross-Country Skimarathon earlier in the day. A reminder that all success is relative, if ever there was one.

From £700* per room per night on a B&B basis, with an £80 food and beverage voucher per adult per day included, plus ski butler service, minibar and access to the spa. carlton-stmoritz.ch/en



View from the
Carlton Spa

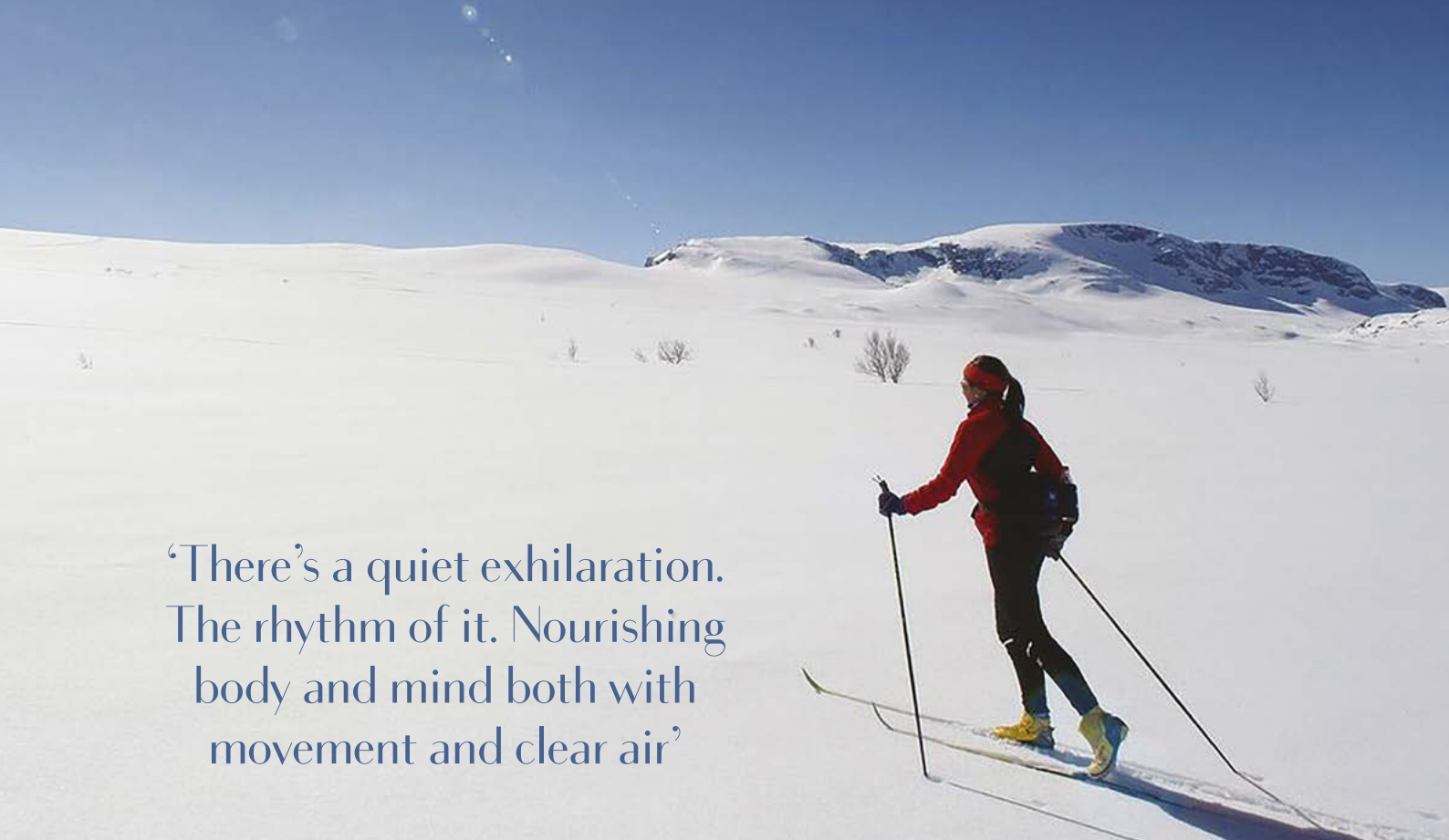
CROSS-COUNTRY

Vestlia Resort, Norway

In the heart of southern Norway, on the edge of the wild, rugged Hallingskarvet National Park, you'll find the small mountain gateway town of Geilo – the country's oldest ski resort. It's here that Vestlia is located – a sprawling ski-in-ski-out hotel, with all the comforts of an intimate luxury chalet, and the activities of a family-focussed holiday park. Roaring fires welcome you into the lobby area, with its book-lined walls, natural wood and comfy leather chairs. The rooms offer a similar level of hygge, but with a tasteful highland lodge edge (think wood panelling and tartan headboards). It's simple, stylish comfort done well and this, along with its impressive 'world of wellness', makes Vestlia the perfect indoor base for an outdoor skiing adventure.

Geilo itself has a long ski season and a sprawling beginner-friendly ski area. But we were here for the cross-country skiing, for which it's a renowned destination. As the spiritual home of the sport, Norway really is the best place to try out what has been a much-loved Scandinavian recreational activity (and means of transport) since the mid 19th century. Considered the quieter sister of downhill skiing, it requires energy, endurance, balance and technique. In fact, it's a brilliant form of exercise, offering a full body work-out and toning. Research published in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* showed that cross-country skiers (who admittedly train four to six times a week) have approximately twice the cardiovascular and muscular fitness of a group that did no formal exercise beyond daily living. Reason enough to give it a go.

But first, I had to learn the basics. Luckily, my cross-country skiing



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boyfriend was on hand to teach (there is however a ski school just a few steps away if you are without this luxury). There are two types of cross-country skiing, and I was taught both with a ‘combi’ ski. Classic, which uses parallel tracks in the snow, relies on a striding motion and poles to move forward. Skate (free) skiing comes from being able to transfer your weight from one ski to another, propelling forward by using an outward diagonal movement (hard to explain, harder to do). The boots are light and flexible, meaning even a gentle downward gradient can feel

more challenging (and scary) than a red slope with alpine equipment.

Once Tom felt satisfied with my ‘skills’, we wrapped up further and headed off into the wilderness. Geilo, it turns out, is a winter wonderland just waiting to be explored. From the pisted tracks in and around town, to the Narnia-esque untouched snowscape further afield, I soon found the slow pace of cross-country skiing means you can drink it all in as you go. There’s no denying it was hard work, though – the wind whips at your face and there’s no escaping the drudgery of trying to navigate uphill areas (‘Use the herringbone technique!’ cried Tom to no avail). Or there’s the feeling of sheer tummy-tightening terror that comes from losing your balance – and nerve – at the gentlest slope downhill. But then there was the quiet exhilaration, too. The rhythm of it. The feeling you are being good to your body and mind. Nourishing them both with movement and clear air. And the sense of adventure – made all the more exciting by Tom having

to use his compass a few times when we got lost.

What we both noticed above all though, was the sense of community out and about in Geilo – a testament to how accessible cross-country skiing really is. Over the course of our days, we were passed by the local biathlon club doing loops, senior citizens keeping fit, and gaggles of young children out with their parents. Even an evening dog walk in Geilo is conducted via harness and skis. The feeling of sociability extends to Vestlia in the evenings. Dinner is enjoyed in a warm, buzzy space with vast windows looking out into the dark, snowy night. The three-course set menu changes daily and reflects the best of Norwegian cuisine, with a creative twist. There’s a brilliant bar too, with lots of dark, cosy corners to hunker down in. Ask for the passion fruit sours which, for me, turned into my ‘well done’ tipples of choice after a satisfying day on *skio*. 🍷

Rates start at £167 per night, including breakfast. [vestlia.no/en](https://www.vestlia.no/en)

