

THE ROAD TO ENGADIN

One ordinary day, four ordinary friends were on an ordinary training run, passing the time and miles by discussing possible future races, when someone proposed the idea of a cross-country ski marathon. With no clue about what this involved, but with interest sparked, some post-run googling unearthed a potential event: The Engadin Ski Marathon. This iconic mass participation Swiss shindig traverses the Upper Engadin Valley at 5,970 feet, along frozen lakes flanked by the Southern Alps, from Maloja, passing through swanky St Moritz and ending 26.2 miles later, in the impossible to pronounce village of S-Chanf.

One of the major cross-country skiing marathons in the Alps, The Engadin Ski Marathon boasts 14,000 entrants, attracting World and Olympic Champions, seasoned locals and plucky novices alike. It is also one of the most popular cross-country skiing events on the Worldloppet calendar. Finding that all entries were already taken for 2018, we four friends, reined in our fervour and reconciled to entering the 2019 race, which fortuitously also bought us some time... to learn how to cross-country ski.

Despite any sub-zero precipitation bringing transport to a halt across Britain, there is just never enough snow for cross-country skiing in most of the country. So, when further intrepid internet research revealed the phenomenon that is Manchester Cross-Country Ski Club (MCSSC) with their programme of roller ski training sessions and tours, 'The Road to Engadin' finally began in earnest. The beginners' weekend course in Lancaster in October 2017 provided an excellent introduction to this new-found sport, and culminated, momentarily, in us skiing one whole lap of the track without falling. One mile down; twenty five to go!

Further training sessions at the UCLan cycle track in Preston during that autumn were followed by roller ski tours in the spring and summer. These tours proved really useful for building mileage and endurance. The club coaches and members provide a safe, supportive environment in which to develop skills, share experiences and often...cake. As summer gave way to Autumn, the UCLan sessions were supplemented by independent ventures on some of the tour routes in Morecambe and North Wales. When the interest in newly laid tarmac was at the point of becoming obsessional, these roller ski trips were in turn supplemented by cross-country ski trips to Norway and Finland. In these havens of cross-country skiing, groomed trails are as plentiful as the opportunities to marvel at local folk of all ages, effortlessly gliding by with perfect form.

With only weeks to go to race day, a second successive injury caused one of our number, Jackie, to withdraw from the trip. We were now three.

As the departure day approached, we came to appreciate our decision to book a week-long package with Cloud Nine Adventures. This included the race entry, accommodation, all the transportation logistics, and, as it turned out, expert coaching

with Tania Noakes, a fully trained BASI Nordic Ski Instructor, UIAGM Mountain Guide and former member of the GB Cross Country Ski Team.

Emma Jack, our competent and knowledgeable host from Cloud Nine Adventures, was to join us in the race. She and Tania had prepared a bespoke training package over four days that included opportunities to ski the whole course over two days, with some of the tricky, hillier parts twice, whilst making sure to keep us fuelled and motivated by coffee and lunch breaks en route. It also included advice and tuition on the complex science of cross-country ski waxing.

Emma had booked us into the charming Hotel Engiadina, in the small, but perfectly formed, traditional Graubunden village of Zuos. This proved a most excellent choice as not only did it serve hearty breakfasts and four course evening dinners, importantly for us, afternoon tea was served daily at 4:00 pm (or cake o'clock as it came to be known). Even more importantly, The Engiadina was located only a couple of miles from the finish line, which was a very welcome fact come race day.

Race Day:

A bleary eyed 5:00am start for breakfast and then a rather packed train and bus ride courtesy of efficient Swiss public transport to the start at The Maloja Palace Hotel. We arrived well ahead of our designated departure time of 9:23am, in good time to make several trips to the toilets and last minute decisions about clothing layers, before placing our belongings on baggage lorries and heading for the starting pen.

As non-expert newbies, we were in the Volkslaufe - the people's race - section. We had expected a mass start and had braced ourselves for chaos, but the timing chip system made it so that it was actually a rather relaxed affair. There was enough space for everyone to wander at walking pace from the pens, clip into skis and head for the start line in their own time, to the stirring sounds of Queen's rousing rock anthem, 'We Will Rock You'.

From the start line, the view of 10,000, skiers - tiny colourful dots against the white snow - snaking their way across the frozen lake towards St. Moritz, was an inspiring and uplifting sight and we were about to join in!

The race was an exhilarating experience. The snow on the lake had been compacted by the preceding skiers and it took a moment or two to establish a rhythm on the freshly waxed skis, suddenly aware of being surrounded by other skiers in close proximity, all pushing along with a single purpose. As the first few nervous shuffles soon gave way to longer glides, our minds became firmly focused on finding space, keeping pace, and mentally ticking off the now familiar landmarks recognised from our training sessions.

Recognising the track leading up to the first and steepest of the hills, we prepared ourselves for a lung-pumping, glute-busting schlepp, but instead, we found... a queue

of three neatly organised rows of skiers, all politely waiting to herringbone up the hill, no faster than the person in front.

The course kicks up over several hills after St Moritz into The Stazerwald. This woodland area ends in a descent into Pontresina, famously known as ‘Mattress Hill’, after the padding on the trees designed to provide a softer landing for out of control skiers hurtling, by any means necessary, towards the half way point.

The second part of the race provides some relief in the more gradual down hill section past Samedan Airport and regular feed stations serving hot and cold drinks, and energy inducing foods aplenty. With the race leaders already on the podium, the clocked ticked on, the temperature rose and the snow turned to slush. Whilst this made for harder going, there was also some levelling of the playing field between long gliders and short steppers. At the ‘Flamme Rouge’, signalling 1km to go after several late sneaky hills, all thoughts of style, form and technique had been subsumed by the ‘Will which says... “hold on!”’

There had been plenty of support along the route. The crowds shouted our names, emblazoned on our bibs, as they urged us up the hills. These cheers and friendly chats with fellow competitors, from near and far, including one chap who was completing his 42nd race, added to the exhilaration of an unforgettable day... and a dream fulfilled.

The finish line was, as ever in any race, a welcome sight. After receiving our medals, we regrouped in the Marathon Village, where we enjoyed a post-race beer and proudly posed for photographs, before taking the conveniently short train ride back to the hotel, where, of course, the celebrations continued.

Post Race Thoughts:

Would we do it again? Yes, without a doubt!



Thank you to all at Manchester Cross-Country Ski Club for your help, tuition and advice over the last 18 months. It has been invaluable. A special thanks to Alistair and also Alison Pawley, our main instructors.

Kate Sutton: 4 hours, 19 minutes.

Margaret Bullock: 4 hours, 2 minutes.

Gordon Nicoll: 3 hours, 31 minutes.