‘We hiss’d along the polish’d ice’

Whether zipping across frozen lakes or flooded fens, there is something magical about getting your skates on at Christmas, says **Lucy Higginson**



AS Christmassy as goose, carol services and the Boxing Day Meet is the prospect of an elegant afternoon on ice skates. Whether the motivation is Diana Rigg (cocooned in fur with everlasting legs in *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*), that legendary Bolero or Wordsworth’s ‘time of rapture… proud and exulting like an untir’d horse… All shod with steel’ as he ‘hiss’d along the polish’d ice’, winter skating has an irresistible allure.

Though people took to the ice with animal bones strapped to their feet in Britain as early as the 1100s, leisure skating is one of the many festive traditions we really owe to the Victorians. They were enthusiastic benefactors of the ‘Little Ice Age’ that lasted until the late 1800s, with Victoria and Albert themselves keen skaters – even if Albert once had to be rescued from a pond at Buckingham Palace by his young bride. The Victorians even had a crack at making the first artificial rinks with limited success but considerable style; a famous Glaciarium in London had an orchestra playing alongside a forerunner of the now-thriving pop-up rink.

Often built against a stunning backdrop (take Hampton Court, for example) today’s seasonal rinks mainly appear in urban centres, though some showgrounds host them too as they require flat ground and ample parking, explains Jamie Dann of Icescape, which has built them for 12 years. Besides a safety barrier, most now have some kind of roof to help limit power costs since “wind acts like a hairdryer and melts the ice”, he adds.

Many open-air rinks are in reality quite enclosed therefore, and are marketed to be busy, plastic penguins and all. They’re enjoyed by many but, even regularly groomed to smooth out ruts, they can struggle to convey the true joy of skating. Some large Continental rinks, on the other hand, fence off areas for specialised skating, as in Vienna’s historic 6,000-square-metre winter rink that hosts a historical ice-dance weekend each January. For €75 (£63) you can join workshops and ice dance to a live band while dressed in ‘elegant, old-fashioned attire’: about as close as most of us



Above: **Hampton Court Palace provides a stunning backdrop to a skating session**

will ever get to becoming a character from a Quality Street tin.

Because the ice can be a cruel mistress initially, the best way to enjoy Christmas-holiday skating is to invest in a few lessons and invest in some skates – both of which limit the agonising cramps that torment beginners in hired boots. A private lesson is about £25 for half an hour; it's roughly £10 an hour to access a rink, and those with skates may join 'patch ice' sessions when the ice is less crowded. In the spirit of full disclosure, my own 'few lessons' has led to all-out addiction.

Having survived the first make-or-break month when falls far exceed the fun, I'm still at it three years later, gradually learning to spin, jump and 'get on my edges'. Though I'll never be graceful, it's absorbing in a way I find shooting and there are various things to aim for once you've mastered the basics. Ignoring family derision, I loved joining a beginners' synchro skating group but another ambition is to swap warehouse walls in Slough for a frozen lake in the mountains.

Samantha Humphries and her partner shared a similar aspiration and last Christmas went to St Moritz, hired a car and skated the three-kilometre-long Engadine Ice Trail along the River Inn. Though Humphries, who also learnt to skate as an adult, had not expected to encounter inclines on the trail ("I was glad I'd learnt T-stops"), she was mesmerised: "With the views and sun through the trees, it was like being in a fairy tale."

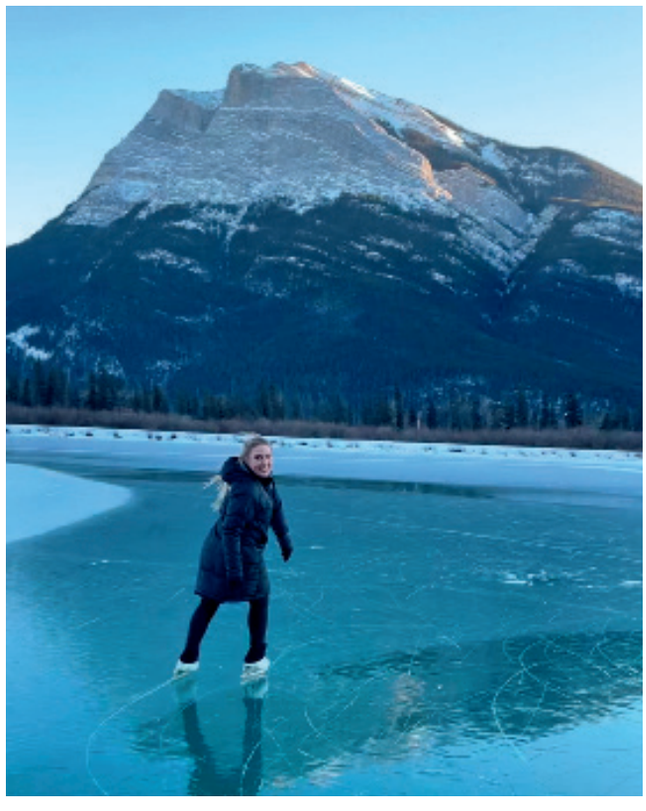
Pru Sperryn, from Essex, learnt at 15 and became so desperate to skate on Canada's Instagrammable lakes that she moved there for a year: "It was always my dream, so I got a job at an ice rink and flew to Calgary as soon as the Lakes froze." Local online communities offer safety and access advice "and it was always reassuring to see a van-load of hockey players show up". She found the ice glassy and perfectly skatable, bar the occasional natural fissure, and sent a glorious photo (shown left) of herself on the deep turquoise ice of Gap Lake.

Sperryn was lucky enough to enjoy the dense, durable and translucent ice (sometimes called 'black' ice) that acts as a window to what lies below and forms when water crystallises in very cold weather, without disturbance from snow or wind: "It was the most beautiful feeling – it's such an expanse, you can skate forever." In fact, the window for skating on most of Canada's lakes is small. "As soon as the snow comes, it's gone," she explains.

On Lake Louise, however, a free-to-use rink is cleared and groomed even after the snow →

How to enjoy a winter skate

- Investing in a few lessons at a rink and your own skates can be life-changing
- Moisture-wicking clothes are vital: even moving slowly you'll sweat with nerves and freeze the moment you stop
- Take spare kit (ice sometimes has puddles on top) and a hip flask for afterwards
- Never skate alone



Right: **Pru Sperryn at Gap Lake**
Facing page: **skaters in action on a frozen field in Cambridgeshire**



Samantha Humphries during her 'fairy tale' trip to Switzerland to skate the Engadine Ice Trail

falls but dwarfing this is the Rideau Canal in Ottawa. It is the world's largest skating rink, an icy paradise that's actually designated a World Heritage Site. For more than 50 years it's become a publicly accessible skateway of over eight kilometres when the canal freezes (typically from January until early March). As the climate warms, the National Capital Commission has adapted its maintenance methods, pumping water from beneath the early-season ice to the surface to help it thicken faster, and using a fleet of modified sweepers, blowers and resurfacers to keep the ice in great condition. The resulting route is used by commuters, hockey teams, figure skaters, families and more.

Everyone who's skated wild ice mentions a sense of fellowship with other ice-lovers, from toddlers clamped between a parent's knees to hockey or speed skaters enjoying ice without barriers. For Louise Pogson – a lifelong skater and horse rider – this sense of community has been doubly important since she began working in Basel where she initially found it hard to make friends. "Outdoor skating is huge in Switzerland, the ice is always safety checked and groomed, and everyone takes their families," she explains. "If you can clearly skate a bit, people come and ask where you're from."

Below: **gentlemen are served drinks on the ice at Cowbit Wash in Lincolnshire**



Pogson soon migrated from a local park to the lake at St Moritz and skating at Alp Raguta, one of the highest and most scenic rinks in Europe, accessed via the Glacier Express train, a gondola, chairlift and then a walk (but there's still a cafe alongside). "I skated once at 6am on my own, listening to the woodpeckers. It really is a privilege," she says. "For me skating has provided friendship, exercise, helped my German and given me an identity outside of work."

The good news is that you don't need to go overseas to be able to skate, as Wordsworth did, on British ice. My research has unearthed icy adventures from Scotland, Yorkshire, the Home Counties and many places between, with shallow floodwaters the place to skate nowadays rather than lakes, and the Cambridgeshire Fens a particular hub. "Despite global warming, there has been three or four days of skating for the past five or six years," says Suffolk-born David Lowe. "Skating is very much an East Anglian thing – a lot of people have a pair of skates tucked away."

Upware, between Cambridge and Ely, is a popular location where the River Cam floods some five acres, and luckily the landowner is sympathetic. Cidermaker and longhorn beef farmer Jonny Fuller tops his fields at summer's end to minimise the number of weeds poking through the ice. "It

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always floods, and my dad was a good speed skater," explains Fuller. He welcomes and sometimes joins the hundreds of skaters who descend – albeit he'd much rather they took their litter home and dropped into his Spinney Abbey Farm Shop while they visit.

He reminds me of the local saying: "If it cracks it bears, if it bends it breaks", and ice that groans and crackles is not necessarily about to give way. "Hearing cracks is really disconcerting," agrees Hannah Hetebrij, a professional ice dancer turned instructor at Cambridge Ice Arena, who skated at Upware last January. "The ice was dark, you could see the grass beneath. But it was a bucket-list thing for me to do having skated for over a quarter of a century, and quite exhilarating. There were guys speed skating, nets out for hockey and lots of familiar faces from the rink. It's part of the history and culture of this area."

David Lowe's taste is for wilder sport, however: "Going round in circles doesn't interest me remotely." He uses expertise and kit he's acquired touring in Sweden to skate the Fens and the Wash, for which you need a prolonged hard frost and at least two nights -10°C. "There are about half a dozen locations with skating potential, and people turn up ad hoc," he explains. He's also a member of a WhatsApp group ('Fen Skaters do it on ice') providing "every bit of information you could possibly need".

Lowe does this 'adventure skating' with proper kit: telemarking boots with long, sharp clip-on blades to help scythe across the odd twig, plus skating poles and safety equipment. When conditions allow, he is able to go long distances. This style of skating involves little fancy footwork but a more upright stance, and even beginners may try it in Sweden and Finland with firms like Nature Travels (now on my own bucket list). "On the Wash there's 22 miles of ice sometimes," says Lowe. "There's a marvellous area between Earith and King's Lynn where excess water goes to avoid flooding." His best year so far was in 2010 when he skated a 12-mile round trip. "It's about speed, fresh air, frost, ice and wildlife," he declares.

If the thought of balancing on two blades of steel doesn't fill you with dread, there is something magical to skating on wild ice, and as 'fieldsports' go it's quite affordable. "Don't just talk about it, just go," urges Samantha Humphries. So there you have it: get your skates on. F

Above: **a frozen flooded field in Upware is transformed into a natural ice rink**

Where to skate

Permanent rinks or (large) pop-ups: Find out when the ice is groomed, skate straight afterwards and go before the schools break up.

Flooded land: Facebook groups such as Ice Skating Group are a good way to find out where is frozen, safe and nearby. Remember ice is never as strong with a river flowing beneath it. Frozen, very shallow flooded areas are the best bet in the UK.

Europe: the Continent has some incredible natural ice, with groomers, rental skates and easy access. Check the Engadine Ice Trail, Alp Raguta or Lake St Moritz in Switzerland or Lake Weissensee in Austria with its 25-kilometre circular track beloved by Dutch speed skaters.



Above: **crowds take advantage of the skating conditions in St James's Park (1895)**