

Top 10 winter activity breaks in Europe

Winter breaks can come with a twist, whether it's sleeping inside a snowball, staying on a reindeer farm or even building an igloo. Here are 10 spins on the usual snow-based fun



Igloo glow ... in the French Alps. Photograph: Sally Guillaume

Sam Haddad

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Build an igloo for the night

Southern French Alps

Once you've reached your remote spot by snowshoe, and had some expert tips on good and bad construction, you'll realise that building your own igloo is nowhere near as easy as it looks in cartoons. But the graft will be well worth it when you're standing at the snowy door arch of a dwelling of your own creation, having had dinner under the stars. Undiscovered Alps runs Winter Multi Activity Holidays in and around the Écrins national park, where you can pick your activities for the week based on a points system. Alongside the igloo expedition, it offers ice-climbing, ski-joering, snow-scooting, paragliding, snake sledging, a giant zip wire and more traditional snow activities, such as ski touring and snowshoeing.

Seven nights' from £342pp, including accommodation in the Orcieres 1850 resort, or nearby ski villages, snowshoes and poles, unlimited use of swimming pool and ice skating and nine activity points (a two-day igloo expedition is five points including dinner and breakfast, snowscoot is one, as is a moonlit snowshoe walk), 0845 009 8501, undiscoveredalps.com Monarch flies from Manchester to Grenoble from £58 return

Sleep inside a snowball



Jokkmokk, Sweden

For the ultimate never-been-done experience this winter, why not sleep inside a giant snowball? Don't worry, none of these epic creations have been hollowed out by small children; they're the work of a snow sculptor with over 10 years' experience and are fixed on flat ground so no one's going to roll you down a hill and put it on YouTube. Inside each snowball bedroom you'll find an insulating reindeer skin topped with a thermal sleeping bag with a polar fleece liner, so you'll be snug despite the temperature being around -5C. A night in the snowball is available on Artisan Travel's February trip to the Jokkmokk Winter Market, a celebration of the indigenous Sámi people and culture. Here, you can also enjoy stalls with local cheese, honey and reindeer meat, and the largest collection of Sámi handicraft, or *duodji*.

The five-night trip costs from £2,925pp (based on two sharing), including flights from Gatwick, full-board accommodation, activities and guides; a night the snowball costs extra, from £175pp, 01670 785085, artisantravel.co.uk

Stay in an ice hotel on a gothic fairytale adventure



Ice Hotel, Lake Balea, Romania

Transylvania, Romania

Travelling through Transylvania in winter, with its Carpathian Mountains backdrop, gothic castles, Saxon villages, and horse-drawn carts, it's easy to feel like you're in the pages of a picture book. Which you are, albeit a blood-sucking vampire one, for this is Dracula country. Bram Stoker apparently based his famous Count on Vlad Tepes, aka Vlad the Impaler, a prince who was born in the medieval city of Sighișoara, which is one of the stops on this tour. His castle at Bran, perched on top of a 200ft-high rock, with imposing towers and fairytale turrets, is another. In between the gothic sightseeing, you'll stay at the Ice Hotel at Lake Balea, which is rebuilt every year with ice from the lake. The beds are made from ice but rendered comfy and warm by multiple layers of mattresses, furs, blankets and polar

sleeping bags. Just remember your garlic.

This trip takes place from 14-21 February and costs £1,349pp, including flights from London, accommodation, all breakfasts, two lunches and seven dinners, all transport and a tour leader throughout, 0845 867 5572, exodus.co.uk

Snowshoe tour to the monastery that first bred St Bernard dogs



Switzerland

St Bernards, that most iconic of rescue-dog breeds, were first bred at a monastery at the Great St Bernard Pass in Switzerland. The Pass is also the route Napoleon used to conquer Italy. St Bernards were intended to be guide dogs but their strength in heavy snow and strong scent-tracking abilities led to them being used as rescue dogs from the early 18th century. Icicle Mountaineering runs two-day snowshoe treks with an overnight stay at the monastery, which is still run by monks. Having been replaced by more agile breeds, the dogs have long since retired from rescuing but they're still a big part of the region's heritage and you can take walks with them in winter twice a day.

Walking with St Bernards, twice daily during winter, £30 adults, £6 children, free for under 6s, saint-bernard.ch. Icicle Mountaineering runs two-day snowshoe tours throughout winter for £249, excluding equipment hire, 01539 44 22 17, icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk. Easyjet flies from Stansted to Geneva from £50 return

Dive into a geothermal pool



Photograph: Alamy

Tatra Mountains, Slovakia

In deepest winter, being outside in your swimwear might not seem that appealing but once you dive into the geothermal pools at Oravice, which simmer at a healthy 38C, all doubt will slip away. Parents will love the relaxation pools and sauna, while kids will lap up the artificial waves in the sports pool and the waterslide. The Family Adventure Company runs Family Slovakian Snow Adventures in nearby Zuberec, which include time at the thermal spa, sledding, lunch with a Slovak family, a winter walk to a frozen waterfall and the chance to enjoy a night lantern stroll accompanied by local traditional music. There's also ample

free family time factored into your week for snowball fights and snowman-building aplenty.

8 days from £1,104 per adult, £994 per child, including seven nights' B&B accommodation plus activities and return flights from Heathrow to Vienna, 0808 271 8995, familyadventurecompany.co.uk

Winter walking in the Highlands



Winter sun over Loch Morlich, Cairngorms. Photograph: Alamy

Scotland

You don't have to scale any actual mountains to enjoy a winter walking adventure with snow-cloaked peaks all around you. Wilderness Scotland runs trips in the Cairngorms national park among the lochs, glens and ancient Caledonian pine forest, reminiscent of many a Hollywood biopic, with stunning views of the Cairngorm Mountains. If there's snow on the ground, you'll attempt to track animals from their footprints, and although this is pitched as an easy hiking trip, you'll be walking for around five hours a day - so you'll be glad to rest your weary limbs in front of a roaring fire each night. Dinners will feature the best of local produce and you'll be treated to fine Highland hospitality.

Trips available from 25 February-1 March, 18-22 March and 25-29 March, £695 including four nights' B&B accommodation, packed lunch and some evening meals, all transport and a qualified Wilderness guide, 01479 420020, wildernessscotland.com. Scotrail runs sleeper trains from Euston to Inverness from £157.40

Enjoy a husky tour



Photograph: Alamy

Kuusamo region, Finland

Few experiences can match the exhilaration of careering through a bright white Narnia-like landscape of snowy forests and remote trails, powered by a team of super-keen huskies. The Border Inn runs dog-sled safaris in the Kuusamo region of Finland, close to the Russian border and deep into the Arctic wilderness. You'll cross frozen lakes, hopefully spot

reindeer, elk and snow grouse, and even get to drive the sled yourself, which is as nerve-racking as it is awesome. It's not uncommon for your Siberian and Alaskan husky team to cover 20-40 miles a day, so you'll definitely earn your relaxation time in the wood-burning sauna in the log cabin at night.

£1,580pp including accommodation, food, guided husky safaris, warm weather clothing and transfers, not including flights or alcohol, +358 400 202 270, theborderinn.com, Finnair flies from Heathrow to Kuusamo, via Helsinki, from £220 return

Stay on a reindeer farm



Reindeers in Northern Finland. Photograph: Alamy

Finnish Lapland

When it comes to reindeer most of us can't see beyond Rudolph but they have been central to Lapp culture and identity since the mid-19th century. One of the best places to get a sense of this is at the Torassieppi Reindeer Farm in Finland, which dates back to the 1840s. There, you'll get to walk among the reindeer, and chat to a herder about the animals and their significance locally, as well as learning how the farm works. Magic of Lapland runs trips, the highlight of which is a northern lights reindeer safari, where you head into the wild on reindeer-drawn sleighs wrapped in blankets to enjoy the peace and tranquillity of this remote Arctic landscape.

Seven nights from £1,895pp including flights, transfers, accommodation, organic meals, warm clothing and activity equipment, 01865 396111, magicoflapland.net

Take a winter mountaineering course



Wales

Deep in the heart of Snowdonia, Plas y Brenin, the National Mountain Sports Centre, has been running courses for all levels of fans of the great outdoors for almost 60 years. The Welsh Winter Mountaineering course is a great entry-level option for summer hill walkers who want to add some winter skills to their repertoire. You'll learn how to use ice axes and crampons, plus rope work for travel over rock, snow and ice, along with winter navigation

tips, avalanche prediction and snow stability and emergency bivouacking skills. Theory sessions in the early evening will support the practical days out and the centre provides a useful and inspiring reading list in advance of your trip.

£475, including accommodation the night before and during your course, meals, instruction, equipment, use of the climbing wall and transfers from the train station, 01690 720214, pyb.co.uk. Virgin Trains (virgintrains.co.uk) run from London Euston to Llandudno from £69 return

Ice blokarting on a frozen lake



Nida, Lithuania

If ice skating on a lake seems far too sedate to you, skidding across the ice at high speeds in a small kart with a sail could be just the ticket. In the Lithuanian winter, when the Curonian lagoon and other lakes freeze, locals replace the wheels on their blokarts with ice blades. Baltic Adventure provides lessons for beginners and claims the ice blokarts are so easy to use, you'll be self-piloting within minutes - and gliding silently across the ice with the wind in your face and a whoosh of adrenaline coursing through your veins.

Ice blokarting costs £24pp for 30 minutes, +370 5 250 5831, balticadventure.com. The Vasara Guest House on the Curonian lagoon has doubles from £33 a night. Air Berlin flies to Kaliningrad, via Berlin, from £90 return