

## **A Winter Adventure in Aviemore and the Cairngorms**

There's a saying in the Scottish Highlands: "There's no such thing as bad weather – just the wrong clothing." Which means that while some of us are digging out wellies and umbrellas and looking forward to Spring, others are dusting off skis, snowboards and other pieces of half-forgotten winter kit and planning an excursion to Aviemore and the Cairngorms.

Why? Because the area that is fast-establishing itself as one of Europe's finest year-round adventure playgrounds is transformed into a magical winter landscape when the first snows fall. From the icy summits to the snow-dusted forest trails and the sweeping pistes, the whole area becomes Scotland's winter outdoor theme park. The mountain massif of the Cairngorms is a 3,000-foot plateau, stretching as far as the eye can see; vast and awe-inspiring under the snow and boasting the UK's only sub-arctic ecosystem.

Such is the special status of this mountain environment, with its valleys and ancient pine forests, that the Cairngorms National Park was created in 2003 to protect and sustain it for future generations. It is the UK's largest, and a formal recognition of the uniqueness of such a wild and beautiful place.

It is this natural playground that has attracted British skiers for over 100 years, and which saw the 1960s start the momentum that has now turned the area into a centre for winter sports. And it is not just a magnet for those who want to sample the delights of skiing and snowboarding on Cairn Gorm mountain.

These days there will be just as many climbers, walkers and other outdoor adventurers making their way to Aviemore and the Cairngorms by road, by air via Inverness airport or by rail to Aviemore station to board the shuttle bus towards the heights of Cairn Gorm.

It is easy to see why first-time mountain walkers often come down from the plateau, which contains four of the UK's highest mountains, with a dreamy look in their eyes. They get seduced by the crisp, clear winter views from the summits that far surpass the hazy panorama of the summer months and they are astounded.

Beginners who are inspired to head for the hills with new boots and a rucksack full of enthusiasm should be aware that the Cairngorms, like any mountain range, can have an unpredictable weather system. That's why first-time visitors and regulars alike are recommended to consult the many instructors and guides in the area who either work for themselves or for outdoor businesses. One of the best places to start is Glenmore Lodge, Scotland's National Outdoor Training Centre. The skills of the staff go way beyond the adventure mainstays of mountaineering, walking and mountain biking.

Even skiers and boarders who want something a little different than the pistes can get lessons in ski mountaineering or cross-country, also known as Nordic skiing. Nordic skiing takes you closer to nature, away from the cut and thrust of the pistes. There are enough acres of the ancient Caledonian pine forest around the Cairngorms to offer miles of tracks that are ideal for this style of cross-country skiing. It provides a truly Scandinavian feel. Families and beginners on Nordic skis are a common sight in the forest and every fresh dump of snow makes it a winter wonderland from November until well into April.

If you are not in the mood for the physical stuff there are all manner of less strenuous things to do – four-wheel drive tours, quad biking, clay pigeon shoots, dog-sledding, a host of attractions to visit, wildlife parks and even a reindeer herd to feed. Walkers who prefer something a little more sedate are spoiled for choice with forest trails and lochside paths that require a minimum of effort. A walk around Loch an Eilean on Rothiemurchus Estate, for example, with its tiny island topped by a castle is a magical trip.

This is one of Europe's last great wild places and also a wildlife haven that boasts Britain's "big five" mammals – otter, badger, pine marten, fox and Scottish wildcat. There are also more birds of prey here than anywhere else in Britain and herds of wild red deer. Many visitors take a tour with a wildlife guide, such as those operating from locally-based Speyside Wildlife. If you are lucky you can see otters, arctic foxes, snowy owls, reindeer, wolves and lynx. Animal lovers should also head for the Highland Wildlife Park at Kincaig where deer, bison and elk live in the main reserve.

The town of Aviemore is one of the main hubs of the area and it has recently seen a major investment, including a £80m development of the Macdonald Aviemore Highland Resort. This provides a selection of hotels, self-catering lodges set among pine woods, a spa with pool and a luxury shopping complex. The lodges have log-burning stoves – something that is a must-have for those of us who like to recount tales of the great outdoors while drying out in front of real flames with a glass of whisky in hand.

Of course, if you want to get closer to the secrets of the "water of life" the distilleries always have their doors open to the public. Nearby Dalwhinnie is the highest distillery in Scotland, while keener souls can sample more varieties on the neighbouring Speyside Malt Whisky Trail.

Meanwhile, the neighbouring Hilton Coylumbridge is a natural hub for family holidays with its fun and leisure facilities nestling in the peace of the Caledonian pine forest, and the choice of hotel accommodation or self-catering lodges.

The investment in Aviemore is mirrored up at Cairn Gorm mountain itself where boarders and skiers are enjoying better access to the slopes via a funicular railway. Unlike its predecessor - a chairlift that was affected by wind speeds - the railway is less oblivious to the weather, running passengers from the main ski car park up to the Ptarmigan restaurant near the summit of Cairn Gorm, the 4,000 foot peak that the massif is named after.

But you don't have to be a snowsports fan to use it. Anyone can take the funicular to the Ptarmigan restaurant (the UK's highest) and look out over the snowy expanses without the hard work of walking all of the way up. On a clear winter's day, having the expanse of the national park laid out before you is the white stuff that dreams are made of.

Check out [www.visitaviemore.com](http://www.visitaviemore.com) for detailed information on what to see and do, events listings and where to stay in Aviemore and the Cairngorms. Other useful websites include [www.cairngormmountain.org](http://www.cairngormmountain.org) for updates on ski conditions in the region, [BBC Ceefax Page 421](#) for skiing updates, and for climbers [www.mis.org.uk](http://www.mis.org.uk) for mountain weather forecasts.

Don't miss in 2006 ...

- The Aviemore Sled Dog Rally on 21-22 January
- The Backcountry Skifest from 24-26 February
- The Aviemore Mountain Film Festival on 3-4 March

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Photographs to accompany this feature are available from the **Keith** consultancy on 01463 811000 or [info@thekeithconsultancy.co.uk](mailto:info@thekeithconsultancy.co.uk)