



Scotland

Cairngorm Mountain

Ellie Ross takes the overnight train to Scotland's top ski-resort for weekend of snow-filled action.

AT THE FRONT of a train packed with early-morning passengers, I press my nose against the window and peer out at my surroundings. This is not your average commute. Ahead, peaks painted white with snow are bathed in the first rays of sunlight as they bump their heads against a brilliant blue sky. A golden glow catches on the pristine slopes and makes them sparkle like diamond dust. In front of me, metal tracks rise skywards, stretching up toward the mountains as far as I can see. We're heading higher and higher and into a deep-frozen, magical landscape. I'm at Cairngorm Mountain in the Scottish Highlands for a weekend of skiing and adventure activities.

To get to the UK's top winter sports resort I take the Caledonian Sleeper from London on a Friday night and by 8.00 I'm standing on the platform in Aviemore, just a 20-minute drive from the resort. By 9.00, I'm taking the first funicular up the mountain from the bottom of the ski station. The carriage is crammed with groups of young professionals, pensioners and schoolchildren - all kitted out for a day at Scotland's most popular ski resort. I cram in next to a man from Cumbria, who tells me he wants to regain his ski legs after a long break from the sport. "I've never been here before but saw there was snow this weekend," he says. "It's easy enough to get here last-minute."

Within four minutes we're 3,600 feet up, next to Britain's highest restaurant, the Ptarmigan, and swathes of perfectly-groomed pistes. To get my bearings, Jim Cornfoot, Cairngorm land manager and senior ski patroller, shows me around some of the resort's 18.5 miles of pistes.

I'm in good hands - Cornfoot has worked in these Highland Hills for 23 years and knows them like the back of his glove.

We snap on our skis and slide over to a flat section of crisp corduroy; opposite the restaurant. Cornfoot tells me that Cairngorm is the most-snow-sure of Scotland's five resorts, with a season that starts in November and runs into May. "The mountain plateaus at the top, so we have a big beginner area up here," explains Cornfoot, as a toddler trailed by an instructor sails past. He adds: "This sets us apart from other resorts, where people have to learn lower down, on slushier slopes." These beginner pistes not only benefit from the altitude but are also wide, with a gentle gradient.

The funicular makes it easy for novices to access good snow cover up here without having to learn how to use a drag lift first. "When they get tired they can either take the train back down or have a break in the restaurant," adds Cornfoot.

At the bottom of the resort is another place to refuel, The Storehouse, the first venture of Cairngorm's new owner, Natural Retreats, who took over the resort in June 2014. Diners can ski

to the door and fill up on fresh, locally sourced dishes, such as a £14.25 platter of salmon and mussels and a £6.95 haggis panini. (Natural Retreats has committed to a five-year £6.2 million investment plan at Cairngorm, including upgrading lifts, re-landscaping the slopes and a new freestyle area.)

Cornfoot shows me the rails and jumps where thrill-seekers can get some big air; but luckily we push off in the other direction. We weave our way down the soft, wide Ptarmigan Bowl, passing a man skinning uphill with his dog by his side, and just a handful of skiers and borders. I trail behind cautiously, not allowing my skis to race away with me just yet, we pause halfway down to take in the mountains that are still gloriously sunlit.

"That's Loch Morlich," Cornfoot says, pointing his ski pole at a brooding expanse of water below in the valley, encircled by forest. "It's good for fishing and canoeing in the summer." He also picks out Inverness's wind turbines, the white peak of Ben Nevis and, just below us, the dark patch of Aviemore, where he learnt to ski on a golf course aged three. "The great thing about Cairngorm is that there is so much to do here, besides skiing. We have mountain biking, hiking, dog sledding, watersports - even whisky tours. It's brilliant for families and as a backup if the weather turns bad. Alpine resorts tend to be set up only for skiing and don't offer so many alternatives."

After a muscle-easing swim and sauna at my hotel, the Macdonald, I stroll past outdoor clothing shops to The Winking Owl pub. I wash spicy haggis pakora down with a pint of locally-brewed Trade Winds. For a wee dram on the way back to the hotel, I stop in at Ski Doo, a cosy basement bar cluttered with ski paraphernalia, skiers and locals.

The next day, the breeze picks up, transforming the summit into a wispy white place and briefly robbing me of most of my sensory indicators. But as I dip below cloud-level, I'm rewarded with endless, silky snow, and even fewer people than the day before.

I spend hours going up and down the slopes, cutting satisfying turns in pillow-soft powder next to the funicular railway that's still whisking passengers up and down the mountain. My tired thighs feel a familiar pang as they fill with lactic acid, my heart is thumping and, despite sub-zero temperatures, I'm boiling hot. Finally it happens: I point my skis further and further downhill until I'm positively flying down the slopes. I may not have mastered the style part yet, but the crisp air nipping my cheeks is all the proof I need that my speed has definitely increased at least one notch.

As I drive down to Aviemore to catch my train home, Cairngorm's snowy peak is cast in an evening light and illuminated, I can't wait to come back.





Cairngorm mountain facts & figures

NEED TO KNOW

Length of season November - May (but December - April is generally the most reliable time to get snow).

Best time to go For beginners, March or April is good because the weather warms up, and the snow is still decent. For advanced skiers who keep warm by moving around, any time within the season is good.

Levels catered for There are 18.5 miles of pistes that cater for all abilities, but the resort is geared towards beginners, with the majority of pistes graded green and blue. That said, Cairngorm has a decent amount of advanced runs, off-piste and a freestyle park.

A one-day pass Cairngorm Mountain Resort costs from £50, cairngormmountain.org

ACCOMMODATION

The Caledonian Sleeper travels to Aviemore from stations including London Euston, sleeper.scot

Double rooms at the Macdonald Aviemore Resort start at £76ppn B&B, macdonaldhotels.co.uk

Natural Retreats operates sustainable accommodation and leisure facilities from South Cornwall to John O'Groats, Lanzarote and the US, naturalretreats.com

WHAT'S ON OFFER FOR BEGINNERS?

1 The pistes due to the mountain's summit plateau, beginners at Cairngorm benefit from gentle and easy slopes right at the top, where the snow is better because of the altitude. In fact the highest runs at Cairngorm are green (beginner) level. If the wind whips up on the mountain, visibility is usually better on the lower slopes, which also has beginner runs.

2 Lessons There is one ski school on the mountain, which offers lessons from £40 per day (theskischool.co.uk). There are more ski schools in nearby Aviemore, such as Free Ski (free-ski.co.uk) and School of Snowsports (schoolofsnosports.co.uk).

3 Getting to the pistes is easy unlike many resorts. At Cairngorm you haven't got to master a long lift to reach the top of the

slope for your first attempt at skiing. The funicular will drop you off right next to the beginner slopes at the top, with no embarrassing tumbles on the way.

4 Places to refuel there are restaurants right next to the beginner slopes, perfect for resting new ski legs. At the top is the Ptarmigan, with its panoramic views and restorative hot chocolate. At the bottom is the new Storehouse restaurant that sells snacks and coffee.

5 New improvements A new, 300m-long beginner tow is being introduced for the 2015-2016 season at the bottom of the mountain, and the mid-station area will be re-landscaped to smooth out bumps, making it more beginner-friendly.

PICK OF THE PISTES FOR BEGINNERS

1 Ptarmigan Bowl (green run) Right at the top of the mountain, this piste has reliable snow, a gentle gradient and is wide, which is good for group lessons. It's accessed by the funicular and is next to the Ptarmigan restaurant for slopeside snacks.

2 Ciste Fairway (green run) A longer piste but still with a gentle gradient - this is a good run to move on to for building up stamina and for practicing turns.

3 Lower Slopes (green run) Further down the mountain, these are perfect if the weather turns, as they are below the cloud line.

4 M2 (Blue run) One of the most scenic, this is the longest blue run and takes you right down to the base station.

FOR INTERMEDIATE & ADVANCED SKIERS

1 The White Lady (red run) This is one of the most iconic pistes in Scotland, and is where all the races were held when skiing first started here in the sixties. It has some of the resort's finest views of the valley and Loch Morlich below.

2 East Wall of Number 2 Gulley (black run) This is a long traverse into the gulley that's in the sun in the afternoon. It's for experts and is one of the least busy slopes on the

mountain.

3 East Wall of White Lady (Orange run) This is easy to access, just off the White Lady and is a big area, so ideal for cutting fresh tracks through untouched powder.

4 Freestyle park It may not be a piste, but it's a good place for advanced skiers and boarders to show off their tricks, using rails, jumps and a half pipe to get some air. It was designed with help of Team GB snowboarder and Cairngorm local Jamie Trinder.

OTHER ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA FOR NON-SKIING DAYS

1 Mountain biking Pedal along some of Scotland's best singletrack, with rewarding Highland views when you get to the top. MTBHighlands, based in Aviemore, will take you on a range of routes from beginner to expert, with guides if needed. Prices from £35pp, mtbhighlands.co.uk

2 Rock climbing Strap on a helmet, clip into a harness and scale rock faces around the Cairngorms National Park. Just don't look down. Prices from £40pp, including equipment and tutoring, activeoutdoorpursuits.com

3 Canoeing get up close and personal with the lochs - by paddling through them. Wilderness Scotland offers a range of trips and tours, including six days canoeing on a selection of the Highland's lochs, including Loch Morlich. Prices from £975pp, wildernessscotland.com

4 Quad bike treks Quad bike tours take you through the Cairngorms National Park and are a good way to see the wildlife. Prices from £45pp, quadsaviemore.com

5 Windsurfing Feel the breeze in your hair as you sail across Loch Insh on a windsurfer. Prices from £19pp, lochins.com

6 Clay pigeon shooting Load your gun and aim for flying clays at Rothiemurchus, a family-owned estate a five-minute drive from Aviemore. Prices from £45pp, rothiemurchus.net

MORE INFORMATION

About skiing in Scotland, ski-scotland.com.

