

Gearcheck

Roisin Finlay



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When packing for an adventure, space is at a premium, so gear that's light but will keep you warm is paramount. Here are three items for adventurers who want to travel fast and light

Thermarest NeoAir Xlite sleeping pad

No matter how light you plan to travel if you want to stay warm while sleeping in rough conditions, a good camping mat is worth its weight in gold. Thermarest really offers the gold standard in this regard. The NeoAir Xlite (€154.95, regular size) is the lightest in the range, offering more warmth and comfort per ounce than any other three-season air mattress available. Ranging in length from 119cm (small) to 183cm (regular) and 196cm (long), they are extremely light (230g, small; 350g, regular and 460g, long) and pack down to about the size of a one-litre bottle, so you'll barely notice it in a backpack – until you need it. A female-specific model features an additional heat-capturing layer and weighs 340g. Made in Ireland, the mattress comes with a stuff sack and a repair kit.

Available from or order through Great Outdoors, Dublin 2; 53 Degrees North, Carrickmines, Blanchardstown, and Cornmarket, Cork; Basecamp, Dublin 1; Kerry Outdoor Sports, Killarney; and River Deep Mountain High, Galway and Limerick



The North Face Blue Kazoo sleeping bag

If you're looking for a light but warm sleeping bag that doesn't cost the earth, The North Face's Blue Kazoo (€290) is a good choice. While it's not super light, it's light enough (1,120g regular size) and is warm and cosy enough for most people's needs. The three-season bag offers 650+ Hungarian goose down and a baffle construction that keeps the lofty down insulation in place to eliminate cold spots. There is also padding where you need it most at high pressure areas like the head, shoulders and feet. A footbox also keeps feet warm and blood circulating. The down fill is protected from outside moisture and frost by the durable, lightweight, nylon ripstop shell that has a water repellent DWR finish. It comes with a compression stuff sack.

Available from or order through Great Outdoors, Dublin 2



MSR Hubba Hubba NX tent

MSR's Hubba Hubba NX (€400) super-light two-man tent (1.54kg) is perfect for anyone who wants to shave weight off their backpack. Ideal for three-season backpacking environments, the tent's poles are designed to maximise interior space, allowing ample head and shoulder room. Large doors and vestibules complete the picture by allowing easy access and good storage space. The included side-loading compression stuff sacks make the tents as easy to pack as they are to set up. And it now comes in a camouflage green colour, so is ideal for discreet, wild camping.

Available from or order through 53 Degrees North, Carrickmines, Blanchardstown, and Cornmarket, Cork; Basecamp, Dublin 1; see Alpinesports.ie for further information



Come on in, the water's freezing

Forget the tropics, for a real snorkelling adventure head to the Silfra Fissure in Iceland – where crystal clear visibility and glacial waters will leave you breathless. **Yvonne Gordon** dons a dry suit

“Let the air out of your suit,” says our guide Montira, as we clamber down a set of steps bolted into the side of a rock. I am kitted out in a dry suit, gloves, a hood, snorkel, flippers and a mask. The water we are about to enter is just 2°C, but that's warmer than the air temperature, which is -6°C. Oh yes, it's also Iceland, in mid-winter.

We're about to go snorkelling in the Silfra Fissure, a rift in the mid-Atlantic ridge between the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates. There's a lot of seismic activity in the area, so I am hoping there will be no earthquakes while we are there.

But once in the water, I forget everything else as I glide along, looking down into the blue depths. The glacier meltwater is crystal clear and visibility seems infinite, the rocky sides of each plate stretching down into the deep.

It's a relaxing experience. The drysuit keeps us buoyant. Sometimes there is a current, so there's no need to use the flippers. At one of the largest areas of the fissure, known as The Cathedral, shafts of light shine through the blue water to illuminate its rocky sides.

In another, shallower area, I can touch the bottom, which sets off a cloud of white dust – this is a sign of lots of seismic tension, created by the two plates pulling apart (they move about an inch a year).

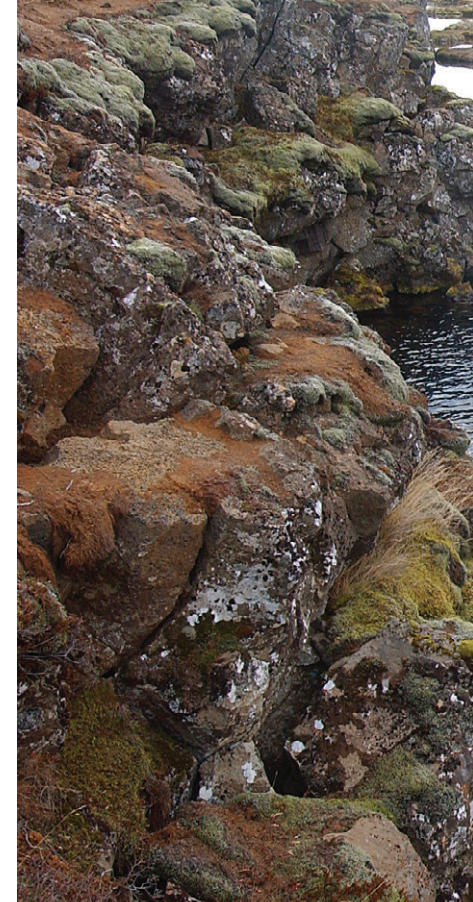
Snorkelling in the Silfra Fissure is an Icelandic adventure that can be enjoyed all year round. In winter, you might have icicles hanging on the cliffs next to you, while in summer, it is bright throughout the night. Because of the visibility – up to 60 metres – and the many underwater caves to explore, the fissure is also a popular area for scuba diving.

After about 40 minutes of snorkelling, we get out of the water, careful not to hold the rail for too

long in case our hands stick to it. Icicles form on my drysuit as soon as I get out, but I am so well wrapped up it never feels cold, just a bit numb on the face.

As we walk back through the volcanic landscape, I notice the big cracks in the rocks, all formed by activity during volcanic eruptions. Montira leads us to a place we where can jump off a small, four metre cliff, straight down into the glacial water – a nice end to the adventure for those who need another thrill.

Feeling elated after the experience, and grateful that there were no big seismic events during our snorkel between the plates, I later hear Montira saying that data shows there were about 20 earthquakes while we were snorkelling, but that they are pretty common. “The last big one was four weeks ago, at night,” she says. “It was 4.3 on the Richter scale. We've that many earthquakes here, it's hard to keep track.”



Entering the water at the Silfra Fissure

Get out there!

Home or abroad, there are plenty of ways to get active this spring

Biking Blitz, February 15

This mountain-biking race series has something for everyone – from juniors to adults to hardcore bikers. Race 2 takes place in Ballyhoura, Limerick, with options to race 17km and 35km in Baggy Shorts and Super PRO categories. bikingblitz.ie

Mountaineering Ireland Winter Meet 2015, Sunday to February 14

Taking place again in Onich, near Fort William, Scotland, Mountaineering Ireland's Winter Meet will offer several three-day courses. Whether you are



Martinhal Bike Week, Algarve, February 15-22

Ski *watch*

Catherine Murphy



in Iceland

Catherine McCusker

Set along the mid-Atlantic ridge, Iceland is a hotspot for volcanic activity and earthquakes caused by the movement of the tectonic plates. There are more than 200 volcanoes on the island, and volcanic eruptions are thought to have created the landmass itself. Because of this, most of Iceland is made up of lava fields – cooled volcanic lava, some thousands of years old, some just weeks old. Many of these fields are covered by a thin layer of soil or grass, and in winter, a layer of snow.

On the way back to base – as the road we're driving along wanders through the grass and snow-filled lava fields – guide Snorri Sveinson tells us how hardy Icelanders are, with a story of how he once broke his ankle and waited three days to go to hospital. "We're a dangerous nation and always have been. From the time of the Vikings," he laughs.

Snorri also tells us stories of elves and trolls and local super-

stitions. When he was young, he was told about trolls and monsters who lived in lava tombs and killed children. Stories like that stopped youngsters going out into the dangerous lava fields, though now, lava tomb exploring is another popular adventure.

The first tombs were discovered in the 1950s, but now there are more than 500 to explore. Being guided through these hidden worlds under lava fields – and seeing the curious features and rock formations that past volcanic eruptions have left behind – gives the visitor a great idea of how the land was formed. In winter, the caves are full of icicles and at the Þríhnúkgígur crater, you can even hike into a dormant volcano's magma chamber.

But it is not just the volcanic landscape that draws tourists to Iceland. The country has 4,500 square miles of glacier – including Vatnajökull, the largest in Europe – making glacier hiking and

ice climbing popular. Visitors can explore the crevasses, ridges and sinkholes of glaciers such as Sólheimajökull, before tackling an ice wall with ice axes, crampons and safety lines.

Iceland is full of adventure – with everything from horse-riding to off-road superjeep and ATV tours and trips in pursuit of the Northern Lights hunts, and there is an abundance of geothermal pools to soak aching muscles in afterwards. Constant seismic activity keeps things interesting.

As Snorri sums up: "Iceland is just a gigantic playground. Iceland is not just pulling apart because of the tectonic plates, but also lifting up because of the magma underneath," he says. "It's getting bigger all the time!"

For snorkelling, glacier walking, caving, lava tubing and other adventures, contact Arctic Adventures at adventures.is, or see the activities section of visiticeland.com



Be careful off-piste this month

Thinkstock

Off-piste skiers are warned over avalanches

Backcountry or off-piste skiing has become a major growth area in the ski industry. More and more skiers want to venture off-piste, but often don't have the knowledge to do so safely.

In the past week or two, off-piste conditions have been particularly dangerous. Many resorts enjoyed snowfalls of between one and two metres, sending avalanche risk levels through the roof.

"For the past week, conditions have been super-unsafe," says mountain guide Nick Parks from mountaintracks.co.uk.

Parks, who runs the company's Grimentz Zinal backcountry adventures operation in Switzerland, tells us: "Many areas had no snow for an extended period, which resulted in a very poor snow base. In a situation where temperatures are low, crystals loosen instead of bonding, creating a weak layer. Now, there's a lot of new snow sitting on that weak layer."

In addition, there has been a lot of wind, which leads to snow accumulation on slopes, another red flag for off-piste skiers.

"The danger will be reduced in popular off-piste areas that are skied a lot," says Parks. "The real problem will be in the backcountry, where there are far fewer skiers."

Earlier in the season, off-piste diehards were at risk of injury from exposed rocks due to poor snow cover.

Even now, there's still some danger from rocks. "We've been skiing areas where there's been a metre and a half of snow and we're still getting through to

rocks," says Parks.

"The human factor is one of the biggest when it comes to triggering avalanches. If you're going off-piste, have the necessary safety equipment [transceiver, shovel, probe and possibly an ABS airbag system], know how to use it and practise with it regularly.

"Learn how to suss out your starting point – is there accumulated snow above you? If so, steer well clear. What's the run-out going to be like? Avoid convex slopes.

"After heavy snowfall, stay well away from steep slopes, anything over 30 degrees, and remember that avalanches can still occur in the trees or in ungroomed snow right next to the piste.

"Above all, learn how to spot the red flags and avoid being caught in an avalanche."

* Ski tragedy

Even before recent heavy snowfalls across the Alps, there had been a number of avalanche deaths, notably in Chamonix where one skier was killed skiing a steep line on the Vallée Blanche, and Patagonia-sponsored skier David Rosenbarger was killed while skiing the Italian side of Mont Blanc (both on January 23).

In a separate incident on the same day, Irish snowboarder Brendan O'Sullivan died following an accident on the Tour Ronde in the Chamonix area. A native of Co Tiupperary, Brendan was a talented big mountain snowboarder and well known in the Chamonix skiing community.



Biking Blitz, February 15

just starting winter walking, or are a seasoned climber, there will be something for you. There will be lots of cric, music and talks in the evening. mountaineering.ie

Martinhall Bike Week, Algarve, February 15-22

This is a cycling holiday with a difference. Designed to develop and improve your riding capabilities, you'll get to ride with the newly crowned Belgian champ Jens Debusschere and another Belgium pro cyclist, Jürgen Roelandts, both from team Lotto Belisol. The full package includes five road-bike tours with the pros between 60-120km, a Strava challenge day and a bicycle fitness test with training advisor. You'll also have complimentary access to the spa bath, steam room, sauna and indoor/outdoor heated pool. martinhall.com

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