

Travel Eastern Europe



The first step is to mark out the area in the snow.” Erik traces a circle with a shovel around one of the members of our group, Ely, who is lying on the snow, arms outstretched. He uses her height and arm span to define the size of igloo we will build, marking out a large circle around her. The scene reminds me of Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man* drawing.

Next, we need to make “bricks” from the snow. We pick an area where the snow is deep and compacted and score out rectangle shapes with the shovel tip. Then we dig down along the lines we’ve made and carefully remove each block of snow.

We’re in northern Slovakia, in the High Tatras, the mountain range on the border with Poland. With three fellow adventurers, I am here to try something different from the usual winter sports on offer in European snow resorts. We got here by snowshoeing up from Zdiar village. Our guide, Erik Sevcik, from the local outfit Adventoura Slovakia, is showing us how to build igloos – which we’ll sleep in tonight.

Erik arranges each “brick” carefully as he gradually builds the circular igloo, row upon row. With three huge slabs in place for the entrance, the half-built igloo looks like the ancient ruin of a tiny church, built of snow instead of stone.

Across the white valley, with its pristine carpet of snow and lines of pine trees, the mountain peaks silently watch over us. The sun moves high across a clear blue sky. It’s mid-afternoon and a few degrees below zero, but once the sun disappears behind the mountains it will get colder.

Digging out the bricks is surprisingly easy work – so easy we have to stop when we realise we’ve made too many – but they’re hefty to lift. We work quickly to finish everything while the light lasts. When the igloo is a few feet high, Erik places three planks across the open roof area to serve as beams, then carefully balances more snow bricks on top.

Our building process is not without flaws – a couple of large “bricks” break on the way to the igloo; another splits when placed onto the plank. We try another and make sure it’s stable – it has to hold for

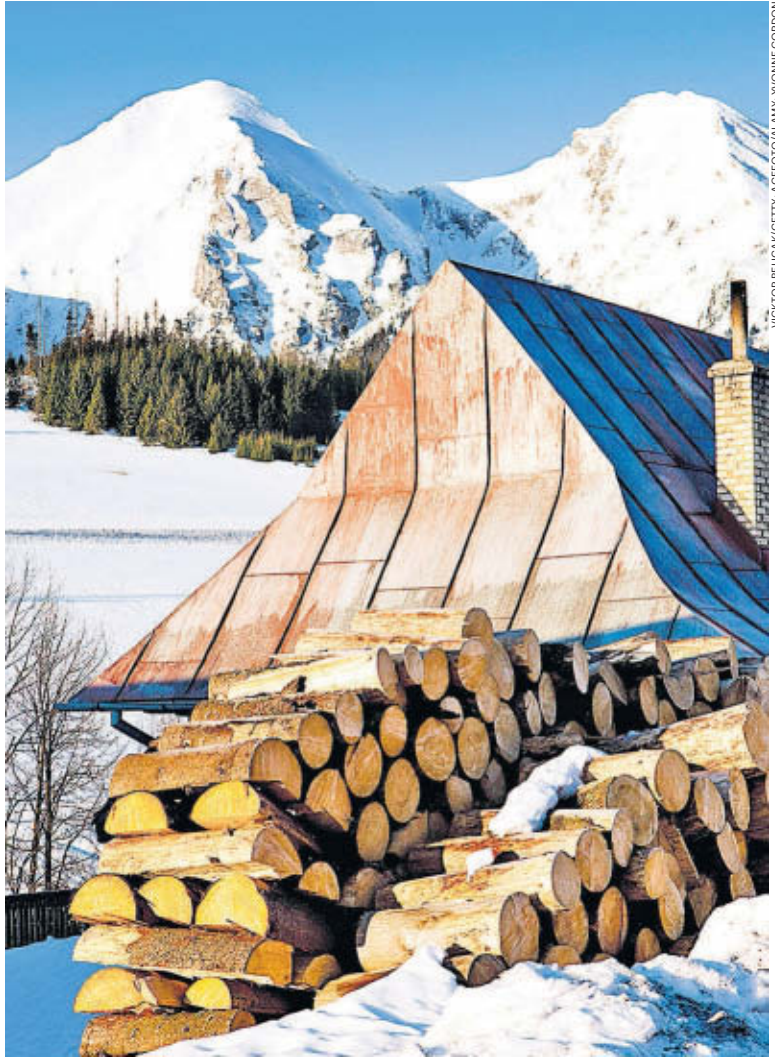
The sun setting over the Tatras; a log cabin in Zdiar, right



“Nobody has slept well, but the adventure of spending the night in such a special place has left us all exhilarated

ALTERNATIVE SKI RESORTS

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SLOPE OFF TO SLOVAKIA

Yvonne Gordon builds and sleeps in an igloo and discovers wonderfully deserted pistes on a trip to the dramatic High Tatras mountains

the night. Once the roof is finished, we line the floors of the igloos with pine branches from the forest. The strong fragrance is a nice surprise at the end of one of the most enjoyable snow days I have ever had. We’ve bonded as a group, and something about a day playing in the snow, building our own little houses, reminds me of the joy of making your own toy fortress as a kid. Except we’ll get to sleep overnight in ours.

After dark, we gather in a circle of “snow benches” with wooden planks on top, light the campfire and marvel at the patterns in the stars overhead. We cook sausages on the fire and have a nightcap of warming slivovitz plum brandy before retiring to bed as the flames dwindle.

At 3am, I wake up. Shivering. At 9pm, the temperature was already -15C, but it feels much colder now. My sleeping bag, designed for use at -20C, feels thin. I’m in three layers of wool thermals and ski trousers, socks and gloves. I do some jumping jacks outside the igloo, rearrange my bedding – which



includes an inflatable mattress and foil ground sheet – open some heat pads, put on my ski jacket and drift off into a broken sleep. I am relieved to see sunrise at 7.30am. Nobody has slept well, but the adventure of spending the night in such a special place has left us all exhilarated. Erik says late January isn’t usually this cold, but it’s a particularly icy week of the winter.

Next day, at the Sherpa Museum a short drive away in the town of Stary Smokovec, I meet Peter Petras. The 74-year-

COLD COMFORT Building an igloo, left, and the view from the interior, above

old, known to all as Mr Petras, still works as a mountain sherpa, or porter, in the High Tatras. Over a coffee, he tells me why he loves the mountains. “I like the hills at night, the full moon. I love hiking at night. That’s the best relaxation for your soul,” he explains.

Visitors from Slovakia, Poland and further afield hike these mountains, even in winter, and Mr Petras carries supplies to a chalet where he offers them refreshments. “Being a porter, the money is second,” he says. “The first thing is being on the mountain.” He says even though the job can be dangerous, with conditions and temperatures that are hard to describe, he has a strong connection and love for the peaks. After the chilly night in the igloo, I think I know what he means.

After we move down from the igloo to spend the rest of the trip staying in the town of Tatranska Lomnica, I’m delighted that I can still see the mountains. I’ve started to get to know their shapes, their contours – I feel more

connected to them than I have in other mountainous spots. At the cosy Vila Beatrice, the rafters above my bed remind me of the beams in the igloo.

One day we try dog sledding, each sled pulled by a team of six huskies, driven by a musher. Like sleeping in an igloo, it is somehow adrenaline-inducing and relaxing in equal measures – I feel I might drift off to sleep if my pulse wasn’t racing so much. One minute there’s magic as the sled glides among the trees; then a thrill as the dogs fly over bumps and the sled bounces from side to side like a dinghy in a storm.

There’s also the chance to take a turn mushing, driving the huskies, who bark with excitement whenever anyone approaches. When they see me, though, they roll over onto their backs for belly rubs. Sometimes affection is just as good as adrenaline.

In the end, I can’t spend time among all this snow without a bit of skiing. And another highlight of the trip turns out to be our day on the slopes at Strachan. The

pistes are busy but not crowded, and there’s no queue for the chairlift or even at the pretty chalet restaurant buffet where we tuck into traditional dishes. Venison goulash, beef soup, fried cheese – it’s all good, warming mountain food, and at pleasantly surprising prices, much like the winter sports themselves.

The wide, gentle ski slopes here are ideal for beginners and families, and the setting is simply beautiful – especially as the sun dips behind those peaks that have now become so familiar.

I don’t normally feel an emotional attachment to mountains, but these are different, somehow, and leaving is a surprising wrench. I think with affection of our row of little icy houses beneath those High Tatras peaks and I realise more than ever why Mr Petras is so drawn to them.

Yvonne Gordon was a guest of Adventoura Slovakia. A seven-day winter trip starts at £630pp, B&B, including skiing, snowshoeing, dog sledding, water-park visit and equipment; igloo experience £92pp (adventoura.eu). Fly from Luton to Poprad with Wizzair