

Fly Ice Flying

Winter action takes off
with tour skating

By Archer Mayor
Photographs by Toby Talbot

Time to crank up your imagination. You are flying like a bird, with your eyes cast down upon the landscape passing beneath you. It is cold, there is a slight breeze, and the sun, cradled by the brilliant blue sky, is for show only. And what a landscape. It is a hard, flat, frozen lake, variably colored from slate gray to smoky white, crazed with small cracks and interspersed with smatterings of low, utterly featureless white islands. You imagine this is what it must be like to soar over the Arctic wasteland—a world of ice and snowy hummocks without a single sign of life or of growth.

But you aren't flying. As the harsh, rhythmic clicking of your steel blades tell you, you are skating—not across a rink or even a pond—across a lake so vast that its far shore is hard to distinguish. When you look up from your study of the flat, brittle, monochromatic surface whizzing by just ahead of your specialized skates, the image of flight suddenly vanishes, and you feel like the tallest object for miles around, as independent and unleashed as someone suddenly freed from the crowd by magic.

GOING THE DISTANCE:

The Swedes call it *långfärdsskridskoåkning* (tour skating on ice). The growing numbers of U.S. fans who don sturdy boots, snap on long blades, and tackle natural ice in the great outdoors call this kind of ice-skating *tour*, *cross-country*, *Nordic*, *trip*, *distance*, and *fun*.

This is the world of tour skating, a recreation practiced for generations in Europe, made most famous by the novel, *Hans Brinker, or the Silver Skates*, and only now making small inroads into the United States.

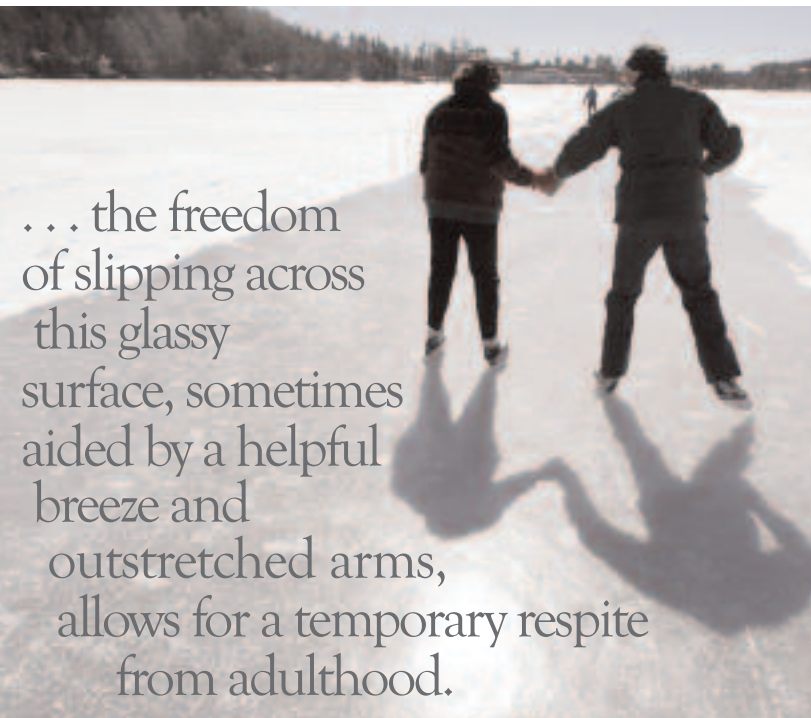
"Technically," says Jamie Hess, "there are two forms of tour skating: groomed-trail skating, and wild skating, which takes place on any frozen lake or river that Mother Nature has left clear of snow." He should know. Hess is a true enthusiast and the founder of Nordic Skater, this continent's principal importer of touring, aka Nordic skating equipment.

"It was when I got out of college, in 1976, that I discovered cross-country skating, after moving to Massachusetts. During lunch, I would go out onto rivers and go for very long distances on my old hockey skates. It wasn't long before I collected a few friends with the same interest."

That early experience led to a desire to learn more, to try it on better equipment, and eventually to turn the whole thing into a way of life.

"After a few years of this recreational stuff," Hess continues, "I began to research

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where people were doing this in larger groups, and to participate in actual organized outings. What I found, via the then-brand-new Web, was that such activity was attracting big groups of people in Europe to single events, primarily in Holland and Sweden.”

Did he say “big groups?” Pausing in the middle of that infinite, flat, isolated New Hampshire lake, I look around at the surrounding stillness, admiring the grace of my few fellow skaters, who are now mere specks in the distance.

“I’ve been a participant in a 4,000-person event in Sweden,” Hess continues, “and in Austria with 2,000 people. I’ve never made the Dutch one because the last time they had it was ’97, but that featured more than 16,000, all on the same day. The Dutch are very into ice-skating.”

Once you get by that understatement, and exchange the wild skating on any randomly chosen, safely frozen lake for the smooth gliding of the groomed trails maintained throughout winter on Lake Morey, Vermont, you, too, can grasp the appeal of skating as a group activity. It is seductively collegial.

People pass each other with cheerful greetings, dogs and kids scamper about on the nearby snow or alongside on the ice, and, when I was there, a small yellow ski plane landed in order to take a few delighted folks on a quick spin overhead. There is much laughter and good feeling, as if the freedom of slipping across this glassy surface, sometimes aided by a helpful breeze and outstretched arms, allows for a temporary respite from adulthood.

As is so often the case with these kinds of activities, the equipment makes a huge difference. Although Jamie Hess began his cross country adventures on hockey skates, he doesn’t recommend them. In fact, as both salesman and devotee, he will supply newcomers to his Nordic Skater events with loaner skates for free, just so people can appreciate the difference between what they’ve used all their lives and the curious things that are touring skates.

In fact, the foundations of these devices aren’t skates at all, but high-end cross-country ski boots, which means that they can also be used for skiing when the mood strikes or the ice is too thin. Additionally, during the nonwinter months, they can be snapped



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onto so-called “roller skis”—essentially short boards on wheels—designed originally to keep winter athletes honed all year long, but now catching on as a sport of its own.

The blades used for touring on the ice are long, upturned at the tip, and razor-sharp, supplying an unexpected stability and a sense of security. You can snap them on and off your boots with ease, meaning also that when you reach the ice’s edge, you simply remove the blades and walk comfortably onto shore.

Finally, for those of us built of more wobbly stuff, two long, elegant, very handy skating poles are available, which are used both for additional steadiness and to check the soundness of any questionable ice.

Well, that would have to come up sooner or later, right? This is frozen water, after all, and only a few inches thick.

“The best technique,” Jamie Hess says, “is to step out very carefully and spear the ice ahead of you, at arm’s length, using as much of your strength as you can. If you pierce the ice at a single swipe, it’s too thin. But there are no absolutes. The edge ice, for example, is not always thinner or thicker than the center ice. Early in the winter, the edge ice usually will be thicker, because ice forms in shallow water first. Toward the end of

the season, it’s the opposite because the shoreline absorbs the heat and radiates it into the water.

“Once you’re out on the ice and skating, remember that ice moves. Pressure ridges are the extreme example of that, forming virtual miniwalls of heaved-up ice in the middle of lakes, but there can be other perils. You test for these by sometimes stabbing the ice as you skate, although color or texture changes (lighter to darker, bumpy to smooth) are your most obvious telltales. And that’s where experience comes in, along with a knowledge of what the weather has been for weeks.”

“The other trick is to choose your lake carefully and to know its history and physical realities. Smaller lakes usually have no pressure ridges, deeper lakes often have thinner ice, etc. We don’t call this *wild skating* for nothing.”

Maybe so, but it largely boils down to common sense. For me, with the wind in my face, the sky huge overhead, and this wondrous sense of flight on earth beneath my feet, a small amount of caution seems well worth the price of freedom. 🐭

Archer Mayor is the author of the Vermont-based Joe Gunther crime series; the 17th entry is titled The Second Mouse.

Ready? Set. Go! An easy way to access the world of tour skating is to visit www.nordicskater.com. There, you will find information about equipment, skating conditions, and various events in the United States and abroad. Nordic Skater also has a store and showroom at 326 Main Street, Norwich, Vermont 05055-4418. Call (866) 244-2570 or (802) 649-3939.

The Upper Valley Trails Alliance (802-649-9075; www.uvtrails.org) and the Montshire Skating Club (802-765-4309; <http://members.valley.net/~ice/club>) groom the trails on Lake Morey. Annual Lake Morey events that include tour skating are Winterfest, the Vermont Ice Marathon, and Skate-athon (on January 7, 13, and 14, 2007, respectively). Lake Morey is located in Fairlee, Vermont, just off Exit 15 on Interstate 91.