

“Glenshee Ski Centre boasts 25 miles of pistes”



Winter wonderland

Don Jolly says Braemar is the perfect spot for those looking for some off-season activity thrills



Ordnance Survey
Landranger Maps 43, 44

At the heart of the Cairngorms National Park, the Club's Braemar site makes for a superb year-round activity-break base. Here, though, I'm going to concentrate on its winter sports appeal, for Braemar lies at 1,100ft, making snow highly likely during the off-season – music to the ears of skiers and snowboarders alike.

Glenshee Ski Centre boasts 25 miles of pistes (over four mountains). There's a beginners' area right beside the main car park and numerous green runs are within

easy reach. Intermediates have 26 blue and red routes from which to choose, while experts can have a crack at a couple of black pistes – the mogul-strewn Tiger on the side of Glas Maol and a longer, hair-raisingly steep run from the peak of the Cairnwell. Don't forget to linger a while at the top – on a sunny day, the views of the snow-covered Cairngorms are out of this world.

Facilities available include full equipment hire (and a shop if you want to buy your own gear), three cafés, plus instruction in both snowboarding and skiing, either in a class (from £22 for

90 minutes) or privately (from £55 for 90 minutes for one person, rising on a sliding scale to £100 for four people) with the qualified instructors of the Glenshee Centre Snowsports School. Lift passes cost £29 per adult (£19 for under 16s and over 65s) for one day, or £116 (£76) for five days (passport photo required).

If you'd rather get your thrills at a slower pace, then you're also in the right place, for this is excellent walking country. A truly delightful spot to start any trek is the Linn of Dee, six miles west of Braemar by a minor road. The route you choose

depends on weather conditions and snow cover; while the hills will likely be mantled in white, the valley may be clear or just sprinkled with fine snow. One option is the track alongside the River Dee to White Bridge and beyond into Glen Dee, possibly returning via Glen Luibeg.

Waterfalls on the Lui Water and the broad Dee spewing through a narrow gorge at the Linn of Dee add to the rugged beauty hereabouts, while nature lovers will no doubt appreciate the chance to spot red squirrels and red deer.

There are so many other hiking possibilities, but one I particularly liked was around Loch Muick, near Ballater, starting from the visitor centre at Spittal of Glenmuick. This is a fairly level route, though the depth of snow can increase as you head south-west along the loch shore. At the far end of the loch, tracks lead steeply to higher ground, including the summit of Prince Charles' favourite mountain, Lochnagar – but you'll need more hard-hitting kit like crampons, ice-axe and helmet.

STONE ME!

No Scottish winter would be complete without curling. For most of us, the only time we ever see this obscure sport is during the Winter Olympics on TV, when it takes place indoors. However, most venues in Scotland's mountains are outdoors and reliant on sub-zero temperatures to keep shallow ponds frozen.

Braemar's curling pond, opposite the Princess Royal and Duke of Fife Memorial Park, venue for the summer's Highland Games, didn't appear to be in use during our visit, but a small pond at Easter

Balmoral has been restored recently. The pond at Ballater is used regularly by the local club, members playing most afternoons when the water is frozen. They welcome those who wish to watch and will happily introduce people to the rudiments of the game, which has similarities to crown green bowls.

There are four players in each team and the object is to slide a 40lb granite 'stone' by its handle along the ice to a target or 'house' comprising three concentric rings. Sweepers with brooms can influence the stone's movement by brushing the ice immediately in front of it. Points are scored for each stone in the 'house' and the winning team is the one with the most points over eight or 10 'ends'.

If you need warming up after that, a visit to a whisky distillery might be the answer. The Royal Lochnagar distillery, by Balmoral Castle between Ballater and Braemar, runs winter tours Monday to Saturday in March, November and December, and Monday to Friday in January and February.

Three tours are available, each showing the various stages of whisky production. The Lochnagar tour costs £6 and ends with a dram of 12-year-old Royal Lochnagar; the Lochnagar Family of Whisky tour costs £12, including a dram of 12-year-old Royal Lochnagar Distiller's Edition and Selected Reserve; the more in-depth Royal Tour costs £25 and includes coffee and shortbread on arrival and ends with a special tasting of Royal Lochnagar through the ages. Admission includes £3 off the purchase of any 70cl bottle of single malt.

After a day in the cold, a distillery tour and tasting will soon warm the body and soul. Slainte! ■



Curling is one of Scotland's national sports

DID YOU KNOW?
Curling is played on a surface (or 'sheet') 146-150ft long and 14 1/2-16 1/2ft wide

ALL WHITE!



INFORMATION

SITE

Full details of Braemar Caravan Club Site (formerly The Invercauld) can be found on p250 of the *Sites Directory & Handbook 2011/12*. To book, call 01342 327490 or see caravanclub.co.uk/searchandbook.



DRAM-TASTIC



CONTACTS

- Glenshee Ski Centre – call 013397 41320 or see ki-glenshee.co.uk (for Ski School call 013397 41010)
- Royal Lochnagar Distillery – call 013397 42700 or see discovering-distilleries.com/royallochnagar