

Skijoring Is the Nordic Winter Sport We Never Knew We Needed



It involves snow, a horse, and hanging on for dear life.

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On a bluebird [Montana](#) morning in February, I found myself in a vast, snow-covered field, clipped into a pair of downhill skis and holding on to a towrope attached to the saddle of a handsome bay horse named Buckshot. The place was the [Resort at Paws Up](#), a 37,000-acre luxury retreat and working cattle ranch in the Blackfoot Valley, east of Missoula. It's a [wonderful place to stay](#), with spacious, haute-rustic cabins that feel like private homes, shaded by ponderosa pines. But as comfortable as the accommodations are, you don't really want to linger in them too long, because there are just so many fun things to do in this beautiful corner of the country.

In midwinter, said fun things include dog-sledding through the woods and snowmobiling up to Garnet, a perfectly preserved 1860s mining town — both of which I tried — as well as cross-country skiing, [snowshoeing](#), and downhill tubing. But I had come specifically to experience the peculiar thrills of equine skiing, better known as skijoring. This unusual pastime has been popular in the western United States since the early 20th century,

when Scandinavian immigrants imported it from Lapland, where it has been practiced for centuries using reindeer or dogs (*skikjøring* means “ski driving” in Norwegian). The version practiced with a horse and rider can also be a competitive sport: there have been several campaigns to include it in the Winter Olympics, and each January, at the Ski Joring Invitational in Whitefish, Montana, top skijorers compete on a course with jumps, gates, and jousting rings they have to capture as they go.

Jackie Kecskes, Paws Up’s equestrian manager, assured me that if I could ski, I could skijor. She sat astride Buckshot, wearing a wide-rimmed felt hat, a Barbour jacket, and jeans. “We had one guest struggle,” she said, “but everyone else has been able to do it, from a 69-year-old man to a teenager with a GoPro taking selfies.” After asking if I was ready, she murmured to Buckshot, who took off in a gentle trot along a path in the snow about the size of a high-school track. All I had to do was rock back slightly on my skis in a kind of half-squat while feeding the rope back and forth to modulate my distance from the horse. A full circuit took less than a minute. Kecskes was right: skijoring was easy enough, though the position took a bit of getting used to. Part of what felt strange was that I didn’t feel like I was really *doing* anything — other than hanging on, which I didn’t do so well when Buckshot sped to a gallop, slingshotting me around a curve.



From left: Riding at the Resort at Paws Up, a luxury ranch in western Montana; a guest cabin at the ranch.

Alexis Pike

After a few loops I tried slaloming in and out of the colored markers on the course, quickly realizing how important the edges of my skis were for navigating the turns. Eventually, my forearms and some mysterious small muscles in my sides — obliques? — started to bark. “Everyone feels it in a different part of their body,” Kecskes told me. I took a breather while she

swapped Buckshot for his lighter-colored buddy, Doc. Once we started up again, I just focused on holding the rope and appreciating the sensation of gliding behind this powerful animal, the wind on my cheeks, the sturdy snowcapped mountains on the horizon.

After lunch, Kecskes and I went trail riding. She gave me a white draft horse named Traveller, named after the one owned by Robert E. Lee, and we ambled through the snow along the banks of the Blackfoot River, chatting about her horses' cliquishness. "It's like in high school," she said. "They're like, 'You can't sit here for lunch, you can't say hi to my friend.'" We passed under Lookout Rock, where Lewis and Clark are said to have stopped to decide which way to go next. A storm was coming in from the west, a dark, sculptural cloud formation massing against the blue sky. I felt an acute, ringing happiness at the majesty of this American landscape, and the pleasure of getting to know the beautiful animal whose reins I held. I knew that when I got home I'd tell everyone that in Montana I'd spent a highly entertaining hour getting pulled around on skis by a horse. But then I'd add that there's nothing in the world better than riding one.

Travelers can reach the [Resort at Paws Up](#) (doubles from \$650 per person, all-inclusive) by flying into Missoula, Montana. Complimentary round-trip transportation is included in the rate. One-hour skijoring sessions are \$200.