

# Walking with Poles

*Jane Alexander takes lessons in Nordic Walking*



Despite living right in the heart of Exmoor (God's own walking country), I'm ashamed to say that I just don't seem to get out on my own two legs that often. So when I saw Nordic walking lessons being offered right on my doorstep, I figured this might be just what I needed and signed up for an introductory session. My friends laughed their heads off, saying I would have to wear a bobble hat and a thick sweater with reindeer

motifs, and that I'd need to talk in ze Nordic accent. I have to admit the idea of striding round Exmoor waving poles did seem like a recipe for ridicule but I decided to give it the benefit of the doubt.

Nordic walking developed from cross-country skiing. Basically you walk using two thin but incredibly strong poles. Unlike normal hiking sticks (which you stab in front of you), Nordic walking poles should never be placed in front of you –

instead you push back on the poles as you walk, rotating your shoulders and hips. The poles act as levers to give you a springy lengthened stride.

It sounds easy enough but, like most good things, it does take a while to get the hang of it. Introductory sessions are usually held on Winsford Hill, where the wide grassy paths offer a great place to practice. But weeks of solid rainfall had left the moor so soggy that Angela Bidlake, our





trainer, decided we should decamp to Tarr Steps. Five of us met up in the car park, feeling a bit self-conscious given that a posse of chaps were clearing leaves and giving us, and the stack of poles leaning against Angela's car, highly amused looks.

Angela brushed it off and got down to business. She has trained with the International Nordic Walking Association and is scrupulous about safety. We each had to fill in a questionnaire about our health and discuss with Angela (in private) any problems we might have. We were then fitted with poles – they should be long enough that your upper and lower arms form a right angle when you hold the poles upright.

Angela impressed on us that waving poles around (particularly likely on Exmoor where there's always something unusual that makes you want to point) is exceedingly dangerous as you could easily poke someone in the eye. Then we started walking – naturally, easily and freely – dragging our poles behind us. Having warmed up, we did some stretches to loosen up our muscles and then we set off down to the Steps. Angela is a good instructor – that ideal mix of clear concise information with a liberal dose of humour. She didn't race us but over the course of about forty minutes we found that, almost without realising it, we were all Nordic Walking.

There's a wonderful sense of liberation when it starts to come together. You find that imperceptibly your stride lengthens into a long easy lope, and your whole body seems to loosen up. Because you are using your upper body as well as your lower (arms as well as legs) it becomes much, much easier to walk up hills (my usual bane). I was also surprised and delighted at how much better my balance was with the poles. 'It's like having four legs,' explained Angela, 'You are just that much more stable. It's ideal for people who have problems with balance or for elderly people who need that bit more stability.'

In northern Europe, Nordic walking is well established and hugely popular. In Germany and Switzerland health insurers actually give discounts to Nordic walkers and subsidise Nordic walking. They recognise its many health benefits. 'Nordic walking can help with strength and stability,' says Angela, 'particularly

after hip and knee operations. It's a low impact weight-bearing exercise so it can help combat osteoporosis. And some people have used it to help build shoulder muscle after breast cancer operations.'

Learning the correct technique, she explains, will help you spare your knees and hips and loosen up your shoulders and back. It builds stamina and aerobic capacity and – best of all – burns far more calories than normal walking. 'They even say it is such an efficient form of exercise that it works up to ninety per cent of your skeletal muscles,' adds Angela. 'You might want to take that with a pinch of salt, but there's no doubt that it is a fabulous all-round workout.'



As we hiked around the Tarr Steps circuit, I began to appreciate fully just what I'm missing by not getting out more. The sun slanted low through the trees and the river was high and feisty. Angela's springer spaniel bounded along the paths with relentless energy and we more or less bounced after her, negotiating the various obstacles with relative ease. The poles make walking that much more comfortable and certainly a lot easier. Sometimes I walked alone, in pleasant silence, enjoying the world around me. Sometimes I would speed up a bit and indulge in some

congenial chat with one or more of my fellow walkers.

It's a hugely adaptable sport. Angela says that many people simply take the introduction, buy their own poles and then go solo. She knows one couple who share a set of poles and take it in turns to walk their dog. Others prefer to join in the various social walks Angela runs. She also gives out (on her incredibly informative website) a list of general (not specifically Nordic) walks that offer good opportunities to stretch your poles. You can Nordic walk anywhere – there are even rubber shields you can pop on the ends of the poles if you want to walk on roads.

Once you feel confident with the basic technique you can up the ante and learn more advanced techniques, using the poles to give your arms a serious workout (goodbye flappy triceps) and achieve higher fitness levels. As we hiked up the hill back to the car park, Angela had me try using both poles together (as if I were doing downhill skiing). Within minutes my arms were aching and I could see how powerful a technique it can be. Back in the car park, we did some final stretches (so we wouldn't ache too much the next day), took off our poles and waved goodbye.

It had been a wonderful few hours and I left feeling totally fired up. I've now convinced several more friends (yes, even some of the sceptics) to take the introduction with an eye to doing plenty more Nordic walking in 2007. I'd recommend you try it too – it's the best fun you can have on four legs!

#### *Fun and Fitness Nordic Walking:*

01398 323541 or

[www.nordicwalkingsomerset.co.uk](http://www.nordicwalkingsomerset.co.uk)

*Angela offers introductory lessons, improvers' classes and scenic guided Nordic walks around Dulverton, Dunster, Tiverton, Barnstaple and Taunton. She also offers Nordic days out on Exmoor and in the Quantock Hills where you can learn the basics in the morning and go for a longer guided walk after lunch.*

*Jane Alexander is an Exmoor-based health writer. Her most recent book is The Overload Solution – how to stop juggling and start living (Piatkus, £7.99).*