

Fernie Nordic Society



What is the difference between skiing on packed trails and just skiing anywhere?

Depending on the snow conditions there can be a huge difference in terms of speed and glide between skiing on packed trails and skiing "off-track". On packed surfaces your skis will glide much further and with classic tracks, you actually have two grooved channels to follow. Off-track ski conditions, on the other hand, are up to the weather and any previous skiers. Sometimes you may have a beautiful experience with previously "skied-in" tracks or, particularly in the Spring, you may get to experience cruising on frozen "crust" stretching to the horizon. On the downside, off-track skiing can feature numerous obstacles (downed trees, swollen rivers, rock fields, etc.), winter dangers (avalanches), and very inconsistent snow quality (everything from ice to 10 feet of powder).

These off-track obstacles are hard to find at most commercial areas where summer trailwork yields flat "roadways" anywhere from 2-6 meters (6-25 ft.) wide. Logs, rocks, and high shrubs are removed much as on Alpine trails to allow for fast, safe skiing and easy grooming. Most commercial XC Centers use a snow groomer with hydraulic attachments to press two grooves in the snow for the Classic skiers and to pack a nice flat "road" about 2-4 meters wide for the Skate skiers. The groomer also usually has a tiller which works the track just like a farming tiller working the soil. Tilling the snow breaks up ice and hard packed snow conditions and leaves a great skiing surface even when the surrounding snow is virtually unskiable. Trail "systems" include the total distance of all a Center's trails and range from 5-10km (cross country skiing uses metric measurements) to several hundred kilometers. Usually commercial XC Centers provide a host of amenities including food, shelters, and special events in addition to lessons and rentals. Virtually every U.S. and Canadian commercial area charges a "trail fee" for use of the trail system. The cost can range from \$5-25 depending on the area and the time of day.

In many areas, public agencies and ski clubs often pack Classic and/or Skate trails with snowmobiles and drag attachments. Track quality at such places can be excellent or it can be pretty sketchy depending entirely on the snow conditions and the budget of the grooming entity. Nominal fees or donation requests are common for the use of these systems as are parking permits for public "Snow Park" lots in heavy snow regions. Flat packed trails are also often provided by snowmobile clubs but you should always ask first as to whether or not skiers are welcome on such trails.

Of course, one of the big reasons many people love Cross Country Skiing is "to get away from the things of man" and groomed trails are only one aspect of the sport. For some folks half the fun is in "breaking trail" to a certain destination. To each their own and the beauty of Cross Country Skiing is that the sport has something for everyone! Be advised that off-track skiing or "touring" can be pretty tough work in deep snow and in hilly terrain. Make sure you have mastered basic techniques and have significant experience in an outdoor winter environment before tackling any ambitious tour without a professional guide. *It is recommended* that beginners spend their first several XC ski experiences on professionally groomed trails in order to learn the necessary skills to go off track.