

TRY IT NOW

NORDIC WALKING

Want to breathe in *lungfuls of sea air* while striding along the promenade or tackling a stretch of coastal path?

Nordic walking poles will put an added spring in your step





Walking is a great way to get out and see our beautiful British coastline but how much better might it be with an extra bit of propulsion? You don't need to strap on a jet pack or take to two wheels – pick up a pair of Nordic poles and you'll find you can walk longer and further, with seemingly less effort, than you could without them. It's a fantastic way to get a workout.

Nordic walking is a bit like cross-country skiing. It was developed in Finland in the 1930s as off-season ski training and the good-natured jibe: 'You've forgotten your skis!' is not unheard of. It's reckoned to be one of the fastest-growing exercise activities in the UK, largely because you don't have to be über-fit to do it. In fact, it suits all ages and helps recovery from hip or knee problems.

Once you've learned the technique, you can stride out on your own or join one of the many groups that have started. There seem to be 'hotspots' in popularity for it along the coast, because it's such a pleasant way to enjoy seaside walking. It's a recreational activity rather than a sport, although there are a few timed



HAVING A GO Paula McWaters and her sister Sue Linfield went on a two-day course with Peter Williamson (OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE) of Nordic Walking for Health in East Sussex

competitions and some marathons now allow Nordic walking entrants.

DAY ONE 10AM LIMBERING UP

We meet our healthy looking instructor Peter Williamson at Salts recreation ground behind Seaford's Marine Parade. He's one of the longest-established instructors in the UK, so we're in good hands. He shows us the Nordic poles – long and slender with removable, angled rubber 'paws' for pushing off smooth,

hard surfaces, over tungsten carbide spikes for gripping grass and rough ground.

Once we have a pair to suit our height, we swing them around and lean on them during warm-up exercises, then Peter has us parading up and down without them, to observe our usual walking style. 'I can tell you're sisters,' he says. 'Both a little stiff in the upper back.' He explains that all of us have a 'muscle memory', which we might have to partially unlearn for Nordic walking.



11AM CATWALK SASHAY

Sue and I walk along in the autumn sunshine, standing tall and trailing our poles loosely behind us. They fasten to your hands with nylon straps so there's no need to grip the handles just yet. 'It's all about having low-slung shoulders and long, dangly arms with hands low to the ground,' says Peter as we sashay back and forth, swinging our arms.

The image of *The Jungle Book's* King Louie springs to mind and humming: 'I'm the King of the Swingers' loosens me up considerably. Sue seems to look more elegant than I feel but Peter is pleased with us both

WATCH *the* PROS

Karen Ingram, 44, from Cowbridge, near Cardiff, is the British Nordic Walking National Coach for Wales. She trains instructors across the UK and runs her pilates and Nordic walking business Barefoot Studio (barefootstudio.co.uk).

'I took up Nordic walking six years ago. I love the workout it gives you, especially powering up hills. I take groups along the Glamorgan Heritage Coast and we're always laughing. You can stop off for a swim if you get sweaty! This summer, I walked round the Isle of Wight coastline – 72 miles in five days. I couldn't have done that without my poles.'



and reckons that we're making good progress.

12.30AM PROMENADING

It's time to take to the prom. Lots of people are out for an amble but our walk seems more purposeful. I'm glad that Peter has 'Nordic Walking for Health' on his T-shirt to explain what we're up to.

'Put all the effort into your midriff area to gently twist your body as you walk,' says Peter. 'Keeping your hands low puts the pole at the right angle to grip the ground.' I'm surprised to find that we've covered half a mile and have reached Seaford Head. There's time to admire the cormorants roosting on the cliff, before heading back for soup at Salts Café.

2PM PAWS OFF

We're on to rougher terrain now, back in the recreation ground, so we remove the rubber paws from our poles and get a feel for the spikes on the grass. Peter has told us that we'll use 90 per cent of our muscles once we're in the swing – better than swimming or rowing.

We try out a few gentle slopes. Going downhill, you squat slightly and shorten your stride; uphill, you



ABOVE, TOP LEFT Peter takes a breather at the foot of the Seven Sisters

ABOVE, TOP RIGHT Peter shows Paula how to get the right grip on her poles

ABOVE The views over the Cuckmere Valley are unbeatable OPPOSITE Paula, Sue and Peter with the picturesque white cliffs in the background

lengthen it and push down hard behind you on the poles. I'm really getting the hang of this and so is Sue but we've gone much further than Peter usually would do on a first lesson, so it's time to hang up our poles until tomorrow.

DAY TWO 10AM GETTING A GRIP

Peter has taken us to Cuckmere Haven today – the scenery is spectacular and I'm happy to be out enjoying it with my sister. I get in a bit of a muddle with technique at first and swing the same arm and leg, instead of the opposite arm and leg, but Peter puts me right. I notice that his poles just touch the ground once, then fly through the air until the next grip, whereas mine are clattering along noisily on the chalky path. Easy as it looks, there's obviously some way to go yet, to get this technique nailed.

11AM SWING LOW

Although we need to keep our heads up and our backs straight, Peter stresses that we should still keep an eye on the terrain, so we don't put a foot down a rabbit hole. And to help our arm swing, Peter does an exercise with us

where he stands behind us and holds the ends of our poles as we push back hard, resisting his grip.

1PM JOINING THE GROUP

Over lunch at the Hikers' Rest Café at East Dean, we meet Jaqui, Jonathan, Ruth, Rosie, Tina, Laverne, Denise and Kay, who've all taken Peter's course in the last two years and will be joining us on our walk today. Rosie took up Nordic walking to keep pace with her long-striding 6ft tall husband; brother and sister Ruth and Jonathan are enjoying it as a physical activity they can do with their mother, Jaqui. Sue and I are relieved to find a range of ages and fitness levels.

2.30PM UPHILL AND DOWN

Peter makes us warm up in front of some bemused pub customers and then we're off. I'm a first-timer here and I can't imagine a more glorious setting as we emerge from the woods and stride out over the Seven Sisters.

To show us just how valuable the poles are on hilly terrain, Peter takes them away and gets Sue and me to walk up a slope without them. The difference is palpable and we're relieved to



NEED to KNOW



HOW TO GET STARTED

Book a course of training sessions with a qualified Nordic walking instructor. Try British Nordic Walking (britishnordicwalking.org.uk, 0845 301 1347) or Nordic Walking UK (nordicwalking.co.uk, 0845 260 9339). Some councils also offer courses. Pembrokeshire; the East Sussex coast; the South West Coast Path (particularly the Isle of Purbeck) and the Cleveland Way, North Yorkshire, are all great locations for coastal Nordic walking.

WHAT IT COSTS



One-hour taster sessions vary from £5 to £10 per person, with some offered free of charge. An introductory course of three or four group sessions costs from £40-£60 upwards. Nordic poles can be hired from most instructors or you can buy

your own from £25 for aluminium poles; £50-£110 for poles with a high carbon fibre content (nordicwalking.co.uk and exelpoles.co.uk). Wear comfortable trousers, walking pants or shorts and layered tops – nothing too loose-fitting. Waterproof walking or training shoes, preferably with a trekking sole, are recommended.

WHERE TO STAY



Riverdale House, Alfriston, E Sussex (riverdalehouse.co.uk, 01323 871038), is less than 10 minutes' walk from the South Downs Way and Alfriston village. Owner Judy is a keen walker and she's sympathetic to walkers' needs. There's a guest lounge, plus microwave and fridge, so you can buy your own food and dine in, if you want to put your feet up. Five rooms. Double B&B from £95.

have them back. After the long hard pull up to Crowlink, Sue looks back with pride – she worried breathlessness might force her to quit but she's managed it. She's still going strong after five miles and we both decide we're Nordic converts. At Nordic Walking for Health, Peter offers taster sessions from £10 per person in a group (1 hour) and £20 per person one-on-two (1¼ hours). Full course (5 x 1½ hours), from £50 per person. Call 0781 352 4587 or visit nordicwalkingforhealth.co.uk.