

GO WITH THE SNOW

For mountain bikers looking to maintain their pre-season fitness, or thrill-seekers in search of an adventure that isn't skiing, fat biking should give you some bang for your buck, and a whole lot of snowy spectacle, as Katy Dartford finds out

The frosty air whistles around my ears, making my exposed skin tingle and sting. But, for a change, my feet don't feel like solid blocks of ice.

The trails, forests and mountains are covered in snow, be that hard-packed snow, crud, or ice. I sweep past trees with their branches hanging low under the weight of the powder. But I'm warm all over, breathing heavily, as I comfortably plough through whatever the terrain throws at me.

While the winter mountains are a heaven for skiers, snowboarders and ski touring fans, if you love snow, but don't want to ski every day, winter usually equates to 'off-season' and deflating fitness levels...

However, deflation is not a bad thing



when you're on a fat bike. Their extra-wide tyres with very low pressure offer a certain level of grip and float on snow, so they're great for winter bike tours off the beaten track, allowing for relaxing flats, exhilarating downhills, and serious uphill slogs. For mountain bikers wanting to keep their legs in shape over the cold months and work on pre-season fitness, riding through a silent, snow-covered forest, enjoying nature, or spraying snow in turns is not just for skiers and boarders.

Having already skied the famous 42km circular tour, the Sella Ronda, in the Italian Dolomites, a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its great historical and geomorphological significance, I want to give my legs a new challenge and explore in the rocky pinnacles that jut up like chimneys, more reminiscent of Moab than anything I've seen in Europe, in a different way.

Getting to grips with the bike

I rent a fat bike and meet instructor and sommelier, Andreas Blanker, in Val Gardena, set in one of the most secluded valleys of the northeastern Italian region. Comprising three main villages dotted between the mountains, unique cultures have been allowed to flourish here: the Ladin language, an offshoot of Latin is still spoken, owing its unlikely survival to centuries of topographic isolation.

Although fat biking on piste isn't normally allowed, we have a chance to break the fresh corduroy of a newly pisted run by catching an early gondola up the mountain for a 7am sunrise breakfast buffet at the Dantercepies hutte. I sit inside in the warmth and watch the 'enrosadira' emerge, a phenomenon that only happens at dawn and dusk when the ancient coral rock turns pink and orange against the searing blue and cloudless sky. I am feeling far too relaxed ahead of what will turn out to be a very intense day.

I grit my teeth before dropping onto the untouched red Dantercepies run, something that wouldn't faze me on skis. Andreas gives us a single instruction – "Ride with it, tease your front-wheel brake and hold firm on the back – to start off, anyway," then he and his friends speed off down the slope, kicking out their back wheels like drift car racers. With the two wheels working completely independently, if the back drags round and you wrench the front to compensate, you can slip-zag the rest of the way down.

Hot on their wheels

I follow, pointing the fat wheel down the valley, trying not to touch the breaks too much. Sitting in a position more like a cat stance, rather than completely off the back seat like a normal downhill MTB, I try to allow enough speed to gather, without letting the back wheel kick out like Andreas'. I am sure that attempting this will only lead to me and the bike sliding, independent of each other, down the piste.



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I hold steady for most of the run, until, feeling confident, I try to imitate Andreas. However, I overspin and crash out. Feeling a little embarrassed, I check the breaks, which are steaming hot due to my overuse. Clearly a delicate technique that one needs to get used to.

Time to climb

After the empty groomed pistes, we take to the roads of Selva and head into the nature reserve, Puez-Odle. Avoiding the early morning ice leads to quests to go further and higher, turning a morning ride into a whole day's expedition.

We begin climbing in a bid to make it to the Alpe di Siusi, the largest mountain plateau in Europe, via the Ciampinoi Monte Pana. Surrounded by evergreen trees, we occasionally stop to examine animal trails left in the snow and get some rest, as we battle through gravel steeps, boggy fields and avoid deer jumping in our path. Crossing some slushy cross-country flats, I don't dare put a foot down for balance as, if I do, it will pierce through the delicate layer of ice, into a hidden hole caused by vegetation below, leaving me thigh deep and stuck.

Deciding whether we should stop or have time to continue, we take a stop at a locked-up hut, which overlooks the highlight of the men's World Cup downhill Saslong slope. Here, during competitions, you can watch them make enormous jumps off a roller to clear another. Andreas pulls some planks together to make us sunbeds as we strip down to our T-shirts, enjoying the 13-degree sunshine. We decide to continue, and although we don't quite make it to the Alpe di Siusi, we've covered about 50km, with 500m of elevation gain in five and a half hours (not including the first piste run), very much earning an Orangina, before the ride home. We return, filthy and exhilarated.

Fat biking is hard work, harder than traditional mountain biking, and requires the same mettle to deal with the various conditions the terrain throws at you. The level of effort required is roughly comparable to cross-country skiing, with the cold weather burning even more energy. The fat bikes are also slightly trickier to handle. While staying fit in the winter isn't easy, they make outdoor exercise possible, offering one of the best and safest ways to explore the landscape when the flakes start to fall.





THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

» Instructor, Andreas, charges €180 for a day, which is cheaper than a ski guide and much more work.

» We stayed at the four-star Hotel Miravalle in Selva di Gardena – to make a booking, visit the hotel's website at hotelmiravalle.it/en or call 0039 0471 795166.

» The nearest airports are Innsbruck, Verona, Venice and Milan Bergamo with airlines, including EasyJet (easyjet.com), Ryanair (ryanair.com) and BA (britishairways.com). Visit the websites above to find the best flight prices.

» For more information on travelling to and exploring Val Gardena, go to valgardena.it/en, email info@valgardena.it or call 0039 0471 777 777.