

Buns of Jello and Other Obstacles to Becoming a Cross Country Skier

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Just because you're not going downhill doesn't mean you can't fall when on skis. **Martin Cathrae**

So you've finally become what you can proudly refer to as an "adequate downhill skier." Sure, it's taken you 16 years of bruises, strains, aching muscles, embarrassing falls on the flat, freak-outs on gentle slopes, temper tantrums with your husband when the easy blue he suggested suddenly became an icy red, and one or two tangles with snow-boarders. But after many years of effort, you now feel reasonably confident with a couple of bendy boards strapped to your feet.

You can do it. Not elegantly, perhaps. Certainly not stylishly. And with precious little technique, it has to be said. But for what seems like the first time in all those years, you finally feel when skiing downhill that, amazingly, you are no longer the worst skier in the group. Not even the second-worst.

What better time, then, to take on a new challenge? Like, say, cross-country skiing? I mean, you live in Moscow, where cross-country skiing is the outdoor exercise of choice for many during the long winter. (Well, that and skating, but you aren't quite crazy enough to try that. There's throwing yourself down a mountain at high speed, and then there's stepping onto a frozen lake with a couple of razors beneath your feet and trying to survive the experience without any broken bones. No, I'll leave that to my kids, thanks very much....)

So you go out and buy what I can only describe as the most subterranean of bargain-basement kits (as your Dutch — read "careful with money" — husband points out, there's no point spending too much cash on this in case you don't enjoy it). Then you head off into the nearby forest with some girlfriends to work up a sweat and take in the sunshine on this frosty minus 10 C day, where you discover the following:

- You still know how to fall on the flat.
- There is still no way on earth to do that stylishly.
- This cross-country ski lark is bloody hard work (though if I keep it up, I fully expect to have buns of steel by the end of February, based on the amount of pain my muscles are in today).
- It's just as possible to end up on top of a frozen lake — albeit covered with snow — when you're skiing as skating.
- Serious Russian cross-country skiers get quite annoyed if they find their way blocked by a group of chattering women stopped to admire the naked — yes, naked — 50-year-old lady taking a dip in the ice hole at the edge of said frozen lake ("Jesus, just ski around us," I thought — "there's a whole lake to use, for goodness' sake!").
- There is a one-way system on the lake. A ONE-WAY system, you stupid foreign woman....

And yes, last but not least: you are, once again, the worst skier in the group.

(As I said to the friends I was out with: it's so nice to find a sport at which I'm a natural after all these years....)

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