

Nordic Walking at Devil's Thumb Ranch, Colorado

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Editors: For reprints, please contact cmwalter@claire-walter.com. Photos are available.



Lang Hedman, hiking guide and Nordic Walking instructor at Devil's Thumb Ranch, demonstrating this form of fitness walking on a trail that passes through wildflower-filled meadows. (Claire Walter photo)

By Claire Walter

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Finland has given us Marimekko fabrics, Iitala porcelain, Nokia cell phones and *sauvakävely*. *Sauvakävely*? Literally “pole walking,” it is, at its most basic, fitness walking using poles. Out of a population of roughly 5,225,000, half a million Finns participate in “pole walking.” If Americans did so at the same level, roughly 27 million people would be striding across the countryside with poles.

Rooted in summer dryland training used by Finnish cross-country skiers, it morphed into a general fitness activity with the development of specially designed poles.

We call it Nordic walking, ski walking or “exerstriding” rather than pole walking, perhaps a phrase close to “pole dancing” isn’t exactly the best marketing name for a fitness activity.

The lightweight poles loosely resemble cross-country ski poles, but with rubber tips for traction on pavement and pointed metal tips for dirt trails. Many models are equipped with two-in-one flip tips that convert from one surface to another. With ergonomically shaped grips and wide straps with Velcro closures, there’s no need to maintain a death grip on the poles. Some poles are adjustable in length.

Proponents, who love to throw out other Nordic walking statistics too, claim that walking with poles burns up to 40 percent more calories and increases oxygen consumption by up to 25 percent calories compared with walking at the same speed and on the same grade without poles. Studies have shown that it increases the heart rate by five to 17 beats per minute. Finally, with heel strike reduced by 25 percent and a push-off from the poles, Nordic walking significantly decreases stress on the knees and other lower-body joints.

In fact, Dr. J. Richard Steadman, Vail’s renowned knee guy, recommends walking with poles for anyone rehabbing after knee surgery or suffering from degenerative joint disease. He also believes that Nordic walking can help preserve healthy joints because “walking with poles can reduce accumulated force by about six tons over the course of a mile.”

Nordic walking technique is simple. Start with a natural stride. Alternate left foot/right arm, right foot/left arm in a comfortable counterswing. On level ground or uphill, most people like to keep their poles close to the body and touch the tips lightly beside the heels. On downhill, poles touch near to the ball of the foot or the toes. Once the movement becomes comfortable and natural, the stride begins to lengthen, the pole touch becomes more dynamic and the real fitness action kicks in.

With poles, the stride and pole touch automatically involve the upper body, the lower body and even the mid-torso. The erect and forward-thrusting posture increases energy and momentum, even as the poles lessen the strain on the back and neck.

Nordic walking has progressed so far that trainer certification programs are now offered, but for most people, the sport doesn’t require ongoing instruction. Still, it’s not a bad idea to get some tips and perhaps some error detection from a pro, especially for cross-country or rehab.

Experts recommend Nordic walking for at least half-an-hour per session. The fitness and flexibility quotient can be further ratcheted up by incorporating other exercises as part of the warm-up, cool-down or in mid-walk. Using poles as accessories, these moves include various squats, shoulder flexes, torso twists and stretches.

This summer, Devil’s Thumb Ranch in Tabernash and the Beaver Creek Hiking Center Nordic walking programs offer guided sessions with an instructor or trainer three times a week. They include basic technique and also adaptations for runners and serious cross-country skiers.

IF YOU GO

- Devil's Thumb Ranch, 970-716-8231; free for guests, \$15 for others. Pole rental without guided walk, \$5 per day.
- Beaver Creek Hiking Center, 970-845-5373, free demonstration, Saturday, July 2, 9-10:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. -12:30 p.m.; \$15 other days.
- Pole brands: Exel, www.exelsports.net; Fittrek, www.fittrek.com; Leki, www.leki.com; Swix, www.swixsport.com.
- Organizations: American Nordic Walking Assn., www.anwa.us; International Nordic Walking Assn., <http://inwa.nordicwalking.com>.

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