

Testing the Limits in Bryce Canyon National Park ©
By Amber Borowski

A recent weekend in Bryce Canyon National Park was all about limits. I tested the limits of my friendship with accomplice Kristy by dragging her all over the park and then persuading her to compete with me in an archery biathlon. Never mind that she had never been cross-country skiing before.

She tested the limits of her friendship with me during the five-hour drive to Bryce, when I had to roll the windows down for much of the chilly February drive thanks to her dinner of garlic pizza. Our hotel room had to undergo a similar de-fumigation process.

We were going to Bryce Canyon's annual Winter Festival. The three-day festival includes free clinics, demos, and tours in cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, archery, ski archery, photography, and ski waxing. The event is usually held over President's Day weekend, but had been bumped up a few weeks to accommodate the Olympic Torch Relay.

I was ecstatic. Bryce Canyon National Park's pillars, hoodoos, and fin-like ridges are stunning enough during the summer months. But in winter, they erupt from the rim of the Paunsaugunt Plateau in a fiery display set against the cold white snow. This high-elevation park is also Utah's smallest with an area of only 56-square miles.

Best of all was the absence of the tourists who flood the park every year beginning in May. Park rangers assert that Bryce averages around 100 visitors on any given weekday and rarely more than 250 on the weekends during the off-season. The park's elevation reaches as high as 9,115 feet, and the resulting snows scare off the fair-weather tourists from November through April.

The Rim Trail

We stayed just outside of the park at Ruby's Inn, which sponsors most of the Winter Festival activities. After a quick breakfast, we grabbed our snowshoes and set out for our first adventure: snowshoeing the Rim Trail. This trail follows the rim of the plateau for 5.5 miles in the northernmost section of the park and offers front-row seats in the amphitheatre.

We connected with the trail across the street from Ruby's. We followed the groomed ski track for about 15 minutes, winding through gnarled juniper and pine groves underlain by manzanita. Naturalist that I am, I pointed out the various tracks in the snow. "See those claw-like tracks to the east of us?" I asked Kristy. Kristy nodded, awaiting wildlife profundities. "They are from snowshoe crampons," I announced. She wasn't nearly as impressed when I divulged that the round tracks with punctures were from cross-country ski poles. Tough audience.

After about 15 minutes, we reached the rim. The profusion of hoodoos towered high above the orange sand. Their infinite gaze pierced the harsh desert landscape, and was backdropped by mammoth stratigraphic canyons in the distance. Shadows filled the amphitheatre and the stone sculptures' silhouettes danced against the walls.

The groomed track curved and ultimately looped back to the main road. The canyon's charms lured us further along the rim. We soon reached a fence, the official marker of the park entrance. We slipped inside a small opening. The groomed track stopped and our real snowshoe adventure began—and finished—as we plowed through deep snow, gazing down upon the amphitheater.

Archery 101

We dove into the Winter Festival that afternoon, starting with the archery clinic. Our instructor was Eric Quilter, a member of the U.S. Archery Biathlon Team. Quilter had been involved in the cross-country ski circuit for years but shot his first bow at the Utah Winter Games only two ago. He soon started to compete in the Archery Biathlon, a blend of cross-country skiing and target archery. The event consists of a 6 to 12-kilometer ski course with several stops at the targets. Scoring is a combination of ski time and shooting points.

Quilter explained that in the real race, a simple "hit-or-miss" style target is used at an 18-meter distance from the racers. Our target was thankfully a huge bullseye with concentric rings that was in much closer proximity. He walked us through archery's basics— everything from eye dominance, to brace-height, to stance.

Quilter then asked for volunteers. Never one to shun a shot at public humiliation, I started to step forward. "How about we start with the burliest in the group?" he quipped. I stepped back. My daunting 5'4" frame topped with curly strawberry-blonde hair didn't exactly constitute burly. But when a couple of wiry teenage boys stepped up, I figured I was in the running and joined them.

The smug juvenile next to me leaned over and whispered, "Hey Blondie, don't worry if you can't pull the string on the bow. You need to be really strong." It was at that moment that archery became the most competitive sport in the world. I flexed. I pulled. I aimed at the bulls-eye with Junior's face etched on it. And I shot those arrows with great precision, overcome by the competitive spirit.

I somehow thought my success (or lack of failure) qualified Kristy and me to take it to the next level: the archery biathlon. Kristy called it insane and at first, refused. She had never been on cross-country skis and didn't believe me when I said it was "all in good fun." She had probably witnessed my interchange with Junior. I finally convinced her to join me.

Bryce Canyon's Base

We took a quick trip to the newly refurbished Bryce Canyon Visitor's Center and chatted with Ranger Kevin. He gave us the inside scoop on cross-country trails and pointed us in the direction of the unplowed Paria and Fairyland roads. He also tipped us off on the backdoor of the amphitheatre—a trail that winds through the base of the canyon. This entrance is accessed via the town of Tropic and rarely gets used until May. His directions were simple: all roads in Tropic lead past the high school. From there, simply follow the road that leads to the canyon.

I doubted it could be that easy, but it was. We hopped in my Jeep and were on our way. Kristy was being a good sport. I knew she was tired and dreading the biathlon the next day. But I lured her in with great bait—a night out on the town of Tropic. It's a good thing that Kristy had never been to Tropic, because she never would have agreed otherwise.

We followed the road past Tropic's high school until we reached a gate that marked the entrance to the park. The marker indicated that Sunset Point was just over 2 miles, and Sunrise was 3.6 miles. The pitch was relatively flat as we hiked through the natural amphitheatres carved by the Paria River. The colorful rock formations were impressive when viewed from the rim, but they became enchanting works of art as we wound through the matrix of erosion. The labyrinthine tucks and folds clenched us like a glove as we experienced a new intimacy with Bryce Canyon.

We stopped at Tropic's pizzeria for dinner. After 30 very exciting seconds of cruising Main Street, we called it a night.

Cross-Country Skiing 201

We participated in a ski clinic early the next morning so Kristy did not have to race cold turkey. Our R.E.I. instructor taught our group of five the basics and then let us loose on the groomed Great Western Trail. I had only been cross-country skiing a handful of times, but I figured 25 years of alpine skiing would have some bearing upon my skills. I forgot I thought the same thing when I took up water-skiing, when I had quickly learned otherwise.

Kristy did better than most of our group, which instilled confidence in her. We eventually connected with over 50 kilometers of cross-country ski track that Ruby's Inn Nordic Center grooms for classical and skating techniques. The trail winds through meadows and forests to the rim of Bryce Canyon. Some of the trails interconnect with ski-set trails inside the national park. The scenery was stunning and best of all, there was no track fee at Ruby's.

Graduate-level Biathlon

We met for the race at 11 a.m. I surveyed the competition. There were many serious biathletes in the group. And then there was Kristy and I. Oh, and Junior.

Eric relayed the rules. The children and youth would race first and start in 30-second increments. The race for the adults would not start until the completion of the previous races. Our biathlon consisted of six laps around the track. After the first two laps, we would stop at the archery range, shoot, and continue for another couple of laps repeating the process. We would shoot a total of nine arrows at three different times.

I was initially disappointed when I discovered Junior would be racing in the youth division. But then I noted that Eric's four young boys, all excellent skiers, were also racing. I decided it was best we had separate divisions—there's nothing like having your butt kicked by a five-year-old.

With my arch nemesis out of the race, I had to concoct a new strategy. I got more realistic and decided upon two goals: to not wipeout while skiing, and to hit the target every time. Bulls-eye was an added bonus.

I was slated third to start the race. Eric went first and I was at the line 60 seconds later. I started strong. With all my amateur archery biathlete might, I forged forward, relishing every stride. And then Eric passed me. On my first lap. I shook it off—I mean, the guy was on the U.S. National Team. But then another competitor passed me, and then another.

I conceded that the majority of the field outclassed me. I vowed to ski my own race and started taking notes. Most archery biathletes made use of the "skating" technique, which is generally faster than the traditional diagonal stride ("classic") style of skiing I was using. No wonder they were able to pass me so effortlessly. Oh, and also because I was slow.

By the time I finished lap two and skied up to the range, I was panting heavily. I grabbed the bow. It bobbed up and down like a ship on a tempestuous sea. I had not taken into account that I would be shooting under such conditions. Regardless, I somehow tamed the tempest and hit the target every time.

Like a masochist, I repeated the process two more times and completed four more laps with two stops at the range. I was exhausted when I finally crossed the finish line but my spirits were lifted when my supporters cheered me on. OK, most of them were Winter Festival volunteers who were supposed to be there but hey, fans are fans.

I ran to the edge of the track to watch Kristy's race. It wasn't pretty. I mean, she should have won the rookie of the race award: first time on skis, first time shooting a bow, and first time in a biathlon. And her finish was spectacular. She made her final shots, turned toward the finish line and face planted. She somehow crawled across the line, leaving a trail of her sunglasses, hat, and gloves. She laughed. Until she saw me. Her look of death confirmed my worst fears. And at that moment in Bryce Canyon National Park, I realized I had surpassed the limits of friendship—a limit that no amount of belching garlic pizza could ever match.