

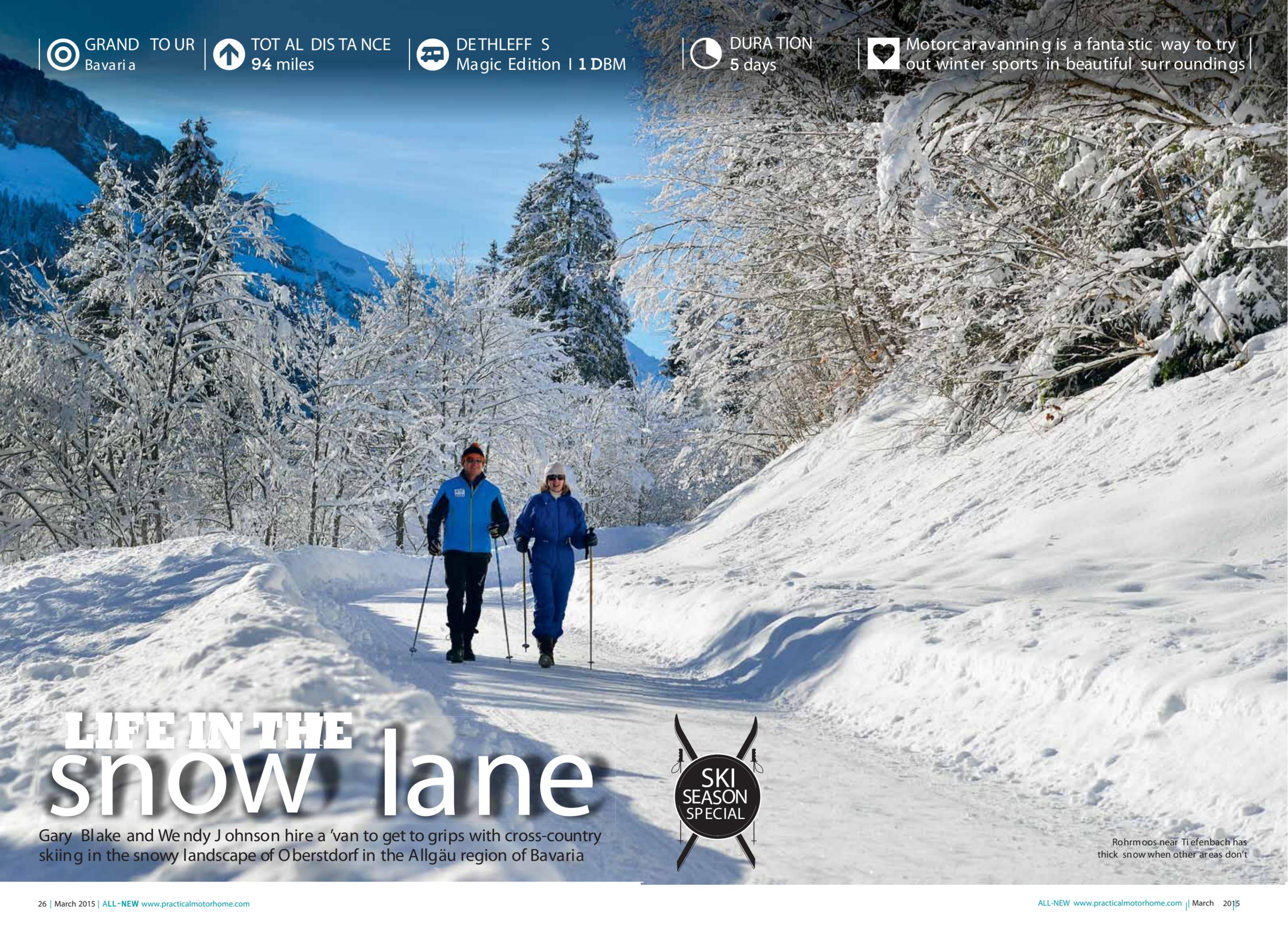
GRAND TOUR
Bavaria

TOTAL DISTANCE
94 miles

DETHLEFF S
Magic Edition | 1 DBM

DURATION
5 days

Motorcaravanning is a fantastic way to try
out winter sports in beautiful surroundings



LIFE IN THE snow lane

Gary Blake and Wendy Johnson hire a 'van to get to grips with cross-country skiing in the snowy landscape of Oberstdorf in the Allgäu region of Bavaria



Rohrmoos near Tiefenbach has thick snow when other areas don't

The Heimatmuseum Oberstdorf depicts the rural life and history of the local area and is housed in a 17th-century building



GARY & WENDY took up motorcaravanning after years sailing yachts. Today they enjoy touring across Europe, and further afield

The snow was falling gently as we arrived at Memmingen airport - a good omen for the start of our trip to a snow camp in Oberstdorf with a four-season motorhome. It was a short ride to the Dethleffs factory in Isny and its hire company McRent where we picked up our fully kitted-out Magic Edition I 1 DBM A Class model — fully winterised and popular with the Scandinavians.

After the handover we nipped into the local hypermarket, with its easy parking for our 7.35m vehicle, to stock up. We set off at twilight with heavy snow being batted off the windscreen for an easy run uphill on good roads to Oberstdorf 875m (2870ft) above sea level.

Located in the Allgäu region of south west Germany bordering Austria, Oberstdorf is one of Allgäu's highest market towns and was to be our playground for five days. Really a large village, it comprises many shops (they close on Saturday afternoon and Sunday), most selling hiking gear and clothing, plus souvenirs, and cafés for a coffee and Apfelstrudel.

It's a world-renowned winter sports centre with five downhill ski jumps off perilously high ramps. Great Britain's

one-time Olympic ski jumping hopeful, Eddie 'the Eagle' Edwards, trained here, as did Torvill and Dean in the skating stadium with its three indoor rinks. An Olympic Training Centre for the German skating team, it's a good place to view their training sessions and also have a go at skating or watch a game of ice hockey.

However, the 128km of downhill slopes within five skiing regions and Germany's longest downhill slope had marginal interest for us on this trip. We were after the 75km of prepared cross-country skiing trails and the natural thermal swimming baths to take away aches and pains.

These cross-country courses were awarded the four-star seal by the German Automobile Club. Whether ski skating or the 'classical' style, we'd been promised we would not find cross-country skiing dull.

USE YOUR BEST GERMAN TO BOOK

This is a region hardly known to the British - we received no reply to our initial emails and realised that English is little spoken. We had more success once we translated our emails into German with Google. But Rubi-Camp was expecting us, thanks to Frank, the English-speaking son-in-law of the Zeller family, the owners of the site. The site is just 3km — a 10-minute walk to the bus or a half-hour walk beside a stream - from Oberstdorf.

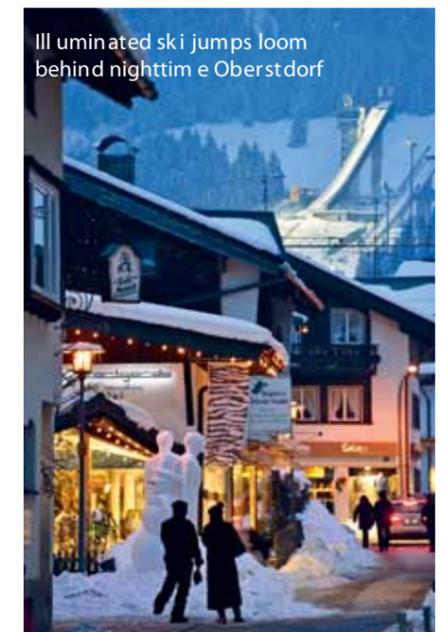
On arrival, Wendy returned from the washrooms exclaiming: "Why can't our campsites be like this?"



Main Oberstdorf is one of Germany's highest market towns Below Wendy kitted out for cross-country skiing instruction



Gary and Wendy loved their hired Dethleffs Magic Edition I 1 DBM A-class



Illuminated ski jumps loom behind nighttime Oberstdorf

St Anna Chapel in Rohrmoos is the oldest wooden chapel in Europe



“The difference between Nordic and Alpine skiing is that in Alpine the boot bindings are fixed-heel”

Although 10 years old, the showers and toilets were in pristine condition; warm and cosy with piped music, towel driers and Dyson hand driers. Heated corridors connected to other rooms for cleaning and drying boots, skis and coats, and washing and drying dogs.

Our ‘van was snug, too. The Truma 3kW all-gas heating unit delivered 21 degrees overnight. We were instructed by Dethleffs to leave the heating set on 1 at all times to prevent the water tanks freezing and at night to set it at 2, which turned out to be too warm.

The following morning revealed a fresh fall of snow and bright blue skies. Oberstdorf’s winter temperatures can be between -10 and 20C but with a glorious blue sky, associated with a dry Alpine climate, and warmer than normal temperatures, the usual 1.5m snowfall had failed to arrive. So there wasn’t enough snow to try out the 13km cross-country ski loop adjacent

to the campsite. We took the shuttle bus into Oberstdorf (free with the compulsory €2.60 per person, per day tourist card supplied by the site) to be fitted with our ski gear at the NTC ski school beside the Nebelhorn cable car.

LESSONS IN ENGLISH

NTC Oberstdorf is the only one of the three ski schools with an English website. It also has an English-speaking instructor to explain cross-country skiing. Derek Barber, a former Australian marine who made the Australian Olympic cross-country squad, came to Oberstdorf to train with the elite and never left.

“The difference between Nordic skiing and Alpine skiing is that in Alpine the boot bindings are fixed-heel, whereas in Nordic the heel of the boot is free. Nordic skiing originated in Norway with Norwegian soldiers in the 19th century,” he explained.



Oberstdorf’s Eringer Arena ski jumps are used in the Four Hills tournament

“You’ll be doing the classic style rather than ‘skate skiing,’” Derek added as he chose the narrow back-entry boots from the racks. Skate skiing involves a decisive weight transfer onto one ski angled and then the other, supported by the inner edge of the ski on the snow, which looks similar to skating on prepared trails (pistes) that have pairs of parallel grooves (tracks) cut into the snow, Derek told us beginners.

“Having gear fitted by professionals is essential,” he stressed. “A round 95% of sports shops don’t know how to do it properly. You can hire boots and skis

Gary and Wendy took advantage of the relaxing thermal spa available at Oberstdorf



Getting to grips with the cross-country skiing in the snowy setting of Rohrmoos



Far left and left By cable car to the summit of Nebelhorn for far-reaching views of mountain peaks and ski slopes

for two hours, a day or a week. We can store them here to save carrying them around. Boots are dried and disinfected overnight through holes inside the boot rack system.”
Wow, we thought.

IN THE KNOW Snow business from Allgäu



Derek Barber, cross-country skiing instructor. “Oberstdorf’s set-up as a national winter sports centre is world-renowned,” he told us. “Three indoor skating rinks, three downhill ski jumps, Germany’s longest downhill slope via the Nebelhorn cable car, a cross-country skiing stadium and 75km of cross-country pistes.”



Veteran skiers Eva and Ardnau drove their car from Hannover to Oberstdorf over several days, as they have done for the last 25 years. They were once downhill skiers but now embrace the enjoyment to be had from cross-country skiing. “We like ballroom dancing too,” said Eva. We were very impressed by their stamina.



The Zeller family Monika Zeller and her husband along with their daughter Marion and her husband Frank Maier run the Rubi-Camp. Frank speaks good English: “We tell people to bring two bottles of propane. You’ll be using one bottle every 3-4 days in -10-20C temperatures. Gas is much cheaper than electricity, paid for by meter.”

FITTING SKIS IS A SCIENCE

Next up were the skis. “They are thinner than Alpine skis. They are long and narrow, to distribute the weight of the skier and allow the skier to move quickly. Typical ski dimensions are 2m in length, about 5cm in width and 1-4cm in thickness at different stages along the length of the ski.”

Depending on the ski design and purpose, they are fitted to the skier based on height and weight. The toe of the skier’s footwear is attached to the ski with a binding, while the heel remains free. Skis have camber and should leave the centre section of the ski clear of the snow when the skier’s weight is evenly distributed between the pair. The centre section of a classic ski will either have ‘fish scales’, or ski wax that will stick to the snow (called the ‘kick zone’ or ‘grip zone’ of the ski). When full weight is transferred to a single ski the kick zone comes into contact with the snow. Glide wax is used on the tails and tips of the skis.

St Martin's mountain church in Baad im Kleinwalsertal can only be reached on foot



Another wow from us, then it was the turn of the poles.

"Like Alpine skiing, cross-country skiers carry two poles for steadiness and propulsion," Derek explained.

Poles have a spike at the end to provide a fixed pivot when the pole penetrates through to a hard surface, and a plastic web, called the basket, to provide extra purchase in snow and to ensure the pole doesn't sink too deeply. Different basket styles are available for different techniques and snow conditions.

Nordic poles are longer than poles for Alpine skiing and should be sized proportionally to the height of the skier. The wrist strap helps prevent the skier from dropping the pole, and also assists with pushing along.

The lesson was booked for two mornings later. For now we took a tour of the stadium, which was in use as the venue for the International Paralympic Committee's Nordic Skiing World Cup.

"Our lessons were to be taken in the beautiful Rohrmoos valley, just outside Oberstdorf"

We saw some of the heats of these handicapped cross-country skiers and then we went on by NTC's minibus to the Stillach Valley to view the world's first large-scale ski jump - built in 1949 - where competitors can reach a 550ft flight. Derek told us he had skied down the incredibly steep landing hill - quite an achievement.

Back in town we saw the more modern ski jumps used each December for the 'Four Hills Ski Jump Tour'. We were relieved to be taking cross-country lessons!

Our lessons were to be taken in the beautiful Rohrmoos valley, just outside Oberstdorf, accessed via a tolled private road. It's a winter wonderland that normally has thick snow when other areas have none.

Thanks to the all-wheel traction on the Volkswagen multi van with winter tyres, and ABS brakes which made light of the ice-covered roads, we were soon putting on our skis and getting ready for our first lesson. It's not a good road for a motorhome - either take a taxi or arrange a sleigh ride from Hans Dornach in Tiefenbach (tel 00 49 8322 5477). 



Above The Heini Klopfer Ski Jump, Oberstdorf
This pic Settled in at Rubi-Camp



In the grounds of Oberstdorf Haus, the village's hotel, spa and recreation centre

Theory dispensed with, we shuffled the skis in the snow, clipped in our toes and slipped into the parallel tracks made daily by the cross-country piste machine. I fell, but was soon back on my feet, throwing off my ski jacket.

This was the first of two lessons and we fairly quickly got the idea of lifting up the heel and using the toe area to half run up hills or to take one ski completely out of the track and 'vee' it out crab-like to get up a slope.

Then we got a demonstration from a real pro of the Nordic Classic run, with the trailing skis lifted high.

"Most people never get past the level of those people, there," Derek pointed at two dark shapes coming towards us. "Skis in the tracks and no back heel lifted."

We found out later that the couple, who were 86 and 83 years old, drove down from Hanover each year to enjoy skiing in this area.

LESSON OVER, TIME TO RELAX

We retired to the wood-lined interior of Berggasthaus Rohrmoos, a hostelry where we were served Leberknödel (liver dumpling) soup washed down with Weißbier 'white beer'.

Pleased with our progress and happy that we had found a new sport, we dropped into the Oberstdorf Therme for a relaxing swim in one of its 35C saltwater pools, with its glass atrium to view the snow-capped mountains. There's also an outside pool, with

sauna and hamam (Turkish bath). It's kit off in the sauna, so take a towel to protect your dignity.

The next day we were 7296ft at the Nebelhorn overlooking 400 craggy, snow-covered mountain peaks of the Allgäu, Austrian and Italian Alps. Accessed by three stages of cable car from Oberstdorf, the middle and top stations having cafés and restaurants with sun terraces, the valleys below looked impenetrable, as did the peaks. This is not the case in summer - the Germans are known as avid hikers.

Oberstdorf offers a vast number of walking/hiking trails from easy, around the town and surrounding area, to the more strenuous high Alpine trails, where mountain huts provide accommodation and food. The huts vary in size, but some can take 400 people.

Even during winter, 140km of hiking trails are cleared, offering panoramic walks in the surrounding mountains. The sheer beauty was overwhelming and the high overview helped give us our bearings.

At the middle station there is an iglu (ice) hotel, which you can visit or spend a night (www.iglu-lodge.de).

We had heard of an oddity - a valley belonging to Austria that could only be accessed by a German road. The Kleinwalsertal is part of Austria, which includes the three villages of Mittelberg, Hirschegg and Riezlern.



Paralympic contestants pose between training in Oberstdorf's facilities

"We dropped into the Oberstdorf Therme for a relaxing swim in one of its saltwater pools"

Because of the mountains there is no access to other parts of Austria, therefore this area can only be reached from Oberstdorf. Pre-EU it had tax-free status. We took a ride to the end of the valley to Baad where the road ends, passing through the Austrian villages.

Next day we strolled into town along a country path wearing our ice grips. First stop was the ice sports centre where we happened on some of the German national figure-skating 

Warm and Glühwein comprises hot wine, plus orange, cinnamon, vanilla and cloves



Oberstdorf boasts miles of walking trails of varying difficulty



A cup of Glühwein or hot chocolate will chase the chill away and revive aching limbs

champions. With our Oberstdorf guest card, entrance to watch was free. We could have used our cards for a free guided day's hiking and Nordic walking tours (Monday-Friday), or the guided Oberstdorf tours, but that was Monday only. Instead we used them for a discount to enter the Heimatmuseum, located in a 17th-century house and containing fascinating exhibits, mainly relating to the history of Oberstdorf and the Allgäu. It also contains the world's largest hiking shoe.

Our walk continued for another 40 minutes to the stadium to watch the final day of the (Paralympic) IPC's Langlauf World Cup. We went via the 'return of the cattle route', which took us over snow-covered common land and past some pretty churches and two chapels — the Appach Chapel, containing frescoes, and the Loretto, boasting an impressive dome and artwork on the ceiling. The Vihscheid cattle drive, when the cows are brought down from the mountain pastures,

"The high tower of St Johannes Baptist Church could be seen from all directions"

takes place every September. It's a huge celebration: the cows are decorated and everyone enjoys the party atmosphere here. The covered bridge adjacent to the Stillach ski jump is part of the trail.

FINDING OUR WAY BACK

It didn't matter from which direction we approached Oberstdorf — the high tower of St Johannes Baptist Church (66m) could be seen from all and became our beacon as we returned to enjoy a mug of hot grog in the village square. We completed the day with a fondue at the Mohren restaurant.

We had intended to walk to the Breitachklamm (www.breitachklamm.com), a deep gorge with suspended walkways that is said to be impressive at any time of year, but is stunning in the winter. From Oberstdorf it takes about an hour but our walk was thwarted. Rain had not frozen the area into its normal winter wonderland.

However, our new best find was Oberstdorf itself and together with the snow campsite, the cross-country skiing (our new favourite sport) and our very comfortable hired four-season motorhome, we had thoroughly enjoyed our six days in winter paradise. ☺



Rubi-Camp

Rubinger Strasse 34, 87561 Oberstdorf im Allgäu
Tel 00 49 (0) 8322 959 202

Web www.rubi-camp.de

Charges Pitch+2 €25, hook-up €0.70 per kW hour, tourist card €2.60 per person per day

Open Mid-December to early-November
This site is owned and run by the friendly Zeller family. Located on flat terrain on the northeastern outskirts of Oberstdorf, which is 3km away, it's easy to find, being just off the main road from Munich.

Surrounded by meadows and edged by a small river, with views of the awe-inspiring, 2224m Nebelhorn and the Allgäu Alps, it also has a 13km, cross-country ski loop adjacent to the site.

The site covers 1.7 hectares and has 80 100sq m motorhome pitches, with parking for the camper on pavers, a place for a tent and 70sq m of lawn. All pitches have their own water, sewage and mains hook-up connections.

The excellent shower blocks are fully heated (in winter) with two wheelchair accessible showers and toilets, and have

dishwashing facilities, washing machines, a ski boot and hiking boot drying area, and an indoor dog washing area. There is a cosy bar and bistro on site.

The free ski-bus is a 10-minute walk away or there is a path into town beside the site, which is a 30-minute walk.

On Sundays in the summer, the locals wear the attractive Bavarian clothing, lederhosen and dirndl skirts.

For stays of seven days during the summer, lift passes for seven cable cars and gondolas are included in the price, which will be around €30 per night.

Way to go

We flew Ryanair from Stansted to Memmingen and were picked up by McRent in Isny im Allgäu. McRent is the Dethleffs-owned hire company and is a great way to 'try before you buy' and they also fully kit out the vehicles for camping. Oberstdorf is 37 miles south of Isny along main roads (B12 and then B19). If coming from the UK, see our February 2014 issue's Grand Tour (p43), which gives a good route mostly avoiding tolls and vignettes.

Food and drink

We shopped locally and at Aldi in Isny for groceries. We tried the Mohren and



Leberknödel (liver dumpling soup) is a Bavarian speciality tried by Gary



The Dethleffs Magic Edition 11 DBM provided warm and comfortable quarters

Berggasthaus restaurants and, of course, warmed ourselves up with Glühwein.

The motorhome

The Dethleffs Magic Edition 11 DBM A-class offered fantastic living space at 7.35m x 2.33m x 2.72m (L/W/H). It sits on a low-platform chassis and has an interior height of 1.78m. It made a welcome retreat after a day's activities.

The basic engine is a 2.3-litre, 130bhp TD. The MT PLM is 3850k g.

Motorhome parking

We used public transport to get around once we'd pitched up at the site.

Find out more

- Ski lessons: NTC Oberstdorf Ski School Nebelhornstr. 67e, D-87561 Oberstdorf Tel 00 49 (0) 8322 989 601 Web www.ntc-oberstdorf.de/
- Allgäu Walser Card (Oberstdorf guest card. Compulsory with campsite fees) Web www.oberstdorf.de/en/vacation/oberstdorf-guest-card.html
- Tourism Oberstdorf Prinzregenten Platz 1, 87561 Oberstdorf Web www.oberstdorf.de/dorf/tourismus
- Oberstdorf Therme Promenadestr. 3, 87561 Oberstdorf Tel 00 49 (0) 8322 606 960 Web www.oberstdorf-therme.de/
- Nebelhorn cable car Located next to the Eisportzentrum. Web www.das-hoehste.de/
- Heimatmuseum Oststraße 13, 87561 Oberstdorf, Web www.oberstdorf-heimatmuseum.de/

Costs

| | |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| Fuel | £19.24 |
| Food & drink | £122.16 |
| Site fees | £103.13 |
| Ski hire (for 2) | £207.86 |
| Ski lessons (for 2) | £157.08 |
| Attractions | £75.56 |
| Transport | £32.21 |
| TOTAL | £717.24 ☺ |