

Shadows of a Snowshoer: Exploring Edinburgh's Arctic Hinterland

By Sam Baldwin of www.SnowSphere.com



It's November 2010 and Britain is getting buried. News reports are saying it's the "worst winter since 1981." In the UK, snow of this volume is rare, and this early in the year it's unknown. For so many people here, snow is just another form of weather to grumble about. When it comes to the white stuff, we don't cope well. Airports and schools are shut, trains have stopped running and the road network is paralysed. People have been stranded in their cars overnight, pipes are frozen and councils have run out of grit.

But for me it's the *best* winter since 1981. Perhaps if more people owned snowshoes they might see it my way. Whist Britain has been complaining about lost man hours and the "cost to the economy," I've been watching the snow fall with increasing excitement. Now the storm has passed, the sun is out, and I'm all set to explore Edinburgh's arctic hinterland.

From my apartment I can see my target: Arthur's Seat. A long-extinct volcano, it forms part of Holyrood Park, and is a piece of wild Highland landscape sitting in the centre of the Scottish capital.



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Keeping watch over the city, it normally offers Edinburghers a large green space to play in. Today it is a large whitespace instead. I sling my snowshoes over my back, wander out into the street and head for the hills.

The roads are quiet, and few people are about. Under the railway bridge I walk, up a snow-covered cobbled lane and alongside Holyrood Palace. It's where the queen stays when she's in town, but the flags are not flying today. Her Majesty must be enjoying the snow elsewhere.

The ground opens out onto flat parkland, edged by large trees. The snow here has been compacted by walkers and is too shallow for snowshoes, so I keep going, on past St Margret's Loch. It's covered in a layer of icy slush; swans huddle together looking cold. I head off the main path, and start climbing a now-closed road. The snow is getting deeper, but I keep going until I reach a stretch of virgin powder. Here, I shall begin my mini-adventure.

A man stops and watches as I extend my poles and strap on my snowshoes. Snow this deep, this early in the year, is a rarity but snowshoers are rarer still. Indeed, though I later see some skiers and snowboarders enjoying the conditions, I am the only snowshoer. It's possible that I'm the first one for years and it's probable that I'm the first ever to write about the experience.

Shoes strapped on and poles in hand I attack a steep slope. The metal teeth bite and I power up and over the clean snow. It feels great. It's been a while since I had the chance to snowshoe, and I've never done it before on British soil. The last time these snowshoes saw snow was in Kashmir, over two years ago. I relish the cold air on my cheeks, the feeling of space and the sound the poles make as



they pierce the surface. If people knew the pleasures of being out and about on a snowy day, they might be up here embracing it rather than locking themselves inside and waiting for the melt.

With no one to photograph, my shadow becomes my model. It follows me loyally up the mountain as we weave through patches of snow-covered gorse, stunted trees and rocky outcrops. Then poses

obediently as the low sun stretches it out across the snow's perfect surface.

I pass a man walking his dog. He sinks into the snow up to his knees and makes slow progress. His dog is having an even harder time. I power onwards, over snowy knolls and between dwarf birch. It's so good to be out in the snow again. If I turn my gaze from the city, I feel like I'm in The Highlands. Yet, just fifteen minutes' walk away, I could be in a cosy pub on The Royal Mile, sipping on a single malt whisky.

I love all things snow and am so happy to be out in it again, but though my snowshoes float me and my shadow over the surface, there is a pang of sadness weighing me down. For the first winter in nine years, the long-lashed snow queen whom I married in this very city is not by my side. In happier times we had visited snowy places all over the world. What began in the mountains of Canada took us to France, Switzerland, Japan, Norway and Slovenia. But this autumn our relationship ended, here in Scotland.

I look down over a frozen Edinburgh; it looks good in its winter outfit. A giant would not dare to walk barefoot through this medieval capital for it is a city of sharp spires and steeples. There seems to be a church, castle or turret on every street. To my left, the Pentland Hills fade into in the distance. To my right, the icy waters of the North Sea sit under a blue sky. Edinburgh is famed for its



cold wind, but today the air is perfectly still. She's down there, somewhere. I wonder how she's doing and if she misses our snowy adventures. Thoughts turn to our last ever meeting. We embraced and wept in a busy street then said goodbye for the final time. I turn my back on the city and snowshoe onwards.

In some places the snow is smooth. In other parts it is rippled like wet sand on a beach. On the brow of the knolls it is shallow where wind has scoured it, yet in the hollows, half a meter has collected. I slip off my snowshoes, and stop for a snack. Up high on the Seat, skiers and snowboarders have hiked up to ride down a steep face. I gaze at the scene. The terrain is tempting, and if snow were a regular fixture of Edinburgh's climate, Arthur's Seat would make a great little ski area. Incredibly, the BBC has just reported that avalanche warnings have been issued for the area, though I find it hard to believe that they are a genuine hazard.

The winter sun is sinking and it's time to return to the city. I start to head down, leaning back on my shoes and taking long, sliding strides. Within half an hour, I'm home, feeling all the better for my trip.

I sit in my apartment, writing this story, it is snowing again. Though most of my fellow countrymen would likely disagree, I hope winters like these become the norm. If they do, perhaps there will be a few more snowshoers exploring Edinburgh's arctic hinterland next time.

Until then, it's just me and my shadow.

Sam Baldwin is the founder of www.SnowSphere.com – the website for snow travellers featuring snow stories on exotic locations, from India to Iceland, China to Chile.





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