



Ski Mecca

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The Winter Olympics has brought attention to countries that you don't usually hear much about—Finland, Austria, the Czech Republic and particularly the smallish (population-wise) country of Norway, who are winning medals in ski competitions at a higher rate than much larger nations. Norway alone has more Olympic medals this year than the home country of China, which has many times the total number of citizens of all those other countries combined.

But perhaps the best standard by which to measure the chances of winning a medal is not the number of citizens, but the number of people who actually participate in skiing during the winter months. Measured by that demographic, Germany leads the world; an estimated 14.6 million Germans hit the slopes every year. France has the second most skiers (8.5 million) and the U.S. (8 million), Japan (7.4 million) and the United Kingdom (6.3 million) come in third, fourth and fifth, respectively, followed by Poland (4.9 million), Italy (4.9 million), Russia (3.5 million), Austria (2.9 million), Switzerland (2.9 million), Canada (2.4 million), Spain (2.3 million), the Czech Republic (2.2 million), Sweden (1.8 million) and China (1.2 million).

Nobody seems to know how many people in Norway participate in skiing, but it is the country's national sport, and one has to imagine that if a poll were taken, a high enough percentage of its 5.4 million citizens are skiers that it would land somewhere on this list. In fact, there is some evidence that skiing originated in or around Norway's Nordland area, where there is a famous rock carving of a person standing on two skis of equal length, holding a single pole. It dates to anywhere from 6,500 to 5,500 years ago. A primitive wooden ski has been found in nearby Sweden, dating to roughly 1,000 years later, and at a similar date, more than 20 well-preserved skis and ski fragments have been found in drained bogs in Norway. Skiing was apparently a popular activity in Norway during the bronze age, around the time the first neolithic settlers were migrating into Greece, close to the time when the wheel was first invented.

And it apparently took a long time for the rest of the world to notice. In 1799, a French traveller who visited Norway marveled that mail was transported during the winter by "a man on a kind of snow skates" and this traveler then reported that he had seen others move around on the snow on similar contraptions. He opined, perhaps previewing today's world where there are slopes and lodges everywhere there is snow, that "the day will surely come when even those of other European nations are learning to take advantage of this convenient and cheap mode of transport."

Not to mention fun.

Sources:

<https://unofficialnetworks.com/2018/05/23/countries-with-the-highest-number-of-skiers-top-15/>

<https://www.lifeinnorway.net/history-of-skiing/>

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