



# GIRLS ALLOWED

FROM MAP-READING TO MOUNTAIN BIKING, WOMEN-ONLY OUTDOOR SKILLS COURSES HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY POPULAR. FIONA RUSSELL LOOKS AT THE DIFFERENT STYLE OF LEARNING ON OFFER

STANDING ON A HEATHER-CLAD knoll at the junction of two well-worn paths, Lin Storey surveys the rolling Perthshire countryside before her. Referring back and forth to her map, the 57-year-old lawyer from Nottingham notes a collection of visible landmarks, including a broken down wall and a boundary fence, and listens carefully for the sound of a bubbling stream.

After some consideration, she is certain that she has identified the correct track to take, en route to the top of Dun Mor hill above Comrie, but before pressing on she checks her decision with the rest of the all-female group.

"And they all heartily agreed with me," says Storey, smiling broadly. "It was my turn to lead, but I still wanted to discuss my decision. We chatted it through without anyone being possessive of the map and without any arguing. It was so different to the times I've spent with men on the hills."

For Storey, the Women CAN Read Maps course, organised by activity company Breathing Space Outdoors, proved

a revelation. "It was easy-going, friendly and non-competitive," she says. "I learned so much more than I ever imagined and now, after years of following my husband as he navigates the hills, I can go out walking on my own."

Specialising in guided walking and navigation in Scotland, Breathing Space Outdoors, which is run by instructor Fran Loots, is one of a growing number of outdoor pursuits providers that are offering female-only courses, workshops and holidays.

In the Cairngorms, Fi Chappell, who works for Talisman Activities, also leads women-only navigation and hill walking courses, while Climb 365 organises all-female scrambling and climbing excursions at various Scottish locations.

Meanwhile, women-only mountaineering, walking and climbing guiding is offered by the all-female company Chicks Unleashed, set up and run by Rosie Goolden. Another company that is run by women for women is Walking Women, which

offers a host of walking holidays such as an eight-day trip along the West Highland Way.

Elsewhere, The Hub in the Forest at Glentress, near Peebles, has introduced exclusively female mountain bike skills courses, in addition to its line-up of mixed-gender sessions. The female-only sessions suit a range of abilities from beginners through to women hoping to hone their downhill riding.

Recently, a girls-only, beginner-friendly surf tour at Coast 2 Coast, based in East Lothian, proved a sell-out, with other similar concepts now in the pipeline, says the company.

According to Goolden from Chicks Unleashed, there has been an amazing rise in demand for women-only courses. "While there has been a natural increase in the number of women taking part in all outdoor activities over the past decade, simply because of a growing trend, the past few years have seen this new off-shoot of all-female courses," she says. "Setting up Chicks Unleashed in 2004 was seen as



In it together: an all-women group tackle some wintry conditions (left); refining abseil technique (right); check and check again (below)



## “THERE HAS BEEN AN AMAZING INCREASE IN DEMAND FOR WOMEN-ONLY COURSES”

something of a novelty, but now there are all these women-only activities and many of the providers I talk to say they are popular.”

Goolden, who has been an outdoors instructor for 11 years, believes there are several reasons why women are attracted to the single-sex tuition. “To begin with, it’s more of a perception issue in that many women believe outdoor activities with men, or outdoor centres filled with men, will be testosterone-fuelled or too competitive,” she says.

“Once women have tried a few courses they realise this is not always the case, but that it depends on how the instructor handles the different abilities and dynamics of the individuals, regardless of gender.”

However, she adds, many women do not even go as far as signing up for the courses in the first place. “They will just say they don’t fancy them.”

In Goolden’s experience, the women that enquire about female-only instruction believe, “rightly or wrongly”, they will feel more comfortable



## ESSENTIALS

Whether you're keen to learn more about mountaineering or mountain biking, surfing or skiing, the chances are that there will be women-only training courses available. Here is a small selection from around Scotland:

### CHICKS UNLEASHED

Mountaineering, walking and climbing in Scotland and Europe

[www.chicks-unleashed.co.uk](http://www.chicks-unleashed.co.uk)

### TALISMAN ACTIVITIES

Freelance instructor Fi Chappell offers navigation and hill walking in the Cairngorm area

[www.talisman-activities.co.uk](http://www.talisman-activities.co.uk)

### BREATHING SPACE OUTDOORS

Women-only navigation and walking courses in Scotland, plus an annual cross-country ski trip to Europe

[www.breathingspaceoutdoors.com](http://www.breathingspaceoutdoors.com)

### CLIMB365

Winter skills, scrambling and ice climbing

[www.climb365.net](http://www.climb365.net)

### WALKING WOMEN

Gentle to intermediate walking holidays across Europe, including an annual trek on the West Highland Way

[www.walkingwomen.com](http://www.walkingwomen.com)

### MOUNTAIN GIRL

Women-only climbing workshops and holidays in the UK and Chamonix, France

[www.mountaingirl.eu](http://www.mountaingirl.eu)

### SKI LIKE A WOMAN

Ladies Only sessions at Glasgow Ski and Snowboard Centre and sNO Boys Allowed sessions at Midlothian Ski Centre, Edinburgh

[www.skilikeawoman.com](http://www.skilikeawoman.com)

### THE HUB IN THE FOREST

Women-only beginner and intermediate mountain biking skills courses at Glentress restart in the spring

[www.thehubintheforest.co.uk](http://www.thehubintheforest.co.uk)

### COAST 2 COAST

This East Lothian based surf school can arrange all-girl surf classes. Also look out for female-only surf tours

[www.c2cadventure.com](http://www.c2cadventure.com)

### GLENMORE LODGE

Scotland's national outdoor training centre is happy to organise women-only courses across a range of activities on request

[www.glenmorelodge.org.uk](http://www.glenmorelodge.org.uk)



## “WOMEN ARE USUALLY MUCH MORE RELAXED WITHOUT THE MEN”

working and learning among single-sex groups. “It’s not that we’re male-bashing in any way, but what does appear to be true is that women seem to thrive and learn more in outdoor activities such as navigation, climbing and winter mountaineering skills without the guys around,” she continues.

“I find women are usually much more relaxed without the men, they enjoy a less competitive atmosphere and they offer a lot more support to each other.”

For Judi Mills, a 38-year-old maths teacher, the “unexpected encouragement, inclusiveness and camaraderie” experienced on a Chicks Unleashed climbing day at Huntley’s Cave near Grantown-on-Spey several years ago proved such a winning formula that she has since completed three other climbing and mountaineering courses with the same company.

Mills, from Kilkenny in Ireland, says: “Before I discovered Rosie’s courses I had attended numerous mixed group mountaineering sessions, but I always felt the pressure of competition and uneasy bravado. I did learn new skills and did enjoy myself but I never had as much fun as with Chicks Unleashed.

“Thanks to the girls on my first course at Huntley’s Cave, each of whom were willing me on to ascend my best ever climb, I made it to the top of the cliff that day. It was as though they wanted it as much as I did and this felt quite different to any experiences before.”

Meanwhile, Loots at Breathing Space

Outdoors believes there is another clear advantage of women-only groups: she has found that women and men respond in contrasting ways to instruction about activities.

“When teaching navigation courses in particular, I’ve found that women generally learn in a different way to men,” she says. “It’s not that women aren’t able to read maps, but more that they look at maps and the landscape in a different way. They tend to visualise landmarks, while men are more formulaic in their map reading and tend to prefer the system of grid references.”

That is not to say that it is easier teaching one gender over the other, says Loots. “It’s just that if there’s a group made up of only men or only women then instruction can be tailored to suit.”

Loots adds that women also benefit from being able to go at their own pace and are more contemplative when making decisions. “In an all-female group, the women will defer their decisions more among each other. This might mean that they take longer to reach a decision but in the end they actually take a more straightforward route and make fewer errors.”

Reaching the summit of Dun Mor on the Women CAN Read Map weekend course in April, Lin Storey recalls feeling a wonderful sense of achievement. “While it wasn’t a big hill or a particularly complicated route, we all felt so pleased to have negotiated our own way there,” she says.

“It’s not that I don’t like to go walking with men, but I now know how much more fulfilling it feels to be out on the hills doing it for myself.” ■

Pointing the way: a student on one of the Women CAN Read Maps courses, run by Breathing Space Outdoors