



OUT OF BOUNDS

SKI MOUNTAINEERING SOUNDS EXTREME, BUT NEEDN'T BE.
IAN SHERRINGTON FROM GLENMORE LODGE EXPLAINS HOW MANY
SKIERS CAN ACCESS SOME OF SCOTLAND'S FINEST BACKCOUNTRY

THE GROWING POPULARITY of ski touring and mountaineering has seen skiing return to its origins as an efficient means of travel, rather than just a way of careering down mountainsides. More and more people are now moving beyond the safety net of patrolled ski areas, with the Cairngorms a particular hotspot thanks to hills that are perfectly shaped for skiing.

The British desire for adventure is renowned the world over and ski mountaineering is a sport in which we have something of a tradition. This year sees the centenary of the Alpine Ski Club, the oldest ski mountaineering club in Britain, and probably the world.

Those lucky enough to have toured on skis often say that it is the most complete and satisfying way to travel in the

mountains. But it is a sport in which you still earn your turns. For a start, you need a degree of hill fitness to help glide your skis to more remote summits. And, given the wildness of the Scottish mountains in winter, you also need the skills of a winter mountaineer to navigate efficiently, avoid avalanche and survive tough conditions.

But for those hardy teams of tourers that head for the hills, the challenges of the terrain and the use of personal skills only add to the satisfaction of a grand day out. The rewards can be great, with stunning views and the thrill of creating virgin tracks in remote mountain areas.

Of course, ski mountaineering can mean different things to different people. It can be an afternoon stroll up a local hill with a cruise back down for tea or a big adventure with friends in truly remote backcountry. It can be a great workout, or a heart-stopping challenge. But above all, it is a sport for life and there is always a new challenge for those who seek it.

The sport offers an alluring marriage between winter mountaineering and skiing that has held many tourers enrapt, including one of the founders of the modern sport, Arnold Lunn. "The night was cloudless and the full moon had risen, revealing a delicacy of tone and texture in the

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY: IAN SHERRINGTON



Ridge riding: enjoying perfect conditions (left); heading for Cairngorm summit (right)

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“snows which tends to vanish under the glare of the sun,” he once wrote. “Our tracks down the pass stood out against the shimmering background. The snow thrown up showed as a faint blur beside the dark line etched by the ski.”

And the attraction remains today, with the only difference being that the sport is now more accessible than ever. Modern, shaped skis have helped many learn how to make effortless turns on the piste. The same shape has been adapted for use off-piste and forms the basis of today’s backcountry touring skis. As a result, skiers are able to venture off-piste much earlier in their development.

There is no reason why someone who competently skis parallel on intermediate runs should not make fledgling tracks beyond the groomed slopes. The trick is to do so with an experienced team who can introduce you progressively and within your capabilities. Similarly, for those who are not mountaineers, you should go with those who are. Friends, courses and clubs can all help make your first experience of ski mountaineering one that will have you hooked for life.

UP AND DOWN

So, how do ski mountaineers get around? Much of the equipment used for the sport is adapted to meet the needs of both winter walking and skiing. The boots are like a downhill ski boot, but with a mountain boot sole that provides flexibility for walking. To walk uphill, the ski

GETTING STARTED



Glenmore Lodge runs introductory ski mountaineering courses including a Ski Mountain Surgery weekend in January (24th to 25th) – a wonderful way to meet fellow backcountry fanatics.

For all introductory courses, we ask that, as a minimum, people be walking fit and have the ability to happily ski parallel on blue-run terrain. If you are with the right group, this minimum ability should allow you to enjoy the day so long as the group leaders are sensitive to your abilities.

The main concern for teams that are self-taught is to remember the seriousness of the terrain and conditions you are likely to encounter. After all, ten minutes skiing from the top of most ski areas can usually see groups on remote slopes, possibly in cloud.

If you are concerned about how well you might adapt to being off-piste, try to get out early in the season and look for short sections of easy-angled slope at the side of the piste. Get up on the slopes first thing before any new snow is tracked out, although remember to check that rocks are well covered before you cut loose.

It is also worth considering lessons. Most ski schools will have instructors who love to ski off-piste. They can help you try it out without having to carry a rucksack. Your progression will be a lot quicker and much more positive. You will also get good advice on equipment from your local retailers. Ski mountaineering is a relatively small-scale sport, so seek out the specialists for good advice. I can recommend Mountain Spirit in Aviemore (www.mountainspirit.co.uk).



It’s white out: being able to navigate in the murk is a key skill when ski mountaineering (above); a bit of creativity can be needed to get down some slopes (left)

ADS

CLASSIC TOURING

When the conditions are right, there is nowhere better for ski mountaineering than the Cairngorms. Here are a few classic routes that offer the kind of well-shaped, open slopes required:

THE GENTLE FORAY:

Cairngorm ski area to the south side of Cairngorm

Head up through the ski area with care. Avoid the pistes where possible. From the highest drag lift, head for the summit of Cairngorm. With good visibility, great skiing can often be found to the south and east of the summit. Return via the ski area.

THE HIDDEN GEM:

Monadh Liath mountains

Starting at the road, head behind Newtonmore and follow the track alongside the Allt a Chaorainn burn. After about a mile, cross the burn (hidden footbridge marked by a cairn) and ascend towards the coll between Geal Charn and A'Chailleach. A'Chailleach is the prize.

THE ROADSIDE ROUND:

West Dromochter hills

From Balsporran Cottages, follow the ridge to the summit of Geal-charn. The round continues to A'Mharconach and then up onto the Boar of Badenoch. The valleys between provide good skiing in their upper reaches.

THE CLASSIC PLATEAU:

Cairngorm ski area to Ben Macdui

Climb to the plateau by the Fiacail a Choire Chais. Ski the upper reaches of Coire Raibeirt then pick your way around the plateau to Ben Macdui. Return to Cairn Lochain. Ski carefully to the west, descending to spot height 1,083m and on to Lurcher's Gulley. Ski the gulley and traverse home to the car park.

For more route ideas, check out *Ski Mountaineering in Scotland* – a definitive guide available from the Scottish Mountaineering Club. www.smc.org.uk

◀ binding releases at the heel and flexes at the toe. Meanwhile, a re-usable 'skin' is applied to each ski, enabling them to slide forward but not backwards.

Once kitted out, ski tourers are able to glide close to the surface, leaving tramlines up the hill while walkers wade through deep hollows. Once at the summit, tourers remove their skins, lock down the heels of their bindings, tighten their boots and it is back into ski mode.

When it comes to location, the Cairngorms are perfect hills for skiers. Accessed from Aviemore via the ski road, the starting point for a tour is already at 650m and so is more likely to hold snow through the winter. The high plateau of the Cairngorm National Park offers the largest area of arctic mountain landscape in the UK, often providing consistent touring possibilities even during these times of erratic snow cover.

A classic tour from the ski area car park will see you onto the plateau in a little over an hour. And as the views to the south reveal themselves, you can gaze across Loch Avon to the granite tors of Beinn Mheadhoin, and beyond to Deeside and Lochnagar.

The hard work having already been done, groups can then choose from a variety of routes. The big day out would be to head for Ben Macdui – Scotland's second highest peak at 1,309m – and ski some of her slopes.

Although vast, these mountains are wonderfully shaped for skiing; their flanks are rounded with open slopes at good skiing angles, while an abundance of open gullies facing a variety of directions ensures there is always fresh snow to be found. The trick is to work out where.

For those of you that make it to Ben Macdui, you will have reached the heart of the Cairngorms. Although popular, during midweek you can still find yourself sharing the plateau with only a handful of fellow adventurers. If they are also on skis, say hi – it might be me. This is after all the UK's finest ski touring area. ■

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“ALTHOUGH VAST, THESE MOUNTAINS ARE IDEALLY SHAPED FOR SKIING”



Back on the piste: returning to civilisation after a successful day in the hills