

Anyone familiar with snowsport touring in Scotland will know that the best winter weather is invariably reserved for midweek days and, strangely, Wednesday seems to be the favoured day. I've lost count of the times I've been in meetings or stressing over work deadlines knowing snow conditions were superb and frustrated in the knowledge that the coming weekend forecast was a return to SW winds, high temperatures and rapid snowmelt.

Determined to address this, and along with a growing number of friends with similarly sympathetic employers and/or flexible working arrangements, in recent winters I've been fortunate

to be able to take days off at short notice in order to increase the tally of outstanding Scottish winter days.

One such day in March 2020 saw Mike Cawthorne, Gordon Pearson and I heading to the Grey Corries secure in the knowledge we'd have settled weather and extensive snow cover, essential requirements for a committing long day on high summits, narrow ridges and sweeping corries. Despite the longer daylight of late winter, our plans still called for an early start. So with the sun just starting to pull itself above the horizon I was already on my way, heading past a frozen Loch Laggan well before 7am.

Stunning highland scenery quickened the pulse, with every corner bringing familiar but always spectacular views. The cliff-rimmed corries of Carn

MIDWEEK MARVEL

Getting the best out of Scottish snowsport touring

Words and pictures by Alistair Todd, Director for Snowsports Touring

Liath and the snowy bulk of Creag Meagaidh were quickly passed, with the eye then drawn to the scene west along Loch Laggan where the Easains proudly pushed their shapely summits skyward to be met by the first of the sun's rays hitting them in a riot of pinks and oranges. Momentary anxiety that we'd chosen the wrong objective was quickly quashed as the Grey Corries came into view with stunning tops and snow cover which extended well down the mountainsides.

To minimise possible parking problems, a car was left at Spean Bridge and we completed the final leg to Corriechoille with an estate car tangled full of bikes, skis and rucksacks. Car parked and gear sorted, we were quickly on the go, wobbling our way up the icy

forest road where the bikes seemed reluctant to take us.

Reaching the top of Leanachan forest after an awkward crossing of the Allt Choimhlidh, it was an easy 15-minute walk before we hit the snowline at 550m where a firm 5cm of old snow provided ample depth for skiing to begin. Newcomers to ski touring find the very concept of skiing uphill difficult to understand but with modern mohair skins providing excellent traction in the snow the three of us quietly settled into a fast kick and glide uphill rhythm. Views opened out and the eye was drawn to Aonach Mor and Aonach Beag with Ben Nevis appearing behind. Everywhere frost feathers sparkled in the improving light and, with no wind, the day was delivering on the forecasters' promise.



Looking towards
the Mamores

Ski mountaineering





“WE MARVELLED AT THE AMOUNT OF SNOW ON THE MAMORES, WHICH LOOKED MORE LIKE THE JOTUNHEIM AREA OF NORWAY.”



On the ridge looking back to Ben Nevis



Top left: Heading up towards Benn na Socaich

Top right: Summitting Stob Coire Easain

Middle: Along the narrowest part of the ridge

Bottom left: Bootpacking to the summit of Stob Coire an Laoigh

Bottom right: Ridge traverse

We stopped for food near the subsidiary top of Beinn na Socaich where a brief gust of wind perfectly timed its arrival to coincide with my new winter gloves having been removed to take photos. One took off and disappeared and although spares were carried it was a frustrating reminder that I should have been using the leashes provided.

The way ahead took us across an incredible surface which appeared to be made up of glass ball-bearings set into the snow. Ski crampons were essential and after the usual bother ensuring a tight fit we moved on, amazed by the conditions. The wind vanished as quickly as it had whipped my glove away and as we moved up towards the summit of Stob Coire Easain an incredible scene unfolded. After a record snowfall winter, huge depths of snow were visible everywhere, with many normal features completely buried or only partially visible.

With some difficulty we crested a final small cornice and were presented with a 360 degree vista. The views were unlike anything any of us had previously witnessed in Scotland. Ridge line after ridge line took the eye towards the horizon and in all directions the mountains were firmly held in winter's grip. Strangely, Ben Nevis, so often the dominant feature in Lochaber, seemed muted as so many other peaks vied for attention. A final challenge presented itself in the form of a steepish bulge leading to the summit of Stob Coire an Laoigh. Unusually, this short

section of the ridge had caught the wind, leaving a rocky boulder-strewn surface where skis were briefly carried.

The ridge snaked its way eastwards, enticing us on with shapely summits, narrow ridge crests, superb light and a guarantee of good skiing. Gordon adjusted his tele bindings with Mike and I commenting on a feeling of loss, with both of us having recently moved from telemark skiing to alpine ski touring. The same sport but with a very different feel!

Skins off, boots tightened, helmets and goggles on and a last check of the way ahead, and we were off on the first descent towards the next summit, Caisteal. For me memories flooded back to the last time I'd been on the Grey Corries, one late May day 20 years earlier, when in T-shirt and shorts I skied the ridge, dropping into the surrounding corries to take advantage of brilliant spring snow cover. Today however was very different, with biting low temperatures quickly chilling any exposed skin whilst short icy sections meant the traverse felt a lot more serious than the last time I'd been here on skis.

In the distance the high tops of the Cairngorms were easily recognisable, to the south the peaks of Glen Coe stood in splendid winter finery, whilst nearer to hand we marvelled at the amount of snow on the Mamores, which looked more like the Jotunheim area of Norway than a scene from Scotland.

Ski mountaineering



Tele turns past the moon

Heading towards Stob coire Easain




Further along the ridge



Under a deep mantle of snow, the traverse of the Grey Corries in winter is a far greater challenge than in summer, with corniced ridge crests and greater exposure. Ski technique needs to be honed to cope with such conditions and despite our combined experience we eventually reached a short section where the exposure and a short knife-edge arête brought us to a halt. As the climber in the team, I was sent ahead to check out whether in the conditions it was better to keep the steel edges of the ski underfoot or do a swap and don crampons. The latter was decided and with some gentle persuasion i.e., “If you don’t come we’re leaving you behind,” I coaxed Gordon across the most exposed section.

From there to the summit of Stob Choire Claurigh was a straightforward ski across easy sun-softened snow fields. Looking back, the serpentine twists of the ridge led the eye to Ben Nevis which, unlike earlier, now asserted its familiar dominance. The light was changing, subtly at first but, with the time now 5pm and the day quickly moving towards sunset, the sky went through a series of colour changes. Summit photos were hurriedly taken and we discussed the best entry point into Coire Choimlidh for our descent.

Gordon was first off with a straight line entry over a small drop followed by a textbook tele turn to control the speed and bring him back into the best line. We watched as he gave a masterclass, dropping 250m in a series of tight turns followed by a final huge flourish as he stopped to wait for us. The snow was by now on the turn as the frost again began to firm everything up. Thankful of sharp edges we pointed our skis downhill, committed to the first turn and in the pink glow of sunset experienced skiing nirvana. In that moment senses were super heightened; turns were effortless and we seemed to float down the mountain. We looked back at our graceful S-turns and wished skiing could always be that perfect.

Gordon was impatient for the off so, despite the moon putting on its own light show and alpenglow still dominating the western skyline, we hastened down, skiing a further kilometre on perfect snow before it finally ran out. Darkness was now upon us and after an hour of relying on head torches it was a contented party who reached the car knowing we’d finally experienced one of those all too frequent but rarely captured perfect midweek days. 



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