



# Mountain Skills



## Seize the day – carefully

### Opportunism and caution on ski

By Heather Morning

IT'S often said that the Scottish ski mountaineer has to be the ultimate opportunist.

The rewards are immense, but the weather and conditions in the mountains so fickle that you have to take your chances when they arise.

There's a big 'but' there though: that opportunism has to be tempered by a clear head and lots of preparation.

Most mountain safety advice will start with information on kit, weather, route ideas etc, but reflecting on why people get into difficulties, based on statistics from Scottish Mountain Rescue, leads me to start this section with us – humans – looking at our behaviour and how we interact with the world around us based on previous life experiences and complex social interactions.

This is known as heuristics. Heuristics feature highly in current avalanche education, but awareness of heuristics and

heuristic traps is something that even the most experienced can learn from across all their mountain decision making. Indeed, it is often the most experienced who get caught out by heuristic traps.

The main heuristic traps are listed below and, as we become aware of them, we can take steps to avoid them.

**Familiarity** – You know the area like the back of your hand and have skied the slope many times. It has always delivered great results and you have never known anyone getting avalanched there – even though you are aware it is a 35-degree angle and on an aspect and altitude showing as a considerable avalanche risk today. You still commit and drop over the edge. But today might just be the day the slope avalanches. Consider another aspect and/or take precautionary measures (one member of the party at a time etc).

**Over-commitment to a goal** – This is also known as being 'goal orientated'. We



have announced we are going to ski that route, gully or summit and after all that time and effort we are so close to achieving our goal. So, we carry on despite all the warning signs around us telling us we should do otherwise: poor visibility, wind slab, fatigue, diminishing daylight... The list is endless. The key is to take the blinkers off, see the bigger picture and make a value judgment not just based on 'the goal'. A really positive way of not slipping into this trap is to plan several goals for your day, so that as conditions change, your goal can change accordingly.

**Peer pressure** – However comfortable we feel within our group, we are all exposed to peer pressure. No one wants to be the 'party pooper' or to be viewed as the weakest link. It is crucial to foster a culture of openness and honesty within your group so everyone can contribute to decision-making and feel comfortable to speak out when they feel that things aren't right.

**Scarcity** – Yep, this one is particularly relevant for Scottish conditions. Some lines only come into condition infrequently and ensuring you are in the right place at the right time with the right people is a juggling act. You might get there and realise that the wind has picked up, forming wind slab on that slope you planned to ski. There's a lot of pressure to ignore the obvious warning

signs that conditions are not right. Combine the scarcity with peer pressure and being goal orientated, and it's a lethal combination heading towards very bad decisions and potentially serious consequences.

**Social proof** – Just because you can see tracks and/or people on the slope does not mean that the line is safe. Just because someone has skied a line before, doesn't mean the line is safe either. Make your own decisions based on the best information available to you at the time.

**Expert Halo** – It's not unusual within a group that someone will put themselves forward as being more experienced and knowledgeable than others. It might be that this person just has the loudest voice and the least experience. It's everyone's responsibility to make sure that they are involved in the decision-making process.

And finally

**Safety equipment** – It's easy to allow safety equipment to cloud your judgement.



*Does wearing that transceiver make you feel safer and influence your decisions?*

In summary, heuristic traps are dangerous, resulting in even the most experienced people defying logic, previous education and common sense in the pursuit of achieving their goals. Awareness of this tendency towards mental shortcuts and guarding against it could save your life.

## Preparation

To be a successful opportunist you have to make sure you're ready to take those chances when they come. Don't let those ideal conditions take you by surprise, otherwise you'll miss the opportunity or end up going out ill-prepared. So keep an eye on weather and conditions as a matter of habit and routine, and make sure all your kit is up to scratch and ready to hand.

## Weather & conditions

Understanding mountain weather forecasts is essential for making the best decisions both before and during your day out. Combine the weather information with the Scottish Avalanche Information Service bulletin for the area you are interested in. Weather and avalanche risk are intrinsically linked. Ask yourself what has been happening during the days leading up to your planned adventure as this will indicate where the snow is or is not and what the conditions are likely to be on the aspect you are interested in skiing or boarding.

## Some helpful websites

Mountain Weather Information Service

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

Met Office Mountain Forecast [www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/specialist-forecasts/mountain](http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/specialist-forecasts/mountain)

Scottish Avalanche Information Service [www.sais.gov.uk](http://www.sais.gov.uk)

The SAIS area blogs are a very useful pictorial resource which will help you decide which part of Scotland to head to.

## Route Planning

Up-to-date conditions and ideas on route choice can be accessed at:

British Backcountry [www.facebook.com/groups/Britishbackcountry/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/Britishbackcountry/)

Scottish Backcountry [www.facebook.com/ScottishBackcountry](https://www.facebook.com/ScottishBackcountry)

Winter Highland [www.facebook.com/Winterhighland](https://www.facebook.com/Winterhighland)





Inverness Backcountry Snowsports Club  
[www.facebook.com/groups/154348047966889/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/154348047966889/)

## Kit and skills

It is assumed that people reading *Scottish Mountaineer* will have a working knowledge of the necessary kit and skills required for ski journeys in the mountains. However for information on this check out the snow sport touring pages on the Mountaineering Scotland website [www.mountaineering.scot/activities/snowsports-touring](http://www.mountaineering.scot/activities/snowsports-touring) which include numerous tips and YouTube videos on kit and on ski technique.

## Navigation

Navigation in winter is more demanding than in summer – and navigation on skis brings more challenges yet – particularly if you find yourself in poor visibility near corniced edges and complete snow cover. It needs to be taken very seriously and a cautious line taken which ensures you keep well away from potentially corniced edges.

Map and compass are essential, with, of course, the well-practiced skills associated with regular use. It might also be prudent to carry some form of electronic back-up in the form of GPS or, as a minimum, the OS Locate app which will provide you with a six-figure grid reference and altitude should you become disorientated. 'Slope aspect' is a key tool in the conditions described above.

Judging distance while descending on skis in poor visibility is particularly challenging, and electronic gadgets will help with this. Using a compass effectively when you already have your hands full with ski poles is a skill which needs regular practice. If in doubt about your ability to navigate, consider a lower route or choose your days carefully.

Assessing slope angle is essential to aid your avalanche judgement. The following will help you assess the angle of your intended slope.

### OS 1:50k map (10m contour interval)

2mm or less between Index contours  
= a slope of 30 degrees or steeper.

### OS 1:25k map (10m contour interval)

4mm or less between Index contours  
= a slope of 30 degrees or steeper.

Additional navigation information can be viewed at [www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/essential-skills/navigation](http://www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/essential-skills/navigation) And winter-specific navigation courses are available, provided by Mountaineering Scotland [www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/courses-and-events/our-courses/winter-navigation-course](http://www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/courses-and-events/our-courses/winter-navigation-course)

# Ski mountaineering: Is it for you?

by Heather Morning

IT'S Tuesday 19 December 2019, I'm on Cairngorm summit, and you can see for miles. The summit of Ben Nevis looks close enough to reach out and touch.

There is a 360-degree panoramic view across the Highlands – white mountains and crystal blue sky – and it's calm, zero wind, the day that dreams are made of. And I wasn't alone. On my skin up through the Cairngorm ski area I must have seen in excess of 40 people all grabbing the opportunity of one of those (sadly all too rare) special days on ski. Be warned: ski mountaineering is a sport for the opportunist! But the lucky combination of skis and conditions meant I didn't have to 'post hole' through the deep new snow on the way up and, even more importantly, that what lay ahead was a cracking ski down.

Ski mountaineering in Scotland has increased hugely over the last decade, from an elite sport carried out by the 'bearded and eclectic' to a sport for the many. Kit has improved massively: lighter, less bulky, more comfortable. (If only I could say less expensive). And it's not unusual to see lots of ski mountaineers heading out from easy access points at ski areas even on days when the ski areas are closed.

## How do you get started?

If you are totally new to skiing, my advice would be to get some ski lessons. Learn the basics on piste, before venturing out into more challenging terrain and snow conditions. Remember that ski patrol will only operate in the confines of the ski areas, so outside the marked areas you are responsible for your own safety.

When you feel ready to venture outside a ski area, 'try before you buy' as the kit is expensive. A full set-up of boots (which have a Vibram sole like your mountain boots for walking), skis, skins (for ascending) and bindings (specific modes for use in ascent and descent) will cost, when bought new, in the region of £1,500.

Look through the following options, all of which will include kit hire:  
<https://snowsportscotland.org/learn-ski-touring/>  
[www.glenmorelodge.org.uk](http://www.glenmorelodge.org.uk)  
[www.g2outdoor.co.uk/activity/ski-touring/](http://www.g2outdoor.co.uk/activity/ski-touring/)



[mountaineering-and-ski-touring/www.british-backcountry.co.uk/www.cairngormadventureguides.co.uk/winter-courses/guided](http://mountaineering-and-ski-touring/www.british-backcountry.co.uk/www.cairngormadventureguides.co.uk/winter-courses/guided)

One of the greatest pleasures of ski touring is heading out away from the infrastructure of a ski area, away from the crowds, the queues and the noise. But that brings its own challenges as well as rewards. In addition to skiing skills, you need to factor in numerous other mountaineering skills – navigation, weather, snow conditions, route choice, decision making, avalanche awareness, emergency kit. Navigation when descending can be particularly challenging (an altimeter can prove useful, especially in poor visibility).

All winter mountaineering skills are just as important on ski as on foot; if you are venturing out on new adventures it would be well worth checking out the advice on our #ThinkWinter pages on the Mountaineering Scotland website [www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/thinkwinter](http://www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/thinkwinter)

The following pages on our website also give specific advice for ski mountaineers and include a 'good practice guide' when accessing the mountains through one of the ski areas.  
[www.mountaineering.scot/activities/snowsports-touring](http://www.mountaineering.scot/activities/snowsports-touring)

We run a weekend course aimed at members who take the lead role on their days out, whether that be as part of a club environment or more informally with groups of friends. Details of this course can be viewed at [www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/courses-and-events/our-courses/snowsports-touring](http://www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/courses-and-events/our-courses/snowsports-touring)