

ClubSpot

Edinburgh Ski Touring Club

By Brent MacGregor



Lyngen Alps Norway

Photo: ESTC / Clare Campbell



Turkey

ESTC / Cathie MacDonald

Imagine a clear February night as you step from the train at Britain's most remote station. A million stars twinkle in the cold and cloudless sky. Shouldering your rucksack, you glide along the snowy track and then fly on skis across the frozen loch. All too soon this glory ends as you meet your ski club mates for a wee dram by the fire.

The Saturday dawn brings a bluebird day with spectacular snow. Fresh huge crystals float atop the season's ample base on Ben Alder, the peak of the day. Skiing conditions are the best they have been for a lifetime. The ascent flies by, aided by the conditions and the great season to date, with everyone fit, some folk having toured virtually every weekend since before Christmas.

All too soon, the good bit, the defining uphill aspect of the sport, ends and it's time for the familiar ritual of removing skins from the skis before making fresh tracks to the

valley. The descent is so good the first impulse is to repeat the whole process immediately, but February days are still all too short and other pleasurable challenges beckon. The day ends with a shared meal of an enviable high standard, prepared communally, followed by a malt whisky or two over the map, planning the next day.

This meeting of the route choice committee is spun out because of the logistical imperative of making the bottle lighter for the trip out. Morning brings another once in a lifetime day before the Sunday night train back to reality.

A typical weekend with the Edinburgh Ski Touring Club? Not quite typical, but certainly one of many recent highlights. Currently one of the largest outdoor clubs in Scotland, Edinburgh Ski Touring Club was founded in 1978 as a university club, opening to a wider public in 1981. Originally

the Edinburgh Nordic Ski Club, its members come from a variety of backgrounds united by a love of the outdoors in winter.

As the founding name suggests, the style of touring was originally nordic. Gear was waxable long, skinny skis and bendy leather boots. Skiing down Lurcher's Gully was a challenge and anyone who could do a proper telemark turn was a star. An early highlight was the Three River Traverse on skinny skis from Aviemore to Blair Atholl, led by club stalwart Dave MacArthur. Camping in temperatures as low as -15C, the party skied on the frozen Spey, the Dee and the Tilt as they traversed the Cairngorms.

Harry Henniker, an early member, ran a service called the Bike Bus. In winter, this became the Ski Bus, providing transport and hire equipment which the club eventually inherited.

Then club Secretary Alison Brown, who was a university Research Fellow, utilised her grant application writing skills and the club was able to obtain a sportscotland grant for the development of a website and to renew the ski hire stock. The programme was designed to promote wider participation given the considerable costs of ski touring equipment.

Over the years, telemarking, starting on cambered nordic 'skinny skis' and nowadays on increasingly wider skis with plastic boots, has undergone a real renaissance. Reflecting the development of the sport in general, the committee recognised the need to provide telemark training for members.

David Brown, also responsible for the club's first website (www.estc.org) and its online handbook, began organising telemark instruction holidays in the Alps. The new gear the club bought with the grant ranged from straight skinnies to slightly waisted touring skis through to increasingly heavier telemark skis with releasable bindings.

The ski hire scheme has been put on a sustainable basis with depreciation calculated and surpluses used to replenish the stock annually. There has

been a degree of convergence as telemark gear has got heavier and Alpine touring kit has got lighter. Once referred to jokingly as 'the dark side', Alpine touring has entered the broad church of the club and the word 'Nordic' has been dropped from its name.

Interest in ski touring has grown as piste skiers aided by modern equipment have ventured first off-piste and then into touring. Gone are the days when Alpine ski mountaineers were a rump of five or six members (some of whom could not actually ski very well) in larger climbing clubs.

No longer do you have to be an experienced Alpine mountaineer before even thinking about ski touring. Equipment and information are easy to come by. Indeed there are specialist clubs. The ease with which the sport can be taken up presents new challenges. Experienced mountaineers wanting to learn nordic touring are easy to deal with. They hire skis, are given a few tips and stride off into the woods or up a rolling hill. The learning curve is not too steep to begin with.

What about excellent downhill skiers who can't read a map? To address these issues, the club has developed the concept of the Buddy Weekend where old hands ski with new members and 'think out loud', sharing their experience explicitly without engaging in actual technical instruction.

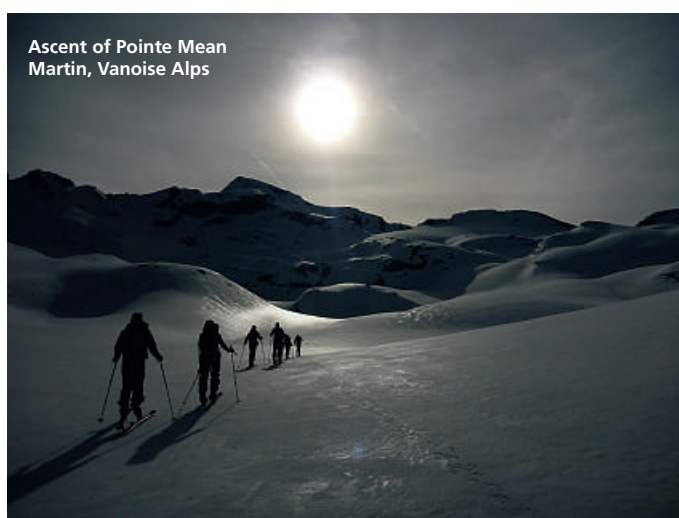
In addition, the club annually circulates a register of external training provision and has worked closely with MCoFS's Heather Morning and Roger Wild, telemark instructor Kim George and Alpine specialists Mountain Tracks. First Aid courses are run with the British Association of Ski Patrollers. Avalanche awareness is taken especially seriously and the hire stock now includes transceivers, shovels and probes.

In recent years members seem to have fallen from the sky with the snow, with the club now comprised of 170 members with an ability range from beginners to instructors and even racer level skiers:



Ascent of Dundreich in the Moorfoots

ESTC/Lindy Firby



Ascent of Pointe Mean Martin, Vanoise Alps

ESTC/Pauline Thompson

rough-tie-toughtie Munro baggers and experienced Alpine mountaineers ski with flash off-pisties and freeriders. Nevertheless, the Club remains true to its roots and there is still much nordic activity to this day from laps of the Meadows under the street lights after work on winter weekdays to multiday tours in Arctic Sweden.

The club is not dependent on once in a lifetime Scottish winters like 2010 and organises an annual programme of overseas trips. Past highlights include the Wapta Icefields in the Canadian Rockies, trips to Poland and the Czech Republic, an expedition to remote eastern Turkey and visits to the Pyrenees and the Alps. Norway figures prominently with areas like the Hardanger, Rodane and the Jotunheim all well explored.

In one week last spring, a club group were laying down tracks on Alpine north faces, while in Norway another group



Ascending above Col d'Iseran in the Vanoise Alps, France

ESTC/Mike Hurst

sailed their way around the Lyngen Alps, touring straight from their boat. Both groups were a mix of Alpine and telemark skiers. Not long after a Nordic equipped group toured in Arctic Sweden.

Not all delights are foreign. Arthur's Seat has been ascended on skis by moonlight, the Seven Hills of Edinburgh have been despatched on nordics and one member had eleven consecutive days on skis in December 2010, without leaving the Lothians.

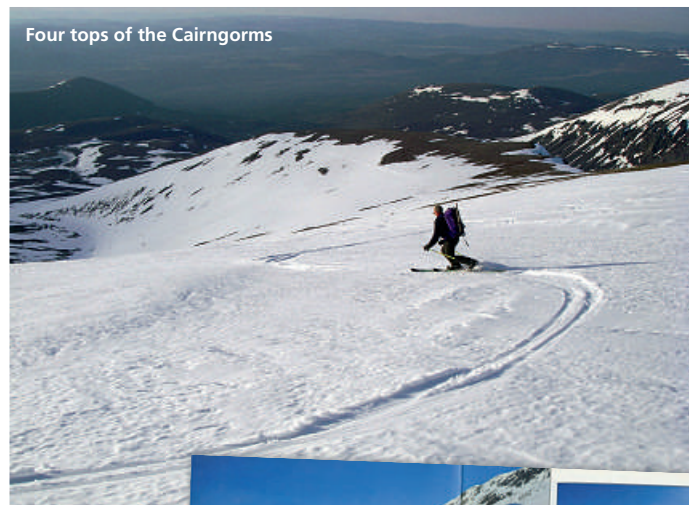
Of course it is not all fluffy powder on bluebird days. Many a rainy day has been spent walking in the woods on winter meets and some years a four-hour carry to a snow patch is a highlight. Such is the lottery of the sport.

To make the club sustainable in the off season, there is a programme of day walks, cycle rides and camping weekends. Members can be seen on climbing walls and crags, including a group working their way through Scottish multi-pitch classics. Enthusiasts are even known to go to the Alps climbing in summer to recce ski routes. A

year round social programme includes ceilidhs, pub evenings for 80 of your closest friends, last Munro and Corbett parties and slide show evenings.

On the evening of 20 June 2010, a club group set off from the Cairngorm car park to hike up Lurcher's Gully to bivi the shortest night before skiing up Ben MacDui at dawn and then race back across the plateau to ski down the headwall of Coire Cas. One star did this steep descent on skinny skis. The season thus ended memorably for all, including one member whose fun began in December in the Ochils, continued with a January traverse of the Pentlands High Level Route and was topped up with Four Tops of the Cairngorms on April 1st. This new member didn't regret joining us. You won't either.

Contact: membership@estc.org



Four tops of the Cairngorms

ESTC/Guy Wimble



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