

TRAINING DAYS

Skiing for mountaineers

Wanting to step up from ski touring to ski mountaineering, **Katy Dartford** enrolled on a course designed to improve technique in varied terrain and snow conditions...

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Skiing will be the death of British Alpinism”, exclaims Andy Kirkpatrick in his book ‘Cold Wars’. In an amusing exchange between himself and British mountain guide and 11 times Everest summiter, Kenton Cool, Kenton suggests “you should try it mate,” but Andy “doesn’t have any time for fun...”

Andy probably hadn’t tried ski mountaineering, where the pain of an arduous climb is rewarded by the freedom and speed of an off-piste descent from a mountain summit. The two sports really go hand in hand, especially in the spring months, where there is still too much snow around to be able to climb on foot. Skis make it safer, spreading your weight and making it less likely you’ll break through a snow bridge into a hidden crevasse. That said, for those who are attracted to risk, ski mountaineering is still inherently dangerous, as you can’t really rope-up most of the time and there’s always a chance of an avalanche. The motivations to take part in ski mountaineering from a skier’s point of view is the pursuit of virgin powder or – for the climber – achieving a mountain’s summit using skis as a tool. It’s often a very personal experience with a sense of achievement, but probably only really appreciated by the extreme skier himself.... so not all that far removed from the motivations behind mountaineering, then.

LONG TRADITION

The use of skis for winter mountain access has a long history with the first group ski tour in the Alps taking place near Davos, when the Branger brothers teamed up with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle from Frauenkirch to Arosa in 1894. Ski mountaineering isn’t quite the same as general ski touring as it involves travelling over any part of a mountain – over rock, ice, or broken glacier sections, as well as high-altitude traverses – not just trails for ascending or sheltered powder snow fields for descent. The equipment is more involved too; as well as skins and ski crampons for traction, ski mountaineers use a range of technical equipment including crampons, ice axes, and ropes to reach otherwise inaccessible or dangerous points. It began

with remote high-mountain descents, far from the cameras, and often involved a dangerous technical climb just to access the ski route. This led to the birth 36 years ago the sport of extreme skiing, when Sylvain Saudan skied the Spencer Couloir on the Aiguille de Batiere. For most mountaineers however, this is the problem. We already have a good understanding of the mountains and the hazards they can present – its the skiing element that we’re worried about!

COURSE OF ACTION

That’s why I signed up for a four-day off piste ‘skiing for mountaineers’ course, run by BASS (British Alpine Ski School) Chamonix. The course is aimed at mountaineers who just need to get their skiing up to scratch. There’s no avalanche awareness training or skinning uphill during the course as it’s assumed you already have this knowledge. Instead it is purely about developing ski performance in the off-piste.

Chamonix is the perfect place to learn these skills; the terrain puts more emphasis on technical mountaineering, with more descents from cols than summits but it also offers a range of off-piste options, from the

treeline skiing of Les Houches to the off-piste bowls of the Grands Montets. The BASS Chamonix course promises to teach how to ski ice, bumps, powder, chopped-up powder and whatever other snow you come across when off-piste, as well as skiing smoothly through trees and tight spaces, and on steep ground.

WHITE TIME

It was one of those ‘white out’ days when our group of six met at Grands Montets, with more and more snow falling as the day went on; from sticky ‘ball bearings’ to fluffy powder. Leading the course was Shona Tate who used to ski for the Scottish Ski Team in the mid-80s and is now also a BASI trainer – so she really knows her stuff. Shona initially got us to partner up and do some runs on a slope, following each other. This is good practice as it forces you to be flexible and to make different turn shapes. I found this a little tricky as I seem to throw lots of turns by forcing my skis quickly across the hill. After watching me, Shona confirmed that I needed to make more slow, controlled turns, as I tend to fling myself out there, speed up, fling and speed up (Z turns) – and what we are looking for are, apparently, ‘oranges’.

We then took a look at getting our body position right: with our skis shoulder width apart, our shoulders over toes to maintain good posture. We then practised jumping up and landing without any forwards or backwards movement, an exercise in getting our weight in the right place and giving us a strong postural position – ideally around the arch of our foot, close to where there is a centrepoint marking on the boot.

Shona suggested we put out poles at toes and heel length and try to keep the body within this distance when we ski. Then it was back down the slope to practise turning with an ‘orange’ shape, then smaller, to a ‘tangerine’. But I’m still doing ‘aubergines’ unfortunately – I’m finding it much harder to turn in fat skis!

APPLES AND PEARS

After watching me again Shona gave me a few more tips. Firstly, I should keep the angle of my shoulders in line with the angle

COURSE INFO

Details of the training course

Course name: Off-Piste Skiing For Mountaineers

Dates/times: 4 half-day sessions, 9am–12 noon and 1pm–4pm

Venue: Chamonix Mont Blanc

Cost: £205

More info: British Alpine Ski School – www.basschamonix.com





of the slope, so I'm 'angulating' and using edging effectively, and helping myself to balance well over the outside (supporting) leg. Secondly, as I turn I should think of a scale of 1-6 as the skis come off the edge and onto a flat ski and onto the opposing edge, so it's more progressive – not edge to edge which is how I ski – and to feel for our toes as we turn. Finally Shona recommended that I should try putting my thumb on top of the pole handle and move it round in an arc in front of my body which should help me bend more.

I was finding it quite tricky to think of all these things at once – the new tricks I was trying were definitely not instinctive yet – but I told myself that they should come with more practice. We then skied down through some amazing gulleys in the 'Dream Forest' area, doing faster turns. I finally began to relax as the visibility improved, and it allowed me to be more patient with my turns, giving them more time to 'breathe'.

MORE FRUIT

The next day the fruit and veg theme continued with Shona getting us to make 'bananas' this time. With more bad visibility but lots of fresh powder we decided to head to Les Houches for some tree skiing so we could see better. Starting at Prarion we practised using our poles to help us correctly separate the upper and lower body – so that the upper body stays very 'quiet' and close to the fall line.

There are two types of separation, says Shona; rotary separation and lateral separation. Rotary separation is used for thin paths and gulleys where the body is kept still and our legs move (twisting under the torso) We can also use this for going over bumps – as we get on top of the bump we need to push the tips of the skis downwards to the hollow using our toes. Lateral separation, on the other hand, is to help us angulate and have more versatility in increasing the edge angle of the skis while maintaining balance at high speeds. As we get closer to cleanly carving and achieving good grip against the snow we learn better lateral separation.

We try and put rotary and lateral separation into practice. First we practise rotary separation by skiing a run holding our poles so they are like window frame in front of us and we try to keep the 'window' straight down the fall-line while slip sliding, throwing quick turns and controlling the edge to slip slide. We then practise lateral separation, by getting our bodies curved like a banana. We hold our poles so the downhill pole touches the ground as we turn and then we try dragging them all the way – again, to get us angulating more to help achieve more efficient edge grip.

"When skiing in off-piste powder," says Shona, "we don't quite plant the pole, but use it to dust the ground and get our timing and balance right." Here we also tilt our feet

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attempting to make as many as possible between posts 14 and 13. I predicted I could do about 15 but only did 12 – the others succeeded in reaching 15, proving my turns aren't yet tight enough. We then skied some black off piste moguls where I fell over a lot whilst concentrating on bear hugging and keeping my tips down. We then finished with a long run right down to Lavancher village with my legs burning and all over the place, like a frog in a blender as I tried to coordinate all the different tips and techniques in to one fluid movement. More practice definitely needed! We eventually hit a very long, icy path winding down through the trees to the road and a bus stop, heading back to Grand Montets, exhausted but satisfied.



the Aiguille Poudre to the Col de la Gliere. With just the three of us there we skied an amazing untracked run into the Gliere bowl and all the way down to the Combe Lachenal and the flegere chairlift. A little out of my comfort zone - but not too much – I practised some of the steep skiing techniques I'd learned, and just traversed if I felt a little unsure.

So had the course given me more confidence for going off-piste? Absolutely. With most things if you keep doing something yourself you learn eventually, but going on a course like this speeds up the learning process massively. You learn not only that something is right, but *why* it's right. And that helps you to consistently do it right moving forward. ■ T&M

GOING SOLO

A few days after attending the course I put what I'd learnt into practice on an off piste run from Brevent, the Col de la Gliere. Our guide book said it wasn't too far off the beaten track, hiking up from the Col Cornu chairlift. The route allows you to link the two ski areas of Brevent and Flegere by a high level ridge traverse which – although the book said would take 15 minutes – took me more like 45 with a bit of a tense moment crossing a path where an avalanche had clearly happened recently. We skied from the Lac Cornu chairlift down the Charlanon run for a few metres before climbing up opposite a ski patrol hut where we reached a rounded ridge. We followed this right round to the Col du Lac Cornu and traversed right under



lift, La Cha, hiked up a little to some awesome, deep powder with some short steep sections on the way down and some beautiful untracked virgin snow.

GRAND FINALE

With the weather improving, it was back to the Grands Montets for Day 3, where we practised all we'd learnt so far on some off piste runs from the Bochar and Herse lifts down to Lavancher and through the 'Italian bowl'. Concentrating on good posture, we were told to keep our arms with our poles



held out as if we were 'hugging a bear' and 'keeping our head against the ceiling' whilst our legs did all the movement to smooth out the terrain. Shona also said we should hold our poles out wider, almost as if we are tracking the terrain. But this highlighted what seemed to really be a problem for me: pole planting. Poles are needed more on the off-piste to help us initiate the turn, but I seemed I just couldn't seem to pole plant at all. I could happily ski without poles if I could get away with it, so this was definitely something I needed to work on.

Another technique I couldn't seem to get was a little movement with the legs, using your ankles to pull them backwards as you go over a bump, helping to maintain balance over the feet and control speed, and when going over the bumps to keep the tips down and shoulders over toes. Speed control on the off piste is something I'm still getting to grips with and I seemed to be hovering between just about making turns, to having to traverse the piste to stop myself.

On Friday it was the big off piste day back at Grands Montets. From the top of the Bochar chair lift we practised a few turns,



(skis) to keep our toes up to break the surface of the powder, and ski with our legs closer together, something I certainly don't do enough. We are told not to use the edges to turn, but keep the same pressure on both skis so that ones doesn't sink lower than the other and we lose balance and topple over. "The turns," says Shona, "need to be subtle and bouncy, so you are not actually turning the skis very much and there isn't a build up of snow stopping the skis momentum." We skied from the Prarion lift down through the trees practising this, then took the button