

The Snowshoe Alternative

by Trevor Smith



Schartenkopf 2854m photo Trevor Smith

Each year the spring edition of the newsletter carries reports of winter ski tours with enticing pictures of smiling groups on snowy summits or downing a well-earned beer while watching the sun dipping across a clear blue sky. While there are a lot of experienced hut to hut trekkers in Britain who are also competent winter mountaineers, most do not have the time, opportunity or encouragement to develop the skills needed to do this kind of journey on skis.

So, what about the humble snowshoe? Much cheaper and it only takes an hour or so to understand what you can and cannot do in them. Hut to hut mountain ski touring is well known but people look on snowshoeing as something you do down in the valley on prepared forest trails or in the softer hills of Scandinavia. Turning up at a high mountain hut on snowshoes might get you some strange looks because it is unexpected but it opens up possibilities for people who would not otherwise be able to make the trip in winter because they do not ski.

The sort of snowshoes you usually see with a large soft deck and long tails are not suitable for steep ground: they are designed for soft powder on flatter terrain. Mountaineering snowshoes need to be smaller and tougher, better to move over uneven ground. They have

deep longitudinal rails to stop side slipping, sharp spikes or teeth to grip hard snow and ice, and large front claws on the hinged foot plate to dig in as you climb; many also have claws on the heel as well which help greatly in descent. Most importantly they need a heel bar you can raise to keep your heel up when ascending. Normally the front claws swing up above the base plate as your foot goes down flat. By keeping the heels up the tips of the claws are kept exposed giving that extra bit of grip on steep ground. This also takes some of the strain off the calf muscles and helps to keep your weight forward and better balanced over the snowshoe.

Although ascent rates for snowshoes and skis are similar, there is no doubt you are at a disadvantage on snowshoes on the flat or even slightly downhill. Skiers have an advantage in speed and effort expended, and traversing on steep snow can be quite difficult on snowshoes while relatively efficient on skis. On the plus side snowshoes are much easier to manipulate over broken ground and round trees, especially in descent and will cope with quite steep slopes, hard snow and ice without having to stop and fit skins or harscheisen. In the right conditions journey times similar to summer trekking speeds can be achieved but, as a general rule, double the time allowed when moving on snow and double that again if route finding or conditions are difficult.

Unfortunately, there is little reference material to help with planning a snowshoe trek but there are some guidebook references for snowshoeing in the Dolomites, Pyrenees and French Alps. However, they are mostly easy day trips, simple hut ascents or low-level circular tours aimed at non-mountaineers. Some route ideas can be got from looking at commercial offerings but few tour companies offer this sort of tour on snowshoes and trying to follow a ski route is not always a good idea because of the difference in speed and capability, especially in descent.

Along with Alpenvereinskarte paper maps we used a variety of online tools to plan our route, most of them free for non-commercial use. These included the Austrian travel service interactive map, Amap Online, the ÖAV and other online hut lists, bus and train timetables, but the most useful was [Outdooractive.com](https://www.outdooractive.com), an interactive route planning tool that allows you to select snowshoes as a mode of travel and will route you through a mixture of summer footpaths and winter ski routes avoiding steep or rocky ground and obvious hazards such as Klettersteige. This, along with the addition of a lot of other features, forms the basis of the new [alpenvereinaktiv.com](https://www.alpenvereinaktiv.com) app being offered to members as a subscription service. Slope angle is important, as with ski touring: slopes of around 30° to 35° are about as steep as you want to go before switching to crampons. We used open mapping apps like Splitboard Digital Terrain Mapping to assess steepness and avalanche risk before settling on a final route.

On route we used smart 'phone apps to check *ski snow forecasts* and the *Tirol Avalanche Warning Service*. Keeping 'phones charged is never a problem but a lot of huts do not have a mobile phone or internet connection, so sometimes we had to wait until the morning for a printed copy to be put up. On the trail we used the excellent *Amap mobile*: this free app allows you to zoom in and download up to 100 1Km tiles at 1:50,000 from the official state

mapping site, it tracks current position offline using the phones GPS and displays grid coordinates and height. We always kept two 'phones tracking this app to check navigation.

I should emphasise that this kind of trip is not for the faint hearted. Avalanche awareness and an appreciation of snow hazards are essential and everyone must be equipped with an avalanche transceiver, probe, shovel and the knowledge of how to use them. Be flexible with your plans, build in plenty of options and potential valley exit routes and always be prepared to turn back. This is winter mountaineering at the sharp end; your safety is very dependent on weather and snow conditions. You should not contemplate undertaking a trip like this without professional help if you are uncertain of your abilities.

Some useful links:

www.alpenvereinaktiv.com

www.outdooractive.com/en

www.austria.info/uk/where-to-go/interactive-austria-map#

www.austrianmap.at

www.splitboarding.eu/en/splitboard-routes/ski-route-planner

Amap Mobile, Lawine Tirol (avalanche forecast) and ski snow forecasts can be down loaded from your App Store



Above Schweinfurter - Trevor Smith



Figure 1 Descent to Gries - Paul Jell