

# WHAT IS SKI TOURING?

Ben Clayton-Jolly



*The peaceful Silvretta alps, Austria – Ben Clayton-Jolly*

Imagine a crisp blue sky morning high in the winter alps far from people, ski pistes and the noise of the modern world. Stunning snow covered mountains fill your view in every direction and the crunch of fresh snow underfoot matches the snow covered wilderness that you are standing in. You breathe in the crisp mountain air as you step and clip your ski boots into your touring skis. The cold, clear air makes you feel alive and you are suddenly aware that the usual chatter of thoughts in your head has gone quiet. A final check of your clothing and gear, a smile at your companions, and you begin that familiar, rhythmic glide moving uphill through the snow to the inviting mountain pass waiting for you in the distance.

Ski touring is the alpine sport of exploring the winter landscape on skis and off the beaten track. Austria's vast mountain ranges and superb network of mountain huts make it an ideal location for ski-touring. As the Austrian Alpine Club (UK) we are an integral part of the Austrian Alpenverein so we have access to very well priced ski tours and training, as well as reduced rates in mountain huts and all the other Alpenverein benefits.

Ski tours can be for a few hours or a few days. A typical tour involves skiing uphill on touring skis using adhesive skins on the base of the skis that enable you to move uphill with a gliding action. At the summit or pass you then peel the skins from your skis, tighten your boots and ski back in



*The happy faces of an AAC ski tour group – Ben Clayton-Jolly*

downhill mode. It is both great exercise and a wonderful outdoor adventure. Sometimes you may be following a ski track made by a previous group, sometimes you are breaking a new trail through fresh snow. Ski touring brings a sense of freedom and adventure, and of escaping into the winter wilderness. Multi-day trips can be created by carrying overnight gear and finishing each day at one of the many mountain huts that are scattered across the alpine mountains and valleys. Austrian mountain huts are very high quality and normally offer a haven of warmth, excellent food and drink at the end of a long day's touring. March and April were traditionally the main months for ski touring but everything depends on the weather and snow conditions. Some huts open in February and almost all are closed by the end of April.



*Ski tour groups prepare to depart – Ben Clayton-Jolly*



*Setting off in the morning from Jamtalhütte - Ben Clayton-Jolly*





*And now the descent, Ötztal alps – Ben Clayton-Jolly*

If the mountains are calling you and you would like to start ski-touring, these are some of the first steps to think about.

### **Equipment and Clothing**

Much of your existing outdoor and ski clothing can be used for ski touring. You need to be prepared for very varied conditions from sweating uphill in light gloves, soft-shell trousers and a base layer top, to skiing downhill in freezing temperatures at 3000m. A 30 litre pack is needed for day trips and a 40 litre for overnight tours. These will carry kit and clothing for the downhill passages and emergency equipment. Touring skis and boots differ from equipment designed for downhill piste skiing, especially the bindings. These give you the flexibility to ski uphill and to then secure the binding, and your boots, into downhill mode for the descent. Most ski hire shops in Austria will rent you touring boots, skis, skins and ski crampons. If you want to buy your own equipment, then owning your own pair of well fitting boots is a good start. Three essential items of emergency equipment are also carried by every ski tourer - an avalanche transceiver, shovel and probe. These can also be hired easily at ski hire centres.

### **Technical Skills**

The skills of skinning uphill are straightforward to learn. The ability to ski downhill in variable snow conditions is the skill that tests most people who have learnt to ski as adults. Developing your off-piste skills, such as with an Alpenverein off-piste course, is a great way to progress into ski touring. There are many other skills involved with ski touring such as navigation, route selection and managing risks but if you are with a guided group then your tour leader or guide will take responsibility for these. It is however important that everyone in a group understands emergency procedures and how to use the basic emergency equipment.

### **Physical Fitness**

Your enjoyment of your ski tour will be helped by having some aerobic fitness and leg strength. Uphill ascent is typically 300-400m/hour, so a steady pace. But it is the long downhill sections especially in difficult conditions or if you are skiing at the limit of your skills, that can tire your legs. It can help to do some physical preparation in the weeks before your ski touring adventure.

### **Next Steps**

The AAC(UK) and Alpenverein run many ski tours and training courses each winter. Some of these will be focused on off-piste ski training or guiding you on easy to moderate day tours. As your skills and experience progress you can expand into hut to hut multi-day tours and more adventurous terrain. Another advantage of the AAC(UK) and Alpenverein is that there will always be friendly people around to help teach you new skills and pass on their knowledge.

Ski touring is a wonderful way to explore and experience the alps in winter. We look forwards to seeing you on an Austrian Alpine Club (UK) ski course or tour soon.