

Basic Alpine Skills Training in the Ötztaler Alps

Lynn Sloman



Practising safely tying-off a belay on an Italian hitch - Ian Taylor

If, like me, you've walked in the high Alps in the summer and wondered what it would be like to be even higher, up on the glaciers, but not known how to go about it, then this Alpenverein-Akademie course provides a very good way to get started.

There were 12 of us on the summer 2017 Basic Alpine Skills Course, with a wide range of experience. Around two-thirds of the group had done some climbing before, but had little or no experience of glacier travel; the rest of us (including me) were starting from scratch. Our fantastic course tutors Hannes and Robert were completely unfazed by dealing with a group with such diverse abilities and ages – from fit and raring-to-go twenty-somethings, most of whom had amassed an impressive amount of experience in the few years they had been climbing, to three of us who were not quite so fit and not quite so raring-to-go any more fifty-somethings. There were nine men and three women.

We met on a sunny Sunday on the terrace of the Berghotel Steinbock at the head of the Pitztal. Our rucksacks were loaded into the *Seilbahn* to be carried up to Braunschweiger Hütte, and we set off to climb the 1000m to the hut.

Braunschweiger Hütte is large and comfortable, with evening meals of huge proportions and friendly, cheery staff. It is only a few hundred metres from the tongue of the Mittelbergferner glacier, making it an excellent base for learning basic skills for glacier travel. The first day started gently, with Robert and Hannes showing us how to use crampons and ice axes on icy slopes, what to look for to avoid crevasses, and how to form a roped-up party to move across glaciers. Day 2 was an expedition across the Rettenbachferner glacier to the top of the Schwarze Schneide (3340m) which, although straightforward after the practice the day before, felt like real mountaineering!

Over the next four days, we learnt how to abseil, practiced how to carry out a crevasse rescue, a roped-up climb up a steep icy slope of the glacier, and learnt techniques for making a secure fixing in the ice or snow, using ice screws, Abalakov anchors, and ice axe T-anchors. We also had some 'classroom' sessions (sitting in the hut or in the sun outside with beer or tea and *Apfelstrudel*) on alpine weather patterns, emergency rescue, and useful knots. The highlight of the week was being lowered down into a glacial 'mill' (hole in the ice) so that we could each be 'rescued' by a fellow member of the group. The swirly patterns of blue and transparent ice and noise of the water crashing far down below made it feel like being inside an art installation.

Robert and Hannes were the calmest, nicest, most chilled-out tutors. They were superb at ensuring that we all felt safe and we all had a great time. They found ways to give extra challenges and roles to members of the group with more climbing experience, while still being able to closely support those of us who had less experience and were getting to grips with a lot of new things for the first time. The group was great too: everyone looked out for everyone else, and the group members with more experience were very good at helping out when those of us with less knowledge were confused (yet again!) about the right knot.

Sadly, glaciers are shrinking fast due to climate change, so this amazing and wonderful landscape is becoming more inaccessible, and is increasingly confined to the highest and hardest-to-reach parts of the Alps. That's all the more reason to travel to the course by the least carbon-emitting method you can manage. It's easy to get to Innsbruck by train (check out www.seat61.com) and Innsbruck is a lovely place for an overnight stop. Then take the train from Innsbruck to Imst Pitztal (about 40 minutes) and bus 4204 from Imst Pitztal station to Mittelberg.

You definitely do not need to be young, or male, or macho to do this course: it provides a fantastic opportunity to take the next step on from being a reasonably fit mountain walker, and is a special and memorable experience in its own right.

Thanks very much to AAC(UK) for a generous grant towards the cost of this excellent course.



Charley (Charlotte) proves that a small woman can easily pull a big bloke out of a hole in the ice - Ian Taylor



The all-women team that Connie (right) very competently led to the top of the glacier - Ian Taylor