

Basic Snowshoe Course 2017

By Ruth Griffin and Anne George



Group photo by Allan Hartley at Kalksteiner Egg

Snowshoeing had been on our wish list for a couple of years and at last we managed to book on the ÖAV beginners' course in February based at Innervillgraten. After booking, we received a comprehensive list of compulsory and desirable equipment including avalanche probe, shovel and transceiver. This rather alarming list made us appreciate that this was not just a "walk in the park".

On February 25 we left Gatwick and, after a spectacular flight between snow-capped mountains, we landed in Innsbruck. We spent Saturday night in the Weisses Kreuz, a famous traditional Austrian Gasthaus in the center of Innsbruck. The hotel is a favorite with the AAC(UK) and is apparently where Mozart once stayed. In the evening we met the other 6 participants and dined in the Weinhaus Happ, opposite the Gasthaus.

The following day, we set off for the mountains. Our guide for the week was Robert Thaler. His first challenge was to fit our oversize suitcases with the snowshoes into the back of the minibus, which he achieved with calm and good humor. After a scenic 4 hour drive, which included crossing into Italy and back to Austria, we reached Innervillgraten (1402m).

Here we were warmly greeted at the family-run Gasthof Bachmann. Innervillgraten is a tiny village deep in the mountains with zero mobile phone reception and limited Internet (good for a digital detox) but there are farms, several churches and a co-op!

On Monday after breakfast we had a team brief and equipment tutorial. Snowshoes are single size and need to fit snugly on to the walking boots (which must be sturdy enough). They look like large hinged plastic paddles with sharp metal teeth underneath (like crampons) enabling you to grip in ice and steep slopes. We also received the avalanche equipment. The transceiver must be checked and switched on the "SEND" mode at all times whilst trekking in the mountains whereas it can be switched to "SEARCH" mode when searching for avalanche victims.

Once kitted out, we were driven to Kalkstein (1639m) and walked up Kalksteiner Egg. It was a fine day but with little snow. We climbed some 500m before returning to Kalkstein and then to our hotel where we enjoyed a home-cooked dinner followed by a fascinating talk and slideshow on a pioneering expedition to Greenland by some of our team.

On Tuesday, it was snowing and we walked up into the mountains close to our hotel (Graferalm). During the climb we did a group exercise on the use of transceivers for searching for avalanche victims.

The next day we were greeted by a beautiful sunny day with at least 10cm of fresh snow. We trekked NW from Kalkstein until the junction to Kalksteiner Jöchel. We learnt that this lovely fresh snow is unstable and can carry an avalanche risk. Dangerous conditions include unstable snow and steep slopes (over 30%). We were shown how to measure the angle of the slope using our ski poles. In risky conditions, the team must walk at least 10m apart (50m or more in descent) to avoid the whole party being buried in an avalanche. In fact, during our picnic lunch, we witnessed a couple of small avalanches in the distance.

On Thursday we climbed from Kalkstein towards Marchkinkele (around 2000m on the opposite side of the valley). Again we had sunshine, not a cloud in the sky and stunning scenery. We were off tracks and the snow was up to a meter deep, making the climb difficult, but the views at the summit were worth the effort. The descent was even trickier with most of us falling knee-deep into the snow a few times.

Friday was our last day trekking. We returned to Kalkstein and climbed up to Stalldristall hay barn (2230m). Again we were off tracks, another beautiful sunny day and the mountain vista at the top was breath-taking. On the way down, we had more avalanche rescue training which involved using our transceivers, avalanche probe and shovel to find a buried transceiver. The probe is used to distinguish between a buried body and a hard object such as a rock. We learnt that once a person is buried in an avalanche, they need to be rescued within 5 to 15 minutes if they are to survive.



Arriving at Stalldristall 2230 meters. Photo by Anne George

Both of us thoroughly enjoyed the trip and we couldn't have wished for a friendlier and more interesting group to spend the week with. We would particularly like to thank Robert for leading us safely on all the treks and driving us around, the Bachmann Hotel for their warm hospitality and Janet Britnell and Gabi Schlecter for organizing this trip. We would love to go back again in 2018....

We would also like to thank the Austrian Alpine Club (UK) for according us a grant towards the cost of the course.

In 2018 the Basic Snowshoe Training course will be held in Kühtai: see Alpine Training Courses on p??