

Basic Ski Touring Course February 2018

by Charles Clay



Our intrepid group of 8 enthusiasts met up at Ischgl, a small village way up a narrow valley on the edge of the Silvretta. Walking to our meeting point from where the post bus stops, the village quickly morphs into a hectic resort filled with the brightly clothed. With its underground walkways, travelators and cable ways it is quite impressive.

Behind the Cornice - Charles Clay

Leaving this behind we set off up to the Heidelberger Hütte in a snowcat. It was my first time in such a vehicle and, although I was rather excited by idea of travelling like this in the evening light, the windows were frozen and there were no real views. I might have preferred the accompanying snow mobile, which carried up all our gear, but I don't think we were offered that option!

Half an hour later we were up in the well-appointed 3 storey mountain hut. I thought this a lovely example of national cooperation: an English course run by an Austrian club in a German hut that was actually just over the border in Switzerland. At 2265m, it was in a great location for ski touring, being at the base of a high bowl surrounded by generally easy slopes leading up to range of summits at around 3000m.

On the first day Mario our guide had us out early into a cold, clear morning, obviously wanting to get us to enjoy the superb situation. Having checked out our avalanche gear, he took us way up to the gentle top of the Lareinfernerspitze at 3009m. It was quite steep and slippery towards the top but the views were great and we had a great ski down all the way to the hut.



Arriving at Heidelbergehutte - Tim Hodkinsonte



Testing Snow - Tim Hodkinson

The rest of the week followed a broadly similar pattern, getting out as much as possible, but with a variety of stops to go through the various elements of good touring practice: transceiver checks, perfecting kick turns, practising avalanche rescue with our transceivers, deciding the best route to take and critically evaluating the snow. One time this included digging down into the snowpack. Routes back were chosen to get us experiencing the best snow. This was really appreciated as most of the group had fairly limited off-

piste experience. In the evening practice was backed up by a variety of classroom-based sessions and looking at the various web-based apps now available to make touring safer.

Our last full day saw us on Pix Mottana 2898m. On the way there we came across an area of stunning oversized snow crystals. Against the sun they were like jewels. Maybe that slightly entranced us for, shortly afterwards, coming back down from the summit to the col where we had left our skis, we noticed that we had walked on the cornice side of a long snow crevasse. There must have been a huge build-up of snow there as we were about 10m or more from the edge.



First Summit - Tim Hodkinson

One day when visibility was poor we finished early and built a snow cave. Great fun but, as one of our group with a military background demonstrated, if you can find a bank to make use of, it is much quicker to dig a snow hole.

The day trips were hard work and, whilst not everyone was able to always keep up with the main group's physical enthusiasm, it was an amazing experience. There is just so much to learn: simple things about snow, like the fact that walking on wind-blown snow only squeaks when it is below -8C or that moisture from old snow can sublimate upwards to form an icy layer at the next junction, making a potential slip surface. We were again introduced to *graupel* that funny marble like snow that forms when supercooled water vapour hits warmer snow – apparently becoming common as climate change leads to increasing variability of winter temperatures. Then of course there were the more complex considerations about when to go out and when to change plans.

For me it was a superb stepping stone from going off-piste to feeling comfortable about undertaking a hut to hut tour.



Descent from Lareinfernerspitze - Tim Hodkinson