

Improvers Ski Touring Course for Seniors

by Frank Loftus

After over 20 years of ski touring, and having reached a certain age, I was starting to ask myself “How old is too old for ski touring?” Well if you're a member of the ÖAV there seems to be no limit. I therefore set off to meet up with a group of other senior tourers and our guide, at the Berghotel Rudolfshütte (2315m) in the Hohe Tauern. However the first problem was getting there due to 120 kmph winds. After a short wait at the gondola station, I was dispatched into the maelstrom in a wildly swinging gondola. Gradually, the rest of the group arrived followed later by Robert Thaler, our guide. Over dinner he told us a bit more about the weather (poor visibility but less wind for the next day) and suggested meeting on the slopes at 9:30 the following morning.

Next day we skied easily to the middle gondola station at Grünsee and then skinned the 580m back up to the hut, arriving at 2:00pm for a beer and bite to eat. This was useful for getting used to the gear and ironing out problems. The following morning the wind had dropped almost completely and a fine dog fox peered hungrily at us through our bedroom window. Flocks of snow finches whirled around and there were patches of blue sky as we skied down to the Weiße and then skinned south towards the Medélzkopf (2760m). The views didn't look promising but we continued to climb through exposed rocks until just below the summit, Robert suggested we make a ski depot and climb the rest on foot, to reach the hoar-covered summit cross at about 1:00pm. By then the sky had cleared and we were rewarded with superb views of the Ödenwinkl cirque, a definite must for a summer traverse sometime. Then for the descent! Robert explained we would side

slip slowly through the rock barrier until we reached better snow. This we did without mishap and were soon descending the piste towards the hut for a beer.



*Medélzkopf - Frank Loftus
– by John Hardwick*

The following day dawned fine and we set off towards the Hochfürlegg (2943m). Robert assured us there would be only 3 kick turns today, but he didn't mention how steep they were. In the event he showed us how to dig a platform to facilitate a more conventional turn, which was easier on our older legs. We arrived at the 2900m contour at about 2:00pm, with superb views of other parties ascending the Stubacher Sonnblick (3088m). At that point we all agreed we were close enough to the summit and were looking forward to the descent back to the Weißee and thence to the hut. This did not go without excitement. During a traverse, where the powder was loosely bonded to ice, a small slab was triggered which caught Hilary and knocked her over and buried her arm. Thankfully this was a very minor incident, but illustrative of what can happen. The rest of the descent was through delightful powder, but following Robert's tracks closely to avoid the odd icy cliff.

The next day we were due to do the famous Palatschinken tour, but the Föhn was blowing furiously again and the visibility in the driven snow was only intermittent. Immediately, 2 people went down, and while Robert went to help, the rest of us tried to anchor ourselves to the slope. Robert showed us how to lose height by slowly side slipping keeping our backs to the wind until we could make more conventional turns to reach the middle station again. This time there was no question of skinning back up. We came up in the gondola with one of the staff whose job was to monitor its swinging. He said the wind was about 130kmph (80mph)! I spent the rest of the day in the pool and sauna. That night the wind changed to a northerly, depositing 10cm. of fresh snow on our surroundings.

We set off again, slightly earlier this time, to attempt the Palatschinken tour again. After descending the piste towards a point at about 2052m, we started our skin up to the Niedere Scharte overlooking the frozen Tauernmoos See. The water stored there is used to power Austria's railways. With the fresh snow and a risk of avalanche we kept 10m between us until we reached the col. Visibility was poor down to the old ÖBB building and Robert showed us how to roll snowballs to judge how steep the descent was. He concluded there was a big cornice, and chose a route that avoided it. After traversing along the kilometre long dam wall, we climbed easily to the col below the Rötenskogl and then skied through powder amongst the trees until the forest became too dense and it made more sense to ski down the road until we reached the highlight of the tour, a tunnel! Although only about 60m long, the entrance was festooned with icicles. Once inside, the floor was sheet ice but Robert cut steps and sprinkled rock dust on the bad bits, and by holding onto the rope at the side, we all made it safely through to Enzingerboden

and the bottom gondola station. Rob and I had to rush at this point as we needed to collect our luggage from the hut and descend before the last gondola at 4:15pm. The rest of the group came back with us, thus giving up their chance to eat the famous Palatschinken (filled pancakes) at the Enzingerboden Alpengasthof.



Tunnel - Frank Loftus – by John Hardwick