

BASIC OFF-PISTE TRAINING IN THE STUBAI

By James Coley and Wendy Dodds

Having found the course for English speakers mentioned in Newsletter 220 it all sounded too good to miss and so it proved! Based at the wonderful Lizum 1600 used by the Alpenverein Akademie, a purpose-built training centre/hotel at Axamer Lizum, close to Innsbruck and underneath the spectacular Stubai Alps. With a ratio of 4 participants to our one guide, Christian Damisch, who expertly coached our wayward technique (forgiving us frequently), guided us around the mountains and imparted his comprehensive knowledge of all things mountain and snow related, we were set to improve, come what may. Lizum 1600 could not be better equipped with extensive facilities – ‘wellness’ room, sauna, steam room and extensive dry room lockers. Superb and unlimited food was provided, designed to cope with the “healthiest” of appetites! As the centre also accepts private bookings for skiers and walkers and is accessible with the free bus service from Innsbruck, this may well feature on our itinerary in future.



James, Mark, Wendy and Dougie, photo Christian Damisch

There was some apprehension expressed about the possibility of being ‘dismissed’ (and left to our own activities, but retaining the lift pass) after the first day if we were not up to progressing from on piste to off piste skiing. Despite the concern of being continually assessed by Christian on day 1, we all slept well before this ‘ordeal’.

Our aims for the course differed a little, ranging from James Coley simply wanting to establish some ability to ski off piste, whilst Wendy Dodds, Dougie Bell and Mark Cousen were contemplating future hut to hut ski touring. However the common theme for all was mountain safety in winter conditions. Our days started with the local forecast and avalanche bulletin, assessing the impact for our day on the mountain, followed by

equipment checks and basic transceiver tests to ensure that we were protected as much as possible.

Although familiar with skiing equipment there were new things to learn – applying skins, skinning uphill, perfecting kick turns, the use of avalanche probes and shovels as well as bivvy bags and first aid kits. For first aid we learned that the most versatile piece of kit was an Israeli bandage. Avalanche recovery was a key skill and we practiced the use of transceivers and probes to reduce to a minimum the time taken to recover colleagues. We also assessed snow condition, digging out a large chunk of the snowpack, examining the various layers whilst Dougie Bell bravely jumped all over the top of the block attempting to induce a failure between layers.

On piste ski instruction featured heavily throughout the week but it was evident on the first day that excursions off piste would be altogether more challenging. Frequent falls failed to dim our enthusiasm and with Christian's expert eye we quickly improved. Mid-way through the week our efforts began to see results when venturing further afield.

Back in the Training Akademie Christian ended most days with desk-based training using the "Stop or go?" decision making protocol designed to avoid getting into dangerous avalanche situations (prevention better than cure) considering the local weather/avalanche forecast. Putting this into practice each day we looked at the predicted avalanche risk level, ensuring appropriate spacing between members of the group, considering snow conditions, the angle of slopes and other factors, all usefully summarised in the Alpenverein publication "Sicher am Berg – Stop or Go for ski tours" (available from the AAC(UK) Office). Use of the ÖAV and snowsafe apps – both available free of charge to download to smartphones and tablets, made planning straightforward although we were always aware of the risks of relying on new technology in the freezing temperatures expected in January. Old style (paper!!) maps came in handy as we also tested our navigation skills.

Fortunately we enjoyed benign snow conditions throughout the week. Despite record snowfalls in Austria earlier in January, there had been no significant snowfall for a week and no new snow fell during our stay which, coupled with stable low temperatures, meant that avalanche risk was relatively low.



Wendy and James studying the snow pack that the 4 of us had dug out, photo Dougie Bell



Looking north, photo Wendy Dodds

All the time we enjoyed spectacular views of the surrounding mountains and ridges as far as the Zillertal, Olperer and the distant peaks, easily named by Christian, rarely remembered by us. Highlights of the week included a descent to Axams on a ski touring route returning by bus, finding our way back to the main resort pistes from Widderbergsattel and, on our last day when confidence was high, a beautiful section below Nockspitz/Saile, within sight of Birgitzerkopflhaus.

Fortunately the skiing ability of the group was closely matched allowing us all to ski at our own pace without pressure from other group members to speed up.

This course is to be recommended and we are grateful to Gabi in the ÖAV office for arranging it and to Alpenverein Britannia for supporting us. A level 2 course with Christian for 2020 would be an attractive proposition.

From 2020 similar courses will be arranged by WELTbewegend as the Alpenverein-Akademie will concentrate on leader s' instructional courses.



Lunch break, photo Wendy Dodds