

WINTER SKILLS AT GLENMORE LODGE

BY Oliver Proudfoot



Fluffy corry - O Proudfoot

Our instructor beams broadly and places an ice-axe on the table. Snow layers the Scottish mountains beyond the window panes. “Anyone ever used one of these before - no? Me neither”. A merry chortle draws matching grins around the table. The sub-arctic plateau of Cairngorm awaits and our band of intrepid wanderers would stride it axe in hand. The next Shackleton, Scott, Fiennes, Alpine assailants, Crampon conquistadores, Tundra titans. Wait, wait, wait - rewind.



Start to Cairn Gorm - O Proudfoot

I’d never been winter mountaineering before, but it began with ‘what if’. Early in the season on Skye the final gully approach remains lightly layered in snow. What if I could enjoy the view atop that ridge? September hut-to-hut walking in the Zillertal: glaciers cap the highest peaks. What if I could hike that final km? [Safety note: British courses do NOT teach crevasse rescue essential for glacier travel.] What if we could do our favourite hobby all year round? What if snow simply added a beautiful new perspective?

But winter hiking and mountaineering always presented added risk and I wasn't sure how to approach it. A summer slip may lead to a bruise or twisted ankle. A winter slip could be a lot worse. The summer slope hides few secrets, but snow can shroud rocks, gullies, or sheer drops. Exposure and the cold necessitate more careful planning. Squeaky snowslab and cornices are a far cry from clomping in Kent. Added together, I wouldn't have felt comfortable striding through the Lakes in January with only a few books and online videos under my belt.



Snow-wind ridge - O Proudfoot



Return by rime - O Proudfoot

It turns out there's a world waiting out there for those with just crampon and axe: no ropes required. Walking as we all know and love, just in winter. Enter the 'winter skills course'. We covered weather, avalanche forecasts, route-planning, crampons, ice-axes, preventing a slip, stopping when already sliding, and navigational nuggets of wisdom. All with a group of like-minded persons with the reassurance of a qualified instructor to lend his invaluable risk assessment to bring us up to speed.

So what next? Not a solo winter ascent of Mont Blanc to be sure. I'm planning a few long weekends in the Lake District with my partner over the winter. Ready to head to the Peak District if they receive a dump of snow. Looking into courses to gain some glacier experience for reaching some Austrian peaks in summer. I'll bet there are members, like me, who want to take that next snowy step. Give it a go!