

Winter Mountaineering Course, Glenmore Lodge

By Elaine Gillies



East Ridge Beinn a' Chaorainn

In the first week of March this year I attended a 5 day Winter Mountaineering Course organised by Glenmore Lodge near Aviemore.

I had been wanting to do a course like this for some time in Scotland as I am keen to do more challenging routes in the winter but wanted to be more independent and less of a 'passenger'.

Conditions in the first part of this winter had been difficult for the instructors, with very high winds, lots of snow moving around on the hill and high avalanche risk. This meant it had been difficult to get to some of the high tops and ridges, plus the harshness of the conditions had made the teaching environment quite tricky. However, conditions began to settle down the week of my course and we got plenty of quality time out on the hill.

It is quite an intensive course with early starts, longish days on the hill then lectures before, and sometimes after dinner in the evening. However, you certainly feel you get your money's worth!

My goals for the course were to nail my winter navigation; gain more experience and skills using crampons on steep mixed ridges and gullies; and to consolidate my rope skills. All of these goals were achieved over the 5 days, and an ascent of the East Ridge of Beinn a' Chaorainn in full winter conditions put them into practise in the real situation. I was so happy with my scrambling ability on the ridge that day but felt particularly chuffed when I was able to navigate us safely off the hill in 'white box' conditions while having to do a dog-leg to avoid falling into the corrie!

I find mountaineering in the winter in Scotland quite intimidating. There is so much more to consider and so much more to go wrong. At times it feels easier to just avoid going out at all.



Chimney East Ridge Beinn a' Chaorainn



Rope work in The Cairngorms.

This course has taught me that 80% of the planning for a winter day on the hill happens at home, in front of the computer. Planning has to be thorough because there **IS** a lot more to consider in the winter (avalanche forecast, snow condition, freezing level, snow build up, cornices etc). Days are obviously short so you have less time for faffing around on the hill and the weather can change rapidly, so the more planning you do at home the better. This came into sharp focus after I had reached the top of the East Ridge on Beinn A'Chaorainn. While navigating off the hill I had to take two bearings to allow us to dog-leg round the corrie, plus I had to carefully work out the distance we had to go before I took the second bearing, meaning I had to accurately work out my pacing. The wind was absolutely howling, it was freezing and the snow was battering into our faces and swirling around us. It was really hard to deal with a map and compass in these conditions plus I had to take off my goggles to put my reading glasses on,

so the snow was blowing into my eyes. I also had to try to turn the compass housing with thick gloves on.... and meanwhile we were all getting really cold hanging around. It is easy to see how a day can suddenly turn epic.

On reflecting on this stressful experience back at the Lodge I realised that we had known we were going to have to do this dog-leg from our planning the night before. So it would have made sense to work out the bearings and the pacing at this stage and have written them down so that when we got to the top of the hill we could just dial them into the compass and keep moving. Planning, planning, planning- My new winter mantra.

There was so much learning that went on during this course I could end up writing a mini thesis if I tried to tell you all about it all. However, when I signed up for the course I anticipated that I would mainly be working on 'Hard Skills'. While I did learn some great technical skills, I would say the biggest learning for me was the 'softer' (but by no means less important) skills which make your whole day safer. For example -How to thoroughly plan your winter hill day; How staying constantly alert on your approach to the hill and while on the hill is critical so that you quickly see or feel any changes or anomalies in the snow or the weather and can make decisions before getting into difficulties; Constantly keeping an eye on your party so that you catch any problems early; Where to find reliable weather and avalanche reports and how to interpret them etc.

In conclusion- It was a brilliant course. I learned loads and was raring to go..... Then Lockdown happened!

I would highly recommend this course to anyone who is already a competent and experienced winter walker and wants to progress to winter ascents of ridges and gullies. If you are new to winter walking there is a Winter Skills course you should consider first as the mountaineering course does assume a certain level of competence in navigation, crampon technique and hill

awareness. For those who want to Winter Climb there is a course available at the Lodge for you too.

My attendance on this course was made possible by receiving a grant towards my course fees from the AAC and I would therefore like to say a big Thank You to the Awards Committee. The contribution was very much appreciated.