

Maurienne Ski Tour April 6-16th 2009 (The Girlie Tour)

Bernard Smith

Dave Buchanan, Clare Stafford, Claire Mc Lennan, Josie & I drove down to the Maurienne valley, where we met up with Duncan & Kath Scattergood, for the annual Easter Ski Tour. This was to be the first tour for several members so it was a very mixed party.



Having booked the Refuge Ambin well in advance we were surprised to find that, contrary to the information on the website, it was unmanned. On arrival in Termignon we had telephoned to confirm the reservation as requested, to be told that the refuge would only be guarded at weekends. In view of this and the Category 4 avalanche danger we decided to postpone our visit for a few days and await the arrival of Dave Sudell & Julie. We booked into the Gite d'Etape "Les Paras" in Termignon and skied the pistes for a couple of days. The Fohn wind was blowing off the plains of Lombardy and had reduced the snow pack to a soggy mess, as evidenced by the huge avalanches that had fallen all along the valley.



Three days later as we parked at the road-head above Bramans we were greeted by the elusive guardian who was ferrying up supplies for the Easter weekend. The avalanche danger was now down to three so we judged an early start to be relatively safe. Parking at 1600m., above the chapel of Notre Dame, we had about 670m. to climb to the hut. The guardian zoomed off on his skidoo and we followed more sedately on skins. The hare, however, was overtaken by the tortoise as the skidoo had to be abandoned part way and his huge load carried on his back through the avalanche debris. He steadfastly refused all offers of help and insisted on carrying the whole load himself. 4h. saw us at the hut where friends of the guardian were busy digging out the solar panels! We joined in and spent the afternoon digging out the door, the window, the wood supply, the axe and eventually managing to light the stove. All attempts to gain entry to the toilet were repulsed so an improvised long drop was excavated, as our intention was to spend four days here. (and the girls outnumbered the boys) Gradually we made the place habitable and Gerald the guardian descended to the valley, leaving us to cater for ourselves.



The good weather forecast for the next day turned out to be a myth, as we battled into conditions more reminiscent of the Cairngorm plateau for a couple of hours. This attempt on Mont Ambin ground to a halt at 2600m. in a metre of wind slab, and we scuttled back to the shelter of the hut for more exercise in the form of wood cutting and digging out the food store. Gerald duly arrived for his weekend duty with the information that everyone else had cancelled. This was fortunate as it meant that Clare could have her own bed and did not have to share with Gerald after all. He cooked us a magnificent meal and a convivial evening was rounded off with his homemade pear brandy.

As we had to dig ourselves *out* of the hut the following morning it was decided that a return to the valley was our only option. All was not lost however as a call to the Refuge de la Femma revealed much better snow conditions, apparently being further north it is far enough away from Italy to be less affected by the Fohn. After a civilising night at the Gite La Grange in Termignon, with the meteo promising three clear days, we decided to go for it.



The road to Le Suffet had been ploughed to 1600m. so we ferried people up and were underway by 9.00 am. The snow was very heavy and skinning was really hard work. Dave Sudell's new boots took a terrible toll of his feet and there was even a threat of mutiny. Lunch was taken at the unguarded Refuge du Plan du Lac. Gas and a pan enabled us to enjoy a brew whilst Dave nursed his feet. Pressing on we dropped into the Vallon De Rocheure which seemed unending as we followed it upstream to the Refuge de la Femma. It took 8.5h. hard going and we were ready for a beer when we arrived. The refuge was very comfortable with small rooms and hot showers. The food was excellent so we settled in for 2 nights.

The meteo was proven correct as we awoke to a cold clear day. We were soon underway towards the Pointe de Mean Martin. Being fairly slow after the exertions of the previous day we settled for an ascent of the Pointe des Rognons 3211m. as the snow was beginning to soften in the sun. The run down to the hut was magnificent although there was some disappointment in missing the main summit.



Another glorious day saw us cross the Col du Pisset 2958m. for a great run down to the Refuge Fond des Fours, where we were told that the weather was due to break tomorrow afternoon. Deciding to escape while we could we were up early. The guardienne didn't rise till 7.00am so we catered for our own breakfast and were soon skinning up to the Col du Fours 2976m. a climb of 440m. It was windy on the col and ominous clouds were building from the south. However we enjoyed good snow down to the Pont de Neige at 2528m. After several freezing nights we judged the gorge to be safe from avalanche. After a narrow entrance on the right bank we crossed to the left as it widens out to give a splendid run down to Bonneval sur Arc. Along the way we were treated to an eagle eyeing us up for lunch and a herd of chamois galloped across our path. Crossing back at a bridge we used the road to ski to within 10 minutes of the village. As Dave & I hitched down the valley for the car it started to rain. We had timed it right for once.

Maps & Guidebooks: IGN 1;25000 3634OT Val Cenise
IGN 1:25000 3633ET Tignes. Val d'Iserre.
Vanoise Ski Touring. Paul Henderson. Cicerone Press
Ski Mountaineering. Peter Cliff
Accommodation: Gite d'Etape, Les Paras, Termignon 04 79 20 51 45
La Grange, Termignon 04 79 20 53 34.
Ambin Hut (valley no.) 06 72 64 36 94

