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**Ski touring above
the Argentiere Glacier**



WORDS AND PICTURES: KINGSLEY JONES



HOW TO... PLAN A SKI TOUR

You've practised your kick turns, you've got skinning down to a T and you're itching to go on your first ski tour. **Kingsley Jones** of Icicle Mountaineering advises on how to plan it...

➔ Sssssh, click, sssssh, click, sssssh, click. It's a hypnotic motion of sliding one ski forwards, then pushing my heel down to engage the bristles of the skins beneath my ski with the snow to stop it sliding backwards, and sliding the next ski forward. Left, right, left, right. Ahead the pre-dawn light is a deep marine blue above, filtering through to a ruddy red, and light orange colour behind the mountain headwall in front of us. With each sliding step, the skis make different sounds on the snow, a hiss through light powder, a crunch on thin windslab, and a squeak on the cold ice crystals.

Having left the hut behind an hour earlier, we've settled into a steady rhythm, and are keeping warm despite an air temperature of -10C. Many people describe ski touring ascents as repetitive monotony, but nothing is really further from the truth. We are moving at a good rate, and there are two factors that motivate us; firstly there's subtle undertone of endorphins as we exercise just below our aerobic threshold to maximise efficiency, and secondly there's the sensory overload of sounds, views, colours, and a feeling overwhelming insignificance below the Alpine peaks glowing in the dawn light.

Behind us we glance around to take in a final view of the Bertol hut, perched in a vertiginous position on a shark's fin of rock rising from the glacier. The first rays of sun cast a pink and then orange glow across the snow, and as we skin up to the small summit of the Tete Blanche,

the huge North Face of the Matterhorn unveils itself before us, with the Monte Rosa mountain chain behind. There's not a cloud in the sky, and we know it's just the ski down the complex Schonbiel glacier, beneath the Matterhorn, to reach Zermatt, and we'll have completed the infamous Haute Route from Chamonix to Zermatt in five days.

Five days effort was the culmination of nearly five years planning, training, and then a dose of good luck. Perhaps we refer to luck with ski touring too much. We need to make our luck, and the planning that goes into a ski tour, in terms of equipment, route choice, safety and timings. Here we look at the key aspects of planning a ski tour...

BETA

Read, chat, and read some more. Hoover up all the information you can about the ski tour you plan to do. There's a plethora of blogs, and online forums to trawl through. Chat to people who have done your planned tour before, as their gems of information will save hours of effort on the mountain, or extra kilos on your back. In the Alps you can get advice from mountain professionals at information centres such as the Office d'Haute Montagne in Chamonix, or Alpine Centre in Zermatt.

MAPS & APPS

There's no better way to make outlandish plans, than when poring over a map, while armed with a pint in a good pub. The time you take to

study the route you plan to ski tour is never wasted. It takes time to consider where cornices will form, where there are unavoidable avalanche terrain traps, what alternative routes and escape paths there are, and to log all that information in your mind.

These days online mapping is free for most Alpine regions, and you can add graphical overlays to indicate slopes greater than 30 degrees. This is useful primarily for identifying the slopes that have the highest avalanche risk, and also which are too steep to easily tour. Booting up slopes wearing crampons on your ski boots, whilst carrying your skis, isn't the greatest fun, and is best limited to a few hundred metres at most. Online maps and apps for the Alps include the French IGN and SwissTopo Cartes des Pentes, and SkiTrack.fr.

SEASON

The decision of what time of year is critical. Alpine ski touring aficionados will be found skinning up peaks from the first snows, through to the early summer. Skimo gives you the longest season of any Alpine winter sport, but whilst grabbed day tours in December or June are the exception, rather than the rule, the classic hut-to-hut ski touring season is mid March until late April. Despite the huge commercialism of the Alpine ski industry, the key ski touring season is less than two months long. There's a golden window of opportunity after the end of the key winter snowfalls, which are generally over by late February, and the melt and Spring avalanche risks of May onwards. It's an ephemeral sport, and the hut guardians know the seasons all too well, so if you are planning a ski tour, and find all the huts closed at the time you are planning, the hut



➤ **Bootpacking in the Alguilles Rouges**

➤ keepsers know something you don't. They are a hard working bunch, but they innately respect the mountains, and accept that they are dictated to by the snow conditions not commerce.

PHYSICAL

My favourite adage is that efficiency and laziness are the same thing, re-marketed. Nothing could be truer for ski touring, where the seeming effortless efficiency of an experienced tourer, gives a very false impression that physical conditioning and training are of a lesser importance. You only have to see a beginner ski tourer huffing and puffing their way up a hill, while a skilled friend of theirs glides ahead. For sure the skill and experience are very important, but the bedrock is very good physical conditioning and preparation. Endurance training is key, and in building this up, you

will adapt the clothing that works best for you to provide the balance between ventilation, and keeping your core and key muscle groups warm. Every drop of perspiration that runs down your face on the training runs or gym sessions, will make every single step of ski touring that bit easier. This is as much a key element of planning, as it is saving mountain rescue numbers in your phone.

MOUNTAIN-CRAFT

It takes a lifetime to build up your mountain awareness, and skills including navigation, crevasse rescue, avalanche awareness, transceiver searches, and route choice. There's also the constant assessment of objective dangers such as rockfall, avalanche, snow-bridges, orographic weather, and snow metamorphosis to consider. Some of these elements can be planned

for, as well as a constant assessment of how these risks evolve on a diurnal and minute-by-minute basis.

When planning a ski tour, it is crucial to adapt the objective to your skills set. Be brutally honest with yourself, and adapt the plans accordingly. For example if you don't know how to set up a 1:5 mechanical advantage hoist system, don't plan a tour on glaciated terrain. Don't worry, there's plenty of areas you can still go to, and they're only going to increase in our lifetime, with glacial retreat caused by global warming!

It may be tempting to reply on technology to bypass gaining some mountain skills. Many turn to GPS units instead of a map and compass, but the weight of batteries you need for a week of navigation by GPS, allied with the risk of fallibility of electronics in the cold or if dropped, will soon see you

scurrying to improve the 'old school' navigation skills. There's a reason they've stood the test of time, but equally to carry a GPS as a backup or extra aid, is recommended.

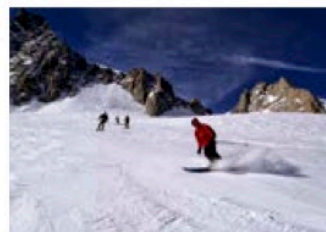
SKIING

You also need to plan for your ski touring skills set. How quick are you at putting on, and taking off your skins, how efficient are those kick turns, and what about your off piste skiing level? There's no doubt that the time spent ski touring is three-quarters uphill, and a quarter skiing downhill, but it's not as easy as judging your off piste ski level, to choose a suitable tour.

You need to take into account how your legs will feel from skinning up a hill to reach the descent, especially on day five of a multi-day tour, and whilst carrying a 35 litre rucksack that will be full and altering your weighting and balance on the skis, not to mention agility. Spring skiing can provide a huge scope of snow conditions, from corn snow to champagne powder, crud to icy ruts. Be conservative with your ski level estimation, and ensure that a tour is well within your skills set, to give you an improved margin of safety, not to mention enjoyment.

EQUIPMENT

There's nothing worse than laying out all the kit for your ski tour, on your bed or table, ready to pack your bag. It's a humbling sight, and the vision of it all soon gets you re-evaluating how many base layers or clothes to take. Light is right, goes the saying, but too light is soon cold and loses the fun very quickly. The



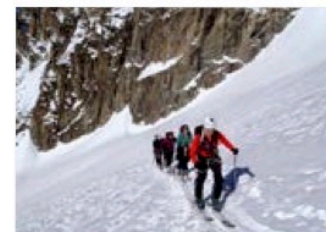
➤ **Skiing down onto the Argentiere Glacier**



➤ **Skiing through crevasses**



➤ **Ski touring towards Col d'Entreves**



➤ **Skinning up to the Col du Tour Noir**

key is not taking extra 'just in case' or luxury items, but not to scrimp on good quality kit and clothing. Uber-light touring skis may be feather light on the ascents, but they'll flap around on the descents, and at the sight of any icy sections they'll positively flutter.

The same goes for clothing. Take a couple of merino base layers of different thicknesses, that can be worn individually, or in combination on a cold day. Strip the crevasse rescue kit right down to the essentials; 3 karabiners, 2 prussic loops, 1 pulley, 1 ice screw, and a 30m half rope. Go through all your kit with equal detail, and soon that pile on your bed shrinks down.

When staying in mountain huts, you don't need to take anything extra other than a sleeping bag liner and head torch. All your food is cooked for you, the huts provide slippers to shuffle around in, and there's even wine and beer stocked. Your rucksack is your little capsule of personal and safety items for the tour. The best advice is on day tours to rigorously assess what kit you didn't use, and to leave it out next time. You quickly work out what kit works best for you, but keep whittling that bag down!

TIMINGS

Start early, finish early, is the safety motto to keep at the forefront of your mind when ski touring. There's a huge amount of logic to this, and none of it is linked to getting the best beds in the next mountain hut. Factors include the frozen snow being easier to skin up than slushy mush, avalanches being triggered by rising heat later in the day, snow bridges being weakened by the sun, rock fall risks rising with the temperatures, and the likelihood of convective storms building in the afternoon, not to mention the holy grail of skiers; fresh tracks!

ADAPTING

Plans are just that, plans. They aren't fixed rules, and anyone

doing a ski tour will find they need to adapt their ideas before the tour, and most importantly, during the tour. Changing your plans in reaction to how the conditions evolve, or the team feels each day, is paramount to keeping safe and having a great ski tour. One of the greatest skills when planning a ski tour is therefore the beta you obtain, which allows you to gain a more holistic knowledge of the options. This beta isn't all gained from the internet or research before the ski tour, but also it's obtained en-route from skiers you meet, mountain professionals, and most importantly from hut guardians. The mountain hut keepers live on the mountain, and synthesise information from tens (if not hundreds on a busy route) of skiers passing through each day. They are a crucial source of information, so make sure your plans include learning enough of the language to communicate effectively with them.

SUMMARY

Planning for a ski tour is multi-faceted, but a fascinating process, which starts months if not years before a trip. It is an evolutionary process, that shifts to cater for performance, conditions and safety. Always ensure that you over-prepare, rather than under-prepare. The avalanche stats for the fatalities per capita of each mountain user group, always have ski tourers at their head. Planning ahead, and during a tour, will ensure you have done everything to avoid adding to this morbid statistic. It's a cautionary note to end on, but is important to mention.

Sssssh, click, sssssh, click, sssssh, click. I watch my ski tips as they alternately surge through the glimmering crystals of snow. The sunlight refracts the light from each snow flake, shimmering in the low shafts of sunlight that spread across the glacier basin. I feel the wind on the right side of my face, intermittent light wisps of



Top 5 Alpine Ski Tours

Classic tours to put on your 'to do' list

1 Silvretta Ski Tour

■ Situated on the Austrian-Swiss border, the Silvretta Alps offer a very good network of huts and 3,000m peaks. The classic 5-day tour starts in Ischgl and traverses the region to end in the Galtur Valley. Access to the region is via Landeck, a 2.5 hour train ride from Zurich airport.

2 Monte Rosa Ski Tour

■ Affectionately called the Spaghetti Tour, this route wiggles its way along the crest of mountains on the Italian-Swiss border. You will make ski ascents of many 4,000m peaks in the week, and can stay at Rifugio Margherita 4,554m, the highest hut in the Alps.

3 Gran Paradiso Tour

■ A relatively undiscovered gem, the ski tour takes in the highest summit that is completely in Italy, Gran

Paradiso 4,061m. The food in the Italian huts is amazing and plentiful, and the tour has many variations to adapt to the weather, from a loop to a traverse.

4 The Haute Route

■ Probably the most famous ski tour of them all, the Haute Route snakes its way from Chamonix to Zermatt, typically taking five days. There are many variations, but none should miss a night in the spectacularly-located Bertol hut, mentioned at the start of this article.

5 Ski Mont Blanc

■ At 4,810m this is, of course, the highest peak in the Alps, and a challenging ski tour. In good conditions you can ski right from the summit, all the way down past the Grands Mulets hut, to reach the Plan d'Aiguille, and then through the forest into Chamonix, a vertical drop of nearly 4km!

frigid air. The snow squeaks with each step, my soft-shell jacket rustles as my arms rhythmically place my ski poles ahead with each pace, and there's a faint hiss of wind-blown snow scouring just a few centimetres above the surface.

Sensory overload was a term used at the beginning of this article, as was repetitive monotony. While plans for ski touring start at home or in the pub, the best and safest ski tourers never encounter monotony on a tour. Every step gives sensory information, that supports or

forces the changing of those plans. When you arrive safely at the hut, it should be your head, not your legs, that are the most tired. That's when you know you've really planned it well. ☑

■ The author of this article, Kingsley Jones, is a guidebook writer for Cicerone and works on the guiding team at Icicle Mountaineering (www.icicle.co.uk). They offer a wide range of ski touring trips, from beginner weeks based in Chamonix, through to week-long ski tours across the Alps and further afield.