

Sainte Foy, Tarentaise, 2-9 April

The club trip to St Foy near Val d'Isère 2-9 April was a week of great diversity. The weather ranged from a morning of rain and drizzle to days of dazzling hot sunshine. Ski activity ranged from lessons on the piste to a steep, high altitude, off piste north face descent. Spring snow was in abundance, some pockets of fresh stuff were found and breakable crust inevitably crept in. Literally thousands of vertical metres were skinned. The club made some great new friends and had some great skiing.

Twelve ESTC members had the pleasure of each other's company for what became a silly hat holiday in the French Alps. With record high temperatures making the usually high altitude sun even stronger, there was a veritable fashion parade of inventive and sometimes silly head gear on display.

After the late night arrival from Geneva airport, day one was devoted to sunny free skiing trying to remind the old legs what to do. In the evening we were joined by our Mountain Tracks guide Matt Dickson and instructor Annie Donovan. The high temperatures and their impact on the snow pack were discussed and there was definite feeling that we would have to go to high altitude to find good snow.

The first group day was spent in very Scottish rain in Sainte Foy, on slushy pistes with avalanches roaring in the gloom and the lifts closing. The forecast break in the weather did not appear at lunchtime and we had to abandon our planned off piste descent over the back of the resort. Plan B involved a skin up through trees, then along a closed piste and then a murky descent on great snow—fresh but wet on a firm base. In spite of the conditions, there was an excited remark from one happy camper—'my very first alpine tour.' And it could only get better. It was clear we would have to move higher as the rain and warm weather had created havoc with the snow pack at medium altitude. Ste. Foy's location meant that we were only a short drive away from a number of higher level venues both on and off piste.

The sun came out on Tuesday and the chalet vans took the group on the twenty minute drive to Val d'Isère. We got the first lift up from Le Fornet and from the top of lifts skied south to an appropriately named bridge--Pont de la Neige. There we began the skin up in brilliant sunshine to Col des Fours. The ascent gradually steepened and ski crampons were used on the final section to the top. We climbed slightly above the col on the north side to get a better line on the steep descent in brilliant snow. There was spring snow on every aspect at every altitude, a complete one off, the result of the earlier rain which had smoothed the surface of the snow which then refroze overnight before softening nicely for us. Down at the Fond des Fours hut we stopped for coffee and to take photos of our tracks. One very pleased member of the group exclaimed that they had lost their Alpine virginity, the mini tour of the day before having been simply foreplay for them. The day finished with a ski on and off piste, in Val d'Isère, with the excellent spring snow everywhere.

We set off on Wednesday for our two day tour which was brought forward because of the forecast very hot weather. We repeated previous morning's start to Le Fornet and up, this time bearing south over no less than three cols with 1000 metres of ascent before the ski down to the Refuge de la Femma. There we engaged in ritual hut sun bathing, tea and beer drinking and marmot spotting. Even the odd nap was taken before the excellent evening meal, starting with a great soup through to free home made Genepy given to us for helping with the washing up. From the dinner table a chamois was spotted up bounding up the hill. In the morning we would do the same.

The next morning we had to skin up 1,000 metres before the planned descent of the north face of Pointe de Mean Martin. The skinning passed quickly with the previous evening's Genepy clearly fuelling a few and slowing down one or two others. Skins came off at the col and we continued on foot up the ridge (*Mike's photos excellent here*) before an icy traverse on skis brought us to the top of the north face bowl. There we divided into two descent groups, the hard core and the mellow (or the mellow core as they wanted to be known). The mellow team actually got the best soft snow with a few of the hard cores taking falls on their steeper ground. We then joined up to negotiate a band of breakable crust which prompted some spectacular crashes including one worrying slow backward fall.

Luckily the spring snow returned before giving way to sinking slush lower down with Nick pulling Brent out of a hole by the rucksack when a snow bridge collapsed over a stream. We finished skiing down Le Manchet valley to Le Chatelard where the chalet staff and the vans were waiting. The sore shins and sunburnt tongues were soon forgotten and modest quantities of food and drink (at extortionate Val d'Isère prices) were consumed.

Having well exceeded the planned amount of ascent, and being mindful of the continuing hot weather (a record of 29 degrees was recorded in Bourg St Maurice that day), Friday was spent at Tignes with one group doing a firm Vallon de la Sachette off piste route, while the sensible had a lesson from Annie. The class contained the best alpine skier and the least experienced of the group and no less than three telemarkers. Great progress was made around the hill by this pick and mixed ability class, with top tips offered in abundance. From the top of Tignes you could clearly see our tracks on Mean Martin which put a spring in everyone's turns as they dutifully practised new skills.

The two groups met for lunch which was followed by an avalanche instruction session. As we practised transceiver search, three black clad skiers appeared on a steep slope above us. At first we thought they were very stupid recreational skiers as they set off a small slide with their skis. When they set off a second and third slow wet slide, it became clear that they were pisteurs purging the slopes above the piste. From our very safe vantage point below, we saw how easy it was for a skier to literally slice an avalanche off the mountain.

We finished the week by going up the Grand Motte on virtually the last lift. On the ski down Annie gave Nick an exercise to do. As he skied elegantly by, a small child resting at the edge of the piste exclaimed 'Mummy he looks like a ballerina. Why is she making him do that?'

Friday night was a last opportunity to sample the excellent food and drink in the Auberge sur La Montange and to say goodbye to the team that had looked after us so well. Chalet girl/drivers Charley and Lula, ski tech Steve, driver Ryan and chef Rupert had laid on a great week, well supervised by owners Andy and Sue Mack. The venue (including hot tub and sauna) was ideal, offering a wide range of skiing possibilities all within a short drive. The record hot weather at the end of a lean Alpine season meant that many of the touring opportunities in the immediate Ste. Foy area remain for another day. Certainly the club has made great new friends in Matt and Annie and we have a great new venue to return to for some unfinished business. The only question being how soon do we return.