

Loipers Top Telemark Team – 2 weeks in the Alps!

Two years in the planning... We finally made it to the Alps, albeit with a slightly diminished group. Neil, David, Martin, Jon, Keith and Alan had a great week of Tele skiing in Val d'Isere, followed by a challenging week touring in the Vanoise. We had wonderful weather, fabulous scenery, and great company - though sadly not the best of snow!

Tim and Penny, Steve Campbell, and John Dark all dropped out for various good reasons – so we arrived in the Alps with only 6 of us. We had booked our Val d'Isere accommodation in two apartments (3 of us in each) and that proved to be an excellent idea. It saved us a lot of money compared with a hotel and eating out. And it also minimised our outside contacts and risk of getting covid. Still, three of us managed to return home with covid – but that is a different story!

Travelling to the Alps didn't quite go as planned. We each bought an Interrail Pass (bought at a New Year discount) intending to go by train. With France out of lockdown (beginning of Feb) we lost a week working out how to book our seat reservations (with adjacent seats for 6 of us with separate Interrail passes) and by then the said seat reservations had all gone. Damn it! Our carbon footprints were blown in one go as we backtracked and bought flights from Leeds Bradford to Chambéry. (We could have got by train from Newcastle to the Alps in one day – albeit if long day.)

The two apartments turned out to be perfect. If Steve and John had joined us, we would have had less space but we would have managed fine. The apartments were less than 5 minutes from each other and handy for the main ski lifts in the centre of the resort. The supermarket was also close at hand and we took it in turn to do the shopping and cook the evening meal.



Val d'Isere scenery was stunning

We skied our first day making good use of the lifts. Alan was delighted to get a free lift pass (again). That is the only benefit of being over 75 (the downside is that it costs an arm and a leg for ski insurance). Snow conditions were not too bad on piste – but looked quite horrible off-piste (rutted and icy). There had been almost no precipitation since January (just wind and sun). The sun certainly shone all of our first week and most of our second.

Martin cooked a curry for us in the evening and then we had a visit from Nicko from Telemark Tracks. He was keen to talk to us about what we wanted to do over the week. Surprisingly, he suggested we could be skiing some of the off-piste – he even promised some 'Spring snow' (big sugary snow crystals – haven't skied on that stuff for a few years).

Monday morning, 6 of us met Nicko at the bottom of the gondola for our first day of Telemark coaching. The first thing that struck me was that his teaching style was quite different from his colleague Ben with whom we had skied in Dec 2018. Different but also very good! We did warm up runs each day, skiing in Alpine style rather than Telemarking and we mainly stuck to the easier runs – greens rather than blues (though a Val d’Isere ‘green’ would probably be a ‘blue’ in most other resorts). We all managed to look pretty good Telemarking on the easier runs (we got some great video feedback) but some of us were struggling to hold it together on the steeper icier slopes.



Jon, Alan, Neil, Keith and David

Martin got some special treatment with one-to-one coaching most mornings. But then we all came together at lunchtime and skied some longer runs without coaching in the afternoons. We didn’t all have energy enough at the end of the day to ski the busy home run back to base.

Tuesday was my birthday (Alan) and I had expected we were going to eat at the other apartment. But the guys had a surprise for me. I was treated to a meal to the local pizza restaurant (where we had enjoyed some seriously good pizzas 3 years ago). Afterwards we went back to the other apartment, and there was a birthday cake waiting for me! Thanks guys, it was a great evening and a nice surprise.



For our last two days with Nicko, we did some challenging off-piste skiing (accessed from the top of the lift system). I don’t recall skiing any ‘Spring snow’ (not nice Spring snow as I remember it!). The snow was challenging but the scenery was stunning – blue skies, jagged peaks, and rows of snow-covered mountains.

We did long traverses, skied down into gullies, negotiated some steep slopes and icy moguls and skied out via an impressive canyon. Now and again, we linked together a few Telemark turns – but much of the time it was survival skiing!



Nicko... great telemarking off-piste on tricky crusty snow!

Saturday was our last day in Val d'Isere. After 6 days of skiing already, David and I were the only ones skiing for the last day – albeit just a short morning (2½ hours) to practice some of the Telemark technique that we had been taught through the week. We also had to sort out our gear and get packed for our week of hut touring.

That evening we met up with Richard Dupont (our guide for the Vanoise tour). Richard joined us at a local restaurant La Source which turned out to be a good choice. He had been in the Vanoise the previous week. We had plenty of time to hear about the huts and get updates on equipment requirements. Thankfully we were no longer required to take ice axes – though we would still be needing ski crampons (advance warning of the hard icy conditions to come!). With ski crampons, boot crampons, climbing skins, avalanche shovels and other gear, each of our rucksacks weighed around 10kg.

Our first hut, Refuge du Fond des Fours, was no more than an hour of skiing from the top of the Val d'Isere ski area (much of it was steep and icy) followed by a half hour of climbing to the hut. Both of our chosen huts were run by the Vanoise National Park authority. The Fond des Fours was very basic! No washroom or showers and a dormitory with everyone packed shoulder to shoulder on a two-tier sleeping platform. The



single toilet was about 30 yards away down a steep snowy path! But it was perfectly charming and well located (the hut I mean!). The guardian Claire was fantastic – she kept the place in good order and provided us with good food, whilst also bring up her two boys (aged 3 and 6) with her in the hut. For more information on the hut and the guardian Claire, see [Petit mot de la gardienne | Refuge du Fond des Fours \(vanoise.com\)](http://Petit mot de la gardienne | Refuge du Fond des Fours (vanoise.com))

We ate lunch at the picnic tables outside the hut. Then, leaving behind some of our gear, we set off with suitably lightened rucksacks, for an afternoon ski tour to the Col des Fours (450m above the hut). By the end of our week, we had visited the col three times, so it became quite familiar to us. Skiing down from the col was fairly challenging. Martin had a nasty fall and injured his left ankle, and was clearly in some pain and unable to ski. He ended up walking all the way back to the hut. (Richard skied with Martin's skis strapped to his rucksack.) Martin's ankle was obviously swollen and there was little likelihood of him being able to ski. An hour later, the helicopter came to evacuate him and take him to the hospital in Bourg St Maurice, where it transpired that he had broken his ankle in two places. He then transferred to the hotel in Bourg (where we were due to finish at the end of our tour) then managed to get a flight back to the UK a few days later. At the time of writing, he is still in plaster!



Martin's rescue helicopter

Day 2 – the sun was still shining and Richard led us on a grand tour which turned out to be quite strenuous with around 750m of total ascent. The first 500m were not too bad, mostly in the cool of the morning, but later in the day, as we returned over the Col des Fours, it became very warm – the sun was relentless, and I was tired and sweaty. We topped out on a 3061m peak, Pointe des Roches, and had a 300m descent to a lake and then a 200m ascent back over the col. On any other day it would have been good a good run – but I was skiing like an idiot, so I didn't have a great experience.



Richard leading the way to the Col du Roches



Jon, Alan, Keith, David and Neil on the 3061m summit

On Day 3, we were heading over to our next hut, the Refuge de la Femma. That involved a 550m climb over the Col de Pisser and a very challenging 750m descent to the refuge. I was still skiing like an idiot and struggling with the icy conditions and difficult terrain. It would have been fine with fresh snow but there were long narrow sections which had become quite worn. I was pleased to get to the hut.

The Refuge de la Femma was comparatively luxurious! It had indoor toilets and hot showers (much needed) and bunkrooms with space to spread out our gear. We lounged outside on the sun deck to eat our lunch and then in the mid-afternoon we did an avalanche search drill with Richard. Later in the afternoon the clouds came in and we had the beginnings of some light snowfall. By the following morning we had 5cm of fresh snow – not very much but nonetheless very welcome!

Neil and I were both tired. I definitely needed a rest day. And Neil was having trouble with persistent pain in one knee (back in the UK, he is still having treatment). We both decided to stay in the hut. We had a relaxed morning playing scrabble! Keith and David and Jon went on a tour with Richard and enjoyed the fresh powder (all of 5cm!) and did about 700m of ascent and descent, (not with the best of visibility I think).

We were due to stay 3 nights at the Femma hut, but Richard was concerned about the forecast for the next two days as it would have been a difficult ski back to Val d'Isere on Friday in bad weather. Hence he made the decision to ski back to the Refuge du Fond des Fours the next day Thursday. Despite mostly limited visibility, we had some good skiing and returned over the Col de Pisser via a different route, with about 700m ascent and 500m descent. We were greeted again by Claire and we celebrated our return with a beer. The hut was full. There was a party of about 8 snowshoers plus another group of skiers sharing our dorm.



Our last morning - the ascent to Col des Fours – best snow all week!

The following morning, we were due to ski back to Val d'Isere but there had been another 15cm of snow and Richard suggested a morning ski up to the Col des Fours (again). Neil was still having trouble with his knee but the rest of us agreed. There were glimpses of milky sunshine – either the forecast was wrong, or the storm was yet to come in. It did! We had a great ski back down to the hut, albeit in flat light (the sun had gone). The fresh snow made a huge difference and all of us were telemarking for much of the descent. We had mid-morning drinks back at the hut, then packed up our rucksacks and set off for the bright lights of Val d'Isere. Richard had promised to take us for a late lunch back at La Source (a nice way to finish). And finally, we turned out into the gathering snowstorm to await our taxi to Bourg St Maurice.