

2022 Loipers Ski Trip – Høvringen and the South Rondane National Park

We finally made it back to the Rondane! This was unfinished business after we were forced to leave Norway in March 2020 as part of their Covid restrictions. Of the original group of 6 Loipers on that trip, only 4 of us (Peter and Alison, Paramjeet and myself) could make it. We had piggy backed onto Dan Morgan's (Classic Adventure) trip which meant we could enjoy a week of on- and off-track skiing from the Hogsfjellhotel in Høvringen to get our ski legs before our hut touring expedition in the Rondane. We also benefitted from some excellent telemark tuition from John Mordue and navigation practice from Dan.

Our journey to Edinburgh airport from Newcastle was put at risk as Storm Franklin threatened high winds and a big dump of snow in the NW and NE. To ensure we got away from Newcastle safely Peter and Alison stayed overnight, and Paramjeet made an early start to Wylam from where we set off. Fortunately, we didn't experience any delays and our Norwegian Flight to Oslo proceeded as planned with an overnight at the airport in Oslo. Next morning we took a train to Lillehamer, a bus to Otta and then onward taxi to the Hogsfjellhotel in Høvringen.

It was great joining up with Dan's group who were entertaining and enjoyable company. Sarah Griggs joined us on some of our day trips and we had some great skiing off-track on the slopes of Vardhoe. It was fun exploring the loipes in all directions including the Trolløypa. The snow was in good condition, and we had a new dump during the week which made Nordic skiing a pleasure. John Mordue also led the group on days of off-track up to Steinbuho (1500m) and across towards Dovrehytta on the south side of Vardhoe. John was always on the lookout for good off-track skiing, often finding the best in the shelter of trees. On another day we took tracks south to Puttenseter, where we celebrated my birthday with hot chocolate and waffles in the Fjellstue. Our return to base was via a col between Heimfjelet and Anaripiggen, again with splendid views in the sunshine. I felt very lucky to be in Norway with such good friends!



Practicing our Telemark turns on the slopes near Hovringen

On another day we decided to take the 'Weasel' (a caterpillar tracked vehicle from 1940's) which was to take us up the hill in the direction of Smuksjøseter. You can decide to take a seat inside the vehicle or be pulled along on a rope tow. Unfortunately, the Weasel was having an off day and broke down soon after we started off. John Mordue had to make a quick exit from the rope tow as the Weasel lurched backwards when it tried a second attempt at the hill!



The snow weasel – not having a good day!

Dan's group also provided us with some great activities and entertainment which included early morning Yoga sessions with Rona, an interesting talk about cross channel swimming by Virginia, and a game's evening of table tennis, table football and pool.

Monica, who runs the Hogsfjellhotel, made us really welcome and I'd thoroughly recommend this location as fabulous base for exploring the area. The food, rooms and service were perfect for us and the Hotel had a lovely ambience.



The Hut touring week

Over the week we slowly evolved a plan to ski from the hotel in Høvringen to Mysuseter via Smuksjøseter and then on to the self service hut at Eldabu in the south of the Rondane. From here we wanted to ski north to the next hut, Bjørnhollia, but no winter route was marked on the map. After a phone call to the guardian of the hut we were disappointed to learn that they didn't think the snow was going to be in good condition but their information was 2 weeks out of date and they were summer guardians! A discussion took place and we chose to take the risk! We might have to turn back if needed. If we got to Bjørnhollia we planned to head west along the valley to the next

Fjellstue at Rondvassbu where we hoped to take a few days exploring the dramatic landscape we had seen back in 2019.

On the start day of our tour we left our big bags in the Hogsfjellhotel and set off with our loaded rucksacks, carrying emergency kit, food and sleeping bags. This began to feel very heavy as we headed uphill towards Smuksjøseter and I almost wished we had taken the 'Weasel' to ease our journey but we enjoyed a short break at the Fjellstue before continuing. The views across the Rondane were impressive and we were often on our own as we gradually started to descend towards Mysusetter. Basic accommodation had been booked at a hostel and we enjoyed fish and chips at the only café. We had covered about 20 km and we celebrated our successful first day with a friendly Norwegian couple who were also staying in the hostel.



Big packs for our hut touring week!

Day 2 involved following tracks down to the frozen Furusjøen lake then following a lovely winter marked route through woods and gradually uphill. You can almost see the Eldabu DNT hut from the highest point on the slopes of Sore Eldåkampen and as the crow flies we were about 1 km from the hut but the route headed north then swung back in a spiral, adding further kilometres to the tally. It is always difficult to imagine the complexities of the terrain from the 1:50000 maps which only have contour intervals of 20m. Our hard work paid off and we were delighted by the hut which we quickly warmed by lighting stoves in each room and melting snow in a huge pan ready for making hot drinks. We were joined by 2 German guys who were taking a different route through the Rondane. They were carrying enormous rucksacks and had certainly brought enough food!



Arriving at Eldabu

Day 3 we nervously set off from Eldabu by retracing our path back to the frozen riverbed. From here we wanted to head north following the river which we crossed several times. It was cold but the wind, which was fortunately in our direction of travel, helped us along the valley until we came to frozen lakes and deserted fishing huts. The huts were all locked so no good to us for shelter but we did get out of the wind behind one of the buildings to rest and recover. From here we needed to head northeast as the valley narrowed and we realised that we needed to take a higher route out of the valley as we were heading for a tricky very steep descent into a gully. The higher summer route had been stripped of snow by the wind and we had to pick our way through on the snow that remained. We finally admitted defeat and took off our skis for the last 1.5km as the descent to the valley was often just bare rocks! Such a great feeling to arrive at Bjørnhollia which was nestled in the hill with dramatic drops into valleys below.



Not much snow here!

Day 4 became a sort of rest day as I was very tired from our journey so far and Paramjeet was experiencing back pains which could mean that he would have to find a quick way back to civilisation. However we decided to explore the beginnings of the onward route to Rondvassbu to make things easier for our next day of travel. It quickly became obvious that finding the start of the winter route was not going to be easy as we tried several directions without success. In fact, the first direction we took had been correct but seemed too difficult as the path descended precipitously from the hut down a narrow ravine to a bridge crossing the river. As we ventured cautiously down towards the river we suddenly heard voices. It was Dan Morgan and his group! They had skied from Rondvassbu and were struggling to find the route out of the river bed up to the Bjørnhollia hut. We were all extremely pleased to see each other as we now knew tomorrow's path was correct and Dan's group could find their way up the ravine safely! We cooked a meal for both groups that night and enjoyed swapping stories of our time since we had left Høvringen.

Day 5 dawned with high winds and a significant wind chill. We packed up and left early from the Bjørnhollia DNT hut. Knowing the route down to the river meant we could follow Dan's group ski tracks through the twisted forest of trees before emerging into the wider valley. Unfortunately the wind really started to pick up and was funnelled down the valley constantly in our faces with nowhere to shelter. At one point we stopped for a quick rest and energy bar. Alison dropped her glove and it quickly flew away in the wind! Peter became the hero of the hour by skiing back and catching the glove before it finally disappeared. This was a serious day in the wilderness!

Reassuringly Dan's group followed us and we met up at a steep descent to the valley and each group pushed on with dramatic mountains looming over us as we made tracks to Rondvassbu. It was

fabulous seeing the route down to safety and the well-appointed hut in the distance. The hut was quick to warm once the stove was lit and we helped ourselves to food from the stores and noted every item on a form so that we could pay for everything we had eaten. Later in the evening Kath, from Dan's group, read from 'Ernest Shackleton's diary of their journey on ice floes of the Antarctic.

Day 6 we had given ourselves a couple of extra days in case of bad weather and now this paid dividends as it meant that we could explore the inviting mountain slopes across the lake from the hut. We had said goodbye to Dan, Sarah, Kath and Vicky first thing as they were returning to Høvringen via a night at Smuksjøseter Fjellstue before heading back to Oslo. The snow was in excellent condition and we slowly climbed up to the highest col where we could look to Doråseter and the Northern Rondane. Skiing back down was superb with the whole group attempting some telemark turns with our metal edged touring skis.

Day 7 after cleaning the hut we headed across the immense landscape of the Rondane back towards the Peer Gyntt hut. The snow became more wind blown and descents needed some caution when carrying large rucksacks. But we navigated well and hit the track perfectly back to Smuksjøseter and on to Høvringen. We were tired but pleased to get back to the luxury of the Hogsfjellhotel where we spent our last evening dwelling on our memories of a wonderful hut tour in the wilderness of the Rondane.

All that was left to do was to celebrate the success of our trip with Dan's group. We had another lovely meal at the hotel. The next day, after saying a fond farewell to Monica, we all travelled back to Oslo together and stayed in the Scandic Hotel at the airport. We met up with Vivienne and Ebony who had been to Dalseter but had contracted Covid! That evening we had our last meal together with Dan's group and said our goodbyes as they were travelling back to Manchester.

When we finally arrived back home we picked up a text from Dan and Sarah letting us know that everyone in their group had caught COVID! Peter, Alison and I managed to avoid being infected somehow despite our close proximity in the huts, hotels and transfers, but Paramjeet unfortunately succumbed and started testing positive for quite a few days. Thankfully he's made a full recovery now!

Neil Waters – March 2022