

SCOTTISH WINTER

Snowy Scottish peaks are the perfect place to learn essential mountaineering skills, as **Andrew Mazibrada** discovers..

Training Days

Name of course:
Advanced Winter Mountaineering

Venue: Talisman Mountaineering, Aviemore, Scotland

Price: £450 per person for 5 days

Contact:
www.talisman-activities.co.uk/winter/

// *Climb when ready.* These words seem barely a whisper above the intense, deafening wind but are clear as a bell to my tuned, expectant ears. I am in a bucket seat dug around 15 minutes earlier. It is my first in anger, the rest thus far having been merely practice for my first Scottish Winter Grade I climb: Jacob's Ladder in the Coire an t-Sneachda on the arctic tundra of the Cairngorm plateau.

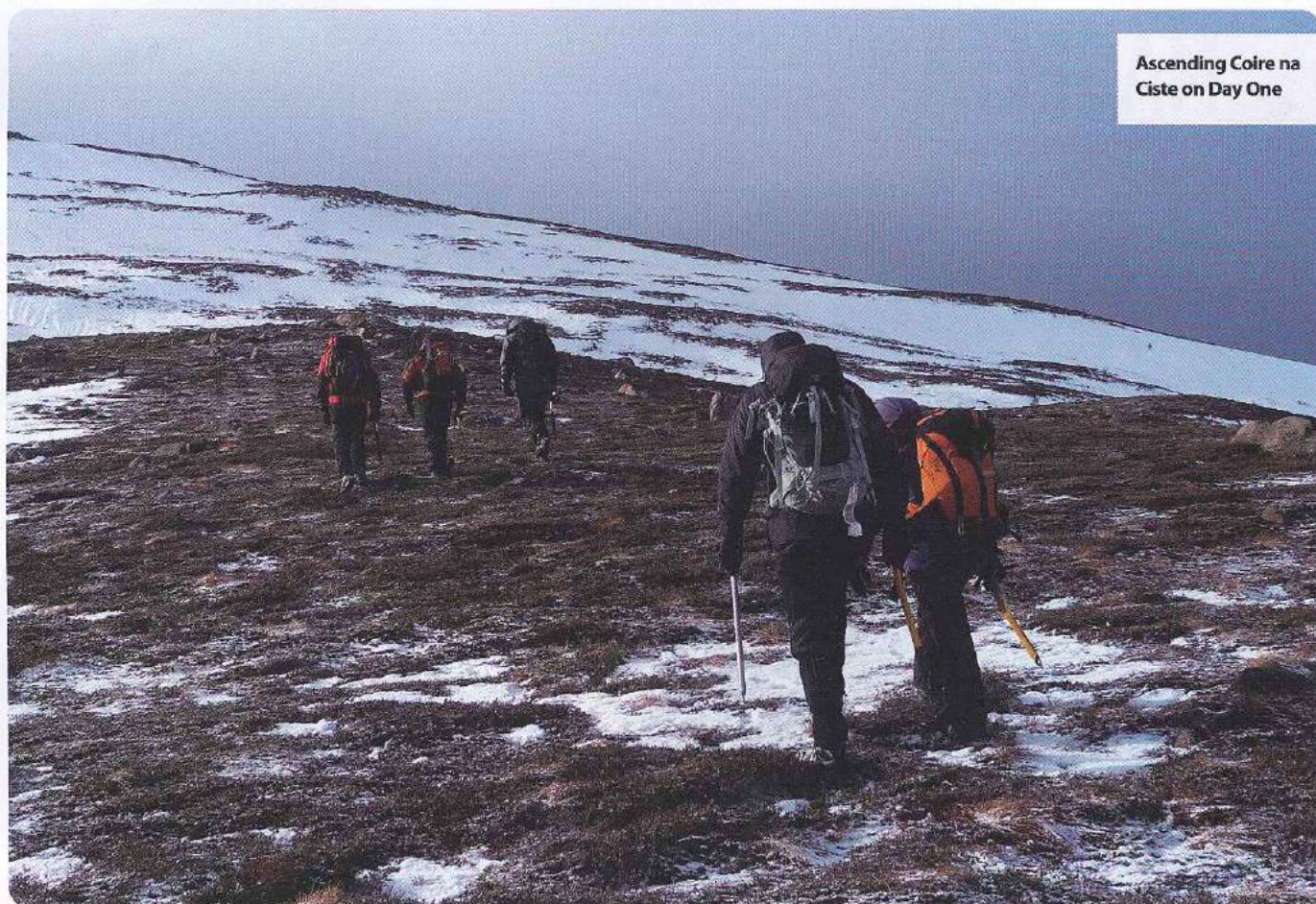
The time has come for me to begin the first pitch. Not just my first pitch in Scotland, or even my first winter pitch, but my first ever climb of any sort. I am perhaps understandably a little edgy. While waiting, I have had time to survey the canvass of the Cairngorm plateau laid out in front of me - it really is an arresting masterpiece and it relieves the inevitable tension in what lays ahead. My mind drifts back to day one of Talisman Mountaineering's Advanced Winter Mountaineering Course.

Ron Walker MIC is our instructor and two others join us on the five-day course. We are hillwalkers, they are climbers - such is the crossover of skills in winter, we are all capable of learning on this course. My partner and I are planning to be in the Alps later in the year, traversing glaciers and snow-capped peaks well above 3,500m, and with limited winter hillwalking under our belts, and no climbing experience at all, we want to get our alpine and winter mountaineering off to a solid start.

THE BASICS

The first day, as much to assess our skills as to teach the basics, covers movement on snow and ice, with and without crampons, and use of an ice-axe. First, Ron checks our kit. Ice-axes, crampons, clothing and packs are all scrutinised. Other essentials are helmets, slings, crabs and belay devices. We add a 30m half rope per pair and move off. The sun

Ascending Coire na Ciste on Day One





"The time has come for me to begin the first pitch. Not just my first pitch in Scotland, or even my first winter pitch, but my first ever climb of any sort"



Ron examines each and every belay, ensuring students learn as they go and offering improvements

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casts a subtle gleam across the snow and ice, the hillside punctuated by tussocks and rocks amid the snow. As we ascend Coire na Ciste, Ron demonstrates step kicking, both with the edge of the boot angled down and into the mountain when traversing, and with the front when facing the mountain. Good boot choice is essential for walking on snow and ice with or without crampons - kicking steps is far easier in a stiff-soled B2 boot, which also takes a C2 crampon.

He impresses on us the importance of constant avalanche assessment, explaining that wind carries snow and deposits it on the leeward side of the mountain resulting in a potentially loose snowpack. We must therefore have regard to recent snowfall and to weather reports. Examine the evidence around you, he warns. Have an eye for sastrugi, for example, and raised footprints that tell you in which direction wind had been blowing and where windslab snow might have been deposited. We listen diligently, and get the message that winter is as much about preparation and homework beforehand as skills on the snow.

We reach a steeper slope at the bottom of which is a shelf - this is perfect self-arrest practice territory. Ditching packs, we wait at the top as Ron hurls himself down the mountainside in various seemingly suicidal bids; on his back, his front, either side, head first, feet first, with axe, without. After each we follow, mimicking repeatedly, using our axe to stop a slide. The basic self-arrest position is to hold the axe diagonally across the chest, the lower hand on the bottom covering the spike, the upper hand palm on the head, fingers curled underneath. The adze is tucked into the hollow just below the collar bone. When face down on the slope, the pick is driven by body weight into the snow. We must also be able to use our axes to cut steps with metronomic, straight-armed precision swings, as we slowly move sideways up icy-slopes. It is protracted, ponderous work this and to be avoided if possible.

After lunch, we head further up the mountain to a small hollow between two slopes. It is time to strap on crampons and learn rudimentary ropework. Without experience of rock climbing or serious scrambling, I have little knowledge of knots and belaying principles so I am keen to learn. We walk (and run) up and down sheer slopes of névé, with and without packs, endlessly switching between flat-footing, front pointing and hybrid technique. Usually, you want as many crampon points in the snow as possible. Flat-footing, or French technique, involves exactly that - keeping feet flat and varying your direction of travel to allow you to do so, according to the slope. This may well involve crossing your uphill leg over your downhill leg every other step, and pointing it down the mountain, in order to keep feet flat against the slope. Front pointing involves facing the mountain directly, keeping your feet level, and kicking the two



Basic ropework on Day One - abseiling for the first time



Ron explains the principles of good crampon technique



The approach to Coire an t-Sneachda in the early morning



front points into the snow or ice. It is used for steeper slopes, both ascending and descending, or ice-climbing. Hybrid, or American, technique is a mixture of the two - the upper foot front-pointing, the lower flat-footing. Whilst edging with boots is essential in winter, edging with crampons is disastrous.

We shift then to a small, snowy crag and began to climb up, and belay short abseils down. Nightfall is not far off and Ron takes this opportunity to instill another lesson - know the time and be aware of your limitations. Night creates ambushes in winter.

The second day is about consolidation. After digging emergency snow shelters, we continue with ropework and abseils, with crampons and without. We dig snow bollards with our axes - deep, horseshoe trenches in the snow with the inner wall of the trench angling inwards as it gets deeper to prevent the rope coming over the top. Size matters here and is directly proportionate to the compactness of the snow - the less compact, the bigger the bollard must be. They need to be good - we abseil off them within minutes.

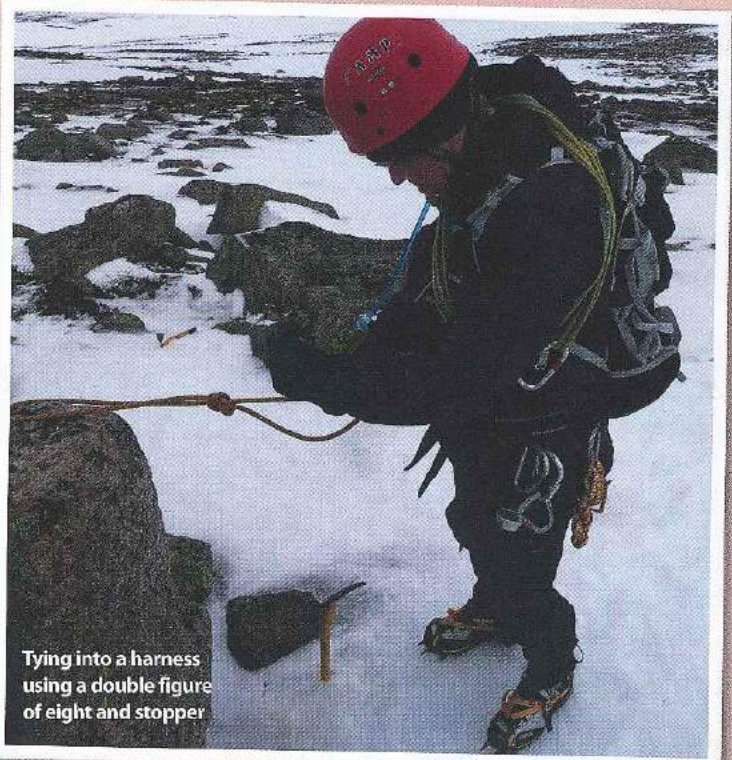
The third day begins in the classroom: a cerebral morning of knots and harnesses - clove hitches, Italian hitches, figures of eight and overhands. Learn these knots, Ron tells us, they are non-negotiable. The weather does not brighten as we leave for the mountains and visibility is non-existent. We traipse, heads down and hoods pulled tight, to a steep slope with a frigid-looking river at its base. This focuses our concentration. Setting down packs again, we pull on harnesses and begin the next phase of our lessons - belaying using snow. We dig more snow bollards, perfecting our ice-axe carpentry, and learn to craft a bucket seat in which to sit when belaying and a dead-rope box. A bucket seat, deep and angled into the mountain, provides stability when belaying - gravity makes it far harder to pull a seated belayer down a mountain than a standing one. We dig a deep trench and bury an ice axe pick down in the snow, a sling tied to the shaft by a cow's tail - another way to craft for ourselves an anchor whilst belaying from our bucket seat. All these are tested with more short climbs and abseils until night descends.

JACOB'S LADDER

Day four arrives and I am now on the slopes of Jacob's Ladder, ready to climb. Yet the peace is brutally shattered as I hear, as clear as crystal, a cry above me. One of our class is hurtling down the slope. There is the sharp snap of his runner, a sling around a rock to which he is clipped, halting his fall. His belayer, reacting swiftly, takes the weight allowing a moment for composure, voiced thanks and then continued ascent. His mistake, an infinitesimal downhill edging of the crampon, was enough to rob him of his footing and send him barrelling earthwards. It is a salutary lesson. I face the mountain, drive my front

SCOTTISH WINTER ESSENTIALS

Key techniques to practise and perfect



Tying into a harness using a double figure of eight and stopper

1 GOOD CRAMPON WORK:

Use different crampon techniques for different gradient slopes, different terrain, and to rest muscles. Get as many crampon points into the snow as evenly as possible. Drive them in if necessary. Don't even lean into the mountain - the points will come out. Take a zig-zag route in order to flat-foot if possible, utilising the cross-leg method if necessary on a steeper slope.

2 PRACTISE SELF-ARREST EVERY SEASON:

Find a slope where a mistake will not result in injury, and practise every form of self arrest - with and without an ice axe. Use an old waterproof layer so that an accident does not ruin your best jacket. Practise driving the spike into the ground and grabbing the shaft of the axe, at the base, with the other hand before a slip becomes a fall.

3 SNOW ANCHORS AND BELAY TECHNIQUES:

Snow provides a boundless source of impromptu anchors and belay assistance, often using only an ice-axe so knowing how to construct safe anchors and bucket seats is essential. A snow bollard, buried ice-axe and foot brake are all easy to learn and permit far greater versatility on different gradient slopes to ensure you keep moving at the right pace.

4 MENTALLY FOCUS:

Every step is crucial, every ice axe placement essential. Self-arrest is a last resort and in the Alps, very often impossible. Concentrate on what you are doing and what the other people you are roped up to are doing as well. Stay alert all the time. A fall could be deadly, especially in the Alps.

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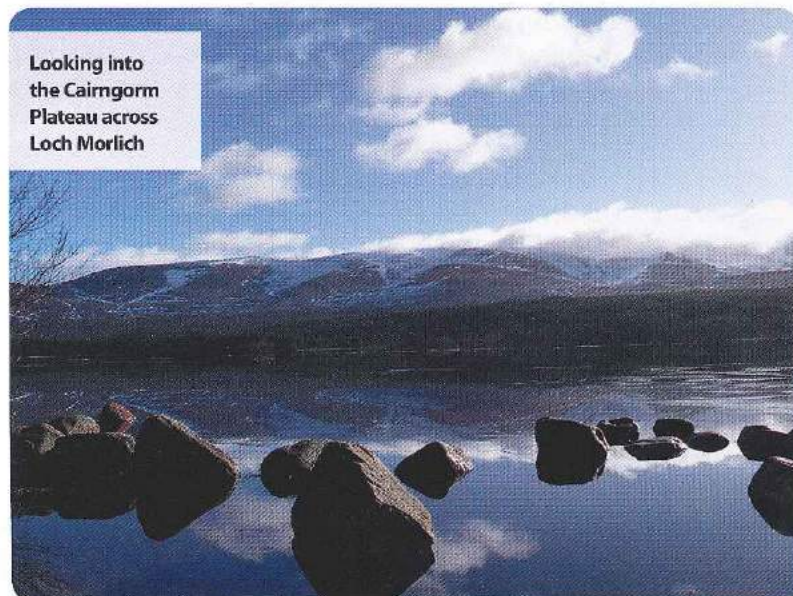
At the top of Jacob's Ladder after a superb climb, watching the sun set



My first bucket seat belaying an abseil



Looking into the Cairngorm Plateau across Loch Morlich



points into the snow and shrug on my pack. Retrieving both my axes, as well as the sling which has been my anchor, I tip my head back to gaze up the gully. It is a sheer, attenuated fracture in the mountainside buttressed by immense slabs of sable rock, and the gradient grows sharply steeper, to almost vertical, at the approach to the cornice. A deep breath and I begin to climb. For a beginner on a steep slope like this, front points are best. Kick upwards, keep your feet level and have three points of contact into the snow and ice at all times. It's technique, not brute force. Tilt your heels up and the crampon points will come out. I move at first like a newborn giraffe - ungainly and deeply unsure of my footing. Eventually, my progress becomes something approaching rhythmic symbiosis and I gain in both speed and confidence. My calves burn - they are unused to being called upon to carry in excess of 75kg up a mountainside.

Frequently, I am struck by falling ice from climbers above and I take a line to one side, knowing I'll have to traverse the gully to reach our next pitch. When I arrive there is little in the way of a stable base to rest my aching legs - no serene bucket seat here, so I use the adze of my axe to dig a ledge in the snow. I clip into a sling anchor and try to ease my aching muscles. Eventually, all four of us are at the anchor, with Ron debriefing and explaining the next pitch.

We move off, my partner and I roped together now without protection, for the final push. Mercifully, in far shorter a time than I thought, we both reach the heavily corniced overhang that marks the end of the gully and the plateau. A few tricky moves and I am over it, elated and exhausted. My partner joins me. It's a wonderful moment. As the sun casts a crimson shadow across the summit, we revel in our new found skills before heading home.

MOVING TOGETHER

The final day is the chance for all of us to learn some new skills unique to alpinism, in particular moving together in a single rope-team. Tying into our harnesses, the two of us are joined by a single length of rope, shortened by coiling the excess around our chests. The snow is fresh and takes a crampon well. Again, pitches would normally be unnecessary but we are practising, so again we set up runners, usually slings around a rock, and climb alternately, belaying each other as we go. This time, Ron does little for us, observing but trying not to interfere. We deploy clove hitches to clip into anchors and belay using the Italian hitches we have learned and then abseil down off rock and a snow bollard.

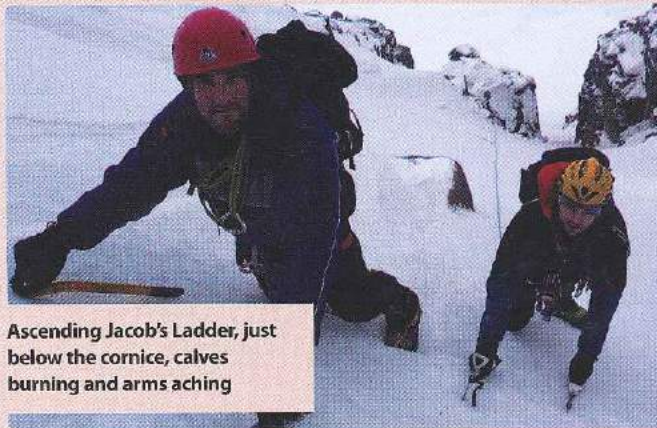
After these few intense days in Scotland, it's gratifying to see our skills coming together. We know, in the Alps later in the year, the time spent here will stand us in extremely good stead and make our trip a much safer and enjoyable experience. T&M



WINTER SKILLS

Some of the techniques covered

Learning to abseil from snow anchors, avoiding an icy dip



Ascending Jacob's Ladder, just below the cornice, calves burning and arms aching



Ron constructs a snow bollard

GEAR ESSENTIALS

Tooling up for the mountains

Paramo Aspira Smock and Salopettes -

waterproof, warm, robust and hard wearing, these are ideal for Scottish winter.

Scarpa Manta Boots -

B2-rated boots, but flexible enough for comfortable walking in winter.

Grivel G12 Crampons -

C2 crampons and a great mountaineering all rounder capable of steep climbs and long walks.

Grivel Airtech Evolution Ice-Axe -

another great all-rounder, with a sharp pick, wide adze for cutting steps and anchors in snow, and rubber grip for hands in gloves.



Scarpa Manta boots and Grivel Airtech Evolution

