

MOUNTAINEERING SCOTLAND

One year ago, reviewing my outdoor explorer skills matrix, I recognised a large gap under "Mountaineering". A Google search later, I came across "Talisman Mountaineering" – Caingorm based guides offering 3- to 5-day long courses on ice axe skills, crampons, snow shelters and emergency rope work all for around £200.

By the end of this course I would be a fully-fledged mountaineer ready to ice-climb my way up Everest.

ELS administrators gave me the nod that the Talisman course could be funded - all I had to do was sort out the paper work to set up the new training provider and convince some other Body engineers to share the experience (and petrol cost!)

I knew just the Body engineers to invite – Alex Ross and Gareth Davies who I've walked along Snowdonia's "airy" Crib Goch ridge in the wind and rain with. Getting them to sign up was easy. The same, however, could not be said for the paper work! My recommendation is to avoid applying for a new ELS provider anywhere near the cut-off date.

Gareth and Alex organised a hire car (we didn't want to risk our bangers for a 900mile round trip), booked some mountain boots (ice axe, helmets and crampons were provided) and a caravan to sleep in. With everything in place, and Alex's sister Jen invited along to boost the numbers, we finished at 12:00 on a Friday and rushed out of Gaydon. Destination: Aviemore



TOM
CULLINANE



D A Y - 1

A bit apprehensive about getting our first taste of mountaineering, we duly wrapped up in as many layers as we could get our hands on – but were still convinced we wouldn't survive because our kit wasn't "mountaineering grade". Cue panic-buying of overpriced gear suitable to -50°C from an outdoor shop in Aviemore before meeting our guide and trainer, Ron.

Ron is a highly experienced guide, leading winter skills courses in Scotland during the winter and spring, Mont Blanc expeditions during the summer and rock climbing courses in Spain during autumn. Ron issued us with crampons, ice axe and helmets, before telling us to follow him up in convoy into the Caingorm mountain range.

The scene was looking decidedly wintery driving through the Glenmore Forest Park, with snow-covered pine trees and ice-filled ponds. We parked at Caingorm Ski Centre car park, and followed Ron up a track to where the snow would be deep (it's so windy in Scotland the snow collects on East facing slopes, while West facing slopes can be relatively bare) Ron set a sprightly pace up the ridge, and we duly became drenched in sweat, asking for a break to reduce our clothing to about three thin layers. So much for the big puffa jackets!

We came to a sheltered snow-filled Corrie (a glaciated bowl) which would be our classroom for the morning. The first lesson was in how to use an ice axe to stop if you find yourself sliding down a snow-covered slope. Cue some comedy trips and drives down the side of the Corrie to initiate the slides!

Lesson two was an introduction to crampons. Crampons are a brace of sharp blades that clamp onto special mouldings on the base of mountain boots, designed to provide traction to ice. With a quick introduction to avalanche avoidance, we went straight up towards the top of the Corrie; about a 200-metre climb.

For the first half of the slope we used a zigzag manoeuvre, but the second half steepened significantly and required a "head on" approach, relying on the ice axe for stability. With rocks waiting for us at the bottom of the Corrie, we weren't about to make a wrong move here. Reaching the peak of the slope with the gradient levelling out, Ron informed us this was the most dangerous part of the climb, because we were more likely to stop thinking.

Exhilarated to have used mountaineering equipment in anger on the first day, sleep came easily after a scotch.





D A Y - 2

Arriving again at the Caingorm Ski area, we set off to find a sheltered and isolated gully that Ron had intimate knowledge of. With Ron setting a blistering pace up into the mountains, we stopped 20 minutes in for our now ritual stripping off of layers. Going over the crest of a ridge, we entered an idyllic wintery cove, protected from the regular 100 mile-an-hour Highland winds, snow had built up in giant drifts either side of us. As we donned ice axe and crampons and headed down a 60-degree gully, Ron impressed us by mentioning he had skied down it only last week.

Next was a good old fashioned beasting – a circular trudge across steep rock, snow and heather to get a good views up Strath Nethy – a huge valley going up the heart of the Caingorms, which you'd only use if you were really stuck in winter due to its boggy nature.

Reaching the top of a steep cliff, Ron cut a horseshoe groove into the snow, and trailed a rope through it. We used an abseiling technique that allowed us to drop down the cliff without a harness, using snow as an anchor.

At the bottom we of the cliff, there was a snow-holing lesson. Snow holes are for when you don't have enough time to make it back to base, with the added benefit of being heaps of fun to make. By the end of the lesson we had each made our own snow hole – out of the wind chill and with an ambient temperature of a rosy 0°C. I would never have thought Britain to have enough snow to make a shelter like this – but there were metres and metres of deep drift there.





D A Y - 3

The third day's weather forecast was for high winds and snow, but there were still plenty of climbers setting off for action in the ski centre car park. Walking along a path that headed towards Coire an t-Sneachda, one of the most famous winter climbing spots in Britain, Ron informed us that people had perished along the footpath we were walking along, because of extreme weather and exhaustion. I thought to myself "British weather can be bad, but surely not bad enough to warrant dying in?"

The approach to Sneachda was an absolutely stunning Arctic-like landscape - an expanse of white dotted with black rock, with the walls of the Corrie in the horizon.

Coming to a small cliff of wind slab we practiced our vertical ice climbing techniques. An ice axe in each hand, crampons on - I had made it!

We walked into the heart of the Sneachda Corrie to view the climbers on the 600- metre (?) faces. By now, the weather was coming in, and for the first time in the weekend I had begun to feel the cold. Ron pointed out the various routes up the side of the Corrie; the climbers going up the vertical channels of rock and ice were mere dots. These were mountaineering routes requiring a much higher level of training than the scope of this "Winter Skills" course. Losing the feeling in our hands at the bottom of the Corrie, with climbers 300 metres up requiring their hands to climb yet another 300m, and with stormy weather threatening, it dawned on me what real mountaineering was about. In awe of the climbers' bravery and boldness, and with my tail slightly in-between my legs, we headed back to the wind slab for a sheltered lunch.

The final activity of the course was to head up to the summit of the Caingorm Peak. The soft layer of fresh powder on top of hard ice below gave the impression our feet would slip at any moment. Reaching the Caingorm

plateau, we encountered a weather extreme that I had never experienced before. A 70 mile-an-hour ice blizzard battered us head-on; we could barely see where to go, make progress against the wind, or hear each other's voices. No snow could settle up here and our crampons crunched against the icy rock. Ron navigated us to the weather station sitting on top of the Caingorm. West facing horizontal icicles covered the weather station, a build-up of months of wind carried ice pummeling the structure.

Back to civilisation and with the course over, we rewarded our efforts with a slab of steak and sticky toffee pudding in traditional log-fired highland establishment.



D A Y - 4

On the fourth day, we woke up to a covering of fresh snow on the camp site, and headed back to Caingorm for a day's snowboarding. Alex and I finished the day bruised and battered - attempting to convert skills from a one day ELS course in a snow dome onto a ski slope is a painful process.

The journey home along the mountainside road cut out of the rock was as visually pleasing as the previous activities, bar the occasional white-out, with views of stags in the surrounding landscape.

Alongside the physical challenges of the course, a plus point was the unique wildlife of the area, with sightings of red grouse, ptarmigans with their white winter plumage, snow buntings and a herd of friendly reindeer

All in all, the course was an eye-opener, a massively enjoyable adventure with great company and well worth the initial planning effort.

