

TOUR DE FORCE

AS WELL AS THE DOWNHILL SLOPES, SKI TOURING
OFFERS ANOTHER OPTION — SKIING UPHILL, TOO.

SIMON BIRCH GOES OFF-PISTE AND GIVES
THIS INCREASINGLY POPULAR ADVENTURE
SPORT A GO IN THE FRENCH ALPS



“Crikey, you’re having a laugh, aren’t you?” I gasp incredulously at Dave, one of our guides. The cause of my incredulity? A near-vertical-looking mountain of thigh-deep snow looming right above us which, alarmingly, we’ve been told we’re now skiing up.

“Just take your time and you’ll be fine,” says Dave, smiling reassuringly.

Taking a deep breath, I grit my teeth and begin the long haul up through the deep, fluffy snow.

I’m in the heart of the dazzling French Alps at the start of an introductory week to ski touring, the increasingly popular and adrenaline-fuelled alternative to plain old downhill.

So, just what is ski touring and how does it differ from regular downhill?

“The key difference is that ski tourers are able to not only ski down mountains, but thanks to some specialist kit, they can actually ski up them, too,” explains Dave, back at our base in the pocket-sized ski resort of Sainte Foy.

What makes ski touring so exciting is that you’re not dependent upon ski lifts to get you up the mountain; instead, you ski up them yourself.

The great thing about ski touring is that getting out into the mountains under your own steam gives you the freedom to explore the untouched Alpine winter wilderness well away from the overcrowded pistes and their endless lift queues.

Plus, by slogging up the mountains, you’ll get one of the best possible CV workouts with the reward of charging back downhill through miles of perfect pristine powder.

Essential avalanche-safety training

Before we’re let loose into the wilds, we’re given lessons in basic ski-touring skills, the most important of which is avalanche-safety training, as going off-piste is fraught with risks and potential danger.

But, while we spend our first afternoon mucking about in the snow above Sainte Foy with avalanche probes and transceivers, the biggest factor guaranteeing our safety is the years of mountain experience that our guides have totted up between them.

The other key skill is learning how to ski uphill,

TAKING A DEEP BREATH, I GRIT MY TEETH AND BEGIN THE LONG HAUL UP THROUGH DEEP, FLUFFY SNOW



SKI SKILLS: NEED TO KNOW

1Managing your body temperature while ski touring can be tricky; you get very hot and sweaty on the way up, and you quickly get very cold skiing down. The solution? Choose lightweight layers of clothing, such as Patagonia's Micro Puff lightweight insulated jacket, which performs perfectly. Plus, don't forget a sunhat.

2If you're looking to go on your first ski tour but aren't sure which one to choose, then speak to the experts at Mountain Tracks. They'll be able to match your skills and fitness levels with the right tour.

3Fancy giving ski touring a go, but don't have much off-piste skiing experience? If you sign up for Mountain Track's week of off-piste coaching, then this will set you up for their introductory week of ski touring. You also need to be able to be OK skiing black runs on-piste before trying ski touring.

4While you don't have to be an olympic athlete to ski tour, don't underestimate how physically demanding it can be, so train beforehand. Regular cyclists, runners and swimmers should be OK.

5You can find out more about ski touring by visiting the following websites — aacuk.org.uk and eagleskiclub.org.uk.

APART FROM DISTANT
CIRCLING FLOCKS OF ALPINE
CHOUGHS, WE'RE SOON ALL
ALONE, SURROUNDED BY
ENORMOUS PEAKS WHOSE
SUMMITS SPARKLE IN THE
FROZEN, PALE BLUE SKY

but how do you do that?

"The bindings on ski-touring skis release at the back but keep your foot firmly attached at the front. This lets your heel lift up, allowing you to walk uphill," answers Dave.

The other trick up the ski-tourers' sleeve are skins; long strips of bristly nylon which you whack on the back of the skis allowing them to move forwards, but not back. Sneaky.

Surprisingly, when it comes to heading up our first small hill, I find that skinning up (the ski-tourers' lingo for walking uphill), isn't so difficult and is really more of a shuffle.

So much for the nursery slopes.

Perilous crossing

The next day, our newly learned skills are put to the test among the monster-sized mountains that tower above Tignes, the mega-sized ski resort just up the road.

A quick scoot up the lifts (we're training, so no, we're not cheating) deposits us at the top of the pistes, from where the downhill hoi-polloi head down, but from where we continue to head up.

It's here that we literally cross the line between piste and off-piste skiing by stepping over a long chain emblazoned with warning signs that sets my heart racing: 'Cross at your peril!' Yikes.

Undeterred, we head out into the deep powder snow, and apart from distant circling flocks of Alpine choughs, we're soon all alone, surrounded by enormous peaks whose summits sparkle in the frozen, pale blue sky.

"Right, skin up everyone, it's time to head up," says Dave as we reach the foot of an impossibly huge-looking mountain.

With my skins securely in place under my skis, for the next sweaty two hours, I steadily skin up the slopes and find that it's really no more gruelling than grinding uphill on a mountain bike.

That's not to say that I wasn't relieved to reach the summit, from where we had jaw-dropping 360-degree views of countless snow-blasted mountains disappearing into the distance. Awesome.

But with the icy wind whipping up the spindrift around us, this was no place to linger and having stripped the skins off our skis and reset our bindings,

OFF-PISTE HOTSPOTS

You can do day ski tours from a fixed base, but for a full-blown winter adventure, a hut-to-hut tour is the more exciting option. Here are five of the best hut-to-hut ski tours in Europe:

CHAMONIX TO ZERMATT HAUTE ROUTE, FRANCE & SWITZERLAND

Meaning literally the 'high route', the Haute Route is the most famous and one of the most exciting and challenging of all Alpine ski tours for good reason. Skiing right up among the highest and most dramatic Alpine peaks, the only downside is that the tour is on the to-do list of all experienced ski tourers, so you won't be alone.

BERNESE OBERLAND TRAVERSE, SWITZERLAND

This classic tour ventures right into the heart of spectacular and remote big-mountain country. Throw in jaw-dropping views of the Eiger and its sister peaks of the Jungfrau and the Mönch, and you'll think that you're in Alaska, rather than the Alps. Because this tour stays high in the mountains, conditions are often excellent right through to May.

THE SILVRETTA TRAVERSE, AUSTRIA

If you're looking to do your first hut-to-hut ski tour, then the Silvretta Traverse ticks all the boxes. The mountains aren't quite as nerve-rackingly high as those in the western Alps, so you'll be able to ski right to the top of some of the peaks. Plus, the Austrian huts are rightly known as being among the comfiest in the Alps.

DOLOMITES CIRCUIT, ITALY

With its distinctive towering limestone peaks and pinnacles, the Dolomites are among the most breathtakingly beautiful in the world. This tour, which is perfect for intermediate ski tourers, takes in some of the most famous sights, including the Tre Cime and Cinque Torri. You'll also be rewarded with some blow-out Italian dinners in the mountain huts and hotels.

TOUR OF THE QUEYRAS, FRANCE

Tucked away in the southeastern corner of France, the Queyras remains an amazingly tranquil and untouched corner of the Alps. With wide-open slopes which aren't as scarily steep as those in the Alps further north, this tour is perfect for anyone looking for their first ski tour in one of the least touristy parts of the Alps.

An introductory course to ski touring costs £1,395, including six days' instruction and seven nights' half-board accommodation. The price doesn't include lift passes and equipment hire. Courses run throughout March. For details, see mountaintracks.co.uk or call 020 8123 2978.



WE HAD EYE-POPPING VIEWS OF THE MOUNTAINS STRETCHING OUT INTO THE VANOISE NATIONAL PARK TO THE WEST, WHILE THE HULK OF MONT BLANC DOMINATED THE NORTHERN SKYLINE

it was time to head back down through all the untouched powder snow.

If you've never skied off-piste through powder, you're missing out, as it's totally unlike skiing on a regular pisted slope.

Gone is the grinding clatter of ice under your skis and, instead, you silently and magically seem to just float through the snow.

Happy-making powder snow

Oh, and it's also one huge and instantly addictive endorphin rush. I love it.

"What a cracking morning!" I beam to Dave in the mountain restaurant where we're wolfing down lunch.

The place is rammed with boarders and skiers and already I'm missing the quiet

solitude of the mountain we'd earlier had all to ourselves.

I needn't have worried, however, because as soon as we'd carbed up, we were back out again, tearing down mountains and exploring the hidden corners of Tignes, before whizzing down to a much-needed beer. How perfect is that?

And this was pretty much the pattern for the rest of the week: punishingly long but epic days getting deep into the remote country around Tignes and nearby Val d'Isère, all the while improving my technique under Dave's watchful eye.

All this hard, sweaty work came together for what was the most exciting day towards the end of the week when we skied to the border of the Vanoise National

Park, one of the biggest untouched areas of mountain wilderness in France.

It was a sparkling alpine morning as we left the crowds of Val d'Isère behind to begin our 10km ski into the mountains, which started with a steady two-hour skin up towards the Col de Fours, a remote and precarious mountain pass, a whisker below 3,000m high.

Things became even more interesting when we had to cross an icy and exposed 100m slope, for which we had to put on lightweight crampons under our skis to grip the ice.

A nerve-racking 20 minutes later, we all reached the safety of the col.

From here, we had eye-popping views of the mountains stretching out into the Vanoise National Park to the west, while the hulk of Mont Blanc dominated the northern skyline.

It was a suitably dramatic high point for such an action-packed week of snowy adventure. The only problem now is that ordinary ski holidays just won't ever be the same again.

