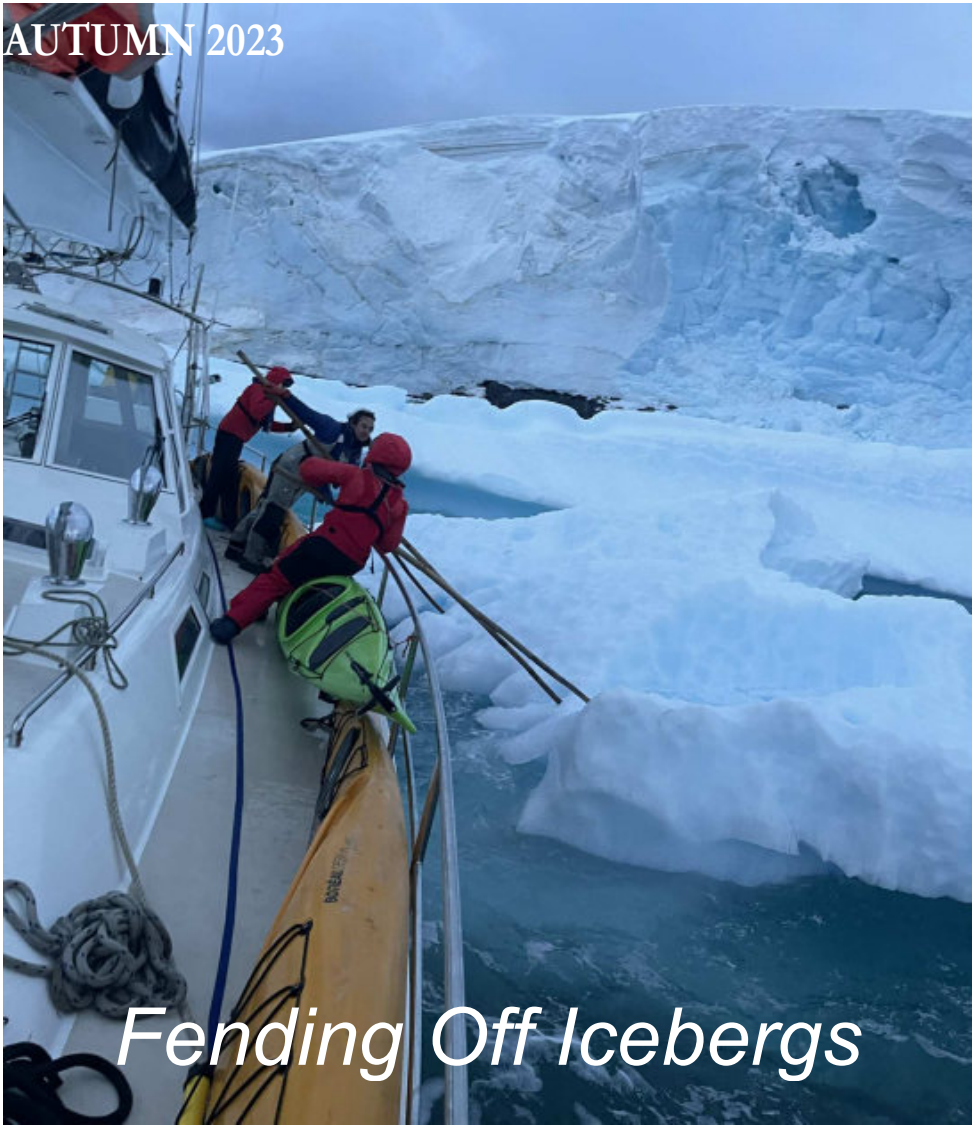
ASC REVIEW

AUTUMN 2023



Fending Off Icebergs

From the Editor

Articles for the Review

Please do tell us where you have been touring throughout the season. And if you have been somewhere particularly adventurous, then contact the editor to arrange for a longer article, and include some stunning photos.

We are looking for a mix of many standard articles together with a few longer ones for unusual locations.

Copyright and Original

The articles submitted for the review must be copyright of the author and must be an original, unpublished account of the trip. Where trip reports are submitted to multiple organisations, *e.g.* when receiving grants, it is important they are sufficiently different and use different photographs to avoid any copyright issues.

Photographs must be copyright of the named photographer.

Standard articles:

Short and snappy to fill a single page or so, about 300 words with 2 photos.

Long articles (by agreement):

Up to 1500 words maximum and supply a selection of photos.

Photographs:

These must be of sufficient resolution (at least 1500×1000 pixels, approximately 600Kb) and include a caption and the photographer in the filename. Send your photos to the editor via the Contact page on the website. Make sure you include all required information – a short caption and the photographer (for copyright) – preferably all in the file name.

We cannot accept photos embedded in documents nor links to large collections. Please send us your small selection of the very best photos.

editor@alpineskiclub.org.uk

Front cover: Fending off an iceberg in Paradise Harbour. Photo Frederick Laumans

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President's Foreword

I am writing this having just returned from a long season in the High Arctic, leading tours in the spring on ski, early summer on snow-shoe, and late summer with hiking boots. The end of the pandemic has given us back our freedom to travel and explore our mountains both close to home as well as farther afield. But the world into which we have re-emerged seems to have changed considerably. Summer arrived in the Arctic three weeks earlier than it did a decade ago, as witnessed by the early arrival of the migratory birds and the disappearance of skiable snow. Touring in the Albula Alps, where I was fortunate to find fantastic skiing conditions despite the lack of snow at lower elevations and the closure of many ski resorts, I was particularly struck by the disappearance and huge retreat of so many glaciers across which I had previously travelled. And during our expedition to Antarctica we endured a month of almost continuous rainfall and even witnessed an electric storm in Tierra del Fuego – the first that local people could recall. Similar changes are echoed by Robert in his tail-piece about skiing in Greece. These changes seem all the more profound after the COVID- enforced hiatus in our mountain activities, and will undoubtedly make it increasingly challenging to find places to ski tour reliably and safely in future years.

In this review Richard eloquently sums up what motivates us to plan our next ski adventures. You will have to read his account of skiing in Kazakhstan to find out if his dreams came true. This made me think about our Antarctic expedition and how our dreams and plans had to change because of weather, conditions and circumstance. Steve's account of our expedition, and Branden's account of his impressive Scandinavian traverse, both illustrate the importance of having an expedition mentality, in which flexibility and embracing and adapting to challenges mean that it is still-possible to have an incredible adventure, even when dreams and plans don't necessarily coincide!

Both the Antarctic and Scandinavia expeditions were awarded Memorial Adventure Fund (MAF) grants. In addition, Training Grants were awarded to two members for an Avalanche Training Course in Norway (see their article in this Annual Review). It is worth reminding everyone that Training Grants are there for you, the Club's members – whether you are an Aspirant or a Full Member, if you would like to learn or brush up on any ski touring skills then it is certainly worth applying for.

In March twelve members met in Ochsengarten, Austria, for an enjoyable Club Tour, and another dozen met in July at the Robertson Lamb hut in Great Langdale. Club meets, both at home and

abroad, are key to the Alpine Ski Club, but we do need more people to organise them. The Club provides a generous contribution towards the meet organiser's expenses, so if you are interested in running a meet, or if you have any suggestions, please do get in touch with myself or any of the committee members.

Finally, I would like to give a big thank you to all who have helped the club over the past year, whether as a Club officer, a meet/event organiser or a contributor to the Annual Review. The Club could not function without such a team of volunteers - your hard work is very much appreciated. I would like to extend special mentions to Richard (Secretary) and Roger (Treasurer and much more!) for holding the reins, particularly during my long absences while working abroad and away from comms, and to Bruce for editing and producing such a great Annual Review. I hope you enjoy reading it; when you are out on skis this coming winter don't forget to write something up for next year! We all love to read about what everyone's been up to…

Phil Wickens

Piz Surgonda, Albula Alps. Photo Phil Wickens

Ochsengarten, Austria

Ochsengarten has been a base for club and members meets for nearly a decade, at least since Ingram's Secretary's Meet in 2015, and I've now found out why we keep going back. It's a great location for day tours of a wide range of length and interest, and for much else, and 12 members met there in March this year. We were greeted warmly by Anita who evidently remembered having been called out long after dark to pick up Phil from Kühtai when late back from a day tour on his last visit in Jan 2017, but she seemed to have forgiven him. The Scheiber family still run the Gasthof Bergland, and

Skinning up die Mute. Photo Phil Budden

we enjoyed Richard's cooking and being looked after by his brother Christian in the restaurant and at the bar.

There was little snow on South facing slopes except on the piste but plenty North facing and everyone was out doing something each day, on skis or walking in the woods. The tourers generally skied as a single party, and I much appreciated their encouragement, especially from Tom, Mike and Valerie who I hadn't met before, as well as Nick who I know well. We started by skinning up the piste from near the hotel and then up along woodland trails for lunch at the Kühtaile Alm, where Roger joined us despite over 500m uplift. At 91, he set an impressive example of touring longevity, especially as he beat Nick who got lost in the woods on the way, distracted by tracking the carved wooden figures of local fauna! I'm an aspirant member and something of a novice tourer so on a steep learning curve, wanting to appreciate the excitement my Dad gets from touring compared to our family downhill holidays. Each day got more interesting, with Die Mute up from Kühtai next, and then Schafzoll up from the reservoir. This had a tricky section crossing the stream which we thankfully avoided on the way down, and the snow higher up was hard and icy which made the kick turns difficult, but the ski down was manageable. The next day we attempted to skin up into the Wörgetal valley but retreated from the hard ice on narrow tracks as we'd left axes and crampons behind. We split up for the afternoon to variously take lifts or skin up

Summit of die Mute. Photo Phil Budden

Summit of Schafzoll. Photo Tom Stephenson

but all enjoyed the piste with a layer of fresh snow.

A snowstorm at breakfast the next day sent some sightseeing in Innsbruck, but the weather quickly cleared allowing us to skin up under bright skies and on fresh powder to the Grieskogelscharte. This was followed by a lovely ski down, looking back to see only our own tracks, and I was really beginning to understand ski-touring's appeal. On the final day the weather was about to break properly but Roger joined us again as we attempted to sneak in a skin up Hochalter from the top of the lift before the storm arrived. Sadly it wasn't to be as the snow was poor, and we decided to retreat as conditions deteriorated. On this occasion Mike and Valerie did their own thing skiing off piste at Ochsengarten, linking patches of perfect snow.

Meanwhile Ingram and Hywel were skiing, mostly on the piste and also some loipe, but having problems with equipment. There were multiple trips up to Kühtai by several members to try different kit, but additional major purchases were somehow avoided. David and Michael did some skiing but also enjoyed walks in the woods. Gill was mostly going for walks but keeping her powder dry for a visit to the valley. Overall, a very pleasant week for everyone.

Jenny Budden

Roger Birnstingl, Jenny Budden, Phil Budden, Mike Gee, Mike Hendry, Valerie Hendry, Hywel Lloyd, Ingram Lloyd, Gill Putnam, Nick Putnam, Tom Stephenson, Dave Wood

Val Gran San Bernado, Italy

Flexibility seems to be ever more required in these times of climate change, pandemics, and ageing ski tourers. This time, Dave Harmer, lead skier, accountant and navigator, had to drop out shortly beforehand due to a medical problem, and all planned southern slope routes had to be abandoned due to lack of snow. Three of us stayed at the aptly named Hotel Beau Sejour in the village of Etroubles, which was like an open air museum. We arrived at the start of the carnival, so it was also like a folklore museum. As befitted a group of pensioners, our goals were limited to cols rather than summits. The first objectives were the obvious three valleys on the south side of Val Gran San Bernardo, Combes de Flassin, Citrin and Serena.

We were relieved that there was continuous snow cover from the car park to the cols, each route having first a cross country ski trail and meadows, then steep forest and finally an open upper valley. The Flassin route started at a cross country ski centre and defunct draglift, with a track through the forest well beaten by skiers and snowshoers. The Serena route started at the Crevacol downhill ski centre (a white strip in the green south facing slopes) and was also popular, although we managed not to find the best way back down through the forest. The most eventful day was Citrin, where the forest was steeper, denser and

Col de Bastillon. Photo Alex Miller

Col de Serena. Photo Alex Miller

the snow was unfriendly. I had toured there 30 years earlier with a beginners group and had no particular memory of it, but clearly the route has become steeper and more overgrown since! We agreed on the ascent that we would walk down. On the descent from the col I broke the rear part of my pin binding, and had to ski in half telemark mode, so I was quite happy to walk a section. The next day we piste skied at Pila by Aosta while I had new bindings fixed.

In the search for snow, we drove through the tunnel to Switzerland for a couple of tours, parking where the old Super St Bernard ski area used to be. At the weekend we were far from alone. Here the Combe and West Col de Barasson, and the Combe de Drôme and Col de Bastillon were the objectives, with of course the obligatory visit to the hospice at the col. The descent from Bastillon was south facing and we found exactly the right time of day for a fine ski. For the last tour we drove up the south side of the Great Saint Bernard pass road, which was closed surprisingly low down just after St Rhémy. It was possible to skin up the old road, under the new road at the tunnel entrance, and then up towards Col du Fourchon, stopping at the highest alm. Sadly we did not find the right time of day for the descent.

Alex Miller

Chasing The Dream

Kazakhstan

How many times have we gone off on a ski trip, enjoyed ourselves immensely, but a year later we hope for something a little better than last time?

I often think that I am chasing after the perfect trip, a dream to come true.

We don't often think a trip has fallen short of our expectations. Best not to set the expectations too high to start with. Just to be realistic of course.

We can choose who we go with, and where we go, but what about the snow ? the weather ? and will the place be too crowded?

We go with great hopes and expectations but then….

The avalanche risk is too high, so can't go here, or there either. Settle for something less. The wind has blown all the new snow away, so we get ice, sastrugi and wind slab. It is too warm and all that lovely powder is now heavy or covered in a crust. The new snow arrives. Great some fresh powder to ski! But it is snowing heavily and there is so little visibility. The sun comes out and brings all the people who trash all the best lines. Worst of all there is no snow. It has rained.

Going to the Alps, we take it for granted that we will need to pack Harscheisen. At least some of the time, sometimes most of the time, the snow will be hard and icy. We base our expectations on reality. There will be some bad weather days. Hopefully there will be enough snow, of some sort. We will be able to skin up and ski down. We can

Overlooking the main Ridder valley. Photo Marc Clothier

Skinning gently up towards our first ridge. Photo Marc Clothier

enjoy the scenery and if we are really lucky maybe a day of fresh powder. At least with ski touring we can get away from the crowds. Well maybe. With growing popularity even this is not so easy.

For years I have had a dream. A prescription for my next trip.

The snow would be perfect powder. That stuff that flies off the back of the skis and hangs in the air. There wouldn't be any tracks in it of course. We would see no tracks but our own.

There would be no avalanche risk.

The weather would be benign. Sunshine glinting off the snow. No wind.

We can skin up through the scattered trees, enjoy the views from the top before we float down through the glades and then closer trees further down.

Accommodation would be in a luxury timber ski lodge. Warm, comfortable, superb cuisine. We would be the only guests.

If we wanted to pack more skiing in there would be a snow cat with heated cabin parked just out the back. This would drive us up the mountain for run after run, but of course we would never ski the same bit twice. Always a fresh bit.

There wouldn't be any other skiers or ski tourers around. There wouldn't be another ski lodge within 500 miles, let alone a ski resort.

Oh, and just for good measure, it would be cheap !

Maybe ridiculous to have such a dream. What a daft idea. Get real !

Then I went to Kazakhstan.

Richard Symes

Kazakhstan

The Dream Comes True

I first met Andrey five years ago in a lodge, deep inside Siberia. He had organised a trip for British ski tourers. It was here that I discovered his great skill for finding fabulous snow conditions in remote locations in the Asian continent.

So when Andrey, an aspirant guide who now runs an adventure travel company, invited me to explore eastern Kazakhstan -- how could I resist?

I easily persuaded Richard and Luis to join me and we were teamed up with another group of six skiers.

Kazakhstan is a big country, spanning three time-zones. We were billeted near the mining town of Ridder in the north-east corner of Eastern Kazakhstan. The journey to reach here was remarkably simple, with a direct flight from Heathrow to Almaty, an internal 1.5 hour flight to Ust'-Kamenogorsk, followed by a 2 hour drive to Ridder.

Our lodging was the rather smart Ridder Resort Hotel, with excellent facilities including a cat-skiing operation, which starts from the rear car park. Since we were in a small suburb several kilometres outside Ridder, all dining was in the hotel, and the meat eaters enjoyed a good range of meals.

The terrain in this part of Kazakhstan is rolling hills as far as the eye can see, generally ca. 2000m, with nearby ranges reaching over 4000m. To the south west, the mountains rise to 7000m in the Tien-Shan. For

Skiing the dream. Photo Andrey Golovochev

us, these gentle hills sparsely covered in mixed forest were a perfect playground for ski touring, with slopes rarely going above 30 degrees. And of course, in the middle of continental Asia, with temperatures hovering around -5°C, the snow lay round about deep and crisp and even. And with no other ski tourers in sight, it was all ours .. day after day after day .. run after run after run.

The plan for the week was three day tours, climbing about 1000m, followed by two days of cat-skiing. Each touring day we loaded up our gear into a mini-van to drive for half an hour to some remote parking spot. Sometimes, we needed to transfer to four-by-fours to tackle the forest tracks to reach our start point.

Despite a bitterly cold start on day 1 we had very stable and mild weather and some blue skies most days. The ski touring was idyllic. Meandering up through the trees on an easy gradient to reach a ridge. Our choices for the descent were typically wide open glades with a few trees to add interest. We completed the days with a second shorter lap .. all faces bearing happy broad grins by the end.

Andrey surveying future routes. Photo Alexy Gaponov

Personally, these touring days were the true magic of the trip. A pace of travel in the quiet mountains that suited me perfectly.

For the last two days, Andrey had organised cat-skiing. We travelled in a converted piste-bashing machine, fitted with a comfortable cabin. Our party was joined by a few extra snow boarders.

The outward journey took around 45-60 mins to reach some ridge. The runs started fairly gently, in perfect untracked snow for a few hundred meters vertical. Here we were picked up by the cat machine, whisked back up to a ridge and then down another run

with perfect untracked snow. And so the day continued. The later runs became more interesting, falling through steeper trees and again with more fresh tracks.

I am showing my age here, but after a few runs this full-on skiing was all a bit too much. I miss the walking through the mountains, reflecting and observing.

For me, these trips to remote places are not all about the skiing. I look forward to the opportunity to travel somewhere new and to connect with different people in a different culture. Richard and I explored the back streets near the hotel, where every property was gated and with ferocious guard dogs defending; this mining town had a wild-west feeling. Kazakhstan has a very mineral rich geology, with world leading reserves of many metals, and mining continues to play a prominent role in the development of the region.

So when Andrey organised an excursion into central Ridder, first for a private viewing of the local museum steeped in soviet history and the local industry, and then to sample some rather unusual local foods an drinks -- it rounded off our experience.

Roger Upton

ASC members Luis Puzo, Richard Symes and Roger Upton. Another six skiers, Alex a local Kazakh guide, plus our leader and organiser Andrey Golovachev (primalscapes.com).

Great Langdale

Joint ASC-ESC Summer Meet

The weather omens for this joint ESC-ASC meet were not propitious. Parts of north-west England had already received some 300 percent of average July rainfall and another low was fast approaching from the south-west. "Getting-out", however is not the primary attraction for this annual meet at the Wayfarers Club's comfortable Robertson Lamb hut in Great Langdale. The draw is the food and the craic, fuelled by not a little of the grain and grape. The hosts, as always, were Dave Wood, meet leader and master chef, and his able assistant Mike Gee. The score, or more of us who packed in to the main room of the old hut on the Saturday evening owe the pair a huge thanks.

And despite the weather there was in fact a good deal of "getting out". In a brief respite from the rain on Saturday morning small parties set out to all points of the compass. Pete Boyd, Alessandra Laiso, Julian Braithwaite, and Martin Bull started the Crinkle Ghyll scramble; thwarted by the volume of water in the beck they exited the

Rya Tibawi on Upper Scout Crag. Photo Steve Goodwin

Ghyll and hiked steeply up the flank of the Crinkles to summit Long Top.

The fortitude prize perhaps goes to Roger Upton and Mary Ann Edwards who put in an eight-hour day: discouraged by dark clouds on the highest peaks, they traversed from Angle Tarn around Rossett Pike and the Langdale Pikes, over Thunacar Knott, then Pavey Ark and along the ridge eastwards, taking in Blea Rigg. Here their luck with the weather ran out in a sleet storm and a direct descent to the valley ensued.

Richard Carter joined Dave and Mike for a ramble over Lingmoor before the two cooks adjourned to the kitchen; Ken Crocker and Alan Yardley took off over the hills on bikes; and Hywel and Ingram Lloyd headed for Helm Crag above Grasmere, mixing an enjoyable climb with a touch of nostalgia. Ingram's grandfather - a local policeman and Cumberland wrestler - had raced up Helm Crag as a competitor on the annual Cumberland Games.

Rya Tibawi and Stephen Goodwin climbed on Upper Scout Crag on Friday evening (Route 1, a 3 star VDiff) and on Saturday scrambled up the East Rib of Tarn Crag and then Belles Knott, described somewhat fancifully by Alfred Wainwright as the "Matterhorn of Easdale". He should have travelled more.

Stephen Goodwin

Also attending: Roger Birnstingl, Paul Cooper, Mike Esten, Peter Ferguson, Ian Thompson and Jane.

Antarctic Peninsula

Paradise Harbour

Our prime objective was to ski up Mt Morton and other unclimbed peaks on the Antarctic Peninsula, sailing from Ushuaia, Argentina on an 18 metre yacht Icebird. The initial entry to Argentina was spiced up, with a customs official asking 'who owns the Malvinas Islands', a diplomatic response followed before the official smiled and asked us to have a good stay in Argentina.

Our start was delayed by poor weather and 3 sets of ski bags not arriving. The weather delay wasn't enough for the bags to arrive but enabled acquisition of essential missing kit, including skis, boots and crevasse travelling kit.

Once out in the Drake Passage to cross the Southern Ocean, 5 of us met the oceans' demand to reveal our last meal, causing an uncomfortable initial 1-2 days, after which we largely improved and enjoyed the crossing and the extensive wildlife including: albatross, petrels, minke, fin and humpback whales. Penguins appeared on most ice bergs, cliffs etc after arriving at the peninsula.

We anchored at Enterprise Island opposite Bancroft Bay. After celebrating a belated New Year (the boat was dry for the crossing), we had a shake-down ski on Enterprise Island, with variable snow and weather, and a fine lunch on the far side in a small cove by the sea.

The following day was spectacular in every aspect. We crossed to Bancroft Bay and skied up Harris Peak (1002m). The snow was great, a bluebird day, no wind and the crevasses covered, unless big enough to easily avoid. Views for miles were of snow-covered hills, crevasses, icebergs floating around in the blue sea and plenty of low flying sea birds. As we arrived back, Oli delivered

The team on Harris peak. Photo Steve Kentish

cool beer by zodiac to enjoy while watching the odd penguin wondering what we were up to.

Two of the team had a cool dip in the sea on return, followed by kayaking trips, before and after dinner. A combination of poorer weather and still having L plates on my kayak, I was the third person to experience a cold dip in the sea.

Life was good.

The weather deteriorated overnight, bringing snow and wind. The latter came with icebergs, some of significant size and one blocking our harbour exit. We spent the day keeping the icebergs off the boat and trying to move them out of the way, using bamboo poles, our zodiac, rope and shore anchor points. We were unable to influence nature but learned skills in shoving ice bergs with bamboo, and generally had fun trying. The following morning brought a favourable wind, which opened the harbour for us and we sailed south to Cuverville Island, where the weather was a little better. After a failed ski attempt with low cloud and wind, we settled for penguin tourism, which was a rather smelly but entertaining affair.

Sadly bad news on return to the boat. The gearbox was failing, offering limited drive, coupled with anchor clutch failure (used rapid deployment

Camp at Harbour Glacier, looking towards Doumer Island. Photo Steve Kentish

for an 'emergency' stop), we were compromised with limited low speed manoeuvring, required for docking and anchoring to enable shore excursions. Thus the prime goal of the trip was now unlikely.

We launched the spare zodiac to help with manoeuvring, however an internal board was missing and a slow leak, limited its full use.

We headed for the Chilean base in Paradise Harbour where they had a mechanic and 2 opposing natural harbours. We anchored and roped up in the ice-free one. Soon after midnight we had a rude awakening, with ice scraping down the side of the boat followed by a call for 'all hands on deck'. Our newly learnt skills of playing snooker with icebergs using bamboo 'cues' was put to test. The Chileans spotted our predicament and assisted by adding 2 powerful zodiacs. We got our ropes clear, some left onshore and were nudged out following an opening in the ice. Shortly after the gearbox engaged and we were free of ice and the harbour. Our zodiac collected the mooring ropes we had cut free. The ice from the opposing harbour had largely been blown clear, so we were able to anchor there and retrieve our zodiac and ropes.

In the afternoon the Chileans invited us to a birthday party, where we met our saviours and relaxed on dry land briefly. Sadly their mechanic was not able to help with the gear box, which was clearly deteriorating.

We embarked on an all-day kayak trip the following day. We paddled past and next to icebergs, many gentoo penguins, a leopard seal and multiple humpback whales. The Chileans threw a BBQ in

the evening for us and another yacht in the harbour, finishing the day off excellently, noting that vegetarians go hungry at Chilean BBQs.

It was decided to head for Port Lockroy, one of the most protected harbours in the area as the weather was currently freeing us from our existing anchorage. Port Lockroy had many advantages, other than being safe, 2 other yachts were there, with a similar return dates as us. The harbour also offered some skiing, kayaking, penguin watching, as well as the Port Lockroy base to visit. We made a couple of day trips on ski. Firstly we headed to Jabet Peak along with visiting the interesting Damoy hut. The following day, after a long zodiac ride, we headed to Doumer Island, climbed the Peak and Stokes hill, observing humpbacks in the water below, a bit of a unique ski-day out, even if we had some heavy crusted snow and a small avalanche to contend with. Port Lockroy offered a history lesson to the area, with early exploration, weather monitoring and an improved understanding of the wildlife, also the world's most southerly post office.

With no weather window for a return to Argentina for a few days, we used our tents, supplies etc to enjoy a couple of nights camping out on Harbour Glacier. We skied across the glacier, tried climbing a small couloir but turned around due to deteriorating weather and some open crevasses. Waking on the second morning to a bit of an Antarctic storm with snow covered tents, so we decided to retreat to the boat.

Icebird at anchor with the zodiac. Photo Steve Kentish

A couple of days later the stars seemed to align, the wind and weather were favourable to sail home. We needed to escape the Port Lockroy harbour first, which was tricky under sail, with the narrow channel out, however the 2 other yachts returning offered assistance. After a valiant effort to tack out we were forced back and took a tow from Pod Orange. They released us in the open water, free of land, were we hoisted sails and made fine progress north in waters choppy enough to upset my stomach but others held up well. The return journey was punctuated with a broken main sheet, due to continual gusts and then a bit of a weather lull, where an engine would have been useful. More suitable winds followed and we were soon at the entrance to the Beagle Channel. The Pod Orange was planning to tow us, however following the injury to a crew member they had to return immediately. The wind had too much west in it, so we waited around a day before it turned southerly, allowing us a run home. The Beagle Channel was again alive with dusky and Peale's dolphins jumping all round and a close encounter with a sei whale, made for a special return.

After nearly another day, in spite of issues with the main sheet mounting point, we sighted Ushuaia with our zodiac ready to guide us in. With additional assistance from the harbour's zodiac and some skilful skippering from Oli, we docked inch perfect in Ushuaia in front of many onlookers, after 7 days under sail.

With our freezer failure and no ice now to keep it all cool, the meat, along with plenty of beer and wine, enabled a celebration BBQ for us and the people who helped us home.

We thank Oli our captain and first mate Lena in bringing us back safely, and to Phil for utilising his Antarctic experience to make the best from the trip.

While the boat had rather too many issues for comfort, combined with the unusually poor weather on the peninsula, the trip was rather more an expedition than exploration, but we all got a huge amount from the trip and met some great people in the process.

Steve Kentish

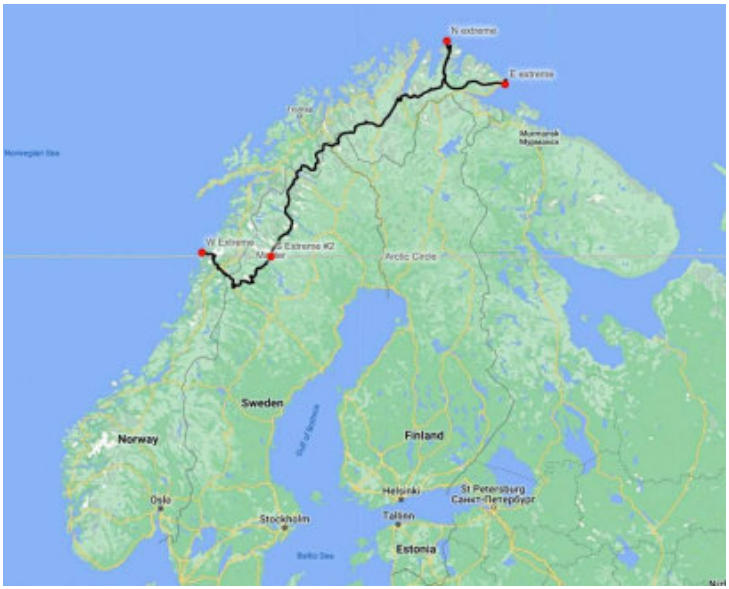
The party received a grant from The Alpine Ski Club, Memorial Adventure Fund (MAF)

Ski Party: Phil Wickens (leader & ASC), Paul Cooper (ASC), Liam Dye (ASC), Rodney Franklin (ASC), Ian Houghton, Steve Kentish (ASC), Frederik Laumans (ASC). Yacht Crew: Oli Grant (Captain), Lena Drapella (First Mate)

Solo snow kite crossing of Scandinavian Arctic

77 days, 972 mile traverse

Inspired by a ski traverse of Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Park in early 2021, I dreamed of pursuing a longer crossing within the Arctic Circle. Shortly after my Grand Teton traverse, two years ago, I decided to attempt a 1,000-mile ski and snow-kite traverse of continental European Arctic, from west to east. Although I recognised this dream, I knew it could be several years before my schedule allowed the traverse to come to fruition. However, when I was offered a primary contract to work in McMurdo Station, Antarctica for the austral summer of 2023-24, the timing lined up perfectly to start the traverse directly following the contract. I started the focused planning phase of the logistics, route, and strategy. What appeared to be a relatively simple point A to point B trip unfolded to be far more complicated than I could have imagined.



With an expedition duration of up to three months, my gear needed to be high quality and in excellent condition. I designed the route to pass through a town with a grocery store and gas station every 200 miles or less. With only three snow-kite learning sessions before embarking on this project, I planned the traverse to be predominantly skiing while utilising the kite if conditions warranted.

The structure of this multi-sport expedition being nearly ten times longer than my previous ski traverse and being on a foreign continent with changing of seasons, I knew I was in for a challenging and transcendental ride.

My journey began with a flight to Norway, a backpack and more than one

The thrill of snow-kiting. Photo Branden Joy

Aurora borealis. Photo Branden Joy

hundred pounds of equipment in ski bags. After organizing my gear and shopping at the grocery store, I approached Aakvik, Norway, the western geographic extreme within the continental European Arctic. Heavy snowfall preceded my arrival, followed by cold temperatures and high winds to welcome me, making for an unexpectedly challenging start. My legs and mind adjusted to the exposure to cold, particularly sleeping outside. As incessantly as I breathed and blinked my eyes, the continuous decisions regarding navigation, weather observation, fatigue, and risk management became engrained in my existence. I didn't think about needing to do things; I only took action.

I found travelling with a sled arduous, having attempted to traverse the Svartisen Glacier, the second-largest glacier in Norway I failed twice. I decided that the glacier was too dangerous to cross alone. So I took a combination of ferries, buses and hitchhiked lifts with all my equipment to advance and retreat on the route to the nearest city.

After retreating from the first section two times, I sat in a hotel room in Mo i Rana, Norway, with winds gusting 40 miles per hour outside. I could not afford to waste more time on the first section, as there was another 960 miles to go. So I decided to cut my losses and continued from Mo i Rana forward towards Ammarnas, Sweden.

Portaging my sled over dry ground. Photo Branden Joy

With a limited knowledge and proficiency of snow-kiting, I effectively learned how to kite on this trip. Gone were the ideal conditions of the flat, powdery reservoir with the consistent wind in Utah, where I had previously practised. Soon, I entered a wild game of fluctuating snow conditions, melting lake ice, whiteout blizzards, blowing snow, flat light, never-ending topographic variation, trees, and exposed wind-scoured stone. On day ten of the trip, I used my snow-kite to cross a lake over the border between Norway and Sweden, and I forgot to attach the kite's safety line and unintentionally ejected my kite into a grove of healthy birch trees at dusk. The kite was undamaged, but I lost half a day untangling the kite lines.

Over the coming weeks, fatigue set in both physically and psychologically. Day by day, I continued to move forward and chip away at the project. The weather slowly warmed, and by the time I reached the halfway point in Abisko, Sweden, I was portaging my sled across dry ground as I approached the town. Snow in the hills that surrounded the town was nearly non-existent, and rain fell on the hostel as I considered the situation.

With no information about conditions further along my route and no resources to ask, I decided to continue, taking an extra day or two of contingency food and fuel in case I moved more slowly than expected. Week by week, the weather continued to get warmer. When I arrived

at Kautokeino, parts of the rivers were not navigable due to thin ice and melting. My stress increased as I knew my chances of reaching the eastern geographic extreme decreased daily.

I continued, immersed in fear of doubt and my safety. If the weather continued to warm at this rate, I could be stuck in the middle of a remote 200-mile section without snow, which, with a sled, could make a self-evacuation to the nearest highway tough, if not impossible with the food and fuel rations I had.

This year, spring came early to the north, and soon I faced gushing rivers, flooded bogs, thin lake ice, precarious snow bridges, deep slush, heavy rain events, barren tundra, and arid boulder fields. Each day, I was surprised by the mesmerising and, at times, harrowing cocktail of environmental conditions presented. Halfway between Skoganvarre and Tana Bru, Norway, I was forced to evacuate to the south or east. If I continued east, I would continue along my intended route, but evacuating south to the nearest highway would be 20% shorter. After counting my calories and fuel volume, I took the gamble and tried to make my way to Tana Bru.

After a week, I successfully evacuated to the nearest road and hitchhiked to the nearest town with an old Norwegian man. I stored my ski items and sled at a hotel in Tana Bru, and I was able to reach the eastern geographic extreme via a remote Arctic highway thanks to an archaic 80L backpack borrowed from a local.

Immediately after arriving at the eastern extreme, I hitchhiked back to Tana Bru and flew back to Bodo. I acquired a kayak and logistical support from my parents, who had planned to meet me in Bodo at the end of my trip and re-attempted the first section of the route. Instead of crossing over the dangerous crevasse-ridden glacier, I kayaked around it and walked the road back to Mo i Rana, to fully complete the course.

The trip lasted 77 days, covered 972 miles, and contained 76,000 feet of vertical gain. I crossed borders between Norway, Sweden, and Finland in the mountains and did not encounter border patrol. Of the total distance covered, 46% was in Norway, 50% in Sweden, and 4% in Finland.

I resupplied at grocery stores seven times along the route, averaging 121 miles between towns. Of the distance covered, I skied (66%), snow-kited (19%), walked (13%), and kayaked (2%). During the journey, I snow-kited a total of 186 mind-bending miles over the course of 19 distinct kiting sessions.

When I started the journey, daylight lasted about 11 hours, and after 50 days, I no longer needed my headlamp at night due to sufficient sunlight 24 hours per day. On many occasions during the first half of the trip, I was lucky enough to glimpse the vibrant northern lights,

Spring comes early to the Arctic. Photo Branden Joy

sheltered from the wind and the cold, with only my head poking out of my tent.

Each day, I typically moved between 8 and 10 hours. During this time, I allowed my mind to wander, as during meditation. I reflected on my past and considered my future as I absorbed the present's beauty, discomfort, pain, tears, sweat, and joy of the journey. I contemplated the essence of life, mortality, and existence and deeply considered the core of my needs as an individual and a human.

With the desire to kite, I became so sensitive to the wind speed and direction that I needed only to turn my head slightly, as if I were glancing over my shoulder, to assess the wind, instantaneously cross-referencing intelligence of the snow conditions and impending terrain to determine if kiting would be an efficient use of time. I knew simply by how the wind gripped and shook my tent whether or not the wind would be sufficient to snow-kite.

I have never felt such an intimate and developed connection with my body, mind, and the world around me. Even during the trip, I felt a great nostalgia for this place, its beauty, vastness, and wildness. Following this trip, I yearn for the liberation, freedom, and adventure I had felt.

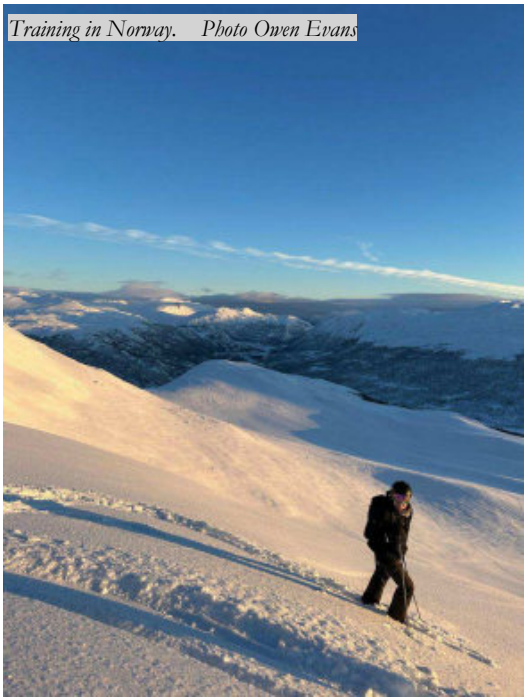
Branden Joy

Branden Joy received a grant from The Alpine Ski Club Memorial Adventure Fund (MAF).

Hemsedal, Norway

Avalanche Training Course

Dan Halvorsson of Tindiliv is an experienced International Mountain Guide who spent more than two decades as a winch-man on helicopters in Viken County, Norway. He was also, seemingly, the only appropriately qualified man in Europe not fully booked for avalanche courses in January 2023. Perhaps this was a consequence of pent-up demand due to travel restrictions in recent seasons.



Training in Norway. Photo Owen Evans

So it was that Rosie and I joined Dan for a three-day avalanche course in the valleys around Hemsedal, Norway. There, our good fortune of finding a guide with late availability was compounded by near-record snow depth and stable, cold temperatures.

Day One - Gravset

Part one of day one was to find suitable equipment. We did so in Tunet Sport, Hemsedal, where we also enjoyed the three-dimensional topographic map hung on the back wall. Here, we plotted likely routes and checked the weather on the brilliant Norwegian equivalent of the Met Office - yr.no. To aid us further, we downloaded the stunningly powerful app Varsom which maps the entirety of Norway and uses phone GPS to triangulate your position and give you terrain gradients of adjacent features.

Unfortunately, there was a strong northerly wind, so we found a South-facing, tree-lined slope and set about testing our equipment and learning the least inefficient ways of skinning up through a forest. Two important rules of thumb: i) if there is a shallower route, take it, and, ii) if you think you might have one too many layers on for the ascent before you've started, you'll soon realise it was more like two.

Nearing the crest of the hill we stopped for a lesson on the hill about snow layers

which doubled as digging a snow hole for lunch.

After lunch we attempted the final short push to the top of the hill and were promptly met there by a fierce and terrifically loud wind. We turned 180 degrees, slipped down off the top and found a little shelter in which to remove our skins. We skied down the tight track we had just made for ourselves at a snail's pace because the density of the forest did not permit any straight lines of more than about four metres. Eventually, we made it down and decided that the weather was not amenable to more efforts at skiing. Instead, Dan felt that Rosie and I should practice locating and digging up buried transceivers.

The training continues Photo Owen Evans

Day Two - Hulbak (Tuv Valley)

With a significant drop-off in the wind, day two of our course was on the gentle 15-25 degree West-facing slopes of the Tuv Valley immediately north of Hemsedal. Local temperatures were stable and cold, curiously inverted: -18 in the valley and -12 on the mountain top. We drove to a car park belonging to a local farmer and discovered that Norway is dominated by a payment processing company called 'Vipps' and that having their app is all-but essential for paying your way in the country. After writing an I.O.U to Dan, we scooted across a frozen lake and made a brief hike through a sparse mountain birch forest. On walking out above the tree line, we were thrilled not to feel the need to dip back down immediately. Instead, we worked our way up the mountainside with just a couple of stops to learn a little about how to measure slope gradient and to coordinate ourselves both on our paper maps and on the Varsom app. We took a wide zig-zagging route up and watched with disbelief as two other skiers went straight up to their chosen summit without any deviations to lessen their effort. We skied down, ate lunch, plotted another route up to an adjacent peak and repeated before calling it a day well in advance of sun-down, which was around 6 o'clock this time of year in this part of Norway.

A brilliant day only slightly ruined by a 90-minute delay on the road south from

Hemsedal due to a car colliding with an elk.

Day Three - Storeskardnosene (Tuv Valley)

Eight inches of snowfall overnight and a valley temperature of -17 were certainly cause for excitement. However, not immediate early morning excitement because it meant having to thaw out the car in the dark and use snow chains for our very first time. Our meeting time with Dan was over an hour before the roads were likely to be cleared. So, we fought with the snow chains and slowly made what had been a one-hour journey the day before in a little over twice the time.

Blue skies and freezing temperatures. Photo Owen Evans

We met Dan in the car park and checked that the present weather conditions were aligned with the expectations we had from checking yr.no that morning. As predicted, wall-to-wall sunshine and a slight enough breeze to mean that we could lunch wherever we wanted. We headed up Storeskardnosene and made it to the top by lunchtime. We enjoyed the view there before peeling off our skins, painting on our grins and heading down a broad, open slope of light-as-air powder snow.

As we approached the tree line, we all lightly applied the brakes and began to snake through a low-density part of mountain birch trees Dan first, then me, then Rosie. Then, Dan found a ditch running perpendicular to our direction of travel. Unfortunately, he did so with his skis, not his eyes and was promptly bucked out the front of his bindings and catapulted onto the opposite bank. This was a timely reminder that perfect conditions, great views and good company, though dreamy, can be fertile breeding ground for a little complacency. Thankfully, Dan was not hurt, and we all rode a little easier the rest of the way day.

Owen Evans

Owen Evans and Rosie Baker were each awarded a training grant from The Alpine Ski Club.

Zeus

Many years ago, in May 2000, I joined an Eagles team led by Rob Collister to climb and ski Kedar Dome, a Himalayan peak sacred to Shiva, the Great God of the Hindus. I sprained my ankle on the walk-in and couldn't climb beyond Advance Camp Two. It felt like my attempt had not found favour with Shiva.

A week or two later, I climbed to the shrine of Tungnath, a place particularly sacred to Shiva with a magnificent view of the Kumaon Himalaya. The forests all around had been untouched, unlike so many Himalayan slopes that have been clear-felled. Delighted to see the forest still intact, I asked pilgrims on their way to the sanctuary why this was. Various people offered unconvincing explanations until a Bengali family said rather shame-facedly that the local people were very superstitious and believed that Shiva would punish them if they felled the trees. I felt (or did I imagine?) their embarrassment at confessing such credulity to a representative of rational Western culture. They were themselves pilgrims and could therefore be expected to share the local people's beliefs.

I stayed overnight on the veranda of the temple at Tungnath, sitting with the temple pujari and a saddhu, looking at the mountain chain under the full moon. Just before dawn a powerful storm broke, with pouring rain, crashing thunderclaps and frightening lightning bolts. It cleared by 10.00 am, the sun came out and I set off downhill.

As I was crossing a grassy saddle there suddenly appeared just three metres in front of me an enormous spark, fully a metre in length, fizzing madly and shaped like a rugby ball. It quivered and shot up into the sky. The energy threw me onto my back, totally stunned and in absolute (and electric) shock. Completely wired, I struggled up and ran frightened across the rest of the saddle to where a small group of locals were drinking tea in a shack, the Bengali family amongst them.

They had all obviously found my experience terribly funny as they roared with laughter, banged me on the back and bought

me tea. I commented to the Bengalis that, far from being primitive, the local people were absolutely right to respect their god. I had just had evidence of his power. They appeared, understandably, very pleased to hear this from me.

I later learned that a boy on a neighbouring hillside had been struck dumb when lightning had hit the herd of water buffalo he had been tending, killing them all.

In an appreciative state of mind, my take on all this was that I may not have been granted access to the Shiva's summit, but that I had been given very personal evidence of his power … and been allowed to survive it. Overall, I felt, a positive outcome for me.

Less so, of course, for the boy struck dumb.

In March of this year (2023) I set out to climb and ski one of the peaks of Mount Olympus, sacred - as we all know - to Zeus, the Great God of the Greeks. Our little team was composed of men all past the age of sixty - some of us well past - led by Jim Blyth and Giorgos Rokas. We toiled up under a burning sun amid glaring white snow, but too slowly, and had to turn back before reaching our summit. I was disappointed. Thwarted again by another Great God.

But as had Shiva, so was Zeus to show favour later. Our ascent of Scala, the third peak of Mount Smolikas - Greece's second highest mountain - two days later was a blissful climb up, and the ski down was a paradise of spring corn snow under a cobalt sky, ending amongst well-spaced Bosnian pine trees which have the shape and magnificence of cedars.

Two days later a climb of eighteen hundred metres to the summit of Mount Ploskos gave us another wonderful long descent, most of it in spring snow. The French deprecatingly call this le ski du retraité (pensioners' skiing); Brits call it 'hero snow' because anyone can ski it like a superman. We skied it in the heroic style, like supermen.

Heroes all, we had found favour with the gods, the spirits of the place.

Greece has never in living memory had a season with so little snow. With professional skill and local knowledge, Jim and Giorgos found us snow where all others had given up.

Greece faced a long, dry summer with wild fires raging all over. Our planet is on fire beneath our feet. We skiers see the snow disappearing from our mountains.

The gods live only in our imagining. Without us, they would never have been dreamed into existence. They cannot save us if we do not help ourselves in practice.

We had all flown to Greece. We all flew back, leaving a heavy carbon footprint.

But the skiing is so beautiful. It remains so compelling …

What to do?

Robert Borgerhoff Mulder

(Robert Borgerhoff Mulder skied in northern Greece with Jim Blyth, Giorgos Rokas and five members of the Austrian Alpine Club in March 2023)

Robert skiing 'hero snow'. Photo Jim Blyth

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