

MISSION: WOW

Katy Dartford heads off on the split skies for a weekend of ski-touring in Val Ferret.

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“You’re not allowed to say sorry. There are no sorrys this weekend” says Caroline George, our lithe looking American/Swiss guide as a few of us apologise for faffing around trying to clip into the ski tour bindings. On first appearance look rather complicated...and sparse.... How could that small piece of metal possibly hold a ski boot in place when smashing through the thick powder that had been persistently falling since the previous night?

I’m in the Val Ferret in Courmayeur on a girl only weekend introduction to ski touring, organised by MissionWOW. Having spent much of this winter in Chamonix honing my carving and off-piste skills, it was time to break free from the hordes on the slopes and head off for a more authentic mountain adventure. I’d heard much about touring amongst the legendary peaks of Chamonix, and I wanted to ‘earn my turns.’ But where to start? There seemed to me a whole lot of bravado over which couloir to ski, who had ‘just missed’ an avalanche unfolding on top of them and the day's latest ‘epic.’ I really wanted to get away from all that ‘boy talk’ and learn the skills of ski touring in an unintimidating environment.

We start by preparing our equipment, provided by Scott Sports, in the car park of the Val Ferret. Our guides show us the basics of sticking our carpet-like skins onto our touring skis so we can ascend the mountain, clipping our touring boots, which have a walk/ski setting, into our touring bindings and the basic movement for walking uphill; bending from the knees and sliding the skis so they are always in contact with the snow.

We skin through the valley for about an hour before a vital hot chocolate stop half way, then stop for ten minutes more before beginning our final ascent of around 400 meters. Ulrika urges us to eat, drink and quickly put on layers, as despite feeling very hot from the effort, you lose heat and energy quickly. We're also given helpful tips such as holding the uphill pole lower down its length so your arm is at a 90 degrees angle, how to do pivot pivot turns round a sharp corner by making the shape of a ‘V’ then an ‘A’ then a ‘V’ with our skis, and my personal favourite; flicking a plate of metal on the binding called the heel lifter, which lifts your heel so your calves aren’t so stretched when going uphill - tight calves something I’ve had problems with after years of wearing high heels.

From the distance we look like a trail of ants following each other up the hill carrying our loads. When we eventually arrive at the Refugio Bonatti, part of the Tour du Mont Blanc after about an hour and a half

of climbing, it's surprise for the gnarly mountaineers to see a group of 25 jovial women, from as far flung places as Scotland, New Zealand, French and Britain led by Ulrika Asp, Isabelle Santoire, Caroline George and Pia Palm, some of Europe's top female mountain guides.

After lunch we're offered the choice of either staying and chilling out in the hut, or having a 'kick turn clinic.' We split into small groups and are shown how to make full 180 degrees turns; apparently men find hard to do as their hips aren't so flexible but fter a few attempts I'd pretty much mastered it. We then take our skins off, twist the bindings into ski mode and ski back down to the hut in time for a quick stretch session, before a dinner, of salad, soup with cheese, meatballs and apple flan. It's not long before we were all ready for bed in the cosy dormitory style rooms.



Sunday dawns bleak again with practically zero visibility. We're offered a choice of activities; a short skin up and ski down with avalanche training, map reading and crevasse rescue skills back at the hut, or a long skin up and ski back down to the hut, with some avalanche training before lunch. Alternatively, you could just do nothing. Wanting to make the most of it, I opt for the exercise, joining the long skin up group to the 'Tete Entre Deux Sauts' or the 'Head Between Two Jumps.'



Caroline shows us that we are following a summer hiking trail and from that we can see what features to expect, just about making them out amidst the white out - a ridge line to the right and ruck buildings to the left. After about an hour skinning we stop briefly to refuel, then taking off one skin at a time so we don't have such an impact on the snow pack, we get ready for a rewarding ski down to the hut for lunch, then a final descent back down to the valley.

The snow is fairly tough, like frozen shaving foam and at first I fall a few times not feeling confident in the minimal visibility, but the guides are very encouraging and in no rush to get us down. We are split into slow and faster groups and by the time we reach the trees my confidence is boosted by the improved visibility. I then finally remember my off-piste skills and begin a mix of tight turns between the trees and big sweeping turns, cutting fresh tracks through the open sections as I try not to fall. By the time we arrive back in the valley for a celebratory beer, we all feel more confident to head out into the backcountry and explore the world away from the hordes on the piste.



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