

## **Winter Tour Report 2008-09 Exploration Club**

It was decided that the tour this year would be an ice-climbing tour for members who had some experience of climbing or ice climbing. This was, obviously, to take place overseas to take advantage of the waterfall ice conditions that are unreliable in the UK. The tour this year was limited by the gear that the members were able to use. Due to the high popularity of the tour amongst members, it was necessary to allow the group to split into two to let all members who wanted to go take part in the tour and benefit from the Imperial College Union and Imperial College Trust subsidy available. Both groups were self-contained and each member taking part only went on one trip, both of which took place in January 2009. Several of the members taking part were ex-Imperial student members of the club. This was a very important part of the tour as these members were not only able to provide guidance for the less experienced members of the club, but were also able to provide advice on the best time of year to go and the best locations. One group of 6 people decided to travel in mid-January to the Pelvoux region of the European Alps, and the second, larger group of 12 members decided to travel at the end of January to Rjukan, in Norway, where a tour had taken place previously and had been very successful. The different locations were justified by the expected ice conditions in each location at the times that the members on each tour were able to take time away from college. The tour lasted for 7-8 days for each member with a total of 18 members..

It was decided that each member would buy their own flights for the tour, since this was easier than managing the purchases through the club accounts. Each member was asked to pay a deposit initially of £50, which was to cover changes of name on flight booking if members had to pull out of the tour. Then members were asked to pay a further £200 each before the start of the tour. The exact cost to each members depended on their flight ticket price since this affected their travel cost total, but the average cost to each member was a little under £250.

The group travelling to Pelvoux experienced large snowfalls throughout their week. The made ice climbing difficult as the avalanche risk was almost always very high. They visited valleys such as Ceillac and Fressinieres. The best location was Ceillac as this had several shorter ice falls that were in good condition, although this was also a very popular place with other climbers. An early start was needed to avoid congestion on several of the days the group climbed here. On days when snowfall was too much and the conditions too dangerous to climb, the group went skiing, both downhill and Nordic. This increased the cost of the tour since equipment had to be hired, but the group members greatly enjoyed this, as a compensation for not being able to ice-climb. The group stayed in a Gite that previous tours had visited, in the same area.

The group travelling to Norway was also affected by snowfall, and some climbers experienced avalanches whilst on climbs, causing them to quicken their climb and remove themselves as fast as possible from the danger of further avalanches. Many of the pitches climbed in the Rjukan valley had abseil descents, so groups were often late back to the accommodation after long, but successful, climbs. The group stayed in two huts in the valley, and hired cars to transport them to the climbs. A very positive point about Rjukan is that it offers very short approach walks to some climbs, thereby allowing the climbers to carry less equipment, and spend more time climbing!

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Positive points about both locations were the variety of options for beginners and more experienced members of the groups. The ice conditions were good at the beginning of the week in the Alps and then deteriorated as the temperature rose as snowfall continued. In Rjukan they had been the best for several years just before the tour, and they remained good throughout most of the tour. All members were extremely safety conscious during the tour due to the climbing accidents that had happened a short time before January 2009, in the Alps, and excessive risks were not taken.

The overall impression from members was that the tour was a great success. Some members from the Pelvoux group were disappointed by the now conditions, but were exhausted enough by trying to learn to ski that they had little breath left to complain with at the end of the day! The Rjukan members were extremely satisfied with their trip and are keen to return. More flexibility about the final location of the tour would be ideal since the best place for ice climbing greatly depends on the formation of ice and therefore can be extremely difficult to predict in advance. However, due to the need to book travel and accommodation in advance, this is not likely to be possible. Equipment has now been purchased that will allow all travelling to take place at the same time in future years, making the organisation much easier. This will also make the tour available to more members in future years.

### **Tour leaders**

Hilary Dyer

Kunal Masania

A report from the Rjukan contingent:

The second instalment of Explsoc winter tour ice climbing was off to a flyer. We had all made the flight 6am in Stansted and managed to check our entire luggage onto the plane. Granted; some had an interesting understanding of what was deemed safe for hand luggage (Jeff) by managing to get a set of screws and quickdraws through security! Once in Rjukan the fun was just beginning – having retrieved all our bags and unstuck the rental cars...their axels had frozen in the extreme cold weather that had hit all of Western Europe – and a quick photo of the map at the bus stop and we were off! The journey to Rjukan takes you west about 400km from Oslo, so we broke up the journey with some EXPENSIVE lunch (everything in Norway is expensive) and a quick snow fight by the frozen lake. Everyone was itching to get on the ice – so as soon we entered Rjukan – bags were dumped and all made a speedy transition into winter gear and we went off for some ice bouldering that lasted late into the night.

Day 2 saw the whole group head off to Krokan – the idea was to spend the day finding our feet by notching up some short routes. This was the first real exposure just how cold things could get and was a real good introduction to the first timers to winter climbing. Temperatures hit around -25 and thinking back to the first day I get a mental image of Adam sitting on the rope like a corpse; totally winded from the cold with Andy at the top belaying and enjoying all the fun that is hot aches! It must be said that the extreme cold resulted in very brittle ice which meant placements were not solid and climbing conditions and protection were difficult. The weather eased out as the trip

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progressed. Kilian racked up a really good ascent of Topp (WI5). It didn't take long for others to get into full swing with Johnny deciding that a route was too easy and taking an interesting line directly up a free hanging pillar.

Day 3 we went to check out the lower gorge as there were more routes that are lower in the grade. The aim was to get everyone leading and confident for multipitch. Some of the group looked to bag volume – with 10 routes to a pair including solos of Trippel (WI3). Andy led an impressive Hjemreisen (WI4). Luke finished the day with an excellent lead of the free hanging pillar of Swiss Army (WI5) before the light started to fade.

Thereafter the group split into three and we looked to visit particular areas in Rjukan to start ticking our objective routes. The group made numerous ascents of classics such as Rjukanfossen (WI4) – made all the more interesting by the “will flood without notice” sign and the fact that you could see the water flowing fast below the surface of the ice. Other good ascents of multipitch routes in the Upper gorge included Nye Vemorkfoss (WI5), Sabotørfossen (WI5) and Verdens Ende (WI5).

With such successes behind us – we turned our sights to alpine style ascents of big routes. Andy took on a challenging objective with an ascent of Bolgen (WI3) with Adam and Seb. The group topped out the route at dusk and faced a difficult ab through trees to touch down past mid night. Kilian and Kunal went after a route next to the Bolgen line; To menn og et Foster (WI4) – wading through deep powder and facing some avalanching to finish up at about 8pm. More challenging multipitch routes were also sought with Luke and Kilian on a valiant attempt For Alle Menn (WI5) and Kunal and Dave climbing the adjacent Klappfoss (WI4) with Jeff. Neil, Christine and Phil went on a marathon; Fabrikfossen (WI3).

The trip was rounded off with some excellent mixed climbing; both existing routes such as Fission (M10) and our own lines of around (M6/7) on top rope. Adam and Seb put in a fantastic team effort to work on their first significant lead on Jomfrua (WI4). All in all – the trip was extremely fruitful; with some excellent conditions and a great team of Explosoc members. We were able to transfer skills to the less experienced members and also make time to complete some long standing projects. This trip would not have been possible with the support given to us by Imperial College Union and The IC Trust; and we are massively grateful to them.

Photos from the Pelvoux contingent:

