Outdoor Club Winter Tour 2009-10

Report compiled by Philip Leadbeater

Dates: 2<sup>nd</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> January 2010

Location: Cairngorms National Park, Scotland

# OUTDOOR CLUB

# Aims and Objectives of the Tour

The primary purpose of this tour (dependent upon conditions) was to enable the more experienced members of the club to pass on their knowledge of Scottish Winter climbing to novices within the club. Experienced members aimed to increase their own skill level. In both instances this tour was intended to provide experience that will aid preperation for high altitude alpine mountaineering. Scottish Winter climbing as a discipline involves assessment of weather and snow conditions, technical climbing and often difficult navigation.

Subsidiary objectives were to (dependent upon conditions) take part in skiing disciplines including alpine downhill and both Nordic and Alpine ski-touring.

# The effect of unusual weather during winter 2009-10

Between mid-December 2009 and mid-January 2010 the UK, and in particular the East Highlands of Scotland experienced persistently low temperatures and heavy snowfall. The amount of snowfall that occurred within the Cairngorms National Park was reported to be the highest seen at that time of year for approximately 20 years. Throughout this period diurnal temperatures remained below freezing at all altitudes, preventing melt-freeze metamorphism within the snowpack – a process that is required to provide stable snow that is safe to travel and climb on. Without this process the snow retained a powder form, characteristic of Nordic and North American mountain environments

It was clear in the week leading up to this tour that the Northern Corries of the Cairngorms were being filled with large deposits of unconsolidated and unstable powder snow – as reported by the Scottish Avalanche Information Service and various local mountain guides. Deep unconsolidated snow is very difficult to travel through without snowshoes or, ideally, skis. In addition, unconsolidated snow on angled ground is liable to avalanche. Consequently, the avalanche risk in the Northern Corries remained High in the week leading up to, and the week of this tour. Such dangerous conditions made climbing in these areas an unacceptable risk – which greatly influenced the activities completed on this tour.

Tour successes/ Activities:

The following activities took place on this tour –

Water Ice climbing
Downhill skiing
Nordic ski-touring
Alpine ski-touring/ski-mountaineering

Snow-shoeing
Winter walking
Navigation in difficult (white-out) conditions
Cooking vast quantities of haggis, neeps and tatties

It was possible to climb at a large icefall, close to the road at Creagh Dubh, just outside of Newtonmore. This popular area rarely sees such good condition as persistent freezing temperatures are required for the ice to form stable and climbable structures. Water Ice climbing at low elevation is atypical in the UK and is more akin to Alpine and Scandanavian areas.

With the main climbing areas inaccessible the primary tour objective could only partially be met and so attention turned to the subsidiary objectives of the tour. The abnormal weather conditions provided excellent, and unexpected, sport in the form of downhill and Nordic (cross-country) skiing. Cairngorm Mountain ski centre reported that snow conditions were the best for at least two decades and the large deposits of snow in the glens turned all tracks into Nordic ski trails. Whilst skiing one such trail 8 club members were filmed by the BBC, and for the rest of the day accompanied the 'Freezing Britain' headline on national news bulletins.

### Finances

There are no outstanding financial issues for this tour.

Union and IC Trust subsidy per member £65

There was no contribution from the club SGI

### Adverse events

No adverse events occurred during this tour. The deep snow was challenging to drive in, and made it easy to get the minibus stuck. Snow chains were useful, although in future it may be advisable to take a spare set as we found the fastenings to be unreliable.

### Feedback from members

The feedback on the tour was positive.

## Future improvements

If we are to visit the Cairngorms again under similar snow/temperature conditions we will benefit from the knowledge we have gained of alternative climbing areas.

Snowshoes and skis are a major aid to travel in these conditions and it would be desirable to have these available in future.

### **Photos**

The following pages contain a selection of some photos from this tour

Statement of thanks and the wider implications of tours

The authors, on behalf of Imperial College Union Outdoor Club, would like to express their thanks to the IC Trust and Imperial College Union for their continued support of student activities. With your help we have been able to promote the development of hillwalking, climbing and mountaineering within the Imperial College community.

This tour marked the start of ICUOC's 65<sup>th</sup> year as a student society of Imperial College. Throughout the remainder of 2010 we hope to build upon the strengths of the club and will once again have club members on a first ascents mountaineering expedition in the Greater Ranges. These members were introduced to mountaineering through the clubs programme of Winter and Summer mountaineering tours.

Philip Leadbeater January 2010

Ski Mountaineering









