

A lovely place to slow the pace – Dave Sudell



The club has been running annual ski tours now for a good number of years. One problem has been how can a novice gain the necessary skills and some experience in order to join in, not to mention the difficulty in renting the gear in order to give it a try. I'm glad to report that the times are now a changing folks. Last winter we noticed that good quality ski touring equipment readily available for hire in some of the shops in Argentier making it quite feasible to hire the equipment for a day and take a walk up into the hills. Then the Beaufortain region looked promising at Easter, the snow conditions were good, its not too high and is free of glaciers,

accommodation was unbelievably cheap, the shops rented out gear and there were some easy touring to be had – ski touring for beginners?

We arrived after the necessary torture of the drive down to Dover and across France along with most of the population of Belgium to find ourselves in the lovely village of Areches. Thankfully not the week before as hundreds of ski tourers had massed for the annual race to the summit of Grand Mont. We had pre-booked ourselves a lovely alpine chalet at an amazingly low price via the towns website. The chalet was just outside the village by the ski lift, it had everything we needed and came complete with a lovely log fire. An excellent local shop hired a very good range of gear, changed boots and skies as an when required and happily offered advice on the areas with the best snow conditions.



We spent the first day on the slopes at Le Planey practising the basics and getting used to skinning, turning on slopes and skiing with 'sloppy' boots on. Our second day was an attempt at Roche Plane (2156m), no problem with the ascent, lovely tracks in place and a beautifully sunny morning. The track started through trees and then broke out onto the 'plane' in full sun. Cloud came in as we reached 1993m and we turned to head for home and as every ski tourer will know this is when it gets demanding, well she said she liked porridge! A rude awakening for the pupil and we were both completely wiped out by the time we arrived back at the chalet. Heavy snow overnight and the morning dawned clear but what about the avalanche risk?

We decided on a low level trip along a snowed up road to Lac St Gerin. A good day for fitness training, deep fresh snow makes for super practice at trail braking, we took it in turn and she's better at it than I am, enough said! Day three and after a good nights rest we were ready for the local 'big one' the Grand Mont at 2686m. The luxury of the lift to the Col de la Forclaz at 2374m (novice + cheat) and then a lovely skin up (breaking fresh trail) all the way to the summit. A pleasant lunch with excellent views all around including Mt Blanc. Just the two of us on the mountain, we met another three ascenders as we descended. Initially the skiing down was superb although we did a few flops in the soft snow, eventually dropping into crud before we made the manicured pistes of the resort and enjoyed the rest of the afternoon trying to ski off piste in a little more style.



Day four, a beautiful morning and our last day, we skinned up some kind person's tracks for Legette du Mirantin from le Pleney, a lovely alpine village. One of the local dogs decided to take a walk with us and the world was perfect. The dog obviously knew the score and as we were hit by the sun, it turned for home sliding down the snow on its belly. We carried on and through the trees, first being passed by an ascending 'racer' presumably on his daily routine and going like a steam train, then by a dog walker with a St Bernard following carefully in his footsteps (not daft these French dogs - see later). Over a rise, surprise we were approaching

and about to overtake other parties, pleasantries as we passed feeling rather chuffed. Just below the final rise to the summit the tracks ended the dog walker had stopped and his dog was sitting on a thermal mat. The snow looked fresh, deep and unstable, perhaps the locals know the history of this slope so we waited for them to ascend it. No one did, they all stopped by us and had lunch, taking a leaf from their book we did the same, and enjoyed the wonderful views in bright sunshine.

Now for the difficult bit, let this lot go before us otherwise they may fall over laughing! We enjoyed wonderful powder skiing back down to the porridge, a little respite through the trees before a dammed hard decent back across the lower meadow. Afternoon spent skiing off the side of the piste at Le Planey in absolutely perfect powder. A super end to a perfect week.



The resort was Arches in the Beaufortain <http://www.areches-beaufort.com> we arrange our accommodation via the website and cannot fault it. The people in the Tourist Info and shops were a delight. The resort is low by usual standards and being at the end of the season despite plenty of snow it did go cruddy in the afternoon. The big plus was the ability to hire all the gear (this seems the norm rather than the exception hereabouts); the very reasonable price for very good accommodation; the cheap lift system; a good selection of shops for food. The town and its surroundings are limited for the experienced tourer, but the area does have some classic routes which perhaps need to be attempted Jan/Feb/March rather than at Easter.

