

# thegreat outdoors

by Gayle Ritchie  
gritchie@thecourier.co.uk



## Winter skills are snow joke

I'm out of control, whizzing down a perilously steep snow slope and rapidly gathering speed.

Luckily, I've been taught how to stop before I reach the cliff edge and plunge to my doom.

I throw my body weight on top of my ice axe and drive the head into the snow, taking care not to whip out an eye.

Truth be told, I'm not in any real danger. I'm on a winter skills course in the heart of the Cairngorms and I'm practicing how to break a fall on a pretty tame slope.

Run by the Ancrum Outdoor Centre in Dundee, it is designed to introduce you to a range of skills that should help you to enjoy the mountains in winter competently and confidently.

Following a kit check and safety talk, instructor Dave Slade equips everyone with rigid mountaineering boots. You need these to support crampons and they're great on snow and ice.

He then bundles the six of us into a minibus and drives into the wilds of Glenshee, where we park up round the corner from the ski centre.

### information

- The next winter skills course run by the Ancrum Centre is on February 27, from 8am to 5pm. Tel: 01382 435911. [www.ancrum.com](http://www.ancrum.com)
- Check out the Scottish Avalanche Information Service before you go hillwalking in winter. [www.sais.gov.uk](http://www.sais.gov.uk)

We're aiming for the summit of The Cairnwell Munro and within five minutes of uphill trudging, the path transforms into an icy river.

Walking on it without crampons would be impossible, so Dave directs us to attach traction devices which boast angled spikes to our boots.

It's a tricky task when you're not used to doing it and if, like me, you suffer from exceptionally cold hands.

Finally, we're all cramponed-up and we slowly make our way up the treacherous icy path.

There's an initial reluctance to trust them but once you overcome that feeling, it's a doddle. Whoever thought ice walking could be so easy?

Dave then informs us that avalanches can happen wherever snow is lying at a sufficient angle, so it's wise to learn basic awareness.

Usually, an avalanche occurs when snow deposited in successive layers slides layer by layer, or the whole snow cover goes in one fell swoop.

On a small cornice, Dave digs a pit to identify layers in the "snow pack" then jumps up and down in a bid to get them to fail, demonstrating







the “shear test” – and showing that different layers can slide (avalanche) if they’re not bonded well together.

“The easier the layers slide, the less bonded and more unstable the snow slope is,” he says.

Sure enough, the snow starts to slip and slide in chunks. Scary stuff.

As we climb higher up the mountain, Dave shows us effective ways of moving on snow and I feel like a wonky haggis as I side-step my way uphill.

Another technique is to kick steps into the snow with the side of your boots, or cut them in with your ice axe.

It’s a glorious day and we stop for a picnic a couple of hundred feet from the summit.

The wildlife is outstanding: mountain hares, brilliantly camouflaged white, bound and leap in abundance, seemingly unperturbed by our presence. Groups of red deer cross the hillside and we see snow bunting and hear the comical croak of ptarmigan.

We climb up to slopes where we learn to use our ice axes to carry out what’s known as “self-arrest” – the act of stopping a slide, or breaking a fall. This is fundamental for winter hillwalking.

Of course, there are a variety of potential fall positions and once we’re kitted out in safety helmets, Dave takes us through front-facing versions on our bellies (during which we’re taught to swing our axes to the side and dig them in slowly; drive them in too quickly and you risk losing them) and a backwards slide, which is rather more daunting.

There’s also the chance you might fall and lose your axe, so he shows us how to self-arrest using a combination of boots, hands, feet, knees and elbows.

Practice makes perfect and we have great fun slipping, sliding, screeching and stopping on slopes we know are safe and have soft landings, although at one stage, Dave yells: “Watch out for the rock!”

The course, which also covers navigation and sensible route choice, is a fantastic day out and you’ll learn skills that are invaluable for hillwalking in winter. Book early as spaces are snapped up quickly.

**Top left: Gayle on the Cairnwell learning winter survival skills; Top: A cross on the mountain. Left: a demonstration of avalanche layers and far left: using an ice axe to halt your fall.**

## blazing saddles

by Scot Tares



# Best preparation in the world may not be enough

Getting ready for a race or an event has a ritualistic quality to it.

No matter what the occasion is, the process and emotions are always the same.

I’m not talking about training here – what I mean is the preparation involved in the days leading up to it. I don’t take part in many events now and those I do are just for fun.

However, even then there is still a nervous anticipation of what is to come.

For me, it begins a week or so beforehand, with regular checks of the weather and how it will affect my riding.

For events quite a distance away from home this can have a big impact.

If it is local, I have often left packing my kit-bag until the night before but if I’m travelling any distance, then there is the choice between trusting the forecast and taking clothing and kit which will suit these conditions, or erring on the side of caution and packing something for every eventuality.

This latter course of action tends to be my default course of action now and stems from riding in the Strathpuffer 24-hour MTB event last January.

I spoke to a team-mate and asked what kit I should bring and his reply was simply “everything”.

So I did. I took every bit of clothing, maintenance kit, spare part and anything else I could think of.

Despite this, there were still a few things I forgot, like spare gas canisters for my stove.

Events like the Strathpuffer become epic undertakings – not just the ride itself but the travel, set-up, camping and then the take-down.

They all mean packing



has to start several days beforehand.

If you’re doing the event with friends it can often be a good idea to draw up a list of who is taking what to save “doubling-up” on kit like bike work stands.

This works to a point but requires a level of trust on everyone’s part. For example, will whoever said they would take the track pump actually remember to do it.

I was at one three-day event a few years ago where we had allocated who would take what food for cooking in our self-catering accommodation in the evenings.

Despite this, everyone arrived with two dozen eggs each (there were six of us) and no one had remembered to bring any milk.

For an event like the Strathpuffer, it can also be a tricky choice as to what food to take to eat.

Last year, in the warmth of the supermarket I was convinced four-cheese filled tortellini and chilli sauce would go down a treat at 2am. In

**Just some of the kit Scott took for the Strathpuffer 24-hour event.**

reality, at temperatures dropping to minus eight, all I craved was a bowl of tomato soup and cheese rolls.

Over the years I have tried to refine my process to something that is slick and minimalist. In the end, I still find myself emptying my clothing into a rucksack, throwing all my spares and tools into a big holdall and then chucking the whole lot into the boot of my car with the tent and sleeping bag on top.

It seems to work and unlike one person at the Etape Caledonia a few years ago, I didn’t arrive at the venue only to realise I had forgotten my bike.

rideon

- **Where to ride:** Speyside Way – from Aviemore to Boat of Garten
- **Terrain:** Off-road ride suitable for beginners and very young children
- **Description:** Start: OS Landranger 1:50000 Map 36 to North end of Aviemore, NH906141.
- **Distance:** 6 miles return
- **Description:** The Speyside Way is one of four official Long Distance Routes in Scotland.

Since opening in 1981 it has had various extensions and spurs added. The route now links the Moray coast with the edge of the Grampian Mountains. This short section follows a scenic and mostly flat part of the route with great views to the Cairngorm mountains to the south-east. It runs parallel with the railway line for the whole section and if you are lucky you may see the Strathspey Railway steam train.