

Snowshoeing by Betty Roberts

Snowshoeing, what's that all about then? Dismiss all thoughts of the pedestrian, it is exciting and challenging stuff. On snowshoes you travel through stunning mountain scenery to reach cols & peaks. The only winter alternatives to attain such locations being ski touring (and you have to be pretty good at it) or helicopter (cheating and expensive). With snowshoeing you don't need to spend years developing technique, you just walk. OK it is slightly more complicated than that: you dig in with your toes on the way up, heels on the way down and emulate the models' catwalk shimmy when traversing slopes. What could be simpler? How important mastery of this "technique" depends on gradient & snow conditions.



Betty and friends on the Col Serena

At Easter Phil & I spent a week in the Alps. Our guide Hilary Sharp, although English, has lived in Vallorcine for 15 years. She is a qualified Accompagnateur en Montagne, the author of a number of books on trekking & snowshoeing (see Cicerone press) and great exponent of snowshoeing. She's also a runner and completed the Tour Mont Blanc in 37 hours. She leads both trekking & snowshoeing holidays (see www.trekkinginthealps.com) At Easter she takes a snowshoeing group for "a bit of a blast".

After meeting up in Vallorcine on Saturday evening, we left France the next day for Switzerland and ascended Mont d'Arpille (2085m) - magnificent views over Grand Combin and the Rhone valley. During the day we also managed a spot of avalanche training, locating and digging out transponders buried in the snow. If your interested: Phil or the "Milk Tray Man" as he was dubbed by the group, will have you out in 3 minutes 50 seconds. If you're relying on me, let's just say you're going to be pretty cold.



Milk Tray Man strutting his stuff!

That evening we were driven through the San Bernard tunnel to our hotel in Italy. The first of two hotels & one mountain hut that we stayed at during our time in Italy. All excellent in their own way. All serving lots of magnificent food - with strong emphasis on the lots. The weather and the snowshoeing were great. As an example: staying at a remote family-run inn with superb views of the Matterhorn (or Cervino as the Italians call it), snowshoeing from the door over two cols, the first with great views back to Cervino & the second with stunning views of the Monte Rosa massif.

The toughest day came whilst we were staying at the Prarayer Mountain Hut. That day we left the hut at 2005m with our sights set on the Dome de Tzan at 3351m. Unfortunately, although I wasn't complaining, ice stopped us reaching the summit and we settled for a lesser Peak at 3100m. There was no sense of underachievement since it was a terrific day's snowshoeing. Also we put half an hour into a trio of ski tourers and their guide who left the hut at the same time as us and even increased this lead during the

descent. Needless to say we waited for them in the bar for a quick gloat. If this appears to lack grace I should tell you that when we met them at the top one of our party, a teacher with all the acuteness of hearing and familiarity with muttered abuse that comes with that profession, overheard them refer to us as grannies as they approached us. Leave aside the fact that we ranged in age from 29 to mid fifties, we trounced them! Even their guide said how good we were.



Betty learning to trust those shoes on the first day.

From Italy it was back to Switzerland for the last day of snowshoeing and then a final evening in France. A great holiday: exciting, magnificent scenery, sightings of interesting flora & fauna eg golden eagles and superb exercise. A terrific way to use the hard-won fitness resulting from months of doing the toll bars.



Heading off into the hills.