

The problems at Cairn Gorm – ski touring offers an immediate solution

Description



Cairn Gorm Sunday 25th November – Photo Credit Alistair Todd

Last weekend there was enough snow for skiing at Cairn Gorm but, with the funicular out of action, there was no way to get to the Ptarmigan Bowl for downhill skiers. A shame because Sunday was a beautiful day. With HIE's announcement ([see here](#)) that the report into the funicular's problems will not now be completed until just before Xmas, its even more unlikely they will be resolved this year. The introduction of snow machines at the bottom of Coire Cas may help maintain downhill skiing there but they will not solve the rupture between Coire Cas, Coire na Ciste and the Ptarmigan Bowl caused by the funicular breakdown. (The Day Lodge ski tow rarely has sufficient snow to provide an alternative access route). This post takes a look at the potential of ski touring to enable people to continue to enjoy the mountain and to support the local economy as a consequence.

On learning of the breakdown of the funicular, the first thing Dave Morris said to me was that Cairn

Gorm should be being promoted as the ski touring capital of the UK. While the Response Team ([see here](#)) set up to mitigate the impact of the funicular includes public agencies, its focus has been on snow machines and marketing Speyside as a place worth visiting this winter. Nothing wrong with that but it has done nothing as yet to promote or support ski touring. That's not surprising because the Response Group is made up of public agencies, rather than recreational groups representing skiers and mountaineers. Besides which, there would be relatively little money in it for Natural Retreats.

The opportunities Cairn Gorm offers for ski touring



Angus Todd skiing down through the ski area 28th October 2018, Loch Morlich behind – Photo Credit Alistair Todd

As someone who both downhill skis and ski tours, I had been pondering how ski touring might help resolve the current crisis at Cairn Gorm when, by luck, I met Alistair Todd at the Mountaineering Scotland AGM at Glenmore Lodge last Saturday. Alistair is chair of MS' new ski touring advisory group. He immediately saw the potential for promoting ski touring at Cairn Gorm with photos to prove it! The ideas that follow owe much to that discussion but should not be taken to represent his or Mountaineering Scotland's views.



Angus Todd skinning above the Ptarmigan 28th October 2018 – Photo Credit Alistair Todd

Cairn Gorm is extremely well placed as a ski touring destination. It generally has the most reliable and longest lying snow cover in the country.



Ski touring round Coire an Lochain on 26th April. Photo auhor.

There is good parking with some of the highest road accessed ski touring in Scotland.. The closure of the road to downhill skiers because of snow is no barrier to ski touring.

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Descending Coire Laogh Mor, which is popular with both off piste skiers and ski tourers – Photo Author

The terrain lends itself to both beginners and extreme skiers. It offers unparalleled options for long distance tours and challenging navigation amongst the highest mountains in Scotland. It could therefore be marketed as the ski touring capital of the UK – to use Dave's terrible cliché!



Angus Todd skinning up through the ski area 28th October 2018 – Photo credit Alistair Todd

While many people participate in both activities, in normal seasons there can be some tensions between ski touring and downhill skiing. Most tension results from ski tourers skinning up the edge of pistes when snow is lacking. Other ski tourers consciously avoid downhill ski areas, looking for peace, quiet and unspoilt environments. The closure of the funicular could be used as an opportunity to promote ski touring at Cairn Gorm in a way that has never happened in the past.

Twenty years ago the justified response to that idea might have been “that will never help the local economy”. Ski tourers were few then. Numbers since have risen exponentially and, while most may not buy lift tickets, they do use local accommodation, restaurants and the rest. Attract 2000 people a week to try ski touring at Cairn Gorm and that would make a real difference to the local economy.

The response of the Chamonix local community to the destruction of the Grand Montets ski lift

When a fire destroyed the Grand Montets cable car station above Argentiere this September, the local community immediately announced that the ski area – the largest in the Chamonix Valley – would remain open ([see here](#)). They were able to do this because alternative lifts were available and they were not dependent on one uplift. Within a few days however they were also promoting this as an opportunity for off piste and powder skiing ([see here](#)). Alistair told me (sorry I cannot find links) they

are now promoting the Grand Montets as an area to learn how to ski tour. This builds on existing initiatives in the valley which support the increasing popularity of ski touring. Special ascent routes have been created for ski tourers, which are particularly important for beginners in deep snow, to keep them away from pistes ([see here](#)).

With a little imagination, these ideas and this experience from abroad could be applied to Cairn Gorm.

Adventure ski school

As soon as they realised the funicular would not be repaired quickly, Natural Retreats dismissed their snow school staff. This was completely the wrong response. It was, however, not surprising. The snow school used to be a non-profit making organisation which used surpluses earned one year to support it in poor years. Natural Retreats changed that and their predictable reaction to the funicular crisis was to cut costs. What they should have done was to engage with ski school instructors and others skiers on how ski school could be sustained in the circumstances.

While the snow making machines may allow the new Shieling Rope tow to be accessed and for some ski lessons to take place in Coire Cas, these could be greatly increased with adventure ski school. Instead of accessing the Ptarmigan beginners area by the funicular, use touring equipment for people to walk there. When there is insufficient snow low down, walk up like ski tourers do to the first continuous snow and then start skinning. The access track to the Ptarmigan is sufficiently gentle to be usable by near beginners in both ascent and descent. It would provide a real adventure topped off with some easy downhill skiing at the Ptarmigan to improve downhill skills.



Learning to ski tour in Lurcher's gully in windy conditions and spindrift (it was hard to stand up) Photo Author.

While there are some safety issues, with a bit of imagination and careful planning these could be addressed. Glenmore Lodge provides a great resource of local expertise. Then market Cairn Gorm

as the adventure ski capital of the UK. Great fun. Good for your health. Learn new skills that you can then use all over Scotland.

The biggest obstacle is equipment. With the increased popularity of ski touring, more kit is available to hire but this is mainly, if not all, for adults. While some standard ski touring kit, such as transceivers and shovels, would be unnecessary if the ski area was still fully patrolled, there is not nearly enough for adventure ski school to work. So having forked out over £1m on snow factories, why doesn't Highlands and Islands Enterprise buy £500k of ski touring equipment and then go into partnership with local businesses (not Natural Retreats) to hire this out? If it works, the capital outlay could be repaid by the local businesses over time.

With such equipment available, many experienced downhill and off piste skiers might also be tempted to try and use it access the Coire na Ciste and Ptarmigan lift infrastructure. One accompanied session, again creating jobs, should be sufficient for most downhill skiers to learn the necessary skills to skin up to the Ptarmigan by the easiest routes

A combination of adventure ski school and downhill skiers using ski touring equipment would enable the Ptarmigan and Ciste uplift to run whether or not the Day Lodge tow was able to operate. This would support the retention of ski lift operator and other jobs.

Other ideas for ski touring at Cairn Gorm

With the ski area likely to be half deserted, Cairn Gorm would be an ideal place to host a number of supported ski touring events. Glenmore Lodge are running their own Wild ski festival in March. This has relatively limited scope and is already sold out. So why not build on this? Entertainment could be mixed with formal training options, fun days out, competitions, races etc. Ski Mountaineering races have just taken off in Scotland so why not arrange a series of ski mo races for children and adults at Cairn Gorm? Its just as much fun as traditional slalom but requires a different set of skills.



If the White Lady cannot be accessed by the funicular, why not use it for ski touring races? That would have been possible last weekend. Photo Credit Alistair Todd.

In the longer term, why not include ski touring and off piste skiing in the plans for the area (instead of HIE's roller coasters and zip wires?). Perhaps HIE could cover the cost of replacing the old Ciste building in order for it to be leased out to an adventure organisation intent on establishing a mountain skills and ski touring centre?



Adventure skiing over the back of Cairn Gorm 28th October 2018. Photo Credit Alistair Todd.

What needs to happen?

Both HIE and “Natural Retreats” have been locked into developing Cairn Gorm as a summer destination in order to try and make the funicular financially viable. They have neither the vision nor the skills necessary to develop a new plan for Cairn Gorm that uses the natural qualities of the area.



Good ski touring is possible at Cairn Gorm when downhill is limited to the top slopes. Upper Coire C
November. Photo Credit Alistair Todd.

Over the next few months the biggest opportunities at Cairn Gorm lie in ski touring. The Funicular Response Group needs to consider how this could be developed independently of Natural Retreats and what support would need to be offered to make this work. I believe that will need a new operator on the mountain.

In the medium term a new plan for Cairn Gorm needs to focus on active recreation, both downhill skiing and mountain biking and activities such as ski touring. Such active recreation falls far more within the remit of the Cairngorms National Park Authority and Forestry Commission Scotland than HIE. That's another reason why the Cairngorm Estate needs to be transferred from HIE to FCS now. A community buyout could follow in time. It's also why the CNPA, with its statutory remit for promoting outdoor recreation, needs to be at the heart of future plans for Cairn Gorm rather than sitting on the sidelines as at present. Both organisations are far more likely to include recreational organisations and use their expertise to develop an alternative plan than HIE.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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