

The Cairn Gorm ski resort and its future

Description



The snow factory, Day Lodge, the smoothed “beginner ski area” and mountain bike trail which was then constructed on top of much of this (Cairngorm Mountain facebook page)

After my post on Concrete and the Death of a Ski Resort ([see here](#)) the following comment was posted which I think deserves a proper reply.

October 24, 2023 at 7:54 am

Just get rid of all the ski infrastructure: it's an eyesore, environmentally degrading and doesn't make that much money from skiing now global warming gives us more rain than snow in the winter.

[Reply](#)

Environmental change



1981.09.25 Coire Cas Photo Credit Adam Watson collection

Significant human intervention began at Cairn Gorm when skiers first arrived and decided it was the best place to build a ski area, a resort that has attracted millions to snow sports and still has a magnetic draw today. This had major environmental impacts but, through the efforts of the likes of Adam Watson, for a time standards improved and past damage was partly restored and partly recovered

through natural processes.



The funicular during the course of repairs July 2021. Photo credit Louise Brimelow

It has to be said though that nothing that went on before has had such a long-term impact visually as the monstrosity that is the funicular railway. It was Alistair Bell, in his post on corporate gaslighting at Cairn Gorm ([see here](#)), who stated he had been on the opposite side of Aviemore and that while the railway stood out like a sore thumb, he had trouble finding the pylons for the Ciste chairlifts! It is mostly about size from afar and closer up the level of major ground disturbance.

The Mountain Bike Trails, as can be seen from the top photo, are just as bad â?? we should have learned by now! . Compare that visually to the car park tow (same photo) or the M1 poma (above) which can barely be seen on the right of the pictures. Because of the very slender nature of pylons they are much harder to see at a distance.

The dark area between the MTB trails is where CM(S)L bulldozed Coire Cas to make their â??beginner areaâ??. The bumps and lumps and high speed tracks are not the best idea for beginners, but more experienced skiers boarders will enjoy those custom made runs and jumps. What were the CNPA thinking about when they allowed that environmental destruction to take place? There used to be breeding pairs of Ring Ouzel in the area!

The economic and population benefits.

On the back of skiing Aviemore and the other surrounding villages changed from a quiet, dying backwater to a major winter tourist attraction, effectively starting to reverse a long history of clearances and depopulation in the Highlands. It was **the** place to ski in the U.K, as many as 6,500 on a good day. Compare that to the 2023 season when numbers were limited to a miserly 1,000.

When I first learned to ski at Cairn Gorm the A9 from Perth used to be single carriage way, 18 ft. wide, and went through every village! A good, clear run from Tyneside took about 8 hours but it was worth it! And how about this for dedication :-

For several seasons, the London Weekend Ski Club coaches left that big city at the end of business on a Friday, to drive overnight to Newtonmore in Invernessshire, arriving at 7.30a.m. There the skiers breakfasted, changed into ski gear and were on Cairngorm as the lifts and tows opened. On Sunday they had a full day skiing before dining and changing in their hotel, to drive overnight back to London. This continued for several seasons with two or three coaches each weekend making the long journey, (Ed Rattray. Scottish Skiing The Golden Years 1950 - 1990).

Hotels, B & B's, all kinds of businesses opened, providing employment and catering for the huge influx of winter visitors. It is true that snow sports and the Cairn Gorm ski resort are not what they used to be, some 32,000 skier days last season, but instead of catering exclusively for a dwindling market, businesses adapted and Speyside became a non-skiing holiday destination for millions of people every year. I wonder how many, skiers and acquaintances, have been to Speyside at other times of the year, all because of their first visit as skiers?

Snow Conditions?



While the climate warmed and winters became less snowy, technology developed. Note how the machine-made snow has maintained a good cover while the surrounding area is virtually snow free. Ten years ago the operator was even able to provide skiers and boarders with some features to help to maintain late season interest.

As part of the investigation into the viability of snow making on Cairn Gorm, Winterhighland used a mathematical regression analysis model that indicated that a complete piste from the Sheiling to the Daylodge resulted in up to 700 additional Day Tickets being sold on a decent weekend day.

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Making snow in this way is still possible, as this photo illustrates. The problem is that despite the money HIE has spent on snow making equipment , c £1m, which should have been a game changer, the management at Cairn Gorm have not utilised this asset to its full potential. The Beijing Olympics for example was run entirely on artificial snow! Why not Cairn Gorm?

Most of the snow machines cannot be used because of the lack of appropriate electrical infrastructure (the mains supply to the bottom of Coire Cas has been upgraded this year) and water supply at Cairn Gorm. Apparently before the equipment was bought nobody thought to appraise the running costs or environmental impacts if diesel generators had to be relied on!!!

I have confirmed with Snowsport Scotland that Cairn Gorm is still the only ski area in the UK with homologated FIS race status, a status that people led by Major Guy Chilver-Stainer, a founder member of the Scottish Ski Club and a driving force in the ski world, worked hard to obtain. HIE and CM(S)L have done **nothing** to use that very important asset. Many ski racers used to learn their trade on Cairn Gorm and could still yet, the equipment is there, all it needs is someone with a bit of get up and go.

Compare the management now with the pioneers and what they achieved, Bob Clyde, Tommy Paul, Frith Finlayson, Guy Chilver Stainer and so many others, all with one thing in common?!. a desire, a passion, to create an outstanding ski area, which they achieved, something sadly lacking in the current ownership who seem quite content to let it slide into oblivion.

Conclusion

The funicular was a poor form of uplift for snowsports enthusiasts even before the further flaws built into the design at Cairn Gorm (the tunnel that snows in, the mid-station that is not at midpoint etc). It was in large part responsible, couple with the removal of other lifts, for the downward trend in skier numbers at Cairn Gorm, many going to the other ski areas that offer a superior service. It has never lived up to the hype that surrounded it during its inception. With the current state of uncertainty about its future maybe it is time to consider closing down and removing it. That would certainly improve the visual experience in Coire Cas.

Given the right attitude the ski area could still function without the funicular until such a time as investment could be looked at to provide better uplift. With another winter approaching, the sixth, possibly without decent uplift for snowsports enthusiasts, spare a thought for those who are now facing an uncertain future in employment at CM(S)L and local hospitality businesses.

No winter uplift = no winter work!

Category

- 1. Cairngorms

Tags

- 1. Cairn Gorm
- 2. funicular
- 3. HIE
- 4. snowsports

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