

Season passes and the new “re-opening” dates for the Cairn Gorm funicular

Description



Hare, tortoise or maybe now “SNAIL”?

Alan Bratley in his post of 18/12/2023 ([see here](#)) described the various claims Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd (CM(S)L) had made about the funicular’s return to service for last year’s snowsport season. It never did and it is still not operating.

On 04/10/2024 accompanied by two friends I had a walk up to the passing loop on the funicular to have a look at the current state of the reinstatement works, something which I will be coming back to in the near future. Suffice to say here that there appears a significant amount of work still to do.



Photo 13th October – contractors appear to be working in all conditions to finish the repairs

We had the opportunity to speak to workers on the lower section of the track. Asked about a timescale for re-opening we were told that the work would be completed within five weeks. Talk in the Day Lodge café was of the same timescale as positions for funicular operators were being advertised with a starting date in five weeks time. The implication from these conversations is that staff have been told the funicular would be open for the start of the ski season.

Strangely, someone also mentioned that no one from the Strathspey area had applied for the jobs, possibly because they had not been advertised in the Strathy. That may also be because locals have little faith in the jobs starting and of the funicular running this winter season!

HIE's press office was contacted on Wednesday 09/10/2024 about the re-opening date and their response was it would be by the end of December – although they didn't say what year!

The very next day 10/10/2024 at 16.36 an email was sent by CM(S)L to past snowsports season ticket holders:-

You're On The Priority List!

As a valued season pass customer we will be giving you priority access to purchase your Early Bird season pass for the 2024-25 winter season.

Despite the Mountain Railway being out of service, we anticipate the train to return to service during the upcoming snowsports season. We don't have a definite date at present, but will issue an update as soon as one can be confirmed.

We are also extending the deadline for the Early Bird offer to 30th November 2024 to allow more time for updates on the progress of the funicular.

Prices have also been held from last year too. When buying your Early Bird pass you can enjoy more than a 35% discount off the full price.

We look forward to welcoming you back to the slopes this winter!



Tim Hurst
Interim CEO

This indicates a distinct lack of communication between HIE and CM(S)L's interim part time CEO who has succeeded Susan Smith. So when is it, five weeks from the beginning of October, the end of December or sometime "during the upcoming snowsports season"?


CM(S)L are now also touting season tickets on their website ([see here](#)):

Enjoy Fixed Prices From Last Winter

Winter season pass prices have been held from last year with savings of over 35%* during our Early Bird discount period, which has been extended to 30 November 2024 to allow time for further updates on the progress of the Funicular.

See full details including instructor and governing body affiliated pass prices for winter 2024-2025 below.

*Based on an adult season pass



Season Pass Prices – Winter 2024-25

Season Pass Prices	Early Bird to 30/11/2024	Full Price from 1/12/2024
Adult (18-64 yrs)	£358	£571
Junior (6-17 yrs)	£103	£145

The email to season ticket holders also contained, under a heading “YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED” some further information:

- “The winter season will begin on Friday 20th December 2024;
- The mountain railway is expected to return this winter [!]and we will aim to operate as much uplift and terrain as natural conditions allow.
- Season passes are valid for the duration of the snowsports season and will allow unlimited use of the funicular until 30th November 2025.”

These answers beg some further questions:

- When will the winter season close? Tucked away under “terms and conditions” on the website is the following: “Season Passes valid from 20 December 2024 – April 2025 (end date to be confirmed). If we have sufficient natural snow we will open earlier.”
- What does “we will aim to operate as much uplift and terrain as natural conditions allow” mean? Will the 13 snow cannon be used to improve the “natural conditions”?
- As happened in 2023, the snow season pass now includes an annual pass to the funicular, but what does that offer?.
- A key question in the respect is **What will be the carrying capacity of funicular?** From a design capacity of 120 persons per journey, which everyone knows didn’t happen, engineering reports suggest it will now have to operate at a further reduced capacity of between 50 and 80, which at a generous 10min travel time equates to 300 – 480pph. If there is snow on the hill, how long will customers have to queue?

The email mentioned the snow factory would be in operation to create the beginners area by the Day Lodge, presumably with the aim of opening it on 20th December. There was no mention of whether

the 13 snow cannon, which sat unused for much of last season, will be used to link the Shielling to the beginner area. This would allow skiers/ boarders access to and from the mountain from the car park area. In the two CM(S)L statements there is no mention how they expect customers to access the upper slopes if the snow level does not extend to the bottom of the car park tow.

There was every opportunity this summer, and in previous years, to make the car park tow useable without snow by the fitting of Dendix or similar matting at a cost of approx £300k but HIE/CM(S)L preferred to build a Mountain Bike Trail, a go kart track, and a theme park instead!

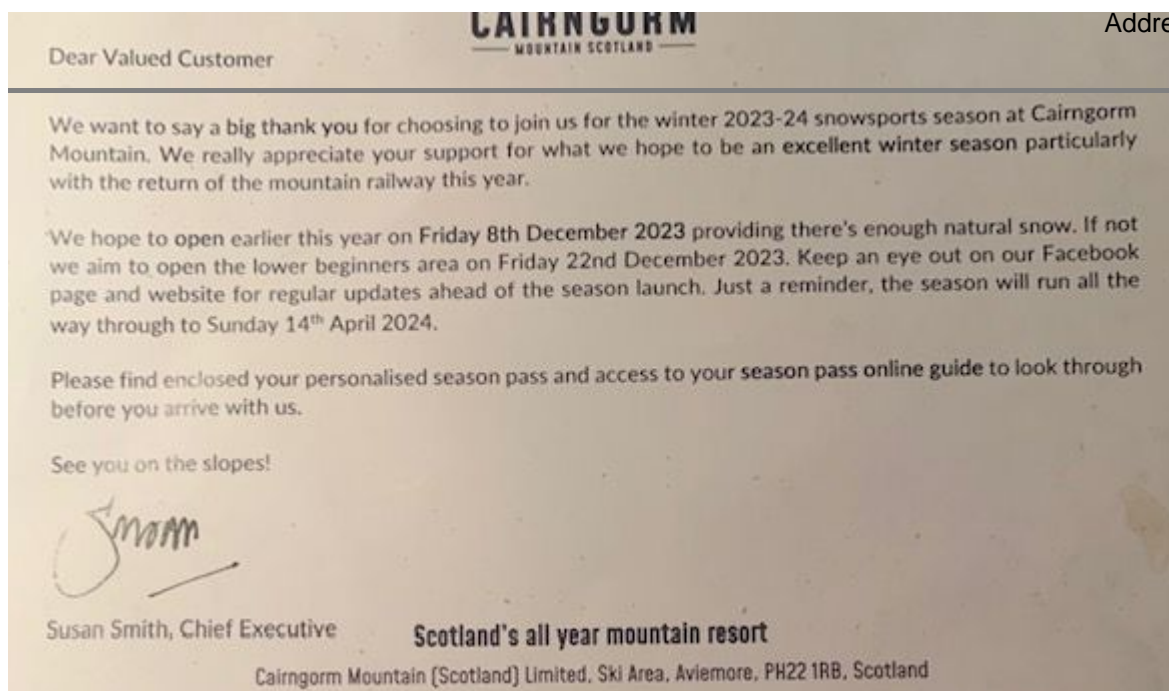
So, another question specifically for anyone considering buying into CM(S)L's current offer:

- (a) Would you be prepared to buy a season pass knowing that you may have to walk up to the shieling before being able to access uplift?
- (b) Will the "cabin", bought to transport snowsports enthusiasts up the mountain when there is a lack of snow lower down and currently fitted on the back of the Unimog, be used as intended?



The cabin on the back of the Unimog which has been used to carry go-karts. Photo Credit CM(S)L webpage.

Last season after the CEO herself declared that the funicular would be running some devotees of snowsports at Cairn Gorm bought season passes on that basis.



Those customers

never did get to use the funicular but they did get to experience the following:

- CM(S)L stopped operating the snow factory in late February
- CM(S)L closed for two days a week without notice in early March
- When uplift further up the hill was working, skiers and boarders had to walk to the mid station to access it without any offer of transport, even for their equipment. That disadvantaged downhill skiers in particular since their boots are not designed for walking and equipment is heavier.

The season tickets last year were sold under false assurances but CM(S)L has never offered any refund. They have not even, as a goodwill gesture, offered a further special discount to those that did buy season passes last season if they buy again this season. Instead they have been offered the same early bird discount as everyone else.

Conclusion

Despite the £millions of public money spent on the initial build, the first round of repairs and the current tensioning works neither HIE or CM(S)L will give a date as to when the funicular will return to service. That hasn't prevented them from still shamelessly continuing to try and sell season tickets.

Assuming the funicular does eventually re-open at some point there is the question of its expected lifespan, if there is one, and the frequency and duration of closures for further repairs. Why would anyone buy a snowsports season ticket given this ongoing fiasco?

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CMSL
2. funicular
3. HIE
4. snowsports

Date Created

October 22, 2024

Author

graham-garfoot

default watermark