

QUEYRAS

Alpine Club meet February 24 – March 7

Dave Wynne-Jones & Peter Moody

This meet was organised by Phil Ingle and based at Le Chateau, the B&B he and his wife run in Guillestre. Guillestre is quiet town south of Briancon, handily placed at the entrance to the Queyras National Park and within easy reach of the E side of the Ecrins. The whole area is very well covered for touring by French guidebooks and websites and an ideal place for a week or two of day-tours, especially in such a good year for snow. Phil had done a great deal of research and helped us with daily suggestions of routes suitable to the weather and our comfort levels. He also joined us when he could.

The advance party, Dave and Alex drove out arriving first in Chamonix to fulfil Alex's ambition to ski the Vallee Blanche courtesy of Francoise Call's hospitality. The Envers du Plan variation gave some fine steep powder with latterly some tricky route finding in mist around the Requin hut in the company of a rather nervous guide. He had just fallen into a crevasse and had been unable to climb out. His clients were neither competent nor equipped to assist him so it was lucky he was able to call in the rescue services. As he said, "It can happen to anyone," and unusually suggested joining forces for the remainder of the descent. A quick meal in Chamonix and we arrived in Guillestre later that night.

A slightly late start next day meant we used the uplift at Ceillac to speed our approach to the Col Girardin then traversed the ridge to climb steeply up icy snow to the Col de Petit Part. It was bitterly cold but the views from the Col were fantastic and the run back down to Ceillac challengingly icy and very fast.

A short day climbing up to the Sommet Boucher from La Rua was followed by an even shorter one at Ceillac when we found Alex's Fritschi Freeride binding was broken at the front mounting. It may have been the difficult skinning on the Col de Petit Part. All good business though for the ski-touring shop in Guillestre that replaced the bindings with the latest model.

With all the snow Phil had been scoping possibilities for first descents of some of the unskied couloirs of the area. On 27th we skinned up from Coin to attempt one on the east face of the Pic du Jaillon. Reaching the foot of the face we could see the line of the couloir rising above the cliffs where it ended in an impressive drop. We stashed excess kit then booted up the steepening slopes heading for a broad break through the cliffs over to the left. This led to a bowl with a steep awkward exit over a rocky rib. From there we booted up further narrow gullies and rocky ribs to gain the summit ridge, breaking through the cornice about 30m right of the summit.



Alex Hood traversing a steep rib on the ascent of the east face of the Pic du Jaillon

Unfortunately we had somehow entirely missed the line of the couloir. Fortunately that meant we did not have to ski the line of the ascent as there was a distinct lack of conviction that we could do so. Phil traversed a little further right to stare down into the intended couloir but the entry was blocked by a very steep loose-looking rock step that we simply could not down climb with skis on our packs. We had lunch, discussed options then climbed along the ridge to the summit at 2720m. A little further and we could step into our skis to ski steeply down to the Col de la Combe l' Above.



Phil Ingle making first tracks into the previously unskied couloir on Pic du Jaillon

From the Col we could ski back down in either direction or traverse high and climb back up to the summit ridge beyond the rock step to make the descent of the couloir. After all that effort it had to be the couloir, although peering down the 50 degree entry chute we were not quite so sure.

Phil led the way as we skied cautiously, one by one, section by section, down the steep snow. Lower down it opened out more and eased to 40 degrees, but in the bowl above the cliffs Alex lost a ski and Phil had to ski rapidly across to intercept before they both stepped up carefully to gain the bounding rib on the right. Crossing that rib, and the narrow gully beyond where our boot-tracks stretched away above us, we managed to ski the further rib with a minimum of scratchiness, despite its awkwardness in ascent. Then we were out in the initial snow bowl and could ski easily back round to our cache below the cliffs.

By then though it was late enough for the snow to have refrozen and, tired by the long day, our skiing was less than elegant back to Coin. A stunning day and first descent, although that night Dave slipped on ice fetching pizza back to Le Chateau and damaged his shoulder: c'est la vie.

Next day Alex & Dave used the uplift at Abries to gain the Collette de Gilly, then skinned up the valley beyond to reach the curiously named Col d'Urine with Dave popping painkillers like sweets. From the Col we climbed the South-east slopes of the Mait d'Amunt on the Italian side of the border to its summit at 2804m. After lunch a short narrow chute took us out onto the open slopes of the north-west face. Interesting skiing led to a long straight down to Valpreveyre, a snowbound hamlet unoccupied in winter. Its chapel had been smashed by an avalanche only 2 months previously. We then skied down the snowed up road to Le Roux where Alex hitched a ride back to collect the car from Abries.

Peter and John arrived on that evening (Saturday), and thereafter the parties set off and climbed the same objective each day, though sometimes splitting for the descent – the Queyras does provide plenty of challenging descents! The weather was mixed – on days when the cloud was low or later in the week when the avalanche risk was higher, we stuck to the trees with targets like the 900m ascent of l’Eypiol 2550m via the ruined summer hamlet of Valpreveyre near Abries on our first day, and an interesting circuit in new powder over the Pt. 2376 from Villargaudin on the last day. We had one really short day when the low came in, but the other three were fine and sunny. One was spent happily using 2 draglifts to access the fresh powder at the tiny resort of Crevoux, another using a couple of lifts from Ceillac to access the start of a skin up the 1000m ascent of the west flank of Tête du Rissace 2965m from Vallon d’Albert, with a good descent on mixed snow to the east to Val Cristallan and a long fairly flat ski round and back to Ceillac. The highlight was probably the tour starting near St Veran, skinning up initially through woods to a col on the ridge between Pic Cascavelier and Pointe des Marcellettes, then on up the ridge to the Pointe at 2909m. Here the party split, with 2 members skiing a steep gully to the NE just below the summit, the rest took a longer descent to the W, then N, also finding a steep but much shorter gully to enjoy.



Alex Hood and a distant Phil Ingle on the ridge leading to Pointe de Marcellettes

At the end of the meet we all felt we’d only scratched the surface of a very promising touring area, with a huge choice of day tours as well as potential for hut-to-hut circuits.

Present: Phil Ingle (Organiser), Alex Hood, John Kentish, Peter Moody, Dave Wynne Jones

Guidebooks: 2 from the Toponeige series – Ecrins Est and Queyras

Maps: IGN 1 : 25,000 3637 OT Monte Viso and 3537 ET Guillestre

