

EAGLES SKI CLUB

SKIING AND SNOW SAFETY (TOUR NUMBER 10)

31 JANUARY AND 1 FEBRUARY 2019, ARGENTIÈRE

This was the first of 3 two day skills courses arranged around the Eagles weekend meet based at La Couronne in Argentière. The aims of the course, led by Andy Perkins IFMGA, were to help us find the best snow without getting avalanched and improve our ski technique. The course was graded E1/S2-S3/M1.

With over half a metre of fresh snow in total on the day we arrived and over the two days of the course, finding great snow wasn't too difficult but with the fresh snow, strong winds (windblown slab) and an unfavourable surface on the old snowpack, avoiding avalanches was! The French and Swiss avalanche forecasts were level 3 (all aspects) for the first day and level 4 (all aspects except S/SW) the second. Andy was delighted – great conditions for avalanche risk assessment and route decision making! So with all this new snow the focus was naturally on avalanche safety and ski technique. Rescue technique wasn't covered as this would take too much time from the avalanche and ski sessions and indeed needs to be covered previously in a separate training course.

Given the conditions, including poor viz on the second day, Andy decided to use the nearby Le Tour lift system (1470m to 2200m) to access the wide variety of offpiste slopes and features which the area offers. Over two days, with a good balance of classroom and hillside, Andy showed us how we could have an amazing but lower risk time in the powder despite the conditions most importantly through careful study of the slope angle using various tools (eg ski poles, inclinometer, compass mirror inclinometer, shaded digital maps and even an iphone app!) to keep us off and away from slopes over 30 degrees. We learned how to gather good information (at Regional/Local/Zonal levels), make careful assessment of the terrain, conditions and human factors (Munter 3x3 system) and assess the avalanche risks (including consequences), and use good group management techniques. "If snow is the problem, terrain is the answer; if snow and terrain are both problems, group management is the answer!".

The two days were packed full of expert, practical information – useful both as an introduction to avalanche safety or, particularly, for those that had previously attended avalanche training courses or with more experience, as a practical demonstration/consolidation of the key decision making issues. As well as absorbing a huge amount of information on avalanche safety, we will

now always have in mind when we're touring some very simple rules to help us stay safe but have fun.

And all the time, Andy provided expert instruction on ski technique to improve our control and therefore confidence – definitely a first to ski with our poles tied together with Andy's pink string! But by our second afternoon we all felt the benefit as the slopes got (much!) steeper.

We even had some navigation input thrown in by Andy as the viz deteriorated and we skied an interesting ridge as a "handrail" down to a pre-determined height before dropping off into powder heaven – a great link to his next skills course!

Party: Torquil Chapman, Alison Laird, Heather Kirkland, Helen Muir, Iain Muir, Laura Re Turner; Organiser Andy Perkins IFMGA Guide.