

Trip report – Ski-touring instructional week – 3 to 7 February 2025 (Author: Geoff Watt)

Party: Jane Baker, Dominic Icely, Richard Peavor, Terry Ralphs (guide), Anna Vojnits, Geoff Watt

After meeting on a Sunday evening in the bar at the Hôtel La Tour d'Aï, our group of six, led by Terry Ralphs, took the gondola on Monday morning up to the Leysin ski resort. The weather was good – and continued to be throughout the week – snow having fallen recently, the temperature just below zero, and the sun out, with few clouds in the sky. In the morning, Terry took the measure of our skiing and, having received some helpful pointers (keep your shins against the front of the boot and knees bent, your weight in the middle of the ski, arms out in front, control that speed!), we unrolled our skins after lunch for the first time, switched our boots to uphill mode, and ascended towards the Tour de Famelon. As we left behind the piste and entered the beautiful, quiet backcountry, Terry instructed us on uphill technique: slide forward, rather than raise your skis; if you begin to slip, shift your weight to your heels; and put some attitude into those kick turns! Back at the hotel, the group was excited, upbeat, and slightly humbled by the challenges presented by off-piste terrain. After dinner, we got our notepads out and Terry led a session on avalanche theory – the different types, conditions that contribute to them, and managing risk.

On day two, we drove to Col des Mosses and put on our skins, stopping en route at Lac Liosin and snapping photos of the 2,000-plus metre ridges that loomed in the distance – before being gently admonished by Terry, in his usual good-humoured way, about paying more attention to our Instagram accounts than the finer points of trip navigation and group management. Freshly chastened, we resumed our ascent to Pic Chaussy (2,351m). At the summit, the sun was strong and we took in the 360 degree views – of Les Diablerets to the south and, further away, the Matterhorn and Mont Blanc. Before driving back to Leysin that evening, we practised avalanche rescue at Col des Mosses, learning how to search quickly and effectively with our transceivers.

By day three, we were reflexively checking the weather and avalanche conditions first thing in the morning. Throughout the week, avalanche risk remained moderate, and that morning we drove east through the Rhône valley to Leukerbad, where we took a gondola to the Gemmipass and, after a two-hour skin, were introduced to “hut life”. Terry had hinted at relative luxury, and he was right: reconstructed in 2016, the Lämmerenhütte is all attractive blond wood and immaculate facilities set among stunning views. After checking-in that afternoon, we toured to the Rote Tote (2830m). After our first delicious dinner at the hut, we asked Terry what the plan was for the next day. Silently, he slid his phone across the table – the White Risk app open – and, in this way, invited us to take a stab at figuring it out, this time (still with the benefit of his reassuring oversight), for ourselves.

We knew that descending, in the afternoon, a north-facing slope was a good option, so we chose the Schwarzhorn (3105m) and took turns the next morning (day four) leading the way up its slopes. There was some wind-pack, some stretches slightly exposed, and on some sections only faint tracks to follow, so we focussed on our breathing, kept our heads up and monitored conditions, and checked-in with other members of the group to ensure everyone was OK. On the higher slopes, we roped-up for the first time to practice glacier travel and maintaining a steady, even pace. There are big bowls below the Schwarzhorn and, after reaching the summit, we took turns leading the descent through some very good powder – the best of the week. Half-way down, we stopped and Terry dug a snow pit and we gathered around for a snowpack analysis – learning more about faceted crystals, surface hoar, rounded grains, and the implications for the stability of a slope.

On our final day, we ascended the Schwarzhorn's eastern neighbour: the Daubenhorn (2941m), taking turns again to lead the ascent and while descending its north face, which featured many pockets of good snow. That evening, back in the bar of the Hôtel La Tour d'Aï and before a celebratory dinner, Terry led the debrief and offered feedback on our skiing, mountaineering and

trip-leading skills and the way in which we had functioned as a team. It was a fantastic trip, led by an exceptionally knowledgeable, experienced, good-humoured and patient guide, and likely to be only the first of many for each member of the group.