

Val Clarée  
Peter Cavanagh  
3<sup>rd</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> February 2025

We all arrived in Névache on the Monday by various means. Susanne and Stephen by train from London, Andy and the two Peters by a shared lift, Patrick by car, all from other parts of France and Mark, who was local to Briançon. Our venue for the first night was the Auberge La Découverte. Andy, our guide, explained the proposed programme for the week ahead and detailed the previous weather and snow conditions that would influence our choice of objectives. The weather for the week was looking promising with a possible deterioration towards the end of the week. The avalanche report was level 3 above 2000m on east, north and west slopes owing to the previous strong southerly winds and heavy snow. Whilst we all sorted ourselves out Andy demonstrated one of his other skills by playing Bach on the piano!

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Tuesday morning, in cold, sunny weather, saw us skinning up to the Refuge de Buffère, firstly by following the easy angled road and track through Névache and then after the Chapel of Notre Dame de Bon Secours descending, with skins still on, before climbing up the steeper forest track, which we shared with groups on snowshoes. After lunch we climbed, gently at first, then more steeply to the ridge overlooking the Lac de Cristol. Andy dug a snow pit and demonstrated a compression test on the slope we were going to descend. Our efforts were rewarded with our first descent in superb light powder snow.

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A day-tour followed on the Wednesday, again in sunny weather, up to the Crête de Baudé 2600m. This gave us the first opportunity to practise our kick turns with variable degrees of success. At the top the scenery was spectacular. Andy had identified a col close to le Rambé where we could have our picnic. We traversed round and just below the col was a slope of perfect powder which we lapped. Another tick to Andy's powder identification skills. Whilst the rest of us were eating, Andy and Patrick climbed up a steep slope above the col, Andy checking the snow stability as they climbed. Some impressive steep skiing skills followed. To finish the day, we made a long traverse towards the Pointe de Buffère and then skied a North facing slope on more marvellous powder back towards the refuge. On the descent we met a French army group who had been training nearby. Back at the refuge we celebrated a great day with cups of tea and tarte myrtille. Before dinner, we took part in a cheese identification quiz organised by Vincent from the local fromagerie. Needless to say, we didn't win!

Leaving the Buffère on Thursday morning, we headed off to the Refuge du Chardonnet. At first, this involved ascending quite a steep slope of hard-packed snow where kick turns were necessary. Andy was on hand to help and reassure those of us who needed it. His technique of not trying to get the uphill ski facing the other way in one movement, but rather crossing the two skis first, certainly helped. From the top of the slope, we then travelled through some beautiful undulating terrain below the Col de Roche Noire passing by well spread out larch trees. More good powder was skied descending to the Refuge du Chardonnet. Following a superb lunch, with many of the group having chosen an outstanding polenta dish, we headed out, climbing about 400m before crossing a col and skiing yet more powder. Could this go on? Of course it could! Rather than ski directly back to the refuge, Andy suggested that we follow a stream line that would lead to a slope which would take us below the refuge but that would be holding more powder. This turned out to be the case and the effort of skinning back up to refuge was well worth it. Dinner at the Refuge du Chardonnet was superb.

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We awoke to somewhat overcast skies on Friday morning and with lighter packs, headed off into the La Grande Manche. This is an impressive hidden, hanging valley. After some steep skinning we arrived at the entrance to the hanging valley with the Crête du Raisin on one side and the Crête du Diable on the other. Andy had earlier explained that the final slope up to the col at 2800m was very steep and that it might not be possible to get all the way because of the snow conditions. I had already stopped at about 2600m with Andy and the rest of the group turning back a little higher. Andy, having performed a snow profile and identifying a weak layer decided that we should ski down. Following lunch, we descended a narrow icy track down to the road before skinning up to the Refuge Laval.

The weather had deteriorated on Saturday with low cloud, mist, gusts of strong wind and some snow. Having crossed the Pont du Moutet we climbed up behind the refuge towards les Brusas. Staying within the wooded area helped with the poor visibility but, as we climbed higher, the weather worsened and so a return to the refuge was deemed appropriate. Following our picnic lunch we followed the road down, before climbing up to the Refuge de Ricou. Being Saturday night the Refuge de Ricou was busy.

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Sunday morning dawned better than expected and Andy made a track up to the Lac Laramon above the Refuge de Ricou. Here we performed a transceiver exercise putting into practice what Andy had explained the previous evening. Although all of us had experience of similar exercises we all learnt something new from Andy's way of conducting it. We then continued climbing up past the Lac du Serpent. A little higher we met another group that intended to descend the way we had come up. We continued upwards towards a col and after a few minutes, whilst looking back, we saw a group of chamois cross our tracks. We reached the col at 2700m and then skied down over the other side in changeable snow back to the Refuge de Ricou. Galettes and omelettes were consumed for lunch before we skied back down the narrow track to Néyache.

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