

RETURN TO THE LAND OF THE GIANTS

Jotunheimen North-West Passage Tour 4-13 April 2003
Fondsbu (aka Salsabreen) to Sota Saeter (aka Saunadalen)

Having been thwarted by the hot temperatures and wet, impassable snow when I tried to do this route two years ago, I was desperate to make a second attempt. I booked into the trip with the Telemark Ski Co., and was delighted to find that our group was to be very small (five of us in all) and that our leader was Tom Higgs, who turned out to be a “fantastisk” navigator, an inspirational teacher, and not at all as serious as I first made him out to be! The rest of the group were Mark (a welcome familiar face from telemark courses in Tignes), Tom’s friend Ian (a dedicated rock-climber whose penchant for hurtling down slopes earned him the nickname of “Dr Schuss”), Mary (a fine telemarking Australian), and me.

The trip started well and just became better and better. The ice was thoroughly broken at Fondsbu on the first night of the tour (Saturday) where we discovered that the hut was hosting a “Spansk Gran Fiesta” themed weekend. This meant wonderful spicy cooking, a incongruous but enthusiastic flamenco demonstration and, best of all, a late-night salsa session in which I guided a startled but willing Tom and Ian around the impromptu dancefloor. Watching the drunken Norwegian youths clapping and olé-ing the flamenco dancer’s every stamp and shimmy and yet later managing to perform some very competent salsa moves all added to the charm of the evening.

With fully limbered-up hips, we headed off on Sunday morning in beautiful sunshine to the unserviced hut at Olavsbu. Tom’s tricks of the trade enabled us to pick good lines across the contours, and we reached a fine spot above a steep high col to have lunch and take in the endless views. The grins on everyone’s faces said it all. Later, whilst Tom, Mark and Mary struck out for an extra trip up an outlying peak, Ian and I headed down to the hut to settle us in for the night. Making the fires, collecting water and wood, and deciding on the menu for dinner were all positive pleasures in themselves as the soon warm, candlelit hut folded us into its presence.

On Monday, we set out for Leirvassbu, having decided that we needed up-to-date information on the state of the glacier, Smorstabbreen, which we were due to cross in order to reach the next hut of the tour, Krossbu. This, for me, was the most thrilling episode as we added a full extra adventure to our day’s skiing by ditching the heavy packs and heading up a rocky ridge towards the high glaciated snowfields connecting the three peaks of Vestre, Midtre and Oestre. The conditions were perfect and, once we reached the main col, three of us stayed to bask on the exposed rock in the late afternoon sunshine whilst Ian couldn’t resist the challenge of climbing up the Midtre summit and Tom hiked up to the final ridge for the extensive views over the Hurrangane. The rest of us later enjoyed the same views for no extra effort as Tom’s dinky video/digital camera

offered instant playback on what he had seen. It also captured our high spirits as we telemarked, hopped, skipped and face-planted our way back towards Leirvassbu down Ros's Gully, since it was I who had requested Tom to let us take that route home. The fine chef at the hut managed to top a perfect day by producing an unexpectedly delicious dessert of liquorice ice-cream sitting on warm blackberries. Even Mark, our organic herbal and flavourings expert, was beguiled by this marvellous concoction.

The following day, having learnt that Smorstabbreen was dangerously impassable, we agreed to spend a second night at Leirvassbu (Tom's arm didn't really need that much twisting...), and the day doing a local route to the base of the glacier and round into a steep side valley. This route, in classic British understatement, turned out to be "not without interest". After stunning views of the blue ribs of the open ice-cave at the base of the glacier, we climbed up towards a col (dubbed the Col of Destiny), intending to do a high traverse round and thence down the gully into the valley. Edging our way cautiously along a convex slope which seemed to fall endlessly out of sight, we dropped some height only to traverse along a slightly less buttock-clenching line two contours below. This sporting moment over, we then skied with as much grace and panache as five relieved people can muster before traversing back to Leirvassbu. Here, an equally stunning dessert was served up, consisting of cold melon soup in which swam a warm chocolate macaroon, topped with whipped soured cream, berry fruit syrup and a sprig of mint. The evening's card games of Stripjack-Snap (copyright RB-G) and Crazy Eight were played that night with the gusto that only a brush with oblivion can truly produce in a human being...

Partially retracing our steps the next day, we set out down a long, fast descent to Krossbu, paying homage at the blood-stained shrine where Ian had done a spectacular triple salco the day before. After a lovely traversing section through the trees where the only sounds to be heard were the whispering of the snow, the twittering of the birds and the muttering of my curses as the wax failed to work, we faced a long, steep climb into the next valley. As exhaustion began to set in, we stopped for a leisurely lunch on a rocky knoll, surrounded by blue glaciers, rolling valleys and craggy peaks. Did life get much better than this? A surprise was, however, in store for us as we reached Krossbu on the other side of the hill, only to find that the main hut was closed and we would have to spend the night in the rather shabby DNT annexe. The initial dispiriting impression of this drafty and run-down place was soon lifted by Mary's starting a cracking fire, Mark's producing supplies of his home-made ginger tea and Ian's adding a dash of Manx whisky to our cups. Fortified by our dinner of "risotto krossbuese" and mushy peas, we crept over to the main hut where the warden had allowed us to use a bathroom in one of the bedrooms and into the sitting room. Inspired by our creepy surroundings and torpid, otherworldly hosts, we recalled our favourite scenes from *The Shining* with shivering delight.

Thursday's route to Nordstedalseter proved to be an unexpected revelation as we skied across a long lake past strange pyramidal rock and ice formations and up another great series of climbs. Then came a stunning valley descent where Tom gleefully led us an intricate dance through half-pipes and sudden dips, past frozen waterfalls and melted streams down to the beautiful hut itself. In complete contrast to the night before, this hut was voted the best of the trip, being lovingly prepared by the loquacious warden Torill, whose eye for decorative detail and cooking skills were unsurpassed. After an impromptu yoga session to help us unwind, we settled down to a meal which very nearly finished us off. The one photo that we never took would have shown us all propped up next to each other on a sofa, our bellies distended with fantastic food, and with grins on our faces the size of a wide-mouthed frog.

Understandably, we were reluctant to leave this haven the next day, all the more so that the weather had finally turned and lapsed into the Norwegian standard of low cloud and hill fog, scattered snow and biting winds. Through the flat light and over the difficult refrozen surface, we had a hard first couple of hours, where lunch had to be spent huddling together under Tom's shelter. Our mood was to change almost miraculously when, on trudging up the track to the Fortundalsbreen glacier, we encountered three Norwegian skiers (the first other people out skiing whom we had met for three days), whom I heard just happen to mention that the hut at Sota Saeter had a sauna. This magic word was enough to inspire me to shoot up the glacier, closely followed by the rest of the group who were dumbfounded at my sudden burst of enthusiasm until I explained my motivation. Our spirits lifted, we cruised down the other side of the glacier, snow-plough slaloming round the sticks, the light lifting just long enough for us to see our sensuous, curvaceous tracks behind us. Then followed a tricky final descent through trees (almost literally in Ian's case...), over collapsing snow and down hidden drops. Once at the hut, we marvelled at the beautiful old farm-style buildings which comprise this extensive settlement and enjoyed a supper fit for conquerors who had come to the end of their quest. The much-anticipated sauna was a fitting high-point, as we melted in the intense heat of a wood-burning stove and thrilled to the chill touch of the snow outside on our overheated skin. The memories – and abrasions from the stony, slabby snow- will remain with me always.

Unlike the Telemark Ski Co. group who had done this same route the previous year, we decided against taking in yet another peak on the final day and dedicated ourselves instead to relaxation and pleasure. A late morning was spent on skating practice by the river, a meander through the woods past Hansel and Gretel's house, and a wonderful open-air lunch by a camp-fire in the snow. As the pinecones crackled, the resin bubbled and the bright red flames leapt high, we half-slumbered on our snowy seat, singing songs and recalling the finest hours of the trip. It was a very special moment. The long coach journey back to Oslo should have knocked us out completely but we still managed to find some

energy for a final drink together at a late-night bar, a stroll arm in arm along the street, and a fond farewell to Mark who was leaving only a few hours later.

Our very last day together was rather strange, like being wrenched out of sleep. Wandering around the Munch museum gazing at the paintings, all I could see was our imminent separation. Once all the others had left, I drifted alone through the beautiful streets of Oslo. Braving the looks of bemusement from the locals, I sat on the ramparts of the old fort overlooking the bay, watched the boats and the sea, hummed my favourite tunes of the trip and replayed one more time all the scenes in my head.

With thanks to Tom, Ian, Mark and Mary for an extraordinary and unforgettable time.

Ros Brown-Grant