

Café to Couloir

Fancy mounting a last-minute weekend ski mission this season? British Mountain Guide Martin Chester gives you the lowdown on how you can ditch your Saturday morning cup of tea for some fresh pow in double quick time

By Martin Chester, British Mountain Guide



Checking out the potential for fresh tracks in snowy Zermatt

1 CHOOSE THE RIGHT AREA

This is all about the internet and up-to-date, accurate snow reports. You also need to ditch the usual approach of just considering resorts you've skied before and enjoyed, or places that have long been on your 'fancy checking out' list. Don't open your mind beyond these options and you're massively reducing your chances of snaring the best snow available.

So, where should you look? Well, you'll often see a pattern emerging of where's good to go at certain times of year. The last few years, for example, have seen fantastic early-season conditions further east and south, while resorts around Chamonix have taken a battering from the wind (and you can have all the fresh you want, and still no powder joy if it's gusting 70 or 80mph up the mountain).

As to keeping tabs on actual falls in resort, www.snow-forecast.com is excellent. Forums like www.snowheads.com and www.pistehors.com can be useful too, but you need to be careful, as

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anyone can post and the information's often not up-to-date. I like the route notebook page of Chamonix's Office du Haute Montagne, where you can check what's being skied in the Alps, and how the individuals posting found the conditions (see www.ohm-chamonix.com for details).

Obviously I'm biased, being a British Mountain Guide, but the community page of the BMG website (www.bmg.org.uk) is useful too, having a list of guides on Twitter. And clearly you can get all their latest info if you sign up to follow them.

In short, gather as much info as you can, take it all with the pinch of salt it deserves and aim for venues that give you plenty of different options.

2 BUILDING UP THE FULL PICTURE

It's not just as simple as finding a good snow forecast. You need to ask the right questions. The first thing to consider is temperature, and where the

freezing level is when there's a fall. Often, if you head too high, you're not utilising the best conditions. As there's a point at which snow just becomes too light; too lacking in water. This means it simply won't stick to the mountain. Go lower, where there's some moisture in the snow, and you'll get better conditions, avoid the crowds (who usually all pile up top) and spend less time getting lifts. You may also get access quicker than larger areas where there's more avalanche work to do too.

Wind, already mentioned briefly, is another key factor. And you can have all the snow you want, but if it's been blowing a hooly for days, you're going to be skiing more slab than powder (and with this, running an increased risk of avalanche). Use forecasts to help you keep track of wind strength and direction, while avalanche bulletins will tell you the consequences of this weather – and help you work out where the risk is greatest.

Want some evidence of the importance of both of these things? Well, just speak to Bruce Goodlad, who helped put this feature together. He lives between Saint-Gervais and Chamonix and skis the surrounding resorts all the time. Last winter, he says: “We had great snow in the low resorts with fantastic cover and loads of powder but if you went to the top of Chamonix's Grand Montets, it had been so cold and windy that much of the snow had not had an opportunity to stick to the glacier. Even late in the season, when it was warmer, this snow hadn't filled in and there were a number of serious crevasse incidents.”

One easy way to compute risk due to the factors featured here is via websites like www.avalanches.org (particularly good for Switzerland) that publish snow profiles. These help you get a glimpse under the snow from the comfort of your sofa. But just as with examining the situation at source, you have to know what to look for when estimating danger.

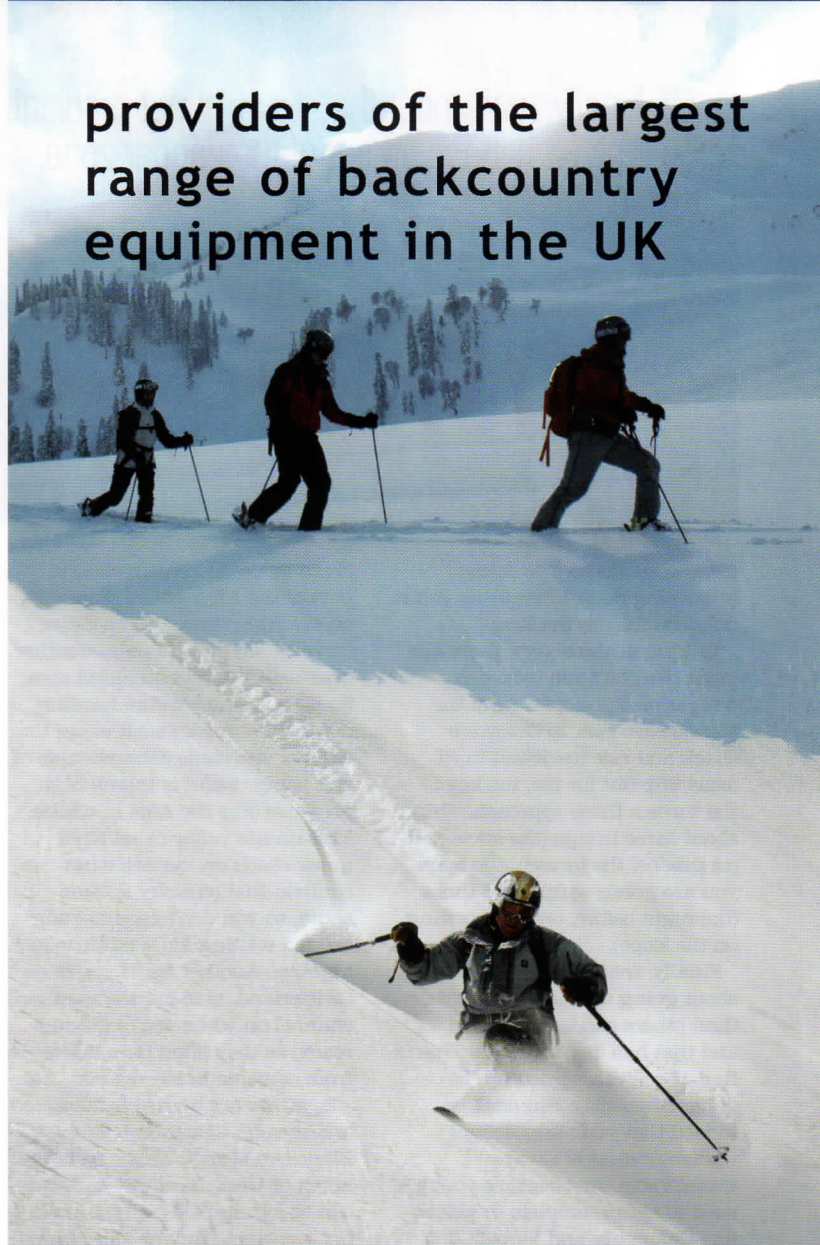
3 GATHERING LOCAL INFORMATION

Get the best advice you can (guides office, tourist info, local bar) as soon as you arrive. Once you know the conditions, start building a plan; and have some options too. Things can easily change overnight and having more than one possible way to go will help you avoid



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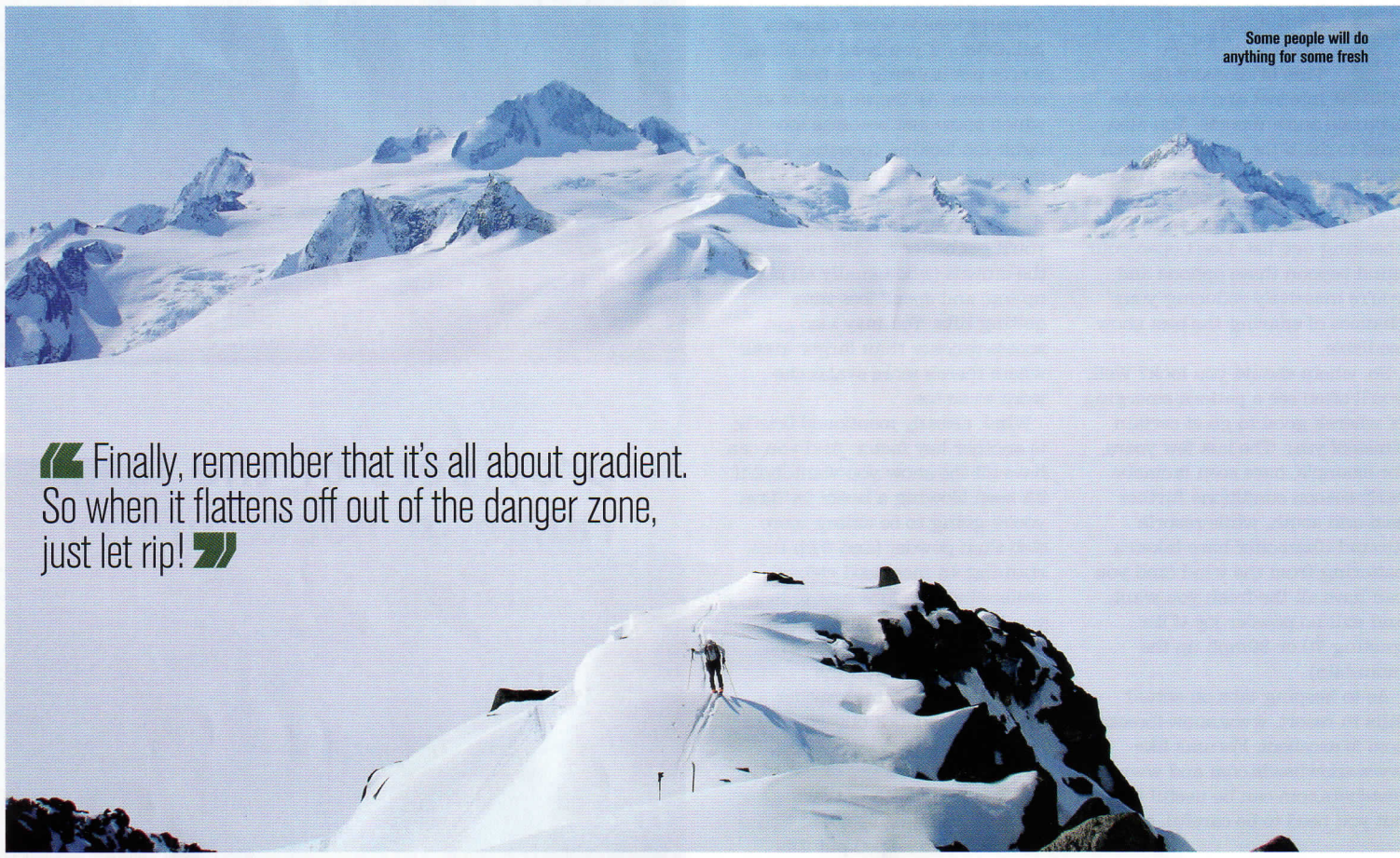
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Some people will do anything for some fresh



“ Finally, remember that it's all about gradient. So when it flattens off out of the danger zone, just let rip! ”

getting suckered into doing something dodgy, simply as you've only one iron in the fire.

Talking of the dodgy, there are loads of great tests to assess danger on the slopes, from the classic Nivo test, to Ortovox's check and ride (reviewed in FL issue 85). But for me, the key is the three x three approach. Think about three things (the snow and conditions, the terrain, the team you are going with) three times (the night before, on the morning, on the slope).

Finally, fresh tracks are often about going that little bit further than others can/are prepared to, and that has its own risks. This is fine, if you've weighed up the dangers sensibly. But don't be kidded that your knowledge/understanding is always transferable. Just because you're used to skiing off-piste in places like Chamonix and Verbier, don't assume the snow will respond the same in a quieter areas. Because the busier an area, the quicker the snow pack is stabilised.

4 THE EARLY START

The day starts here. Get up, throw the curtains open, pull on the transceiver and get out there. Pronto. If you've used all the info we've talked

about so far to get to a chosen part of the Alps, you're definitely on the right lines. But be aware there can be variations in weather even within a very localised area. So if you've time before heading out, have a quick check using the resort's web cams. One example of this being useful is there's high pressure over the Alps in winter. This causes valley cloud but a quick check on the web cams can confirm that blue sky is often above, so you don't need to hang around waiting for conditions to improve. Another tip, if you're in Switzerland, is to put the weather channel on while you're getting ready, as they often have live feeds from cameras in ski resorts.

Be aware of physical features too and the effect they have. Mont Blanc can block weather from the north or west. Be smart and you can be skiing in the sunshine in Courmayeur, while the less savvy are in Chamonix with poor vis. Again, web cams will help you see this, but understanding how/why the weather pans out as it does is a big help.

At some stage, you'll pick and be jumping on a lift. Even now you should be thinking about how much snow there was in the car park as you put on your transceivers. Was there any wind or evidence of it? If so, what

direction was it coming from? And finally, most ski areas will post the local avalanche report... have a look!

5 PICKING THE RIGHT SLOPES

If it's a blue sky pow day, it's really difficult not to just clip in and rip it up. But have a plan about how you are going to look after each other if things go wrong; with any fresh snowfall, there's bound to be some sort of avalanche risk.


Slope aspect, gradient, exposure to wind, threat from above – you should be weighing it all up. Ski tentatively at first, keeping an eye out for wind slab (and less obvious softer blocks in powder). Close to ridge lines, so often the first turns are the worst (or skiing out onto exposed ridge lines) so do so one at a time, and have a system for communicating and watching out for each other. Really trust your sphincter – there is no need to push on when the seasonnaires are holed up in the bar, just because you don't get as much snow as some people. If it feels wrong it probably is.

Remember too, that there's no

such thing as safety in numbers. That lot previously known as your mates are now an additional load on the snow and might cause the slope to avalanche. So stop in sensible places. Ski things one by one, and be aware of what is above you; avalanches often start further up the mountain.

Don't get suckered into following tracks in an area you don't know. You may need skins to get you out of a bowl, while if you're skiing somewhere like La Grave, you may even need a rope to abseil out of the bottom of a couloir. Finally, remember that it's all about gradient. So when it flattens off out of the danger zone, just let rip!

YOUR GUIDE FOR TODAY...

 Martin Chester (IFMGA) is a British Mountain Guide, and their publicity officer too. He's also the chief instructor at Plas y Brenin (the National Mountain Centre which is in North Wales) where he has run their wide range of off-piste and ski touring courses for several years, www.pyb.co.uk He wrote and directed the Off-Piste Essentials DVD with Rob Spencer of PyB; and has skied all over the Alps and on several expeditions to the greater ranges (Himalaya, BC, etc). We are definitely not worthy. www.bmg.org.uk