

Discovering hidden France on snowshoes

With the evenings starting to close in and thoughts turning to the upcoming winter season, Declan Cunningham discovers that there are other ways to explore the snowy Alps than on skis. Here he talks us through the merits of snowshoeing.

Words: Declan Cunningham Photos: Declan Cunningham & Carl Raftery



THE LONGEST DAY of the year is a distant memory and that 'grand stretch in the evenings' is about to twang the other way again. Autumn may only be gearing up but like it or not winter is on its way. And if the last two years are anything to go by that means plenty of the white stuff, and that my friends, is something to look forward to!

In fact, the last snows of 2010 were still lurking on some mountain shoulders like unwanted dandruff when I decided that I hadn't had enough and headed with my wife Carl to the Queyras National Park in the French Alps for a spot of snowshoeing.

While independent trips are feasible, we decided to join an existing trip being led by Vincent Lamy of France Outdoors. It meant we could put our feet up in an organisational way at least. Lamy's week-long outings are run in much the same way as Wicklow Way trips are here, with logistics such as booking beds, gear transport and even packed lunches being provided by the organiser.

It was a novelty getting collected and not having all the faff of car rental to wreck our holiday buzz. No driving on the wrong side of the road or map reading required. Instead we simply sat back and enjoyed the increasingly beautiful scenery and some fancy biscuits.

CLOUD BUSTING

It was lovely and sunny in Italy when we landed but it grew gradually duller and the road disappeared into cloud. It was snowing too but we didn't mind that, just missing out on the views. At least it gave us a chance to acquaint ourselves with Florence (the other half of the company) and two other members of the group from Omagh.



Opposite: Filtered sunlight, an easy gradient, a pair of snowshoes and the time to enjoy them all...what more could you ask for? This page: Descending the ridge above the snowbound St Veran in a spectacular Alpine setting.

“Mention snowshoeing to anyone and people immediately ask you, ‘Oh is that when you walk around with tennis rackets stuck to your feet?’ If that helps you get the idea then fine but I wouldn’t advise a jaunt over the Sally Gap with a Wilson BLX duck taped to each foot!”

The Queyras Regional Park is just to the east of its arguably more famous neighbour the Ecrins National Park. It is less developed and consequently relatively ignored by the masses so it's the ideal spot for total escape. Our first *gîte* (basically a French B&B) was nestled in the mountain village of Montbardon – a beautiful little spot you aren't likely to find by yourself. In typical French style, it could boast a cheese manufacturer and a bakery but not one shop!

The remainder of the group consisted of no less than a quintet of game and very fit Scottish ladies, two of whom were grandmothers! The final member of our party was our guide, Vincent. He's the French equivalent of an International Mountain Leader and was eager to show us what was in store for the next few days, as well as doling out all the extra kit of shovels, probes, transceivers and, of course, snowshoes.

Mention snowshoeing to anyone and people immediately ask you, “Oh is that when you walk around with tennis rackets stuck to your feet?” If that helps you get the idea then fine but I wouldn't advise a jaunt over the Sally Gap with a Wilson BLX duck taped to each foot! You can get pretty technical but suffice it to say we would be using 'bear-paw' style shoes which are almost rectangular in shape, strap on like a ski boot and most importantly are pretty manoeuvrable.

Unusually enough, our inaugural outing was hampered by rain and cloud which unlike home is certainly out of the norm for this neck of the woods. Our *gîte* was called Le Cadron Soleil which means sundial. At home we would have been staying in the cumulus nimbus!

The great thing about snowshoeing is that there's no training required as it relies on walking. But that isn't to say there is no skill involved. As the views were obscured,



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we focused on getting used to our new mode of transport and just getting to know each other. The plan had been to do a linear walk which led to the next *gîte* but avalanche risk meant we had to do more of a lollipop loop.

HIGH SPIRITS

Poor Vincent was miserable because we couldn't get the views, as though the mediocre weather was his fault. We even waited around on top doing practice searches with the transceivers just to give the cloud a chance to clear. Hey, if the weather didn't improve we would probably need them. Thankfully the cloud lifted on our descent and we all returned to Montbardon in high spirits eager for the next day.

Having a guide is optional depending on your experience and aspirations and Vincent will happily suggest routes and provide maps if you're eager to get out on your own. No point having a dog and barking yourself as they say in places that have dogs and the same can be said of guides so we were only too happy to have Vincent to show us the way, improve our

snow shoeing and educate us about the local flora and fauna as well as the 120 main crystal types in snow. I kid you not! In fairness we felt more like guests than clients for the entire week such was his eagerness to please.

In an effort to make up for lost views on the first day, the route choice was altered for Day 2 to take in a small summit. The trail led us through forests of larch and cembro pine. The spaced planting and sustainable forestry methods make these beautiful places of dappled sunlight as the early morning sunshine filters through the branches.

Our five Scots were a right bunch of gigglers but everyone was in good form that day. Amazing how a bit of good weather and banter makes such a difference. Sometimes group outings can be a bit of an effort so the fact we were all getting along was great. The contrast in weather was mad though. The day before we'd been all wrapped up but with the sunshine I was down to just a t-shirt.

We arrived at Summit Buchet (2250m approx) in good time so it was the ideal spot for lunch and oohing and aahing at

the spectacular views before turning tail and descending. Now with nearly two days practice, Vincent started introducing us to the finer skills of snowshoeing which involves getting down increasingly steep and soft snow. I would liken it to running, James Bond fashion, across crocodile infested water. Getting going is easy enough but if you stop or catch the toe of your shoe you'll be up to your neck in it. Several mouthfuls of snow later, we returned exhilarated to our lodgings for grub.

COSY ACCOMMODATION

It has to be said that the *gîtes* chosen by France Outdoors are top notch for the most part. While some of our lunches were challenging, the evening meals were enjoyable two-hour feasts with plenty of great food, wine, beer, homemade bread and cheese so good we resorted to stealing more! Plenty of stories with the meal and an equal supply of drink to compliment both meant happiness reigned. I think the unanimously favourite *gîte* was Le Gabelous in the stunning Saint Veran – Europe's highest village.

The entire Queyras area is ideal for snowshoeing with very accessible tracks and reachable peaks offering walks to people of all abilities. There are also a plethora of *gîtes* to choose from. Part of what we enjoyed about the trip was its flexibility regarding suiting walks to weather and accommodating our wishes too. That flexibility also extended to availing of some of the other options for getting out and about – from downhill skiing, telemark skiing to full-on mountaineering. We stayed in some places for more than one night so taking a day off to do something else, or God forbid nothing at all, was a doddle to arrange without affecting anyone else.

Making use of the telemark tracks is one good way of getting through the valley quickly but you have to be careful not to damage the perfect ruts used by the skiers which isn't always easy as space is tight for your walking poles. Later we zigzagged our way up through the forestry to come out on a ridge line with unbeatable views of the valley. The whole place was a hive of activity and looked like a Christmas postcard without the coloured lights. We followed the ridgeline taking care not to stray too close to the cornice, all the time making note of the pristine virgin slopes of snow we had every intention of wrecking on the way back down.

It was another fabulous sunny day so we didn't mind the idea of going head over heels into the slope. We even had races down whatever steep sections we could find and the more perfect the better. Amazing how maniacal we sounded as we tore down leaving a wake of giant foot prints and unintentional snow angels. This wasn't the slightly psychopathic child coming out in us but commitment to perfect the art of snowshoeing.

Just in case you think that you could manage without the snowshoes I'd dare you to take them off and stray from the path. I'd say the only place you wouldn't have an ice cream headache would be from the neck up!

For the most part the weather we got was great but we did have a couple of glitches in this regard. One of our walks was eventually halted and reversed due to a blizzard where we couldn't see a thing and the pass for which we were headed would be under avalanche threat. I asked Vincent just how many of his trips are affected by weather. He sort of shook his head in dismay and simply said, "Never!" The area gets about 300 days of sunshine a year and this was the first time he'd had to cancel a walk!

Actually he'd been monitoring the weather all week so we could literally save the best till last with a visit to the ancient village of Clapeyto. This half buried village looks like it was caught out by an avalanche and it's hard to believe it



Opposite: Blessed art those amongst...mountains! Settling in for lunch and a chat in an unbeatable picnic spot. This page: Another unintentional snow angel bites the dust...or powder even.

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was ever used as a summertime pasture. This was the longest day with plenty of climbing.

Incidentally, the effort required to snowshoe is inversely proportional to the amount of banter so the scrape and scratch of snowshoes is all you hear when the effort is too much. We made our way through stunning mountains towards the Neal Pass (2509m). Mostly I like to climb on mountains but it was genuinely exhilarating to simply spend time ‘in’ the mountains instead. We were tired returning to Brunissard for the last time. The rhythmic scrape of our snowshoes like a tattoo to herald our return to quarters. The Queyras are a well kept secret as is snowshoeing.

On arrival the area had seemed strangely familiar, seeing signs for Valloise, Argentiere, Ailefoid and Briancon made me feel like it was déjà vu all over again but I hadn't been there before. I've just missed several Mountaineering Ireland or IMC meets to these locations and have listened to all the stories that resulted. The area is a Mecca for all sorts of reasons and this it was nice to head home with a few tales of our own. Now it was time to head home and with winter approaching it's time to dust off the snowshoes, start stockpiling salt, tanning hides and chopping firewood! Well maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration but there's no harm in being ready now is there? 

THE LOW-DOWN

GETTING THERE: We flew to Turin via Ryanair. Other airports close to the region include Grenoble, Lyon and Nice. France Outdoors offers airport pickups which mean you don't have to bother with a car unless you want more freedom.

FRANCE OUTDOORS: Vincent Lamy and Florence Budin, both natives of Provence, run the trips. They spent seven years in Ireland so not only have they fluent English they know what we're like! For more information visit: www.franceoutdoors.com

PACA REGION: Obviously there's a lot more to the region than the mountains but I am biased. The highlights of the PACA region (Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur) for me is of course the mountains but you can find out more about it here: www.provence-hideaway.com/index.html

OTHER OPTIONS: There is enough climbing, kayaking and skiing options to keep you busy but two popular walking options for the area are the GR5 and GR58. Check the following links for a bit more info: www.grfive.com and www.cicerone.co.uk/product/detail.cfm/book/510/title/tour-of-the-queyras

SNOWSHOES: For the nerdy types, click: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snowshoe>