

Winter-rooming in the Alps

After all the effort and hardship of having flogged your way up to a remote mountain hut – why on earth would you want your destination to be unoccupied, snowed-in and freezing cold? This is the reality of ski touring in the Alps pre-season (up to mid-March) before the huts are officially open. Most huts have a winter room which provides a basic refuge for those daft enough to venture out at this time of year. Yet this is exactly what a few of us have chosen to do for the past few years. The pay-back is to (generally) have the place entirely to yourself. After all, one of the attractions of ski touring is to escape the crowds of the ski resorts; to



Splendid isolation
in the Vanoise

spend a whole week in fabulous mountain terrain on virgin snow and not see another person is the epitome of this search for solitude and isolation.

Winter rooms can vary greatly. Most are either a separate room within the main hut building or a section of



Clive digging his way into the Carro Hut

the hut that has access maintained (once you have cleared the snow) throughout the winter. Generally they will have a wood-burning stove and a supply of logs that require sawing and chopping. This provides heat and a means of cooking though we have recently added the luxury of a small gas burner to allow a hot drink in the morning after the stove has gone out overnight. Of course there is a plentiful supply of water, it just needs melting first. Blankets are provided on bunks



or mattresses. Some huts have solar panels and an electric light. Facilities do vary and you cannot always be too sure what you will find. Recently we spent several nights at the old Victor Emanuel hut in the Gran Paradiso region of Italy. Here the stove was so efficient that I was forced to sleep on top of my blankets one night. Later that week we arrived at the newly rebuilt Conscrits hut at the west end of the Mont Blanc massif. This is a fabulous new building – with no form of heating in the winter room. It was cold!

One of the disadvantages of using huts that are closed is the need to carry your own food in with you.



Plat du jour around the stove in the Evettes

However careful planning and low expectations are useful in overcoming this. We always have exactly the same meal – “*Plat du jour*”. This is spaghetti (the most space efficient form of pasta) served with a pot of pesto and a sachet of sauce – magnificent! Beyond this, all you need is a supply of tea bags, coffee and hot chocolate along with cereal bars, flapjack, and your preferred hill-snacks.

Despite the apparent hardship, using winter rooms for a few Euros per night is a fantastic way of spending time up in the mountains and I thoroughly recommend it.