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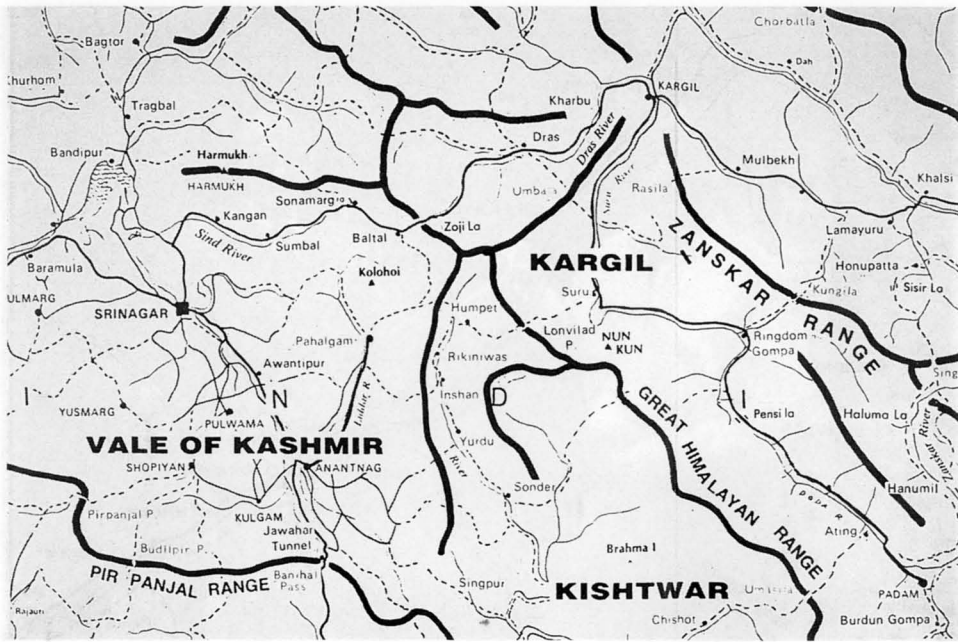
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# **Skiing on the Edge**

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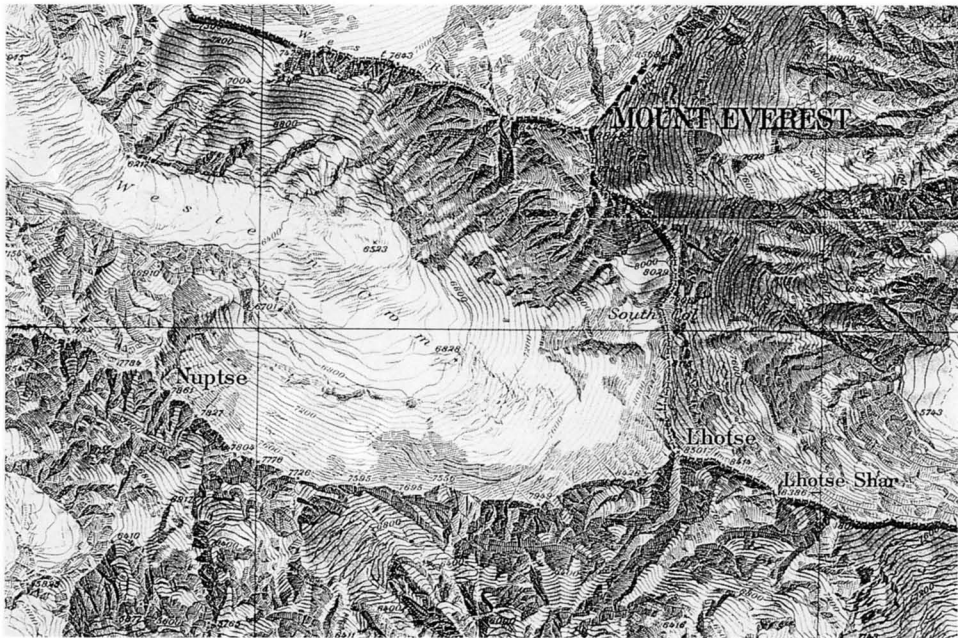


34. Above Extract from Leomann Trekking Map of Kashmir 1:200 000, a good example of a map using ridgeline depiction. (p167)



36. Above left Leaving the plateau on the headwall of Coire an Lochain, Cairngorms. (Martin Burrows-Smith) (p105)

37. Above right Looking down Garadh Gully on Ben Nevis prior to a descent. (Martin Burrows-Smith) (p105)



35. Opposite below Extract from National Geographic Map of Everest 1:50 000, a composite map using many different methods of relief depiction to produce a design admired for both efficient and effective communication of relief information and for its aesthetic qualities. (p167)

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# Making Tracks in Scottish Gullies

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(Plates 36, 37)

Midday, mid-week in mid-February, I was resting at the summit of Sgurr Mor, a fine peak in the Central Fannaichs of the Northern Highlands. I had been here before with my skis the previous winter, and looking across to the magnificent flanks of Sgurr nan Clach Geala, I recalled an epic descent of Alpha Gully on its E face.

That had been an on-sight day, no previous inspection, and wild skiing down the crest of the buttress had led to a tortuous descent of the gully itself, often too tight to turn, but eventually I had been spat out onto its supporting but avalanching apron of snow. The reascent to the plateau had been a good Grade III and required careful negotiation to avoid exposed slopes of windslab. I had continued to Sgurr Mor for a look at Easter Gully on its E face, but had prudently chickened out.

On that occasion I had climbed Easter Gully first, checking out the conditions, and continued up the ridge to the summit to psych up for the descent. A final look round at the view: Beinn Dearg to the north, An Teallach to the west, Skye, Torridon, the Ben – they were all there, caked in snow and blue sky; not a breath of wind. I had the whole range to myself. Under conditions like this, ski mountaineering in the Highlands is second to none.

Back to reality and on with the skis for the ski down to the start of the gully some 500ft down. It's so important to arrive at and start a difficult descent with legs and muscles loose and mobile – brain, body and balance all geared to skiing in control. So I skied a variety of turns, short and long radius, compressions, steps and hops, working on rhythm, feeling the snow, anticipating what was to come.

A huge cornice hung over the final slope of the gully but a snow ridge outflanked most of it on the left, the cornice relenting to a vertical five-foot step. This was the way in, so I followed my ascent steps to the edge. A thousand feet below, over crag and ridge, was the coire floor – no place to catch an outside edge. However, I felt confident, knowing the snow was creamy and consistent; so without delay I hopped over the lip into a fall-line side-slip and stop, upper ski spread high above the lower, reacting to the steepness, hands flung wide for balance, and body angulating hard over the edged skis.

I made a diagonal bouncing side-slip into the centre of the gully, getting used to the snow and the head in order, before launching into the first turn. Edges bite

and body and legs react and balance instinctively. Euphoria! The control and form were there. I could relax and enjoy it. What more could one want than to feel good at the start of an exciting descent?

Further down, a sustained constriction required tight control, with no movement across the slope after each turn. Then a tricky diagonal through rock steps led to the easier-angled central section. From here the gully dropped straight and steep to the coire, and with increasing confidence this was taken rapidly, linking the turns, making use of all available snow on the steeper flanks, and relishing the sustained effort until a short step led to more open slopes, the coire and a long, long cruise back to the car.

The adjective 'extreme' is applied to many sports. It is an emotive word, much misused and abused, with a suggestion of élitism, hype and standards that are over-the-top and involve considerable danger. Applied to skiing, it conjures up a picture of death-defying slides down appalling slopes, like the Japanese skier who schussed from the South Col on Everest, with a parachute to slow him down.

Reality is, and has been for some time, quite different. The priority clearly must be to stay alive! This requires good preparation, planning and timing; the ability to back off if conditions or the head are not quite right; and also, very important, a reliable, precise but flexible technique allied to a certain nerve and cool, which allow the skier to perform at his technical best when the consequences of a fall are unthinkable.

Good conditions are vital. In the Alps the most extreme descents will only be achieved on spring snow on the turn. This snow is reliable, having a firm, consistent base but with just the right amount of melted mush on the surface to make it reasonably forgiving and to provide suitable grip. For the Alpine skier this snow may only appear high up on a few days each year, so it helps to be a local, or at least fortunate, if good conditions are to come your way. This will usually occur any time in May or June but, with the right combination of previous snowfall and temperature, these conditions can appear almost any time of the year. It is rare for good conditions in the high mountains to stay for long as, with increasing temperatures, more snow will melt, sloughs will eventually occur, and avalanche runnels and debris appear. Also, the descent may be wrecked by previous ski tracks!

In Scotland, as in the Alps, spring snow is the best. With our occasional temperate winter climate this snow can appear at any time in the winter, but it is usually most reliable in March and April. However, if you insist on waiting for spring snow to arrive, you could end up with few opportunities to ski gullies; so technique and skills must be adapted to cope with a wide variety of snows.

Windslab is the most frequent snow to appear in Scottish couloirs. Clearly there is a major concern with avalanche risk here, and full knowledge and judgement must be exercised. If considered safe and stable, consolidated windslab can provide excellent consistent snow to ski on. If there is any doubt about the stability of such snow then either leave it alone or, at the very least, keep away from open exposed slopes, particularly convexities and hanging slopes that are unsupported underneath.

Once a melt freeze process is initiated, problems will arise. Any sort of

breakable crust should be avoided – it's so easy to catch an outside edge. Once névé is formed then the skiing can be very demanding and unforgiving technically. The névé should have good surface roughage for grip and with anything less, in particular an icy gloss on the surface, it should be left well alone.

The technical skills of steep skiing must be perfected somewhere absolutely safe. Clearly it would be foolish to experiment at the start of a long and serious descent. A consistent, reliable turn must be developed in a variety of snows, and adjustments should be natural, instinctive and immediate. A turn on steep terrain is very dynamic, requires total commitment, with no hesitation.

At Glenmore Lodge we run courses in couloir and steep-slope skiing. We work initially on slopes with a safe run-out before going anywhere at all serious. Good edge control is vital, developing into short swings (or *Wedeln*), so that the skier can be totally mobile and above all in control, resisting the pull of gravity with natural edge control, through the ankles, knees and hips to the upper body.

The natural steep-slope turn to aim for is actually initiated off the upper ski. A dynamic up motion transfers weight from the lower to the upper ski. As the weight comes off the lower ski, it can naturally turn to face down the slope, thus anticipating the turn that will immediately follow and prevent any blockage of the action. In fact by jumping upwards (rather than outwards) the skier will land less far down the slope, thereby minimising the escalation of speed which is the biggest enemy in causing loss of control. A double pole-plant helps to give a more stable initiation to the turn.

The landing is an intuitive reaction to the feel of the snow as the skier comes into a running side-slip and stop. Depending on the quality of the snow, the weight is usually mainly on the downhill ski, so that often the turn is started and finished on the same ski. Occasionally, though, the weight may well be shared between the skis and sometimes, particularly with breakable crust, the upper ski may take most of the weight to give some leeway if a downhill edge is caught.

There are a few skiers who, whatever their ability, do not get a buzz from skiing on a slope at the limit of their nerve and ability. However, steep skiing was not initially developed as an end in itself – it evolved naturally with the exploration on ski of Alpine passes and summits. Many of the steepest summits and cols had often been descended on foot; but later, when conditions were sufficiently forgiving, experiments were made on ski, and advanced techniques were gradually developed.

A notable development in the Mont Blanc massif was the descent of the Milieu glacier on the Aiguille d'Argentière by the guide André Tournier and Emile Allais in the spring of 1939. This was the first time a sustained slope of 40° plus had been skied, and at altitude too.

With improving equipment in the 1950s and 60s, progressively steeper and more serious descents were attempted until, in the late 1960s, Sylvain Saudan set new standards with his descents of the Spencer, Whymper and Gervasutti couloirs and from the summits of the Eiger and Grandes Jorasses. Patrick Vallencant, Anselme Baud and Serge Cachat-Rosset pushed the limits on the Peuterey Ridge, Aiguille Verte and Aiguille du Midi and, more recently, Jean Marc Boivin on the Nant Blanc face of the Verte and Pierre Tardivel on the N face of the Eckpfeiler.

In Scotland, Harry Jamiesen, a ski instructor from Nethy Bridge, was the first skier to develop couloir skiing in the Cairngorms in the early 1970s. His descents of Aladdin's Couloir in Coire an t-Sneachda, the couloir in Coire an Lochain and the Shelter Stone gullies were remarkable, particularly as Harry was not a climber, so was not in a position to exchange skis for axe and crampons if problems arose on the descent.

Instructors at Glenmore Lodge, with their enthusiasm for off-piste skiing and knowledge of local gullies, eventually followed in Harry's tracks and exploration took place throughout the Highlands. Initially the popular climbing grounds of Ben Nevis, Creag Meaghaidh and Lochnagar were visited, but the search for wide Grade I and well-filled Grade II gullies led the exploratory skier all over the Highlands, including Ben Lui, the Fannaichs, Beinn Dearg, Seana Braigh and more surprising venues such as Glencoe and An Teallach.

Indeed, An Teallach, for many the best mountain in Britain, has in its two main coires the finest collection of couloirs in the Highlands. Up to 1500ft in height, they are well defined, full of character, and cut through impressively sculptured sandstone walls. Big cornices are rare, so access is relatively straightforward and there is a wide choice of superb descents. In the northern coire, A'Ghlas Thuill, are the deep gashes of Murdo's and Hayfork gully with the four Prongs to the left. In the middle is the Alley, a Grade III, that needs an abseil over a short step at two-thirds height, and has thrilling skiing in the upper section above a huge crag and in the lower, steeper gully where a stupendous wall overhangs its right flank. The southern coire, Toll an Lochain, has many equally fine couloirs, some still awaiting a first descent.

Pre-inspection of the descent is clearly a sensible precaution to check out the snow and the best line. Often the most difficult and serious part of the descent is at the start where cornices and steep scarp slopes intimidate and the legs and body are still stiff from the ascent. As already mentioned, if there is a nearby summit it is very useful to ski down to the start of the descent and attack it in the right frame of mind. If there is not, then it is essential to loosen and warm up the legs by exercise before launching onto that crucial first turn.

Cornices can be abseiled, cut down, out-flanked, descended with an ice-axe for aid, or simply left alone. Generally the use of a rope should be minimal as it interrupts the flow of a descent and is ethically impure. However, if the rest of the gully is considered really worthwhile, then who cares?

When reasonably sure of conditions then it's great to ski on sight. To say the least, this can be really good value when on unknown ground. Even better is to link a series of couloirs and steep descents into a long and demanding ski tour, ideally on ski all day. The Cairngorms are particularly suitable for this and many combinations are possible, the best that I have managed being the S gully on Lurcher's Crag, the E gully of Coire Bhrochain on Braeriach, Angels Ridge on Sgor an Lochain Uaine and the couloir in Coire an Lochain.

For the future, although many of the obvious skiable gullies have been done, there are still many descents awaiting the steely edge of ski, protected by their seriousness, lack of condition and inaccessibility. Who knows, but maybe one day a very well-filled Zero Gully will give some hero a good day out, but he'd have to be willing to perform some exciting jumps and it would be nice if the landings were into deep powder!