



When it's good, there's
nowhere better to be.
A powder dawn at
Aonach Mor.



Brave Hearts

INSIDE THE SCOTTISH SKIING RENAISSANCE

Something strange is happening north of the border: the British backcountry scene is snowballing in the face of extinction through climate change. And for those in the grip of the Scottish ski obsession, it seems the more impossible the challenge, the bigger the thrill.

Sarah Stirling investigates.

A gang of youngsters dressed in Euro-bright ski gear are excitedly boot-packing up into an incongruous scene: the wet, windy and brown bowels of a Scottish valley. Their aim? A snow-patched shoulder, a tongue of white snow that's survived in a couloir and some steep, wet grass. Last night they camped in a storm so ferocious it broke tent poles. While watching this very British film, I remember the old joke: "Weather warning: Southerners are urged not to travel unless absolutely necessary. Northerners – you'll need your big coat."

Why are they doing it? Because, during moments of magic when weather and conditions align, the best place in the world to be is Scotland on skis. However, there's no beating about the bush – or the bracken – at times this can be an esoteric ski scene. After all, it's said there are four types of Scottish snow: white (rare), grey (slippery), brown (heather) and black (rocks). But despite the unique conditions, it seems there is something really addictive about the British backcountry.

INSIDE THE SCOTTISH SCENE

"Ach, the skiing is mediocre. It's the scene that's amazing," says Pete Mackenzie, a modest 'boring accountant', well-known for his gnarly steep-ski descents. He has a soft accent and gently infectious enthusiasm. It's a joke, of course, he can yarn about Scottish skiing for hours, but there's something in what he says.

"A great buzz has definitely developed around the Scottish backcountry scene, both on and off the slopes," says ski-mountaineering instructor, Di Gilbert (don't let the blonde pigtails deceive you, she's hardcore). "OK, it's not the Alps but for a tiny island it really packs a punch if you know where to look."

I've tried Scottish skiing a few times but I didn't get it. Talking to these guys, though, I'm wondering if I should try

it with a different mindset. If you want in on the scene, it turns out there are certain criteria.

"Essentially, you need to love early starts, cold, wet car parks, navigating in white-out conditions and whiskey-fuelled, winter nights holed up in bothies," says Robert Kingsland, a young freerider on the scene. I huddle closer to the fire just thinking about it, but his words do contain the appealing call of down-to-earth, very British adventure.

Why is there a British backcountry renaissance taking place, I ask? Kenny Biggin, author of two new Scottish off-piste guidebooks, answers this one in his measured tones. He thinks it's been sparked by a run of good winters (apart from last winter: the worst in recent history), social media and the kit revolution: "Ten years ago you saw an occasional Fritschi binding at the Nevis Range car park. Now there are more and more people clanking with pin bindings and transceivers."

Legendary mountaineer Scott Muir agrees, and adds that the shine seems to be wearing off ski resorts: six years ago he knew a handful of people who would hike or bike into Scotland's wilderness to ski. Now (relatively speaking!) a lot more people do. However, everyone agrees it's still far from busy in the Scottish backcountry. "You're actually chuffed if you see anyone else," says Pete. "You might take their number and go skiing with them!"

It's not just the youngsters who are psyched. In her youth, Myrtle Simpson was the only woman in a gnarly Lochaber gang of climbers. She was also the first woman to ski across Greenland. The younger generation admiringly call her 'the Godmother of Scottish skiing.' Some of them recently took this matriarch skiing in a gale; while they barricaded themselves into down jackets, the 87-year-old strolled out in a woolly jumper.

Myrtle wants to encourage oldies back outdoors: "I think skiing is an excellent sport for the elderly," she says in her strong, imperious voice, "Because the lift takes you up. I get a medal if I go down the Scottish Masters course because there are no other women my age who compete. Tell your granny to get her skis out!"

PHOTO: MYRTLE SIMPSON COLLECTION.




📍 The legendary Myrtle Simpson (87) competing in an end-of-season race.



📍 Mind the gap: Blair Aitken makes light work of the cornice on Number Five Gully (I), Ben Nevis.

PHOTO: HAMISH FROST.



**"YOU NEED TO LOVE EARLY STARTS,
COLD, WET CAR PARKS, NAVIGATING
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**True Scottish skiing. Tackling the monster
cornices at the top of Tower Gully (grade I).**

PHOTO: HAMISH FROST



PHOTO: JORDAN TIERNAN

P Pete Mackenzie making the first descent of Solar Face.

> A BIT OF HISTORY

When Myrtle skied across Greenland she was retracing the tracks of Nansen, the Norwegian explorer: the first to ever make that journey, in the late 1800s. Nansen's books inspired the first backcountry revolution in Britain: "When they read about skiing, the Scots thought, 'Gosh, that's what we could do,'" says Myrtle. "And, it wasn't like climbing: there were women involved in Scottish skiing right from the start. In skirts, of course."

Growing numbers of ski enthusiasts would leave Glasgow on the milk train at 6am at weekends, heading for the hills. "They were great at sending telegrams to each other saying the snow was excellent," smiles Myrtle. I mention this to Doug Bryce, a Glencoe local. He tells me: "Another remarkable thing about Scottish skiing is the working-class background. The original ski tows were largely built by shipyard workers escaping the smoky city for a weekend: The back-to-basics ethos was a direct contrast to what was going on in the Alps."

Doug puts me in touch with John MacLean, former member of the legendary Creag Dhu climber's club. This gnarly gang – known for drinking, brawling and plastering hard lines over crags – built and ran the first permanent ski tows in the Cairngorms. Happily reminiscing, John remembers ski enthusiasts experimenting with tractors and ropes, and a "strong woman" called Molly Porter carrying construction materials up Glencoe on her back. He also remembers enjoying blowing things up for avalanche safety and balancing on pillars in strong winds fixing ropes: "Best 25 years of my life!" But it wasn't until he had kids that John actually tried skiing himself (before that, he called any climbers who skied 'wusses'). What a revelation: "I loved how fast you could go!"

"WHEN PEOPLE DON'T HAVE A HUGE AREA TO PLAY WITH, THEY TRY NEW THINGS, LIKE CRAZIER CHUTES AND JUMPS."

FOUR ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR SCOTTISH SKIING

By Kat Jones, a director of Mountaineering Scotland:

Negotiating bracken fields. There are few Scottish hillsides without thickets of dead bracken waiting to snag your ski tip. Style should go out the window in the interests of self-preservation.

Raging tailwinds. The classic Scottish combo of skiing with a gale-force wind at your rear over wind-scoured ice interspersed with pockets of deep, drifted powder snow means the snow plough is your friend.

Negotiating hidden obstacles. Under every frosty contour is an obstacle waiting to snag your ski while you travel forward with surprising momentum, hoping your ski comes off before your knee dislocates.

Skiing farm tracks. Often the best way up onto the open hill. Keep skis level, imagine floating across the stones that will be poking through. Yes, you can ski right over the muddy cow footprints and tractor tracks, but don't brake or your skis will be scratched to smithereens.





PURE DEAD BRILLIANT

Growing up on a diet of Scottish skiing sounds idyllic. Extreme skier Ross Hewitt dons rose-tinted windproof goggles, and describes winter Sundays at Cairngorm as a kid, playing games like straight-lining down the old speed-skiing route next to the Glas Maol lift, or trying to ski the Tiger run in two or three super-G turns. On clear days, most Brits would argue the Alps have nothing on Scottish light. Ross goes dewy-eyed (admittedly from the safe distance of Chamonix), thinking about the “ever-changing play of light on the landscape, characterised by that unique warm milky light only found in the far north.”

And when you're old enough that your mam can't keep you piste-bound, Pete argues that a small ski area can actually encourage a big adventurous spirit: Squaw Valley in Lake Tahoe, where Shane McConkey lived, has a big reputation for big skiing, yet it's a comparable size to Scotland's Nevis Range ski area. “When people don't have a huge area to play with, they try new things, like crazier chutes and jumps.”

His comment reminds me of Martin Burrows-Smith, the first extreme skier in Scotland, back in the 80s. As a mountain guide at Glenmore Lodge, he was on intimate terms with the Cairngorms. One day, feeling inspired, he dropped into the Grade I climb, Aladdin's Mirror. Reaching the coire floor, he was buzzing about his discovery: a new and exciting way to spend days in the Scottish hills.

And skiing down winter climbs had benefits over ascending them, he recognised: “I could be moving non-stop all day with plenty of adventure, and wasn't the Highlands just covered in worthy and dramatic Grade I and II and even Grade III gullies!” Martin took his skis all over Scotland, increasingly trying to connect steep descents into worthwhile, rhythmical and logical ski tours, and it became a personal obsession to ski every possible line on Ben Nevis.

His story definitely inspired the current generation of freeride skiers, and there are still plenty of cool descents happening in Scotland at the moment. Pete Mackenzie shows me a photo of an amazing line he made the first descent of: Solar Face. In the image, he has jumped over a cornice and is skiing steeply on the way to a 6-metre cliff-huck. He's a tiny dot in a huge mountain scene. Behind him, the mountains look like summer, proving that sometimes hiking up brown valleys does pay off.

“I'VE SKIED IN FARFLUNG PLACES, BUT I'M STILL MOST ENCHANTED BY SCOTLAND.”



SCOTTISH SKIING: WHERE TO START

Coire an-t Schneachda and Ben Macdui

This glacial cirque is a 20-minute hike from the top of the Cairngorm lifts, and when it's good it's very, very good for steep skiing. Rob says he had his best ever ski day here, doing laps on 20cm powder on a spring base. You can also hike from the top of the lifts to the top of Ben Macdui and ski down the second-highest mountain in Britain.

The Nevis Back Corries

After all his research for his guidebooks, Kenny's favourite place in Scotland is still the off-piste Back Corries, accessible from the top of the Nevis Range lift system. Pull along the summit plateau of Aonach Mor for 200m in one direction or a kilometre in another, and it's good almost anywhere you drop. Be warned: some lines are so steep they haven't yet been attempted!

Glencoe ski area

Glencoe ski area is smaller than the Nevis Range, and has a “real ragamuffin feel like a frontier outpost,” says Pete. Expect an array of campervans outside, and Andy Meldrum, the owner, kicking about in the bar in the evening. “It's like a big mountain with world-class terrain, that just happens to be small. There are things to jump off and gullies all within lift-serviced boundaries,” says Pete.

Munros

With their slow and gentle ascents, some of Scotland's Munros lend themselves perfectly to ski touring. “Unlike the Alps, with their impressive in-your-face vertical landscape, the Highlands offer long views over stunning valleys filled with pastel colours,” says Blair.

Gullies

Be prepared to travel at a moment's notice when conditions are good. In a short visit last season, James Thacker and Alison Culshaw ticked No.2 Gully, No.3 Gully, No.5 Gully, South Castle Gully, skied under Little Brenva Face in Coire Leis and skied Observatory Gully. Their tip? “If skiing steep lines, climb up them so you can check the conditions.”

High snow

The higher you go, the more secure the snow is. At the Nevis Range, the summit tow takes you close to the top of Ben Nevis. Likewise the lifts at Cairngorm take you pretty high. However, the weather does tend to be worse higher up!

The high road

“Ben Lawers was one of the first places Scottish skiing gained momentum, because you can drive quite high, and it's still good. Likewise the A9 through Ballater and Braemar round by Aviemore is all high. Aim for one of those areas based on where there's a good forecast and low-lying snow,” says Kenny.

Snow patches

“I have done most of my summer skiing on Ciste Mhearad at Cairngorm,” says Helen. Ben Macdui and Braierach are other prime spots to find snow patches in summer.

📹 Playtime in the Back Corries.



FIVE TIPS: FOR FINDING SCOTTISH SKI HEAVEN

Be as flexible as you can.

If you must pin a week: late February
or early March.

Don't book accommodation.

Or book somewhere central.

The weather passes rapidly over Scotland.

Don't assume just because just because conditions are poor in one place it'll be same elsewhere. If it's not good at Glencoe or the Nevis range, for example, check out conditions at one of the other main resorts: Cairngorm, Lecht and Glenshee.

Check the avalanche forecast

on www.sais.com

Check the Mountain Weather Information System

at www.mwis.com.

Don't rely on reports any further than
2-3 days ahead

Buy Kenny Biggin's off-piste guidebooks:

'The Nevis Range and Ben Nevis' and 'Glencoe' from
www.bmcshop.co.uk

Join the British Backcountry page on Facebook.

It's a hub for sharing photos, condition reports and
general knowledge.

Scottish heaven:
Diagonal Gully in the
Cairngorms.

PHOTO: HAMISH FROST

"SKIING A LINE THAT YOU KNOW REALLY WELL, ALMOST BY BRAILLE IN BAD WEATHER; THERE'S SOMETHING WONDERFUL ABOUT THAT"



Scottish conditions can also be ideal for long, mellow ski tours. Blair Aitken, founder of increasingly popular Facebook page British Backcountry, spent ten years ski coaching in the Alps before moving back to Scotland. He points out, "I was often frustrated when play was stopped at midday in the Alps due to rising temperatures. Usually the snow remains unchanged in Scotland and sport can carry on well into the evening."

Play doesn't even have to stop at the end of the season. After surviving cancer in 2009, Helen Rennie set herself the challenge of skiing Scottish snow every month. She's now achieved that for the past 95. How? Long-lasting snow patches, the closest thing we have to glaciers, are a niche Scottish sub-culture. There has been interest in them for centuries: a patch on Braeriach called the Sphinx has only disappeared six times in the last 300 years.

WHEN IT'S BAD

"I've skied in farflung places, but I'm still most enchanted by Scotland," begins Doug. But I've heard enough about the good days. I know they are very, very good. Now I want to hear about the epics, the bad days, the white-outs. Something about the contrast and tension here seems highly addictive. "What's not to like about Scottish skiing?" I probe. "Oh, rain," says Doug, glumly. "And mud. Heather. Wind. Sausage rolls."

Myrtle explains the character-building benefits of the terrain to me: "I can ski anywhere because I got myself to ski at Glencoe where everything is frightful. If you can ski there, down this sheet ice, down everything that goes wrong with skiing, you can ski anywhere."

It's a good point. Skiing in varied conditions vastly improves technique.

But you don't usually fall in love in order to improve yourself (although this can be a handy by-product!), so why are growing numbers of Brits getting crazy about Scottish skiing? Rob, for example, tells me that Scottish skiing is so demanding that, "You need a flexible working pattern and little other life commitments to make it work", and he isn't the only one building his life around the British backcountry.

Kenny obsessively watches the weather and gets out in the prime windows "After it's snowed and before it melts or rains." Blair describes one of these Scottish weather snatches: "Last winter I skied Scald Law in the Pentland Hills back to the A702 in my suit trousers and shirt, after noticing on the way to work how good it looked. An hour after I left, it was apparently turning green again!" And Jamie Kunka, who makes artisan Scottish skis, tells me that when bad weather lifts, even momentarily revealing a stunning Highland backdrop, he is left "in a state of euphoria".

Pete goes one step further: even managing to find euphoria in the white-outs themselves, arguing that for generations, Highlanders have talked about connection to the land, and skiing is a way to feel that. "Skiing a line that you know really well, almost by braille in bad weather; there's something wonderful about that."

I dig a little. I know he's very loyal but Scottish skiing can't be perfect, right? "If Scottish skiing was a sentient being," he admits, "I guess he or she isn't very nice to us very often!"

"Oh!" I finally get it. "Treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen?"

"There might be an element of that!"





CHOOSING YOUR SKIS

Alison Culshaw, who runs offpiste.org.uk, says: "give careful consideration to the width of ski that you use. I prefer something narrower than I use in the Alps, around 85mm underfoot, far better suited to the Scottish snow conditions, because you don't get that much deep powder so no need for the flotation. Also look for a shorter turn radius. Edges get priority over flotation."



▶ Ross Dunn skis Summit Gully on Aonach Mor.

PHOTO: ROB GREW

▶ THE FUTURE?

We don't know what the future holds for our storm-battered little island, where, as elsewhere, the weather is becoming increasingly erratic. Is Scottish skiing entering its twilight years? Should we savour it while we can? Whatever's on the horizon thinking about how resourceful, forward-thinking, psyched and inclusive the Scottish skiing scene has been since the start, I'm inspired. This coming winter, I'll be more excited than ever about the first British snows: watching the weather over Scotland, poring over Kenny's guidebooks and planning when to head north for a weather snatch. And if the weather gets a bit challenging ... then I've decided you'll find me at home, happily watching another film from underneath my southern duvet. ❄️



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"LAST WINTER I SKIED SCALD LAW IN THE PENTLAND HILLS BACK TO THE A702 IN MY SUIT TROUSERS AND SHIRT, AFTER NOTICING ON THE WAY TO WORK HOW GOOD IT LOOKED." - BLAIR AITKEN

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Want more info – knock yourself out:

www.steeppscotland.com

Scott Muir's authoritative website

www.british-backcountry.com

Blair Aitken offers Scottish ski touring courses

www.offpiste.org.uk

Courses in Scotland as well as the Alps and Norway

www.britishfreeride.co.uk

Not-for-profit founded by Robert Kingsland, which aims to develop British freeriding

www.lonelymountain.ski

Boutique ski-maker based in Dunkeld

www.haggistrap.co.uk

Doug Bryce's enthusiastic blog about Scottish skiing

www.digilbert.co.uk

Ski mountaineering courses and private guiding

www.rosshewitt.net

Aspirant mountain guide and big-mountain skier from Scotland

www.facebook.com/groups/snowpatchesscotland

A rather niche hobby

Myrtle Simpson's 'Skisters'

The definitive history of Scottish skiing