





SKI TOURING ADVENTURES ON THE ICE. By Matthew Flynn

ANTARCTICA

As we made our first anchorage, our guide encouraged us to get our ski gear together quickly for a late afternoon ascent of Banco Island, and our first, warm-up, ski in Antarctica. I looked up at the intended route and thought to myself, this is going to be some challenge. I had joined a four week expedition with the yacht Spirit of Sydney, from Ushuaia, Argentina to the Antarctic Peninsula, for the sailing, kayaking and skiing adventure of a lifetime. Like many, it had been my lifelong dream to visit Antarctica, but, as I looked up the intended first ascent of the snow covered island, I realised I was in for a monster few weeks.

There were nine of us on the boat, an aluminium yacht which has been to Antarctica many times. We were looked after by two outstanding Australian crew, Matt (the skipper) and Meg (second mate). They skippered us for five days across the Drake Passage, notorious for being one of the roughest parts of the Southern Ocean. Our landfall had been Anvers Island, a substantial mountain range forming part of the Antarctic Peninsula. It was late November, so there were 24 hours of daylight. On this particular trip the focus was on ski touring, and specialist Antarctic guide Phil Wickens, from the UK, would lead us over the next weeks.

There were four of us onboard who would form the ski touring party. On our approach to Antarctica, Phil had identified a number of peaks and mountain ranges he thought we would like to explore, many of which had never been explored before. The trouble was that although I was an experienced sailor, I had no particular experience of alpine conditions or the long days of ski touring, climbing and camping. Now I was about to experience this in one of the most inhospitable and remote areas on the planet. Some place to learn.

When I signed up for the expedition last July I considered myself to be an intermediate skier, having skied in New Zealand and in several places in Europe. I was reasonably comfortable about going down, but not so sure about skiing uphill or getting my way out of a crevasse. Cath and Darryl, who own the Spirit of Sydney, very sensibly suggested before the trip that some New Zealand based winter training might make it more enjoyable. They could not have been more right.

So, I made some enquiries and was delighted to link up with Alpine Recreation at Lake Tekapo. They clearly had a good idea of what I needed to learn, so I booked two one-on-one courses with Elke Braun-Elwert, a professional mountain guide whose family have owned Alpine Recreation for a number of years. The intention was to brush up my off-piste skiing skills, learn ski touring techniques and then, on the second course, learn crevasse rescue techniques together with some basic alpine skills such as roping up, arresting falls, avalanche assessment and overnight camping.

Elke sent a very detailed list of gear, most of which I did not have. The most important requirement was to get some good ski touring skis, boots, poles

and skins. The team at Gnomes in Darfield did a fantastic job of equipping me with the latest set of touring boots and skis from Dynafit, which proved fantastic for the job. The gear was lightweight, and suitable for both uphill and downhill skiing. The staff there spent quite some time on my boots, making them just right. As I had limited time, it was critical that these were comfortable; there are no places to fit boots in Antarctica.

I bought some good, lightweight Gortex outerwear, a range of mid layer and merino base layers, a down jacket and a couple of really warm hats. Having done my research about backcountry skiing, the key balance would be to be able to adjust between getting warm from the high work rate going uphill, and cold on the more chilling experience downhill. It was useful to have a chance to try all the gear combinations out before I got to Antarctica. I also purchased a down sleeping bag, which became an oasis of warmth in the freezing temperatures, both at sea and on the snow.

Elke loaned me an excellent book "Back Country Skiing Skills for Ski Touring and Ski Mountaineering" by the American Mountain Guides Association, which was a valuable resource. However there was nothing better than putting the skis on, loading up the pack and hitting the slopes near Mt Dobson with Elke. We had fantastic conditions for the course, using Alpine Recreation's hut on the Two Thumb Range as our base for some intensive training. Her expertise was immediately apparent as she took me through the best ways to use my new equipment, look after the gear, travel uphill and be safe. I will never forget the first time I had skins on and we started moving uphill. Ski touring is all about efficiency of movement and using your energy wisely. Once you get to the top of the hill, then its skins off and the chance to enjoy skiing down, often on long runs where no-one has skied before. It can be tough going at times, and you have to stop thinking about chairlifts!

The second course concentrated on crevasse rescue technique. There are different ways of doing this, but Elke had consulted with Phil to make sure I had a good understanding of what he would expect me to know when I got to Antarctica. On the second day of our training, Elke bravely disappeared down a slope at the end of a rope, leaving me to then rescue her myself. For me there were new knots to learn, rope techniques, the proper use of ice axes, prusiks, and snow anchors, which left me reeling with so much new information. At the end of a few days training I did feel I had upskilled and as I found out, everything was directly relevant to the climbing and touring we would do in Antarctica.

Still, I looked up that first Antarctic slope with considerable trepidation. Landing ashore in Antarctica is tricky, and involves a scramble from the Zodiac carrying all of your gear. The first ascent was up through a steep, iced, narrow valley. I must say I was very relieved to get to the top and look down back over Antarctica. It was truly spectacular, with not a cloud in sight, and hundreds of icebergs in the bays and the surrounding area. It



was the first time the four of us had roped up together, and it was immediately obvious we were all going to get on really well. Phil had significant experience in Antarctica, which is necessary to venture into the remote areas. Glen, like myself, was in the over fifty club, an experienced climber with extensive expedition experience, but he was also relatively new to ski touring. Sean, a young American, was simply a great skier and young enough to know no fear. I survived that first ascent and realised how essential crampons are. I was also glad I had spent some time doing the hills with a heavy pack and my boots on during the winter in Auckland, burning off some of the office worker excess.

Over the next few days we explored various peaks. We would look for a route up avoiding crevasses, which might take several hours, then have a rest at the top before skiing back down the same way we had come up. Some of our tours were over 2500m, much higher than I had expected. One of the best tips Elke gave me was to follow the guide down. Sure enough, Phil always found a good route and in an area like this, without much experience, it was the most enjoyable way to ski. We mostly skied on large glaciers and slopes which had never been skied before. The sense of just the four of us being so alone in this environment was quite overwhelming.

It can be quietest place you could imagine. There is nothing to smell, and it is an area so vast and inhospitable that to the inexperienced alpinist there was an underlying sense of tension. This is no doubt a good thing, as you need to be very careful. There is no-one to help you out there, so preparation, gear and the experience of Phil were all crucial.

On some occasions we put all our overnight gear (including tents, sleeping bags and food) onto sledges, which we towed behind us. We would travel up a glacier for a number of hours, then set up a camp and use that as a base to ski other slopes and peaks in the area. We climbed peaks that

have never climbed before and sadly I forgot to bring my NZ flag, so they were claimed for the USA and the UK instead. I will not make that mistake again. The others taught me all sorts of cool tips and techniques to enjoy camping in such conditions. It was definitely cold, but the snow is very dry and there is almost no humidity, so it is an invigorating place to be. Boiling up ice from the glaciers is a necessity, and it must be some of purest water on the planet.

The weather was so good, we just kept on going day after day and we enjoyed some fantastic downhill ski runs. It got to the point where I was actually hoping for a day of bad weather so we could simply rest up on the boat, but that was not to be. The others back on the yacht spent more time kayaking and sightseeing, having dropped us off at various locations, so it was nice to meet up with them after a few days ashore and enjoy each other's company again on the yacht.

Ski touring is a fantastic way to get off the beaten track, and to enjoy some really memorable skiing and climbing. Choosing Antarctica as the first place to really experience this was reasonably ambitious, but the training from Elke was absolutely first class. Without that, I think it would have been more of an intimidating prospect than it was. As it was there were a few times when, high up on a slope, roped up and looking down at nothing but 2000 metres of snow to the frozen Antarctic waters, I felt a few shivers down my spine.

At the end of the trip I asked Phil where our adventures stood in terms of ski touring in the area. He replied that what we had done was up near the top, so we had extended ourselves and gone into some amazing and challenging areas. Antarctica was an incredible place to visit. I am looking forward to doing more ski touring around the world, but expect it will be difficult to surpass this experience.