A Short Ski in the Eastern Pyrenees – March 1986

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The Peugeot clattered up the steep twisting road sounding more like a Norwegian fishing boat than a 305 Diesel Estate. Behind, a well-used Citroen Visa strained on its 1100cc to draw its occupants up the hill and maintain some sort of station on us ahead. There were seven of us including Molly, my wife, and François, a French friend, who were to return to Quillan with the cars once we had been dropped off. The four Norwegians had arrived a couple of days before at Toulouse, having visibly much enjoyed the Côtes du Roussillon on the Air France flight from Paris. They had come down to the Pyrenees for a short seven-day ski tour which I had pieced together over the previous 12 months.

Almost exactly a year before three of us had been in a more remote wilderness in the MacKenzie Mountains of the Yukon (*AJ91*, 120–121, 1986). But, although this part of the Pyrenees is far from remote, it is quick to transit through the scar of capitalist decadence of downtown Andorra and find oneself in wild and empty mountain country. As we clattered up the road that sunny frosty morning it wasn't difficult to notice that the snow that had been here at Christmas was nowhere to be seen.

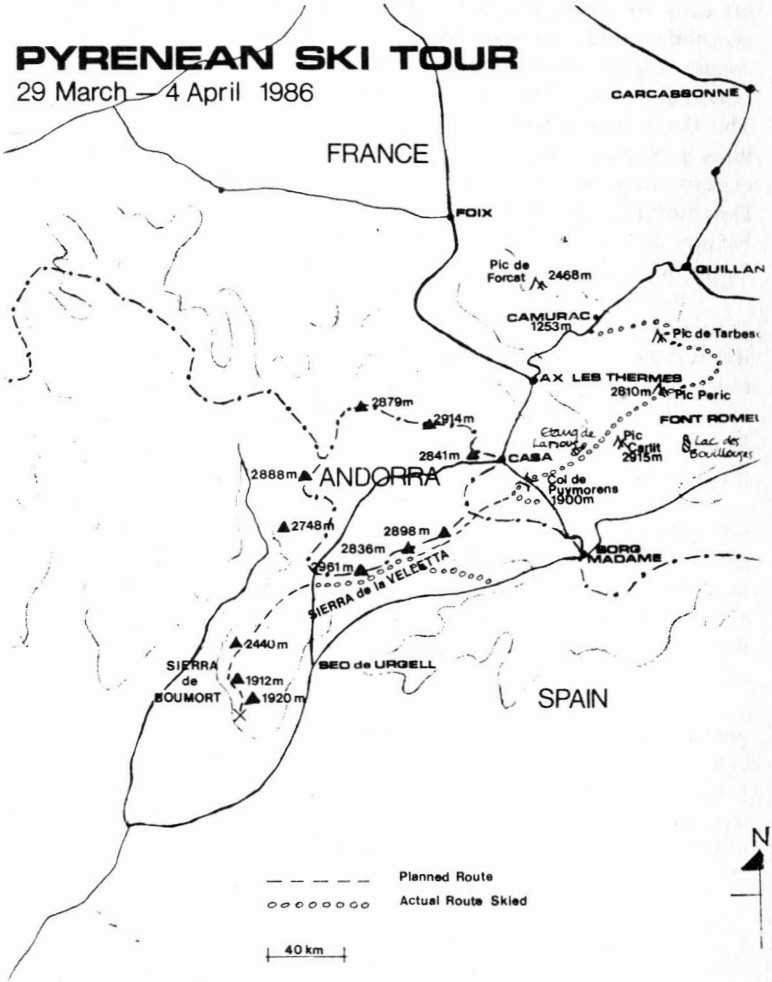
'There's a lot more height to gain – there's sure to be some snow round the corner on the northern side,' I said without the slightest confidence.

Molly sensed my agitation. 'You must convince the Norwegians, not me, darling!' she replied candidly.

There was not a single glistening snow crystal to be seen in the sharp early morning sun as we pulled up into our planned drop-off place, 1800m up on the S side of the Sierra de Boumort, some 60km south-west of Seo d'Urgell. I feared the reaction of my Norwegian chums who had come a long way for this trip. But I had no reason to, because a five-minute soviet poring over a map spread over the bonnet of the car produced the answer.

We returned to Seo d'Urgell and drove to Arcabell, 1142m up on the Spanish side of the Andorran frontier. A short burst on foot for an hour soon found us on snow, and we were away to follow the frontier ridge over Pic Negre (2602m) and Pic Mounturall (2761m). There the steep interconnecting ridge to Pic Perafita (2756m) forced us down into the cwm to the Etangs de la Pera where we had lunch. It was an exhilarating descent; the snow had been perfect and we had made good progress. We camped high and just below Pic des Estanyons (2836m), feeling the exertions of a long day unused to the thinner air.

The fickleness of that winter's precipitation in this part of the Pyrenees revealed itself for the second time the next morning. As we topped Pic des Estanyons and ski'd down towards the Portella de Setut, the snow ran out and



there was virtually no cover over on the Pic de la Portelleta (2898m), where the frontier turned northwards. The decision was made for us; we had to descend south and walk round towards Borg Madame and get up to Porta, near the Col de Puymorens to continue the line. Our frustration was heightened when we were stopped by guntoting Spanish border police in the most unexpected place. '*Rien à déclarer. Pas de problème!*'

The next morning, after camping on the outskirts of Puymorens, we were off early to escape the hurly-burly, cacophony and litter of thousands of downhillers and were soon back in the wilderness and on our own again. A couple of hours saw us on the Col de Lanous (2468m), the bulk of Pic Carlit (2921m) looming above us, and a wonderful descent to the Etang de Lanous. The dam at its southern end stood clear and our own experience of controlled lakes in Norway told us to keep off the ice and take the longer way round its eastern shore before traversing up to the Porteille de la Grave (2420m). Descending, steep at first then easing to that angle where one is able to maintain balance and control without reducing speed, we dropped into the Val de la Grave, where we camped beside a trickle of a stream.

It snowed during the night, but the dawn was cold and clear, the fifth day of sunny weather! Our progress up the slopes to the Etang de la Llose (2238m) was watched by a couple of French Army helicopters which then buzzed off to touch-point landings on the ridge of Pic Peric far above. Otherwise we were alone all day, through terrain similar and reminiscent of parts of Sjødalen in the Jotunheim of Norway, to skirt the slopes of Pic de Terres (2540m) and drop into the top of the Val de Galbe.

The Porteille de Laurenti (2410m) was too steep on its N side to descend without ice-axes, so we traversed down into the Val and camped early in warm sunshine. A steep climb the next morning, through forest initially and then open mountain, took us straight across the top of the ski-runs of Puyvaledor with the noise and evident rubbish of the downhilling fraternity. We were glad to see them, and the scar that their sport inflicted on this beautiful place, well behind us.

That night we were in idyllic meadow under Pic de Tarbesou (2340m), with a black sky rumbling up from the west. It passed during the night, leaving behind a sharp frost, a dusting of snow and a clear dawn. The descent from the Col du Pelèheres to Camurac (1500m) went far beyond what we expected for a wonderful last day. A telephone call and two litres of wine later, Molly arrived to whisk us down to Quillan and huge eats.

180km Nordic Ski Tour 23–30 March 1986, Arcabell (Spain) to Camurac.

Members of the Party: Guy Sheridan, Erik Boehlke, Dag Dawes, Torbjorn Eggen and his son Kyrre, aged 17.

MAPS

IGN Mont Louis 1:50,000, Ax les Thermes 1:50,000, Fontargente 1:50,000, Editorial Alpina, Andorra and S Joán de L'Eran 1:40,000.