



IBSC Steep Skiing Guidelines

IBSC trips can involve 'steep skiing' - lines on gullies or faces typically over 30 degrees. On most trips selecting a steep line is optional, with other less steep options available as well. On some trips, such as to Ben Nevis or the back corries of Anoch Mor, steep skiing is the main purpose of the trip and there may be no easier alternatives.

Steep skiing is a lot of fun and a real Scottish speciality, but its more risky than regular touring, with difficult starts, heightened risk of avalanche, rock fall and the possibility of slips turning into falls over rocks and cliffs. Following these guidelines will help minimise the risk whilst still enjoying what the steeps have to offer.

These guidelines apply to all members. Inexperienced members should use them to help decide if they have the right skills and ability for steep skiing in general or a particular steep line. Experienced steep skiers should use them to help plan and manage steep skiing excursions on club trips.



Be aware of your personal responsibilities. The club does not typically use guides on our Scottish trips. Experienced members can help the less experienced by sharing knowledge and experience, and offering encouragement and advice to help other members build confidence and push their ability – this is an important part of being in the club. But they are not guides and at the end of the day ***it is each members individual responsibility to make sure they have the ability, skills and equipment to get up and down a steep line safely.*** If you are not confident you can manage, then go with a group skiing an easier line. Experienced members must be careful not to encourage the less experienced to go beyond what they can reasonably manage or for group peer pressure to lead someone to attempt a line well beyond their ability.

Assess the avalanche risk. Steep lines are often prime avalanche territory and some of the most popular steep lines are also where the biggest, most frequent, avalanches occur in Scotland. Careful assessment of the risk before setting out, on the approach and before committing to the line is necessary. Use the '[Be Avalanche Aware](#)' guidance, but also be aware this is aimed mainly at walkers and climbers and as skiers you may need to go further in your assessment and management of the hazard. Conducting stability tests may be more necessary. Cornices present particular challenges – they must be approached with great care from above or below in case of collapse. The scarp slope immediately below a cornice is often one of the most unstable parts of a fresh snowpack. It is also exactly where skiers land when dropping in: prime ingredients for triggering an avalanche. Spring is often the favoured season for steep skiing as the snowpack is usually very stable, but watch out for thawing conditions leading to the risk of devastating full depth avalanches when the whole gully may slide or huge cornices collapse.

Make a plan. Before setting out for the day there should be a clear discussion about the objectives, the risks involved and how you will work and communicate as a team on the mountain. Identify 'no fall' and 'no stop' zones of particular risk. Hazards such as rock fall or cornice collapse need to be considered. Try to avoid bunching too many people onto the same route or line and limit the size of any team to no more than 6 and keep the team well-spaced out when on a climb up a gully. Identify possible escape routes.

Choose an appropriate objective. When starting out, its better to develop your skills and experience progressively. Less steep slopes, wider gullies and faces are easier and shorter lines less intimidating. You should definitely avoid lines with 'no fall' zones where a fall might cause you to go over a cliff or rocks. It's easy to get in over your head and become 'crag fast' if you are new to steep skiing or still building your experience, so listen carefully to the advice of more experienced members and what they might suggest is suitable for you. If you lack experience or confidence making quick turns on steep slopes then consider getting specific steep skiing instruction or lessons with a qualified instructor or guide – the club offers off-piste technique ski training with qualified BASI Level 4 instructors each season.

Assess the snow conditions carefully. You must also be able to assess the snow conditions on the line – not just because of avalanche hazard, but because this will dramatically influence how safe (and enjoyable) it will be to ski – spring snow is very forgiving, whereas ice can be lethal as can a breakable crust. One of the best ways to do this is to make your route of ascent the line of descent. This will give you the chance to assess snow conditions close up and spot any ice. If you can't do this, then you will need to assess from above before committing to the line and you will have to gauge the risk of their being ice lower down the line out of sight.



Have good communications. Steep skiing is one activity that benefits from clear comms and VHF radios are an essential tool – they let you confirm when a line is clear of climbers and for people to watch out for one another. The club has 4 x VHF radios available for member use and these should be taken if steep skiing is planned.

Work as a team. Comms is not just about radios though – being open and communicative is more important. All members of a party need to tell others how they are getting on or if they see a risk or problem. And if someone raises a concern – listen to them and have a chat about it with the whole team - don't just dismiss it. Don't leave inexperienced members to go last.

Learn mountaineering skills. Accessing steep lines often mean climbing up steep snow or icy slopes (sometimes also referred to 'boot-packing',

which can make it sound less serious than it is) and many classic steep lines are in fact classed as 'Grade I' winter climbs. Knowing how to move securely on steep snow using boots, crampons and ice axe is essential as well as how to use an axe to chop a stance or arrest a slide. Its easier to learn these mountaineering skills and become more confident without having skis strapped to your back high on the very steep exposed ground of one of the Ben Nevis

gulleys. Being able to safely get your crampons off and your skis on (and *vice-versa*) is a key skill that should be practiced/rehearsed beforehand as it can be challenging on steep ground.

Use the right kit. Helmets, an ice axe (or two) and properly fitted boot crampons are essential. Ski boots should have a proper Vibram-type sole. Avalanche safety kit (transceiver shovel & probe) should also be carried. Ski poles should be non-telescopic or locked solid if not. Bindings should be at the right settings. The use of leashes (which attach the ski to your boot) may can be considered to prevent loss of a ski, but this needs to be balanced against the serious risk of being injured by the ski itself during a fall. Your rucksack needs to be able to securely carry your skis or board and perhaps use an ABS bag if you have one. A pair of lightweight binoculars can be handy to have in the party to help assess lines.

Consider bringing a rope. Steep skiers in Europe and guides would carry a rope as a matter of course. Having a rope available for *unplanned* 'just in case' use – and the knowledge how to use it effectively – can be a huge help if someone gets stuck after a bad drop in, loses a ski in a fall or becomes intimidated trying to climb out the steep headwall of a gully where the snow can become nearly vertical. The confidence offered by a rope from above can make all the difference. Knowing what type and length of rope to carry and how to use it safely and effectively requires experience, skill and judgement. Learning how to construct snow anchors and manage cornice approaches, lower-offs or short abseils needs to be trained and practiced and can be



Selection of kit for steep skiing: helmet, ice axe & crampons. 30m static rope, screwgate carabiner & sling. VHF radios & lightweight harness

learned on winter mountaineering or dedicated steep skiing courses. If you lack these skills and knowledge, then bringing a rope will be of little use and may give a false sense of security – better to leave the rope and go ski an easier line.

If you are *planning* to use ropes, either for the climb up or perhaps a long abseil to access the route or overcome known rock or ice pitches lower down the line, then this requires dedicated climbing skills and knowledge. It would typically mean taking longer, dynamic ropes, harnesses and a winter climbing 'rack'. Planned use of the rope is firmly in the realm of ski mountaineering and

for experienced climbers only. For a demonstration of what can be involved, see these videos by Petzl: <https://www.petzl.com/GB/en/Sport/News/2019-2-6/How-to-use-your-rope-when-skiing-the-steeps>

Consider wearing a harness. For the most serious steep skiing, wearing a lightweight harness and carrying a couple of ice screws may be wise if the line turns out to be too icy to ski safely – again this is normal practice in Europe. This will allow you to secure yourself whilst you get skis off, crampons on and climb back out to safety. If you are planning to use a rope for access then you will need a harness and other climbing gear. For a demonstration, see this video by Petzl: <https://www.petzl.com/GB/en/Sport/How-to-switch-from-skis-to-crampons-on-a-slope?ActivityName=Ski-touring>

