



Warming up for winter  
above Cwm Bochlwyd,  
Tryfan behind.

# THERE'S SNOW GOING BACK

Words  
**Phoebe Smith**  
Photographs  
**Tom Bailey**

Think that only beginners need to practise their winter skills? Think again. Every year mountain instructors hit the hills to sharpen theirs, and if you do it too you can achieve more this winter than you ever thought possible...



Taking the lead: Phoebe guides the party up the Pyg Track.

NO-one would ever consider me a forgetful person. Ask me to name the first trig point I ever stood on\* and I'd tell you without struggling. Question me further on how old I was when I did it and I'd answer without so much as a pause for thought. So why was it that standing on the snow-covered banks above Llyn Bochlywyd, when mountain instructor Rob Johnson told me it was time to put my crampons on, I could not for the life of me recall whether the strap went over or under the toe clamp. Thing is, I only learnt how to do this 12 months ago, rather than 23 years in the dim and distant past (\*it was Bryn Euryn, by the way, and I was 6).

Last winter, after completing my winter skills course at Glenmore Lodge, I had finished my training by practically dancing down a Grade 1 winter gully – yet now I was struggling to remember how to even get them on properly.

"This is why it's so

important to refresh your skills before you head out to the hills in winter conditions," said Rob as he reached down and began to lace the crampon strap around my boot as naturally as if tying a shoe lace. "You'll find that most instructors do it at the start of every season. We need to make sure that our skills are at the top of their game – so that self arrest and kicking steps becomes a process that you don't even think about – it's second nature. Practising them at the start of the season means that when the full-on winter conditions present themselves you can get out there, challenge yourself and have an amazing mountain experience."

And that's why we were in the Ogwen Valley now, searching for some proper white stuff to help me tune back in to winter hills so that I could take a group up Snowdon the following day – my first ever winter lead. I have to admit I thought it seemed a little ambitious, especially as,

before I came on this trip, I'd had to take a cursory glance at an old copy of **Trail** to remind myself how to hold an ice axe.

"When you first learn the basic skills it's great for your confidence, and you leave looking forward to all the winter adventures that await," continued Rob as the snow deepened underfoot. "But then the snow melts, winter is over for another year, and you don't so much as look at a crampon or ice axe again. So when you do it's only natural that you'll need to remind yourself of the skills you learnt. You still know them, I assure you, but you need to jog your memory – and the best way of doing it is not sitting at home but out on the hills, once the first snow has fallen."

It was reassuring to hear that even people as qualified as Rob do a refresher each year, and I was relieved to see that Simon (who has a good number of winters behind him) was also taking time to find his feet again. So feeling more like a professional



## SHARPEN YOUR WINTER SKILLS

"I would encourage everyone to practise their skills at the start of the season," says Rob Johnson MIC of Expedition Guides. "It need only be an hour or so, but it will be good fun and time well spent when you are out there using them for real. If you can spare a full day and teach a friend then all the better – the transfer of knowledge will help you revise as you pass the skills on to someone else who will benefit from them."



## KICKING STEPS

**We know that...** to kick steps you stand side on to the slope, and swing your uphill leg from the knee to use the edge of your boot like a saw to cut a mini platform in the snow.

**But did you know...** you should learn how to kick just enough. You don't need to bury your boot each time. Find out how little you can get

away with, to save energy and be efficient while staying safe.

**We know that...** heel plunge steps can be used when descending a slope: keeping your knees slightly bent and toes up you use your body weight to plunge yourself down into the snow; meanwhile pigeon-hole steps help you ascend by kicking a step directly in front of you to create a downward-angled platform.

**But did you know...** if you practise reading the snow you can predict when it will be soft enough for heel plunges and when it's going to be hard, requiring flat-footing in crampons (and putting them on at the right time).



### Stay slick!

Make sure you keep your gear organised to walk efficiently. Have a snack in your pocket and a hat and gloves in your top pocket so you can do things on the move. And keep an eye out for the 'Can't Be Bothered Factor' – as soon as you find yourself saying this, about eating or putting a layer on, you need to ensure you act as this is a sign of hypothermia.

sharpening my knowledge than a novice taking two steps backwards, and with crampons attached and confidence boosted, I began going over the basics of cutting steps, front pointing and reacquainting myself with the joys of ice axe self arrests.

The great thing about winter skills is that using them out on the snow makes sense and you find yourself getting back into the swing of things quickly. It doesn't take long before you realise that having confidence in your footwork is directly linked to the quality of platform you've kicked out of the snow. It soon becomes obvious that balance is greatly enhanced by a well-placed ice axe; and so on...

As the clouds swirled casting a purple hue on the

sugar-coated cracks and crevices on Tryfan, I tried my final self arrest. The snow was much harder and more slippery than that of the slopes I had learned this on up in Scotland, and I realised how much force I had to apply to bring myself to a halt.

"That's another reason why a refresher is vital," explained Rob as I shook the snow from under my helmet and we began our retreat. "Snow conditions can vary dramatically, so the more experience you get walking on different terrain, the better prepared you'll be for whatever the season throws at you."

Despite my initial worry I left that day feeling prepared for our trip tomorrow when I would, hopefully, lead us up Snowdon.



Well and truly above the snow line on Snowdon's Pyg Track.



## USING YOUR ICE AXE

**We know that...** you hold your ice axe in your uphill hand with the pick facing backwards, your thumb and forefinger around the adze and your middle finger running down the shaft.

**But did you know...** you should practise so that the motion of transferring your axe from one hand to the other becomes second nature as you change direction. Kick your feet into the snow so that they are solid, change the axe into the other hand, and away you go again. The more you do it, the more fluid the motion will become.

## SELF ARREST

**We know that...** when you self arrest your uphill hand stays on the axe head with the pick facing outwards and the adze tucked in to your shoulder, and the other hand goes on the spike at the bottom; then when you slide you push the pick into the snow and lean your body weight over onto it.

**But did you know...** as a worst-case scenario skill you need to practise it each season so that it becomes an instant reaction to any fall. Always practise without crampons and in a place with a safe-run out; but then, as you start to get better again, allow yourself to gather more momentum.





Breaking trail: the snow deepens and the footsteps vanish as Phoebe leads higher up Wales' highest.



Topping out on the windy col at Bwlch Glas.

### Crampons on?

Make sure you find a safe place to stop to put on your crampons. If you're on a steep slope you'll need to stomp or cut yourself a platform to stand on and also one for your rucksack. A good tip is to drive your ice axe shaft through the top loop of your pack – you'll still be able to access all the compartments and use the axe to steady yourself when putting on your crampons.

The day started with a sleety rain which, as I studied the map under Rob's watchful eye, was hammering down persistently on our hoods. The night before, I had used the weather reports to check the snow conditions from the previous week, checking wind direction and noting where the snow had been falling and therefore accumulating so that I could build up a picture of the safety of the snowpack we'd be walking on. So, although it was unfortunately wet, my research told me what to expect and now I could head out and see if the reality matched my predictions. I'd already had to change our approach from the south ridge to the westerly Pyg Track to avoid some severe winds that would be gusting later that morning, and with my plans now firm I led the way along the faint indentation of the track, only visible because of a smattering of sludge from the footsteps of walkers up here on a previous day.

I had chosen Snowdon because it was a mountain I was familiar with, having walked up it before without snow, so I felt most confident about my prospects. On this track we'd have the least amount of ascent and therefore be up to the summit fastest – something some people may sneer at in summer, but it still presents a suitable challenge once snow is in the equation and daylight is at a premium.

"Remember the key things about navigation," said Rob, as the bootprints started to thin. "Ask yourself the five questions: where am I now, where do I want to get to, how will I know when I'm there, what will I see along the way, and what will I see if I've gone too far? If you can answer those then you are not lost."

Mentally ticking off the five answers, I made my first landmark the crossroads between the Pyg Track and Crib Goch, worked out roughly how long it should take and set off, taking my place at the head of the party.

When you're someone who in winter is used to trailing behind, walking at the front can feel like a very novel experience. The exhilaration that comes from calling the shots is genuinely very exciting.

"How long till we get to the crossroads between Crib Goch and the Pyg Track?" asked Simon, grinning. I could tell he knew the answer as he said it.

Leading a party made up of people whose winter hill experience far outweighed mine was both reassuring and stressful at the same time. While I knew that safety-wise no-one was going to let me walk off the edge of a cliff, I felt the pressure of performing well as they would know when I made a mistake.

I knew from looking at the map that we were about 20 minutes away – not because we were actually that far from it, but more from the fact that in the current snowy conditions our progress had been slower than would otherwise have been the case. I was so desperate to declare it confidently but found it hard – not wanting to commit in front of someone who knew the right answer.

"Never be worried about committing yourself and being wrong," said Rob. "Good navigation is all about constantly readjusting your timing based on how fast the group is moving, the weather conditions and so on."

With that I gave my answer assertively and we carried on, our progress made ever harder by the deepening snow, legs sinking knee-deep on every step.

Finally the still surface of Llyn Llydaw was visible below us through the mist. The sign for Crib Goch confirmed that I had made my first navigation point – and in the time I had predicted. I felt elated, and with my confidence boosted I continued on.

"Look at that slope ahead and tell me what you see," said Rob as folds of white seemed to sag and criss-cross on the route ahead. It looked like a mini avalanche, heaped up in intricate patterns on the slopes.

"Leading in winter means constantly assessing the mountains for the conditions once you're out as well as before you go," said Rob. "You need to ask yourself if the snow is where you expected it to be. Is the wind doing what you expected? Is the temperature what you

## USE YOUR CRAMPONS



**We know that...** you 'front point' by sticking the two front points of the crampon hard in the snow, 'flat-foot' by keeping every point of the crampon in firm contact with the ground (rolling your foot rather than lifting it to walk sideways up the hill) and 'hybrid' by front pointing with one foot and flat footing with the other.

**But did you know...** you can get more efficient at fitting crampons to your boots by practising putting them with thick gloves – this keeps your fingers toasty and is a good next step skill. You should also spend time getting confident walking in them. Practise in your back garden or on an area covered in gravel to hone the wide-legged gait required. A sure sign of being good in crampons is the ability to dance without putting holes in your new trousers!



**We know that...** you can dig a block test in the snow to assess the avalanche risk which, by looking at the different layers that have formed and testing them to see how well bonded they are, you can use to assess the stability of the snowpack on the hill.

**But did you know...** if you use the avalanche forecast and weather reports before you go, you can build up a picture of the conditions in the mountains over the previous week to help you understand what type of snow will have accumulated. It's always useful if you can go out and identify the various snow types you forecast, without putting yourself in harm's way.



Don't miss Trail's guide to mountaineering and winter skills – FREE with the February issue – out 22 December!

## PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

### Night fears...

Walking in winter means being prepared for it to get dark early. Chances are you will get caught out even if just for the last half hour of your day, so practise walking and navigating at night with your headtorch so that if it happens you won't panic.

Heading up the snow-covered zigzags.

expected it to be? Remember the avalanche triangle – snow, terrain and weather – all work to create the right conditions for avalanche, and changes in any part of these affect the rest of the day."

Looking at this now, the slope that it was on tallied with what I had researched before: snow had accumulated here because of the wind direction over the past few days. There were also cornices (snow overhangs) well above on Crib Goch, which had come loose – something to bear in mind when climbing out of the col at Bwlch Glas later. With this thought I continued once more, happy that my expectations were being met, and on the lookout for further clues of avalanche conditions.

I was now well and truly breaking trail: each footstep forward was mine alone, dictated by no-one but me, creating fresh steps in the pristine snow. Despite the cold wind I felt like I was burning up in my waterproof, the sweat dripping down my back and running down my face. I knew from experience that moving quickly is not a good thing in winter as if you sweat a lot you can get very cold later, so I slowed my walk to an 'Alpine plod' to try to ease the problem. Stealing a glance back the others I noticed that this seemed a welcome reprieve, and I gave myself a mental pat on the back.

Though still smothered in fog, the edges of Glaslyn began to appear as a thin black line almost

pencilled onto the white paper-like landscape. The ascent ahead was steeper and, as we reached the almost camouflaged marker post where the Pyg and Miners' Tracks meet, I decided to call a snack stop, which was greeted with relief. Battling through snow had taken its toll, and I devoured my cereal bar with the biting rain stinging my face.

"Right: let's carry on, guys!" I soon shouted to Rob, Simon and Tom, and set off up the steepening terrain. The higher I climbed the more I noticed I was needing to use my boots to kick steps, and I decided it was time to swap my walking poles for an ice axe.

"I think this is a good point to stash our poles and get our axes out," I said, as we helped each other wrestle with the straps on our packs.

I looked down at the map again to check our progress, and compared that to the prediction I had made with timings. We were going slower than I had thought – courtesy of the foul weather and deep snow – so I adjusted my estimated summit time, and then carried on.

The weather was getting worse, so I was relieved to see the tracing of the zigzags, indicating we were nearing the col. "Nearly at Bwlch Glas – no more than 10 minutes till we get up there!"

Sure enough we soon emerged onto the windy ridge, the railway tracks cutting through the blanket of white that caked the ground. ▶



## TAKETHE NEXT STEP!

Make this winter the one where you achieve a new walking goal – no matter what your level...

### Comfortable DOING A GRADE I SCRAMBLE?

Then this winter why not try combining your winter skills with your love of ridges by trying winter mountaineering. You could look at routes like the Carn Mor Dearg Arête on Ben Nevis or a winter traverse of the north ridge of Tryfan in north Wales. Make sure you are good on your feet in crampons though first!

### Comfortable DOING GRADE 3 SCRAMBLES?

Then this winter why not try some winter mountaineering on Grade II and III ground. You can go on a course to learn the additional skills to look after yourself on routes like Curved Ridge and the Aonach Eagach in Glen Coe. All of your summer skills are transferable; you just need to learn how to use winter-specific protection, increase your navigation and route-finding skills, improve your avalanche avoidance knowledge, learn some movement skills on snow and ice, and know how to climb on mixed ground in crampons.

### Comfortable LEADING IN SUMMER?

Then this winter why not try a 'Learn to Lead' winter climbing course. You will be taught skills like avalanche risk assessment, stance management, route-finding, belaying from above and below in winter, winter climbing-specific protection, abseiling in winter, winter specific anchors, movement skills on ice and mixed climbs, psychological strategies and cold-weather injuries and avoidance.

### Comfortable MULTI-DAY BACKPACKING?

Then this winter why not try a multi-day journey using snowholes and mountain bothies. Use your winter skills to plan an avalanche-safe route and then be flexible to react to changing conditions. Reduce the length of your days to allow for less daylight, more weight and slower going in the snow. Make sure your navigation skills are up to scratch to navigate in white-outs or darkness on featureless ground.

### Comfortable ON SNOW-FREE HILLS?

Then this winter why not try signing up for a winter skills course. It won't be long before you feel confident enough to head out on the snowy peaks – plus it's really good fun!



Taking time out to celebrate a job well done at Snowdon's ice-covered summit café, Hafod Eryri.

The shelter that both Crib Goch and Garnedd Ugain had provided on the way up was now missing, and we battled against an icy wind at a painstakingly slow pace towards the summit cairn. It was impossible to hold a conversation as any words were lost before they could reach their intended recipient. The sleet that fell up here felt like pinpricks on my face and it was a case of knuckling down until finally the summit cairn emerged, frozen in an ice capsule, sparkling despite the grey sky.

"Well done, Phoebe – you did it!" shouted Rob as the four of us huddled together on top of Wales' highest mountain. Minutes later we took refuge by the café, its stone walls providing a much-needed windbreak. Two other hill-walkers joined us and began speaking to Rob. "So where did you come up from?" asked one of them. "What were the conditions like?" piped the other. "We came up the Pyg Track," answered Rob, describing the ascent to the inquisitive pair. "But it wasn't me who brought us here – Phoebe led us today," he added, and I felt my cheeks flush with pride.

"Crampons on," I said as I began to attach mine to my boots with ease. You'd never guess I'd been struggling to remember how to do it just 24 hours earlier; that refresher had undoubtedly paid off.

With the wind getting stronger the sensible option was to retrace our steps, so I took us back to Bwlch Glas. On the way up, from below, I noticed that a cornice had formed, so when descending Rob went first,

facing the slope, the rest of us following.

Back on the Pyg Track and now sheltered from the wind again, I began to lead us down, keeping an eye on the snow conditions. As the weather warmed up on the descent, we treated the slopes with a renewed caution.

Though leading demands that you remain aware of your surroundings and conditions at all times, you should not forget the reason why you head outside in the winter. "Remember to have fun," said Rob as we left the Pyg Track and joined the Miners' Path, which would take us easily back to the car. "It's obviously important to plan ahead, keep aware and remain flexible in case conditions change – but don't forget, winter is a magical time of year, so no matter what you do just enjoy getting out there!"

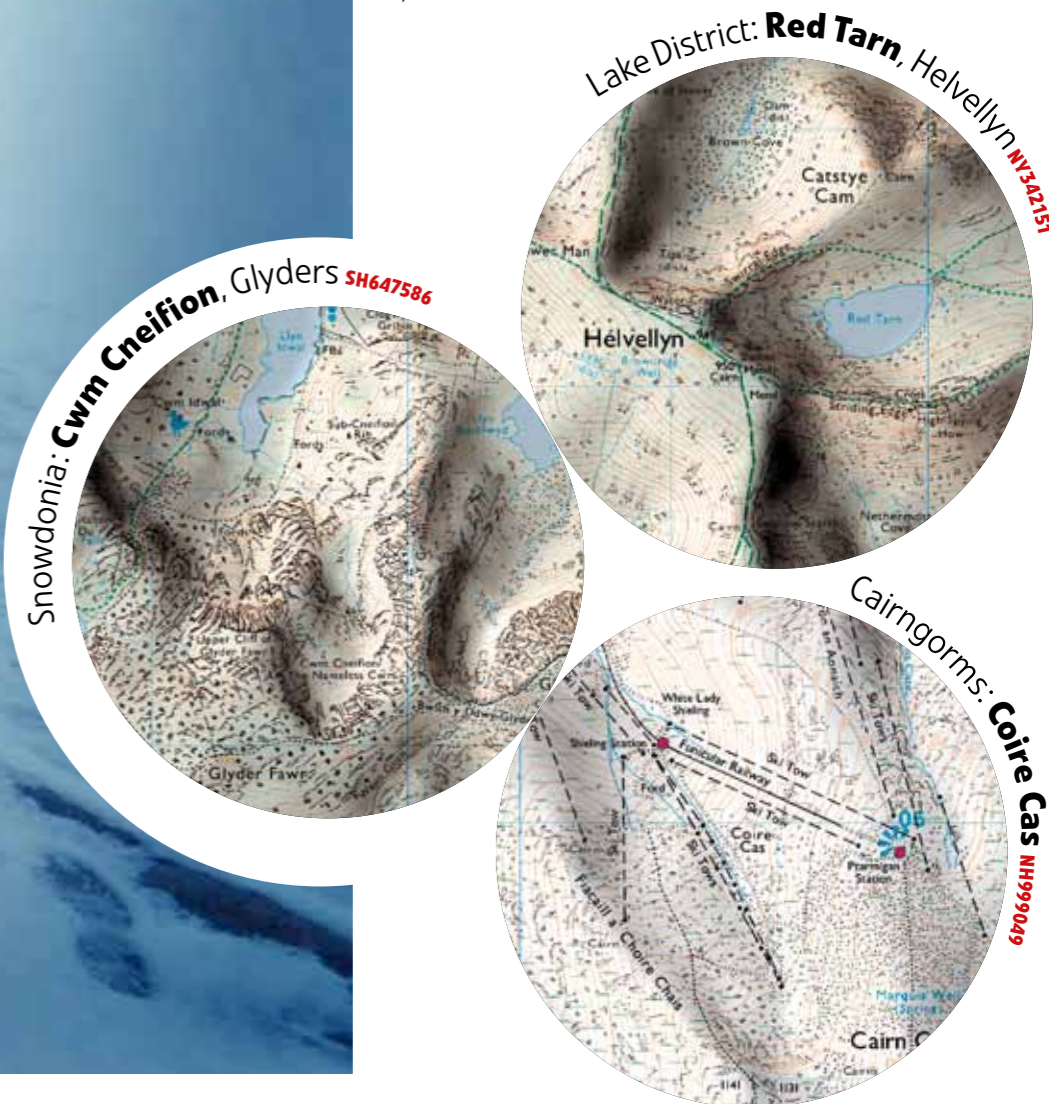
As the snow began to thin I advised the others that they should now remove crampons and stow away ice axes, with a confidence I had lacked earlier that day. Skirting the edges of Llyn Llydaw I took my place at the front for the last time, the monochrome mountains stretching up either side of me, and reflected on what I had achieved. Despite my reservations, I had led some friends up Snowdon in winter – something I never thought I'd be able to do. A smile now spread uncontrollably on my face as I thought about other snowy ambitions I now felt ready to tackle.

One thing was for sure, though: no matter what else happened this winter, I knew this would be a moment that I definitely would never forget. **T**



## LOCATION, LOCATION...

Want to find the perfect place to build your winter confidence and take your first winter walk this season? "You need a spot that has a nice range of slope angles to play on, but on an avalanche-safe snowpack and aspect with a safe run-out at the bottom, no nasty rocks to hit and preferably in the sunshine with a stunning view and close to the car!" says Rob Johnson MIC. The conditions will obviously be down to the weather, but your best bets are north- and east-facing corries as they tend to accumulate more snow and hold it better. So why not sharpen your winter skills here...



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