



## Spells In The Snow

**Faced with an unseasonal absence of snow, John McCarty takes time out to reflect from the Scottish Highlands on the personal pleasures of skiing and the practical implications of the pastime's rapid spread in popularity**

There are many pleasant ways to spend new year, but sitting with a glass of whisky gazing along Loch Garry in the north-west of Scotland must be one of the finest. When you add convivial company and good food you could ask for nothing more.

Nothing that is, apart from snow, it opens up a whole new world for outdoor-minded people. Climbers and walkers revel in atrocious conditions, pitting themselves against the terrain and weather and taking great pride in their independence and endurance. And then of course there are the skiers.

Now for years I hated skiers. Like many fellow hill-walkers I felt that they symbolised affluence and arrogance. We scoffed at their all-in-one designer dayglo suits. 'Moon' boots were guaranteed to produce snorts of ill-concealed laughter. Journeys to the hills became fraught with tension as

the BMWs and Volvos swept past, heading for Glenshee or Aviemore. We felt that they abused the hills with their machinery and litter, creating problems of erosion and cocking a snook at the awesome weather problems that can prevail on Scottish mountains.

Eventually, however, I was persuaded to try a pair of cross-country skis and almost immediately I was hooked. They differ from the standard 'downhill' skis in two fundamental ways. Firstly they are much thinner and slightly longer, and secondly you are attached to them only at the toe, which allows you a much greater range of movement. A slight variation on this type of ski is used for ski-touring, slightly broader and with metal edges and heavier leather boots allowing greater control. With the addition of artificial 'skins' in the soles of the skis (rather like a cat's fur) you can ski uphill as well as down.

One has the freedom denied to the British downhill skier, who is limited by the length of runs and access to the slopes allowed by the current state of the sport. Fine as they are, the Scottish mountains are just not as high as on the continent, so not much can be done about increasing the length of runs.

Access to the slopes is a different matter. Demand for skiing has been steadily expanding, currently at about 7% per year, and this places a corresponding strain on existing facilities and roads. Aonach Mor at Fort William is to be opened up as a ski area to add to the other four already in current use (Aviemore, Glencoe, Glenshee and the Lecht). In addition there is talk about further expansion at Aviemore and Drumochter Pass. These proposed expansion plans have created a certain amount of controversy in the Scottish press between those who want to see the demand met, those who want to make money out of it, and those people who want to conserve the mountains as they are.

Apart from the logistics of placing the appropriate machinery and accommoda-

tion to fulfil the demand, there are two major problems to overcome. One of them is snow. It is unpredictable stuff at the best of times. This is the third new year in a row when the Scottish hills have been bare. Financially this is obviously disastrous, given that it is the major winter holiday period for most people.

The second problem is actually getting to the slopes. Large falls of snow on the hills are clearly to be welcomed. But when it also falls in large dollops on the roads, it is frustrating in the extreme not to be able to actually get to the hills. On the continent, this problem is largely overcome by sophisticated snow-clearing equipment, snow barriers and, in places, covers over the roads to prevent them being blocked.

Skiing has a significant impact on Scotland's economy in terms of employment of those directly involved in servicing the sport, and in the manufacturing and retailing of equipment and clothing. Approximately 3,000 people are employed in Aviemore in the tourist industry, although not all in skiing. This is admittedly the largest and best-developed resort in Scotland, but other towns like Blairgowrie near Glenshee undoubtedly benefit from the boom. The impact of ski clothing can be easily seen any day in Glasgow where ski jackets are common everyday wear for many youngsters.

A classic example of the retail growth is 'Highland Guides', situated near Aviemore. Their major concern is selling cross-country equipment and providing lessons. For years they have operated from what is basically a large wooden hut. Last season they released ambitious plans for a much larger custom-designed building on the same site. If one considers this sort of enterprise across Scotland, then there is a quite clear potential for employment and a subsequent general increase in the tourist trade. This will doubtless be resisted by the conservationist lobby, who complain,

with a great deal of justification, about the exploitation of the hills and the permanent damage that is being done to them. I feel, nevertheless, that they will do little more than limit the extent to which expansion is continued.

One area of concern is what to do with all the skiers when they are not actually on the piste. Apart from Aviemore the other ski centres are situated in very remote places. Of course part of their attraction is that very remoteness and the idea of lots of Aviemore replicas spreading throughout the Highlands is utterly appalling. Local hotels attempt to cope with the large numbers of people but there is no doubt that the much-vaunted *apres ski* exists in Scotland more as a myth than a reality. There is an idea that flaxen-haired people, beautifully dressed, sip Martinis, socialise and generally relax after a hard day on the slopes. It is more likely to be a very crowded hotel bar, swallowing a pint of 'heavy' (Scottish beer) if one can get close enough to the bar to make yourself heard. Despite lack of snow, Glencoe was packed this season. In one hotel they were



Outdoor pursuit

renting single beds to couples to cope with the numbers. Imagine what it would have been like if there had been skiing too.

It is said of one of my friends that if a snowflake falls in the northern hemisphere, he has his skis out ready. He will certainly have to wait a while longer this year. Meanwhile, in this beautiful part of the country, I'll just have another whisky, dig out the maps and contemplate what tomorrow will bring. Perhaps it is just as well that I never could stand Martini. •