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- ALPE D'HUEZ
- CAIRNGORM
- CHÂTEL
- ...AND AN ICEBERG!



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Scotland? Really?

Want powder? Scotland's not usually top of the list. But, amazingly, last season plenty of the world's top skiers found themselves beating a path to our little island. Telemark king **Per Jonsson** and his crew were front of the queue to enjoy the first-time-this-generation conditions

PHOTOS **FREDRIK SCHENHOLM** WORDS **MARCUS OLSSON**

PER JONSSON'S a lucky sod. Last winter his riding diary for the first few months of 2010 read: Montgenèvre, Serre Chevalier, Durango, Silverton, Telluride and Alaska. Oh, hold on. That's not quite right. Sandwiched amongst these juicy fruits was Bonnie Scotland!

So how the hell did that happen? How did one of the world's best heel-lifters end up in the UK, when he had the whole of the Alps and Rockies to choose from, not to mention his home hill of Åre, Sweden? Well, the amazing conditions certainly played a part. And everywhere you

went in Europe last season locals were scratching their heads asking why there was more snow at home for us than on their fine and rather expensively equipped mountains.

But the seed for the adventure had been sown well before it started thumping down north of the border, thanks to Gus Sandman. No, we've never heard of him either, but he's a ski importer. And over more than a few après drinks in northern Sweden, he started thundering on to Per about Scotland. The sell was simple: if you want a real ski adventure, mixing great hikeable terrain, good whisky, and friendly locals, the Highlands was it.

SCOTLAND? REALLY?

► Snow covers the tree tops. The sun bounces off Ben Nevis, Britain's highest peak, above the early morning mist. Even though the group has to walk for more than half an hour to be back to the top after each short run, it's worth it. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the off-piste for the first time," says Per. "Hardly anyone had skied there before us. It was as if the snow had been waiting the whole season, just for us. We met some locals who were kind enough to point out the best spots. A French skier would never reveal his best trails; the Scots were proud and excited to share their local knowledge with us."





SCOTLAND? REALLY?

In a really good winter, there are unique opportunities to be discovered in the Highlands. You can walk from one deserted, powder-filled bowl to another. A truly special experience, no matter how seasoned a traveller you are or where you've skied before. "Before coming here I had no expectations of the skiing itself," says Per. "It's not fair to compare this to the billion dollar resorts around the world. In Italy, for example, the slopes look like polished marble floors every morning. But considering the natural set-up in Scotland, I think anyone would be impressed. We only had to traverse for a couple of minutes in any direction and we would stumble upon untouched slopes. The locals who showed us around told us this was the snowiest winter in 30 years!"

26 SEASON MAN

WORDS BY MIKE MACEACHERAN



WAS it the best season on record? You bet. Well, at least since the rope tow heydays of the 1950s and 1960s. The Scottish Highlands were riddled with powder (plus the usual wind-slab and whiteouts, of course). A pre-Christmas dump on

Glencoe, Cairngorm, Nevis Range and Glenshee ensured that 'better than Utah, kids' was the après whisky slur of choice. The hane was in place; it was time to bring on the powder.

And boy did we brag when it came. Whilst some Alpine resorts had a scraping of just 50cm on their upper runs, there was a giant wetting 150cm in the Highlands. Did you know? Man snow fell on Glencoe at the end of February than on any other run in the world. According to the Met Office, 80cm fell in 24 hours on Meall an Dèimhinn – compared with a measly 26cm at Superbach and Mount Snow in the United States. You got 7.6m of snow in total and was open for 147 days more than Gudvangen, Drammen. As they say round these parts – gettin' high up!

Come Spring, Cairngorm had taken to showing off its finest by expanding its ground-covering 385 plus, said she-didn't get out of the whites. White lady ever since.

From the Ptarmigan top station, next stop was Aladdin's Cauldron and Jacob's Ladder. Likewise, the Highland road into Glenshee was filled with overloaded snow-laden Austrian ski tourists in retreat from the continent, and a tracked-out Tiger turned into a powder train of Siberian proportions.

Sure, there was plenty of ice, mist, ought edges and God-awful C&A one-pieces on show – the Highlands are never going to be St Moritz

“The 45 degree Flypaper was proper powder paradise”

for spectacle, after all. But us Jocks had every right to claim the first, best and last tracks on the hills of Snowgoose and Carr Na Uata.

The early snow and persistent sub-zero temperatures meant, thanks to Aonach Mor and the Nevis Range, that the Highlands really did, for a while at least, have off-piste as good as anywhere. For the first time in years, skimming up took on an entirely different meaning: on the Lochaber Haute route, Easy Gully and Salisac were conquered by the feckhardy and telonish hoes-eyes, they do exist on Scottish slopes) never that Norway isn't the only place where you can compare a deer. Well, if you're stupid enough to go out in winter 77

degrees and freeze your jockstrap off. Even Arthur's Seat, in Edinburgh, was given a royal riding!

Oddly, Glencoe's legendary off-piste East Ridge was unrideable all season, whilst the rarely tested Cam Ghiesun was tried, piped – and avalanched – by surprise, but thankfully safe, snowboarders and fat ski riders.

Still, the highlights more than made up for these minor disappointments. The 45 degree Flypaper, Scotland's equivalent to bailing off Verbier's Bec De Roesses or Chamonix's Aiguille du Midi, was proper powder paradise. Even The Highlander himself, Aviemore's Alan Baxter, turned up for a few turns.

Still not sold? Well, Cairngorm's trial snow cannons weren't found until mid-April, while even my near 70-year-old Dad notched up a 70-day season (more than plenty of bed-mad Euro ex-patriates). Oh snow showers of Scotland, when will we see your likes again? Some time, same place, next year... please!

WHO IS HE?

Mike MacEacheran has skied the length and breadth of the Highlands, and is a veteran of 26 seasons at Glencoe. He tells us his Swiss girlfriend, Katalin, a regular snowboarder at Davos and Lenzerheide, isn't impressed with his chat about how Scotland now has the best skiing in the world!

▶ Come on a weekday. Miss the queues. Bring some mates. Leave the attitude. In Scotland no one cares how you look, what gear you're on, or level you're at. "British skiers have a more laidback style than people who frequent the more glamorous areas I usually visit," says Per. "Here it's not about having all the latest gear or that you need to look cool and fashionable. In Scotland people ski because people want to ski; from beginners to more extreme riders and real ski bums – people who have been here since the first facilities opened back in the 1950s."

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➔ www.nevisrange.co.uk

GLENCOE

Simpler and even more laidback (if that's possible) than Nevis. Small with a family atmosphere, but don't let that put you off. There are still good lines here.

➔ www.glencoe-mountain.co.uk

CAIRNGORM

Seemed like a combination of Nevis and Glencoe. During our visit it had the thickest snow cover of the three, which made it stand out. The variety of terrain available within very short distances was a very nice surprise too.

➔ www.cairngormmountain.co.uk



PER JONSSON'S THREE TIPS FOR EXPLORING THE HIGHLANDS

"WE LEARNED A FEW THINGS
ABOUT TRAVELLING IN SCOTLAND!"

- 1 Never rely on rental car GPS. Most of the country is not so much mapped as guessed at.
- 2 Drive on the left-hand side (unless there's a scary, ginger-bearded local staggering back from the takeaway in the road).
- 3 Scots have a flexible sense of time; 30 minutes translates into about an hour.

"I'VE DONE IT!"



Fall-Line publisher Dickie enjoyed the Highlands during a quick hit last season.

"I was invited up to a backcountry seminar in Aviemore in early April and caught the sleeper up from Crewe.

Backcountry is making a big noise in Scotland, and I headed up to the home of Scottish mountaineering, Glenmore Lodge.

"Last time I skied here was a while ago, when the chairlift was still running, the funicular railway didn't exist, and I couldn't ski. Some things do remain constant. Happily, 12 degrees down in Aviemore translated to enough chill on the hill to retain a deep snowpack and conditions were great.

"The Cairngorm range is perfect for touring – it's not at altitude, so you don't need to acclimatise, and it's easy to select a route that keeps you moving along rather than pining up. That's not to say Scottish touring is always this benign. You need to have your navigation and mountaineering skills up to date if the weather isn't as settled as we experienced, and reading the snow is as important here as anywhere else."

➔ Dickie's Scottish backcountry seminar blogs can be found at www.fall-line.co.uk/blogs



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