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Chamonix Valley Snow Report - 19 December 2008 - Valley de Berard



digging a snowpit

Today, I went on the Icicle Avalanche Awareness Day Course to brush up on my mountain skills for the start of the season. My fellow students, British couple Allison and Alistair, and I were lead by British mountain leader, Kingsley Jones.

Heading up on snowshoes into the Berard Valley, our group was immediately confronted with the copious amount of snow on the rooftops in the Buet Village. I find it hard to judge amounts of snow but I'd say well over a meter, maybe just under two...

As a ski tourer, I've never had the occasion to try snowshoes, but found the movement really easy to get the hang of. To teach us to "sense" the snow under our feet Kingsley blindfolded us so that we could "experience" the snow - its sounds and its weaknesses.

From Wednesday's recent snow fall there was a good 25cm of soft snow on top and then we "hit bottom" on snowshoes; that was the layer solidified by the pre-Wednesday's foehn winds.

The Berard Valley has no shortage of avalanche risky areas and although none of the major avalanche couloirs have come down yet, we didn't have to go too far up to see the first pile of avalanche debris. Kingsley explained why some slopes are more prone to avalanches than others and quizzed us on where we thought it was the safest to walk.

We stopped occasionally to look at various kinds of snow crystals and the stratification of the layers. The top layer was definitely not bonded enough to make a snowball. We learned to look around us and analyse the lay of the land and the trees as well as discussed estimating temperature, direction, wind direction, the 5 point avalanche scale, and estimating slope gradient - all important in general avalanche awareness.

Then, for the moment I was especially waiting for, avalanche rescue training, which we should all practice more often than we do in order to minimize our reaction time in the event of an emergency. Since there is a 15 minute (approximate) time frame in which buried victims have a greater chance of survival, there is no time to lose. Here we familiarised ourselves with our avalanche rescue equipment (transceiver, probe, shovel) and practiced real life scenarios.

In the Tre-les-Eaux Valley, we also took a more detailed look at the snow stratification and built a Ruschblock test block. From the test we could conclude that where we were standing was stable and safe, but there were signs further above of recent avalanche activity and so we decided not to go any higher onto the Loriaz slopes.

All in all it was a very instructive day in the beautiful setting of the Berard Valley.

The Icicle Avalanche Awareness day costs only 49€ per person (less if you are a group of 4 or more) and is accessible to everyone since the lesson is conducted on snowshoes.

[For more information on the Icicle Avalanche Awareness Day](#)

19 Dec 2008



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