

Hubby and I talked a little at the start of the winter about sleeping out in a snowhole. I've never done it, and harbour a suspicion that it will only be once, but I would like the experience. I know the dangers of the hills in winter which is why I have so far avoided it, and why we have taken advice and plan on being accompanied by someone much more experienced than either of us. It seems that watching Ray Mears on youtube isn't going to be enough. Shame, as I like the way he chatted to camera while his mate chopped away in the background and then he sawed obviously pre-cut blocks of snow out with a great flourish. That's how I plan to do it; no use working up a sweat if I am then going to have to sit about in damp clothes all night.

Needless to say, the weekends we had planned to go up have been thwarted, usually by too much snow. It makes me sympathise with visitors who have planned their trip to the mountains maybe for months and then spend their time sitting in a hut looking out at weather too wild to venture out in safely. Maybe some of the accidents in the hills are because their judgement gets clouded by desperation to fulfil the objective of their trip.

One thing we lack for our trip is some decent mountain equipment. Our sleeping bags and boots are fine, but rusty crampons and ice-axes that look as though they belong to the thirties, highlight just how long it has been since either of us ventured beyond forest walks in the winter.

I was passing an outdoor shop in Inverness the other day, when I spied a winter catalogue outside their door. I have to admit that I don't feel altogether comfortable in these shops. Despite having worked in one for a few years, and having many years of experience, I hate the patronising way some assistants treat me. I had eyed up their ice-axes in the window before and the shapes and colours hinted at a whole new design concept for something that in my day was restricted to a choice of different shaft lengths.

I wanted to do a bit of research before I ventured in, lest I be palmed off with something deemed suitable simply because it came in a pretty pastel pink. I remember when manufacturers first made walking and ski boots specifically for women, and there was a certain logic to it. According to the literature, women's calves have a sharper cut off, which means their ankles are narrower than men's. There are also, so I understand, differences in actual foot shapes that means the traditional (i.e. men's) designs didn't fit as well as they could. Similarly, rucksacks made for shorter backs or ski pants with more room around the rear end.

So I was prepared to read about women specific axes, perhaps catering for my shorter arm, or shaped to compensate for my lesser upper-body strength. The catalogue was to prove a disappointment though. The shop seems to equate winter with skiing and boarding. I know it's been a good year for the powder and have no doubt that there is money to be made from the snow sport pound. My research on axes would have to take place elsewhere.

Limited by being on a bus, I continued to peruse the brochure anyway. After all, that chalet in Aspen could yet be mine. I chose boots and skis way more suited to an aspiration than hard reality and was settling back to decide on a jacket that would double up for my days on Glencoe's slopes. The descriptions waxed lyrical about Japanese designers and hot colours, but unlike the men's jackets little mention was made of seam taping and breathable fabrics. Comparing the men's and the women's it became clear that the author thought women favoured style and the men practically.

Purely in the interests of research, I closely inspected the underwear. The men's pants were described as being gusseted for comfort and freedom of movement, non itchy and close fitting. The women's? Cheeky styling, super-sexy and couldn't be hotter. Note to the manager; if I wanted to buy sexy pants, I wouldn't be going to an outdoor shop. And I won't be going there for my new axe and crampons either.