

Introduction

Let me introduce myself - I am an Englishman who dabbled a bit in downhill skiing (only starting when I was an adult), grass skiing and eventually a bit of cross country skiing. When I did the RR for the first time in 2010, at the age of 56, the longest I had skied in a day was 35km. Apart from one year off, I have been back and skied the RR every year since. I am not a great skier, never have and never will be, and most of what I have learned about skiing is on the RR, preparing for the RR and from other RR skiers. So it is probably a very different perspective from anyone who learned to ski when they were young or has access to snow several months of the year.

So these notes are what I have learned so far (learning is life long), but as we say in England "your mileage might vary" (i.e. they may not work for you).

Your feet

If your feet are not comfortable, you will not enjoy your skiing.

Boots

I have concluded that this is the most important piece of equipment there is. Only this year, a skier told me that he considered them so important that he carried one set in his hand baggage. Having had my gear mislaid by an airline for several days at a time, I think this is actually sound advice.

So why are boots the most important? Well over the years, it is blisters that seem to cause the most pain to people and in extreme cases prevent people skiing. My wife had a similar problem on a 20 day hike when her boots fell apart and she had to get new ones and break them in during the hike. So don't set off on the RR with new boots. I have one pair of boots that were great in the shop, but I have never been able to wear them for any length of time and concluded that they are simply too rigid round the heel to ever give enough to stop blistering.

When you do find a boot that really suits you, buy a second pair. I eventually found the perfect boot for me - these are Alfa's - a Norwegian company that specialised in hiking boots but branched out into cross country ski boots. They have a range, and the ones I have are one step up from the leisure skiing. They have a breathable waterproof outer so that your feet don't get wet when skiing through a little water - RR conditions can vary from year to year.



As you may (or may not) know, most people have one foot slightly larger than the other. This makes getting boots to fit perfectly difficult. What works for me is that my boots are very slightly bigger than I need and I have then fitted an extra cushioning insole between the boot and the normal insole. These can be bought in different thicknesses (cost €5-10) but can also be cut so that you can get a snug fit; if there is pressure on the tops of the toes, you can cut the toes section of this extra insole away.



Obviously you can do some general adjustments with thicknesses of socks, but you cannot easily adjust the fit of just a specific part with socks.

It also means that if you do get a blister, and you need to put a Compeed (or similar) blister plaster on, you can trim the extra insole to allow for the thickness of the blister plaster - otherwise the plaster itself adds extra thickness and puts more pressure on the part that it already sore.

Socks

Some years ago, I managed to get shin splints when running a half marathon. It took months to recover and I only just recovered in time for that year's RR. I also find that one of my shins swells a little on the RR due to the fact that for me, I have not been able to cross country ski train for more than a few days prior to the RR. So that year, I took to wearing compression running socks beneath my ski socks. I later discovered that I am not alone in doing this.

But there are some benefits. Compression socks (and I only use modest compression socks, not the ones that are so tight they take 10 minutes to get on) have some other benefits. Because they are tight, they act like a second skin because they do not move. Hence they reduce the chance of your normal ski socks rubbing your skin - any relative movement takes place between the two pairs of socks. For hiking you can buy socks that are a double layer, with a cotton inner layer, that are supposed to work in the same way, but these are nothing like as effective (in my experience). You can get Merino wool compression ski socks, and these, though expensive, are even better than the running socks as your inner layer. Compression socks, of whatever type, generally are thin but stay reasonably warm even when they get wet.

When things go wrong

As soon as you feel something rubbing, stop and deal with it; it will only get worse. If you can catch a blister before it has formed, when it is just starting to get red, you may be able to prevent it getting worse. Microporous tape is the thing to use; not just a small amount, but several longer lengths, in different directions, over the affected area, as the surface of the skin will move and you are trying to stop the movement as well as protect the area.

If blisters have already formed, then Compeed (a gel like) plaster can be stuck over the area. Normally you then leave this on like a new layer of skin as it protects the blister and allows it to heal. If appropriate and possible, you may pad around but not over, the blister, in order to try and limit any further rubbing.

Skis

I am most definitely not an expert on skis. I started, mostly in the Alps, where waxless skis of the fish scale and similar patterns are the norm. In Norway I got a pair of waxed skis, and learned through trial and error, the basics of blue and red waxes and klijster - i.e. the contents of the standard Swix belt pack. Those skis delaminated in their second trip, so I returned to waxless skis. Until my first RR, that was pretty much my knowledge of ski waxing - I had no idea about glide waxing.

Ski waxing is all about some knowledge, and lots of experience - trying things out in different conditions and finding out what works for you. When you live in the SW of England, where snow only settles on the ground about once every 5 years, opportunity is very limited.

"To wax or not to wax? That is the question." I arrived in Kuusamo for a few days ahead of my first RR in 2010. My skis, a pair of traditional waxless, alas, did not for another couple of days. Fortunately I was able to rapidly arrange hire of some waxed skis, and when my waxless did turn up, was able to compare them. Using a heart monitor and one of the training tracks, I was able to deduce that the traditional waxless were more effort and so I bought a pair of waxed skis, an iron and a range of waxes and set about learning how to wax

skis. There was one day on my first RR where conditions changed and I was either glued to the ground or had no grip whatsoever on the last 10km. Since then, I have got a lot better with grip waxes, but still have a long way to go with glide waxing.

However, in 2014 when training in Norway, a very knowledgeable ski technician suggested that I try the Atomic Skintec skis. This guy did a lot of wax testing and reckoned that the Skintecs were less than 3% lower than the best waxed skis.

Skintec (and similar) skis are great skis; they seem to work across a wide range of conditions, especially into the warmer conditions where klijster would normally be used. But I did discover one or two little issues with those particular skis. They have a removable insert, which is held in place with magnets, and a plastic key to change them. The skins can suffer from icing - ice builds up in the skins and they then stick. It can get so bad that on one occasion, without realising for a kilometre or so, the insert stayed in the snow instead of the ski. Anti-icing sprays help prevent this, but my expert technician back in Norway also showed me that some of the liquid glide waxes would work (and are less likely to be confiscated by airport security). The other thing is that the plastic key works inside, but when ice has packed around the edges of the insert, it simply is not strong enough to release the insert. A much better "key" in these circumstances is the corkscrew on a Swiss Army knife! Once iced up, before being able to reapply anti-icing, you really need to remove the ice. You can scrape a certain amount off - this may also take some of the "skin" fibres with it. What I discovered is a small rechargeable hand warmer, about the size of a mobile phone battery, which heats to 40C can be slowly run up and down in order to melt the ice. In reality, I always ski with a spare set of skin modules and change them over, but most "skin" type skis do not have removable modules.

In 2017, I skied the RR more or less entirely on the Skintecs, and then skied HHS3 mostly on waxed skis. I have also tried from time to time using some traditional waxless skis - I have some wider ones for soft snow, but have concluded that for me, waxed skis are good for conditions below about -3C and skintecs where the temperature is changing and likely to go above -2C. This now seems to be an increasingly popular choice for people.

It is a debate that will continue for ever; all I can say is that this is what works for me.

The route of the RR has changed over the years; several warmer years, and the need to reduce risks has led to a new route for day 7 where an existing machine groomed trail has been adopted and extended for the whole day's skiing. This means for those of you who can and want to, most of it can be "skated" - the majority of the RR is only suitable for classic skiing (the second half of day 1 is suitable for skating).

Poles

As the trails are mostly prepared by snowmobile, the snow is not packed down much where you are placing your poles. Generally, this suggests that you need slightly longer poles and bigger baskets than you would use on main machine groomed trails.

I had put bigger baskets on some new poles, but I suspect that this added stress to them, and when tapping the snow off my boots, the pole sheared.

Liisa Oura has a very neat trick for clearing the snow out of the binding bar on the front of her boots when it is icy - she has a horse hoof pick (looks like a bent screwdriver) or a small

stiff brush, something I must remember this coming year, as it is cheaper and more convenient than a new ski pole.



Clothing

The conditions can vary widely; I have done RRs where we have had several days at -30C and people getting frostbite and other occasions where it got up to +11C in the warmest part of the day. Much faster skiers than me may well wear less clothing, but you can cool down rapidly in even the brief rest stops. I use layers, and depending on the conditions for the day, choose the layers to wear. I try to have the outermost top two layers with zips, as I find that just unzipping a little can make a big difference and adjust to conditions that way.

I have also migrated to wearing a windproof gilet over the top as my outermost layer; it can quickly be taken off if you are too hot.

Generally I find that I can find a combination of three layers for around -3C and warmer, four layers to span down to -12C and if it is going to be colder than that, 5 layers. As far as possible, all layers need to breathe - hence the reason for a windproof gilet being the outermost layer, as moisture can still get out.

When I first did the RR, I carried a belt bag. I progressed to a bigger belt bag and now carry a very small rucksack. One thing I do carry is a pair of silk inner gloves - these can be used inside your normal gloves e.g. after a longer lunch stop when it may take a while for your hands to warm up again when you get going. As these are not specifically for the left or right hands, you could always put one over the other on the same hand if you happened to lose one of your normal gloves, as a temporary measure. A very light windproof jacket carried in your pack that you can put on if you stop to prevent you getting cold may be handy. Remember that you can get cold in seconds, but take tens of minutes to get warm again.

The modern materials used in base wear (top and bottom) can be washed. In Finland in the winter, the humidity of the air is very low, and so they can often be dried overnight. I tried this when hiking in the summer in the UK, but because of our much higher humidity, it took about a week for things to dry! It is useful to have a fairly large plastic bag so that if you wash things and they don't dry completely before you leave the next day, you can pack them damp without getting the rest of your clothes wet.

On the RR, we always meet up with the bus at least once per day, so there is always the opportunity to plan to change equipment and clothing part way through the day.

Food

Several days have good lunch stops with hot food, but this is not true of all days, and so you need to make up some food to take with you at breakfast (some days there is also a snack pack to pick up). Along the way, there are plenty of rest stops manned by volunteers - some of the real heroes, they are out there for a long time in the cold (rest stops towards the end of the day when the skiers are most spread out). These rest stops vary with what they provide, but there is always a hot drink - a hot berry cordial (mehu), hot and cold water (vesi), sometimes coffee (kahvi), segments of orange, raisins, sometimes chocolate squares (beware in very cold temperatures these are so hard people have been known to break a tooth on them) and slices of pickled dill cucumber. This last one is to provide replacement for the salt you have lost through sweating.

Some people also take various things themselves, such as energy bars and energy gels. It is also wise to carry a drink. If you want to carry a cold drink, you will need an insulated bottle or flask, as it will soon freeze. I have a small flask with a neoprene insulating sleeve I can put round it in which I carry a hot or cold drink, as conditions and preference dictate. I tested a variety of energy gels by putting them in the freezer at home and seeing how long they took to freeze, to find out which were the best. Now I find the Clif Energy Blocks are better - you just bite a block off and then take a drink of water with it. So it is less messy, you can have just a small piece and they don't freeze. I have heard of keen runners breaking them into the blocks, taking a needle with dental floss and threading them on to make a bracelet so they could bite them off without slowing down.

Be aware that many of the energy gels contain caffeine, and you should not have too many of them in a given time. Beware caffeine - some gels contain caffeine and carry warnings about how many you can take; it is possible to exceed the maximum amount of caffeine in a day (there is some debate as to what that is) and there have been a few cases where excess caffeine has proved fatal (not so far on the RR though.)

Trying to find energy bars that work in cold temperatures is harder - most of them seem to suck all the moisture out of your mouth. The small sticks of Panda liquorice, available in many different flavours are one thing I find cheap and easy for a quick sugar "hit". Wine gums (a hard jelly sweet) are good to suck on when your mouth is dry, and handy if you can find them in the tube-like packs.

Generally you are going to expend some 4-6,000 calories (kcal) per day, compared to the usual 2-2,500 of the ordinary daily living. So you will need to be eating at least twice your normal consumption, and at times this is hard. There is food available generally as soon as you arrive each day, and a significant supper as well, to help you keep your calorie intake up.

Training and Preparation

As I said earlier, I live in SW England, where it hardly ever snows, and come from a country with no tradition in cross country skiing (except the odd expedition in competition with our rivals the Norwegians) and finally a top level skier in Andrew Musgrave.

So training for a long distance ski event is difficult. Fortunately I am reasonably fit, as I have run 16km most Saturday mornings for the last 20 years, although this is on the flat, as where I live is reclaimed from the sea. For my first RR, I arrived in Kuusamo 5 days early in order to get the right muscles ready and to at least do 50km in a day. Whilst this worked, it did mean that I started the RR with some fatigue. These days I usually try and get a week in January of February and then arrive in Kuusamo a week ahead of the RR.

In terms of keeping fit generally, I make sure that I start around September and increase my running. I also use a rowing machine, and recently, I have started rowing in a Cornish Pilot Gig (a sea going team rowing boat) but this is dependent on the weather and having enough crew. One trick I have found is that running on a treadmill inclined to about 5 degrees mimics the forward lean of cross country skiing and gets more of the right leg muscles in trim.

As I get older, I work more on endurance, and do more exercise, so that finally I have lost weight. I use a Polar heart monitor system which means that I can compare the effort between running and skiing and over the years. One of the things I discovered with running is that 3% faster is 30% more effort, and the trick for a long event such as the RR is to find a rhythm and speed for yourself that may not be the fastest, but is the most efficient. Most people find day 5 of the RR, the shortest day, actually one of the hardest. This is because adrenalin gets you through the longest day, day 4, but day 5 is about taking things gently and trying to recover as much as possible. There is some interesting research that shows for long distance running, it is not until the age of 64 that your capabilities are back to where they were at 19. As you get older it is much more about carefully pacing yourself and knowing your capabilities.

People

This is the best part - people are doing the RR for many different reasons. It is not a race, it is an event where you are challenging yourself. There are people from all over the world. I told an Australian whilst waiting at a bus stop in Norway and two years later he was on the RR with friends from Oz. Coincidences abound. In 2014, the "American" couple turned out to be Brits that had been in the US for decades. It turned out that we had all been at the same university for a couple of years at the same time in adjacent buildings, just hadn't known each other at the time.

I have made many friends through the RR, to the point of them visiting me and vice-versa, and some of these friendships will be lifelong. People help each other out; there is this feeling that you are all in the experience together. A significant number of people come back each year, which says a lot about the event - for many of us it has become a major feature in our lives. Talking to people, one thing that is common about the experience is that for the week of the RR, we switch off from our normal, often stressful, everyday lives. In our 24/365 lives even when you go on holiday, people still have some sort of expectations. Most of the people doing the RR are people who find it difficult to completely stop and do nothing, but the RR is like a week of meditation, travelling through quiet beautiful countryside, with gentle exercise. Many of us find this recharges our batteries for another year, and it is this and the friendships that keep us coming back.

Finally we should not forget the organisers and the volunteers - the people who make all of this possible, as the RR is not a commercial venture. There are not many places in the world where an event has so much support from the local community. The RR needs that support because it crosses a lot of very remote and sparsely populated country. I live in Somerset, one of England's largest and least populated counties (549,400 people 3,451sq km) but compare this to Ranua Commune (3,996 people 3,453sq km). That is a big difference if something goes wrong and I take a wrong turn (yes, it happened to me, and a phone call and I was rescued by someone and delivered to the next rest stop and put back on track as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened).



I hope you all enjoy the wonderful experiences of the RR and Finnish Lapland, just as I have over the years.



Maali = "Finish" in "Finnish"!