

ROAD TO THE TOP

IN THE CORRIES near the top of Beinn a' Bhuid are veins of the beautiful rock-crystals known as Cairngorm stones. A greater treasure, however, is the snow that the year round fills the hollows near the summit of this 3924 foot peak.

Through the enterprise of the Mar Lodge Estate a continuation of their road through Glen Quoich has been driven a further four-and-a-half miles up the great slopes to within 300 feet of the summit.

So extensive are the runs reached by the highest track in Britain that as many as 20,000 skiers could be in action on them without overcrowding. A proper access road could result in the development of a new winter sports area.

A journey to those high runs was made on a Sunday in May by the Dunfermline Ski Club, under their vice-president, Felix Hudson. Twenty-two in number, the expedition headed for Beinn a' Bhuid from Mar Lodge in four vehicles — two long-wheel-base Land Rovers, driven by Arthur Robertson of Colton and Ian Whitehead; an ordinary type Land Rover, driven by Jim Marshall; and an ex-Army Jeep, driven by Alan Lauder.

The purpose of the expedition was to assess the potentialities of the high slopes for summer ski-ing. "We want to find out the snow-holding properties of this part of the Cairngorms," explained Mr. Hudson. "Our members are mainly interested in downhill ski-ing, which requires long runs." Runs of two miles and more were available on the Sunday, and the expedition learned that throughout the summer of 1966 there was at least one run of a mile-and-a-half.

In a mere eight weeks in 1966 the road was driven from the head of Glen Quoich up to the ridge, which runs straight towards the summit of the ben between the Alltan na Beinne and Dubh Ghleann valleys. It rises to a height of 3600 feet on the ridge of Crags a' Choich.

It was built at the estate's own expense to show to the County Council and to the Government that a road to the high slopes of the Cairngorms is feasible, and one man and a bulldozer did the job.

Considering the nature of the terrain and the height to which the road climbs, the gradients are remarkably gentle. So well was the route surveyed by Mr. Calum S. MacFarlane-Barrow, factor of the estate, and the bulldozer driver, Mr. Peter Wemyss, that the surface is also remarkably free from snow.

With a dirt surface throughout its length, the track is never less than 12 feet wide. It has also only two "S" bends, both negotiable with minimal manoeuvring. The surface always shelves slightly towards the hillface, and wherever possible there is an outer border of rubble. Rubble barriers also mark the edge of the platforms dug out at the "S" bends.

These barriers would probably halt any run-away vehicle. They are also of considerable psychological help to drivers, who might well funk a downward approach to a sharp bend with nothing between them and the void. Even with the barrier, manoeuvring round a bend is hair-raising enough. The track is probably negotiable only by four-wheel overdrive vehicles, using first and second gears most of the way.

A slalom run had been set out with poles and flags by an advance party on the Saturday, and some fancy ski-ing was the first thing on the Sunday programme. The expedition then walked up to the scalloped edge between the ben's twin peaks, known as the North and



Land Rovers near the top of the track up Beinn a Bhuid

South Tops.

Dark curtains of rain hid the lowlands to the south but the high peaks were clear of mist, and the loftiest group of mountains in the United Kingdom were visible from the summit of Beinn a' Bhuid: Cairngorm itself, 4048 feet high; Ben Macdhui, at 4296 feet the second highest mountain in Britain; Braeriach, 4248 feet; Cairntoul, 4240 feet; and Ben A'an, 3920 feet.

Not even the faintest tint of spring had come to this frozen desert. It was still painted in white and black. But the white wasn't all dazzling. Heather dust, whipped by the wind, made great splotches of grey on the snowy whiteness.

Not only are there innumerable long downhill runs in the vast spaces of the Cairngorms, it is also magnificent terrain for cross-country ski-ing. Felix Hudson, a little earlier in the season, led a small party on a 16-mile ski trek. Although, officially, no area of Britain reaches the line of perpetual congelation, the sheltered

hollows in the Cairngorms contain considerable quantities of snow throughout the summer.

The scenery of Cairngorm is arctic and awesome, snow cornices on the scalloped edge of Beinn a' Bhuid fantastically beautiful. Snow platforms with corbelled supports, formed by swirling winds, project several feet beyond the edge of the precipices of a fearsome chasm at the foot of which lies Dubh Lochan. Where the wind has swept the summit bare one gets the impression that the great mountain is being ground to rubble by the wind. Crazy paving of flat and smoothly rounded stones covers the wind-swept ridge leading to the summit, and when it is not lichen, it is a sea-shore-like gravel that fills the spaces between the stones.

Expense apart, helicopters are never likely to be used to bring skiers to the high runs of the Cairngorms. Air turbulence would make it too great a hazard. But hovercraft might well be the ideal method of transport. If they followed the route bulldozed by the Mar Lodge Estate, the snowfields would not be disturbed.□

NEW SKI LODGE AT GLENSHEE

LAST MONTH saw the addition of yet another ski-ing establishment to the holiday facilities of Glenshee—Glenshee Lodge. The new tenants are the Compass Ski Association which sprang from the "Saturday Ski Club" founded by the Rev. Bill Shannon, warden of the Church of Scotland Training Centre at Crieff. The club was for people with church commitments on Sunday but who still wanted to ski. They travelled to Crieff on Friday evenings, stayed at the St. Ninian's Centre, skied together at Glenshee on Saturday, returned to Crieff, and dispersed after an evening meal together there.

This, however, involved too much travelling in proportion to the time spent ski-ing. The example of other projects such as the Toc H centre at Loch Eil and the holiday centre based on the disused Nethybridge railway station had shown that outdoor holidays against

a background of Christian company and teaching are a viable way of achieving the Church's aims. Again, acquisition of Glenshee Lodge would make available services in the glen for skiers.

The Warden is Archie McKenzie, a Skye man, who has for the past few years been working for the Church of Scotland among the youth of Dunfermline. His wife will look after the domestic affairs of the lodge and he will be assisted by a volunteer party of skiers who compose the association.

The accommodation will house 31—18 men and 13 women. The lodge is intended for all ages, and for all types, whether families, individuals, or group holidays. Outwith the ski-ing season, the lodge will continue to be operated as a general outdoor activities-cum-field studies centre.□