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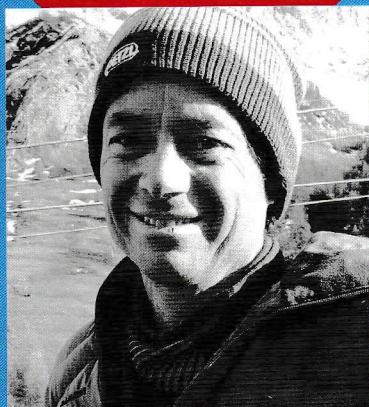
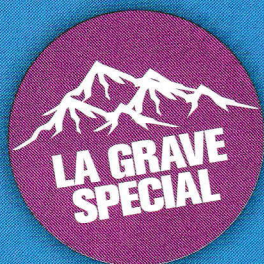


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A DAY IN THE  
LIFE OF...



# CHARLEY SCEMAMA

Ever wondered what it'd be like to be a La Grave ski patroller? Charley Scemama, a single father and one of three ski patrollers in the world's gnarliest ski town, tells **Gabriella Le Breton** about being a 'guardian of freedom'





## MY ALARM GOES OFF AT 6.50AM

That's if my daughter Hanaé hasn't already woken me up. I get up and look out of the window – if I can't see La Meije [La Grave's iconic 3982m peak], I know it will be a busy day! We live in Le Chazelet, a village facing La Meije that's a 10-minute drive from La Grave, so Hanaé and I usually leave home together just after 8.15am to get her to school and me to the ski patrol hut for 8.30am.

## MY JOB IN A NUTSHELL

Is to keep skiers and riders safe. Working with Jean-Charles and Jerome, the other two patrollers, we inform everyone from first-timers to professional freeriders about the snow and weather conditions, advising them what's skiing well and what to avoid. Locals call us 'les gardiens de liberté' (the guardians of freedom) because, by keeping people safe on the mountain, we're able to keep it wild.

## I GOT MY JOB

By being extremely patient! I trained as a ski patroller and worked for 10 years at Le Chazelet's tiny ski area (it has six pistes) before the job came up here at La Grave in 2015. I skied here as often as I could, learning all about the mountain and téléphérique [La Grave's legendary rainbow-coloured gondola], trying to be the best possible candidate for the job when it eventually came up.

## I NEVER LEAVE HOME WITHOUT

My Mammut Barryvox beacon, shovel and probe – they're essential for my and my colleagues' safety. I leave other essentials, like my K2 Pinnacle skis (with Dynafit Kingpin bindings) and Petzl ice axe, at the patrol hut.

## MY TYPICAL DAY

Is entirely dependent on the weather. On a good weather day, I'll get to the ski patrol hut for 8.30am to join Jean-Charles or Jerome (there are two of us on duty each day) and create a bulletin detailing the snow conditions, avalanche risk and weather forecast. This goes on the La Grave website, out to local hotels and businesses and on the notice board outside our hut, together with more detailed signs about the conditions, like 'Couloirs and steeps are loaded!'

On a bad weather day, or when the avalanche risk is level three or higher, everything starts earlier. La Grave works in a unique way in that our Mayor, not the lift company, has ultimate responsibility for the safety of skiers on the mountain. He employs a *technicien du Maire* (a Mayor's technician or expert), Pascal Guiboud, to provide independent advice on whether or not to open the mountain. Pascal has worked as a guide and patroller in La Grave for 40 years and is basically one of us. He always seems to be in our hut anyway...

## ON AROUND 35 DAYS EACH WINTER...

Pascal calls a risk evaluation commission, inviting local patrollers, guides and instructors to assist him skiing the mountain at 7.30am to assess the risk of opening it to the public. Spreading across the mountain, we check key descents for stability and assess the visibility, wind and cold. Pascal relays our comments and his opinion to the Mayor, who makes the ultimate call.

Assuming we do open, the drill is the same with issuing the weather bulletin and safety signs. We'll try to speak with everybody in the lift queue about their skiing

Charley (left) and his fellow 'guardians of freedom'



PHOTO YOLANDA CARSLAW

ability, knowledge of the terrain and mountain safety, and that they're equipped with avalanche safety equipment and know how to use it. We offer free beacon training classes on Mondays and Wednesdays, so there's no excuse!

One of us usually stays in the hut until midday before having lunch together up on the mountain at Le Chalet 3200. Afternoons are spent checking the state of the runs, glacier and snowpack and making weather observations, which we share with Météo France to increase the accuracy of their forecasts. In bad weather, we'll usually both stay at the top of the mountain in case an accident occurs and helicopters can't fly for an air rescue, requiring us to assist people off the mountain.

## THE HARDEST PART OF MY JOB

Is rescuing the injured. We have far fewer daily accidents here than in busy ski resorts, where there are regular skier collisions and minor injuries, but when there is an incident here it tends to be serious. Rescues in this high mountain environment often involve delicate work in couloirs, crevasses and cliffs; it's hard physically and mentally. Critically, the La Grave ski patrol does not provide on-mountain emergency medical care – we're all first aid qualified and help get people to safety but, ultimately, we're merely a link to the emergency medical services in Briançon (a 30-minute helicopter ride away).

## WHAT I LOVE MOST ABOUT MY JOB

Is knowing the mountain so intimately, and having her all to myself sometimes. She is imprinted on all of our hearts and brains.

## I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT WHEN

I realised how open local guides are to sharing information about the mountain. There's a WhatsApp group for local guides, instructors, patrollers and freeriders where everyone shares updates on the snow conditions, if they've come across exposed rocks or spotted a dangerous-looking cornice. Okay, maybe not if they just scored fresh tracks on a virgin bowl...

## AFTER WORK

We usually stroll up from the hut to the Castellan for a beer – it's where all the locals go and Hanaé can play with her friends just outside. Then it's back home to Le Chazelet for supper and a check on the weather forecast before bed.

## MY PLAN B

If I wasn't a patroller? Perhaps I'd work in a ski shop... Here in La Grave, of course. *Fall Line*

**“What I love most? Knowing the mountain so intimately, and having her all to myself sometimes. She is imprinted on all our hearts”**