

How to venture out into the backcountry safely

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More people than ever will venture into the backcountry this year for fun alpine touring, cross-country skiing, and snowshoe adventures. Hopefully this includes you. If you don't have experience in a winter wilderness environment — whether that's skiing familiar trails near home that you normally hike in the summer or snowshoeing off the grid in the White Mountains — you may not realize the risks involved. Understanding proper layering, hydration, calorie intake, and wilderness first aid proves essential, not to mention knowledge of avalanche danger and tree wells, and the ability to assess the weather and terrain.

“Knowledge is king,” says Nick Sargent, a Stowe, Vt., resident and president of the nonprofit SnowSports Industries America. “Even the most basic information can get you out of 10 sticky situations, like going with a friend and carrying extra layers, food,

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Before heading out, learn about gear, weather, terrain

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and a shovel — and paying attention to the weather.”

This year will bring La Nina conditions, according to Kelly Davis, who served as SIA’s director of research for more than a decade and now consults for cross-country ski and backcountry initiatives. That means it’s expected to be “a super cold and snowy winter in the northern half of the United States,” says Davis.

Add to that a major influx of outdoor enthusiasts. Restrictions at ski resorts this year — with tickets limited to pass-holders at many ski areas, parking issues, and slower uphill loading due to limits on who can ride chairlifts together — are expected to draw more people into the backcountry. Cross-country gear sales spiked 300 percent in August and September, according to Davis, and ski guides across the country say enrollment in avalanche courses has skyrocketed.

“If you’re heading into the wilderness, you want to be comfortable with your gear, understand the weather report, and always be prepared for the whole [surprise] factor,” says Todd Walton, an avid backcountry skier and executive director of the Winter Wildlands Alliance, an organization that works to protect public lands. “It’s your responsibility to protect yourself and to protect the places you recreate.”

Adds Rob Benton from New England’s Acadia Mountain Guides, “You could be out there showshoeing around the White Mountains on any of those 4,000 footers and you might be stepping into avalanche terrain — either low consequence or high consequence — and not even know it.”

So how do you mitigate the risks and be prepared for the conditions? First, consider taking a class on wilderness travel. Many New England guide services and mountain schools offer classes, enabling you to get familiar with your gear, learn about the right gear to buy (if you haven’t purchased equipment yet), and find out how to approach wilderness conditions, whether you’re traveling on snowshoes or alpine touring gear.

“When you go into the backcountry, you need to know how to take care of yourself — how to stay warm and dry, and how to be your own chairlift and ski patroller and avalanche forecaster,” says Sarah Carpenter, co-owner of the American Avalanche Institute, which has run avalanche education courses since 1974. “It’s important to get some education because it gives you the tools to make better decisions and set yourself up for good days in the backcountry.”

Martin Volken, a Swiss mountain guide who has run Pro Guiding Service in Washington state for 27 years, recommends you take an intro to ski touring course before jumping into an avalanche course.

“There are important skills — like how to pack your backpack, how to put your skins on and take them off, and how to do uphill kick turns — that you need to learn first,” says Volken, who is certified by the International Federation of Mountain Guides Association (IFMGA). “If it’s your first time doing these things and you’re struggling with the equipment when the instructor is talking about avalanche concepts, you won’t have the mind space to put to the avalanche skills.”

Alternatively, choose a provider that incorporates this training into its avalanche course curriculum. Then, “take a course with your ski group,” recommends Russell Hunter, originally from Lincoln, Mass., and now a guide with the Boulder-based Colorado Mountain School, which has been running avalanche courses since 1981. “It’s more fun doing it with friends and then everyone has a baseline and a common language, which helps with [trip] planning and teamwork.”

In the United States, two main organizations have created avalanche safety curriculum for recreationalists: the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (known as AIARE) and the American Avalanche Institute (AAI). Although their approaches may vary, they both offer courses accredited by the American Avalanche Association (A3), the country’s



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Whether you’re skiing or snowshoeing, it’s essential to have knowledge of backcountry travel and hazards. Many outdoor educators in New England offer courses and private lessons. Above: Guide Jamie Selda from Whistler, British Columbia, showed the author’s daughter, Grace Wright (then 10), how to put skins on her skis.

governing body for avalanche training.

These courses include a three-day Level 1 course, when you start learning how to read avalanche forecast bulletins, identify and travel through avalanche terrain, use a beacon and other essential backcountry tools, assess the weather and snow conditions, and execute a one-person rescue. During the three-day Level 2 course, you’ll learn more in depth about analyzing snowpack and terrain, understanding avalanche bulletins, trip planning, and navigation, and also practice multi-person rescues. The newest offering, a one-day Avalanche Rescue course, can be taken on its own (no experience re-

quired) or as a refresher course for those with Level 1 certification — it covers transceiver use, single and multiple burials, probing and shovel techniques, rescue scenarios, and evacuations.

With the pandemic, most organizations have shifted to offering the first day online instead of in the classroom and then two days outside. Thankfully, it’s easy enough to social distance and mask up in outdoor winter conditions.

At least half a dozen New England guide services and mountain schools offer courses throughout the winter (check the AAI and AIARE websites for a full list). The North Conway, N.H.-based International Mountain

Climbing School and Maine-based Acadia Mountain Guides will collectively offer more than a dozen AIARE Level 1 avalanche courses over the next few months (\$425 per person), along with the avalanche rescue course (\$150-\$180). Similarly, East Coast Avalanche Education, based in northern Vermont, will run its own A3-accredited courses in the Mount Washington and Smuggler’s Notch areas from January to March (\$450).

Consider organizing a private avalanche course and bring your kids, too. “There isn’t a minimum age for kids,” says Matt Wade with the American Mountain Guides Association. “It de-

pends on the child’s physical ability and skill level. They need to have the ability to focus and listen to protocols, and the physical aptitude to ski for a couple of days in a row. Hiring a private guide to do a course is a great way to do it because the guide can tailor it to your pace of learning.”

If you’re not ready for an in-person course, other resources can provide a helpful start, but keep in mind, these won’t replace practical training and avalanche curriculum under a certified instructor. Check out “The Ski Guide Manual: Avalanche Techniques for the Backcountry,” a new book written by an IFMGA-certified ski guide that’s considered “the bible of ski touring,” according to Wade.

Due to COVID, the AAI also created the self-paced avalanche fundamentals course, which offers hours of video learning content and quizzes that test your knowledge (\$30). New this year, it also offers online Level 1 and Level 2 refresher courses.

Also tune in to the AAI’s Instagram channel for 10 free segments that cover all aspects of avalanche travel and awareness, from how to layer, pace yourself in the backcountry, and fix your skins to what items to carry in your backpack. And check out the Ski Kind initiative (www.skikind.org), which outlines the Backcountry Responsibility Code and is geared to anyone out enjoying the outdoors, whether you’re on “a lunch tray, splitboard, inflatable dragon” or any other mode of winter fun, according to the website.

Finally, once you get some basic training, consider hiring a guide for an adventure during which you can practice your skills — from assessing the weather to route-planning — in a no-consequence situation.

“You’ll have an opportunity to plan the day and get feedback from the guide in that process,” says Wade. “The guide can answer questions and be a stopgap [from] putting the group in harm’s way. That can be a really impactful learning tool for people.”

Adds legendary skier Glen Plake, “I hope people get out and experience a wonderful ski-touring day and start down a whole new path that gives them the joy of backcountry skiing for many years to come. Sure, go ride the yo-yos for a day [Plake’s term for ‘ski resorts’] and then go ski in the backcountry,” he says. “The natural skiing experience is all we’re looking for and I think more people are going to enjoy it.”

Whatever path you choose this winter — on whatever mode of travel — the important thing is to get out and explore, have fun, and be safe.

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