

# SHOPPING FOR SAFETY

This holiday, give the gift that keeps on giving: backcountry ski gear



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Christmas is only days away and financial markets are in the tank. We can do our part to help stimulate the economy by going skiing — after shopping for new backcountry gear! No matter if it's a recession or depression, we can't put a price on powder turns.

What I carry every day in the field offers some gift ideas besides a new pair of undies or a CD of Christmas carols. My pack and pockets hold the staples of avalanche rescue gear and a few additional goodies to help me in a tight spot.

First and foremost is my avalanche beacon. I supply it with good alkaline batteries and never let the power fall below 80 percent. The beacon is strapped to my body, not tucked in a pocket of clothing where it can fall out. All beacons are compatible but some have more features than others, like a digital display and a multiple burial function. The more expensive ones have two antennas (vs. one) and can fine search more accurately, a feature that's worth the extra money.

For tools, my shovel is used the most, besides skins and poles. I use it for digging snowpits and unsticking my truck, but its primary purpose is to dig out my partner if he or she is buried in a slide. I can only imagine what would go through my mind if I was buried, but I'd certainly be hoping my partner had a good shovel made of metal with a big scoop and solid handle; not a cute plastic one. The plastic ones can break plus their blade is much smaller. Mine has a telescoping handle which digs more efficiently and saves my back.

A third piece of vital gear, which contrary to popular belief is not an optional one, is an avalanche probe. It needs to be at least 230 cm in length in order to be effective in the typical snow

depths of avalanche debris. The thin, straw-sized probes that fit into the handle of a shovel aren't going to cut it; they're not very long and they easily bend. It's better than nothing, but that shouldn't be a benchmark. Each brand has its own auto locking system which the user needs to get good at deploying — with gloves on.

Another compulsory piece of gear is an inclinometer. These cheap, plastic cards measure slope angles. I carry mine in my pocket so I can whip it out in an instant to find out if I'm in avalanche terrain, defined as any open, snow-covered slope steeper than 30 degrees.

Near the top of my pack, housed in protective Tupperware is my pit kit, consisting of a waterproof notebook, pencil, crystal card, ruler, hand lens and compass. I consider the pit-kit optional for recreational skiers, but my job requires that I dig and record all the layering in the snow. This kit is essential for tracking changes over time, but not imperative for deciding if a slope is stable enough to ski. For that

all I need is a snow saw and inclinometer. With these I can quickly saw perfect snow columns for a Rutschblock or compression stability test on slopes approaching 30 degrees. I like a saw that attaches to a ski pole since I have to cut 3-4 feet deep in most instances.

Near the bottom of my pack is the first aid kit; a small pouch with a few gauze bandages, roll of tape, rubber gloves and pain medication. I'm not looking to do surgery in the field, but just to patch someone up well enough to get to the car. Alongside that is my ski repair kit: a Leatherman, six zip ties, duct tape and baling wire. If push comes to shove I can always limp out on one ski.

It might take awhile, which is one reason I always carry a small LED headlamp.

At the very bottom of the pack are items which in good years never see the light of day. In the event of a real emergency when I have to spend the night out or, worse, leave an injured partner, I carry a few things to make a bitter, uncomfortable night survivable. A puffy jacket with a hood and spare pair of gloves are always welcome to a chilly, wet, injured skier. In my lightweight bivvy sack someone can stay dry for hours. And sealed in a sandwich-sized Ziploc are matches, toilet paper and a fire-starter stick to make a downright cozy evening. I always think about the worst case scenario, and leaving behind an injured partner is one of the grimmest. Everything mentioned in this paragraph totals no more than 2 pounds. It's a lightweight alternative to a night of suffering and may well mean the difference between life and death in the backcountry.

Knowing your current location and heading is essential but difficult to achieve if visibility is low or new snow covers your tracks. I've been saved more than once by my GPS loaded with topo maps. It has steered me away from wrong drainages and spared me hours of bush-whacking. As a backup, I carry a tear resistant topo map of the area, but rarely have to use it.

Finally, tucked away in the lid of my pack is my only luxury item, a pair of hand warmers — the rip open and shake type — which pump out oven hot temperatures. It feels like cheating every time I use them, but I hate the "screamin' barbies" that come with re-warming numb hands.

Listing everything makes the load seem onerous, but it's not. All this fits into my 35 liter AvaLung pack, another fancy, hi-tech piece of gear that allows me to breath under the snow if I get buried. The entire kit weighs in at 14 pounds, a manageable amount.

Enjoy your holiday, help stimulate the economy and don't forget to contact the Avalanche Center for up-to-date weather and snowpack information ([www.mtavalanche.com](http://www.mtavalanche.com); 587-6981). ♦

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