

How To Load A Backcountry Ski Pack

You've Got It In The Bag

By Avery Stonich

You've topped out after huffing uphill for three hours, and biting wind is needling through your base layer. You rummage through your pack, looking for a jacket and snack, and realize you forgot your shell. Your friends are ready to rip, so you hustle, struggling to get organized and feeling flustered. In haste, you cram everything back in your pack, burying your shovel and probe.

This is not a good backcountry strategy. To be safe and efficient, you need to dial in your packing so you can easily access the right gear at the right time. Bring only what you need, including emergency supplies, and nothing more. A heavy pack saps precious energy.

Keep in mind everyone has a slightly different approach. With time, you'll figure out what works best for you. Once you have a system, stick to it and pack everything in the same place every time.

Ski Packs

Packs made for backcountry skiing are loaded with design features to make life easier. In addition, they tend to be flatter and wider than other packs to keep weight close to your body. Use the smallest pack you can. A 22- to 28-liter pack is perfect for day trips.

Avalanche safety packs

You never want to be caught in an avalanche, but if you are, having a pack with avalanche safety features might mean the difference between life and death. Here are some options.

ABS® packs: These packs are equipped with airbags to help you float to the surface of an avalanche. When caught in a slide, you pull a handle on the shoulder strap, which triggers compressed gas cartridges to inflate the airbags.

Example: Osprey Kode ABS® Compatible 22+10 (\$200) + ABS™ Vario Base Unit (\$930). ospreypacks.com

Black Diamond AvaLung: AvaLung packs have a tube that you put in your mouth once you start your descent. If buried in an avalanche, you breathe through the mouthpiece, which delivers fresh air from a valve box in the shoulder strap and expels CO2 through an exhaust port near the hip. This extends fresh air supply, and can increase burial survival time from 15 to 58 minutes.

Example: Black Diamond Anthem Avalung. \$270; blackdiamondequipment.com

Black Diamond Jetforce: New this season, Black Diamond's Jetforce technology is the first to use a battery-powered fan instead of compressed gas to inflate the pack's airbags. It can inflate four times on a single charge (compared to single-use compressed gas canisters). Air can pump into the bag even if it is punctured, and the bag automatically deflates after three minutes to create a pocket of air for a buried skier.

Example: Black Diamond Halo 28 Jetforce Avalanche Airbag Pack. \$1,275; blackdiamondequipment.com



Anatomy of a Pack:

Osprey's Kode ABS® Compatible 22+10 is a fully functioning backcountry ski pack, and can unzip to accommodate an ABS™ Vario Base Unit with airbags (sold separately). At 22 liters, it's perfect for day trips, and it expands to 32 liters for outings that require more gear.

Features

- Back pocket zips open fully for easy access to gear
- Front of pack holds skis diagonally, or a snowboard; has a loop for an ice tool
- Front gear pocket organizes avalanche safety gear for easy retrieval
- Zippered goggle pocket on top has plenty of room for additional gear
- Integrated helmet carry
- Insulated hydration tube sleeve
- Contoured, padded hip belt with zippered pockets



"Finding ways to make whatever equipment you're carrying serve multiple functions is key. You want your volume and weight as low as possible." —Bill Anderson, Exum ski guide



REHAB your gear.

BEFORE

Dirt and soaked in water ruin the insulation properties of down.

AFTER

Clean and waterproofed down keeps water out and body heat in.



Nikwax Down Wash

Cleans effectively while preserving the insulating properties of down.

Nikwax Down Proof

Adds safe, high performance water repellency to down garments.

“I have to eat more often than the guys. And I dress warmer than most of the guys I know. I get cold really fast when we stop, so I like to keep a lightweight warm layer really accessible.”
—Angel Collinson, professional big mountain skier

What To Eat

The amount of food you bring depends on how far you're going. And you probably don't need to pack the same stash your guy friends do. Women are different. Pack plenty of calories and eat often.

In your pack: Easy-to-eat foods are best: sandwiches, wraps, trail mix, bars, salami, hard-boiled eggs, energy blocks, or goo. Consolidate food into one Ziplock bag that you carry near the top of your pack for easy access.

In your pockets: Keep snacks like energy bars and blocks readily accessible so you can chow them on-the-go. If you're the only one who's hungry, the whole group probably won't want to stop.

How To Hydrate

Bring about two liters of water for a day trip. Add electrolyte powder if you like. Top off your water with clean snow if you're running low. A thermos of hot tea or soup is great for cold days.

Options

Water bottle: Choose one with a wide mouth so you can easily fill it with water or snow. On cold days, tuck it in a neoprene sleeve to prevent freezing, or fill one bottle with hot water and drink it second.



Dromedary: This rugged bag won't freeze. A three-way cap makes it easy to fill, pour, and drink. And the Dromedary packs well into the back of your pack, placing the weight near your core.



Hydration bladder: If it's cold, don't use a hydration bladder. Tubes and valves freeze too easily. Plus, if your bladder punctures, you're hosed.



3 step program

SEND YOUR GEAR TO REHAB.

nikwaxna.com/gr

At Nikwax we do all we can to minimize our impact on the environment and people's health. We are the only established outdoor aftercare company to have a completely WaterBased, non-flammable and fluorocarbon (PFC) free range. We have always avoided using PFCs as we believe they are a risk to consumer health and the environment.



What To Bring

Gear

- Skins
- Goggles
- Sunglasses
- Two one-liter water bottles or a two-liter Dromedary bag
- Sunscreen
- Lip balm
- Headlamp
- Map
- Compass
- Helmet
- Several long ski straps (handy for more than just strapping skis)
- Ice axe, crampons, and climbing helmet if you're heading to burly terrain
- Tampons, pads, toilet paper, and hand wipes in a Ziplock bag if it's that time of month



Whippets are good

A whippet is a ski pole with a modified ice pick on the end, helpful in steep terrain.



Expert Tip

Wrap duct tape on your pole partway down the shaft for a lower grip you can use when skinning across steep slopes.

Clothing

Be prepared for bad weather. Wear a base layer, ski pants, and gloves, but also bring:

- Mid-weight layer, like a fleece
- Down or synthetic insulated sweater with a hood
- Thin wind-resistant layer (optional but great for skinning uphill in the wind)
- Waterproof shell
- Extra pair of gloves (in case one gets wet)
- Balaclava or Buff
- Warm hat
- Sun hat

Avalanche Gear

- **Beacon:** Wear over your base layer or keep it in a zipped pants pocket. In avalanche terrain, put a layer over your beacon so it won't come off in a slide
- **Shovel:** Metal or carbon, not plastic
- **Probe:** Not convertible ski poles, which waste precious seconds in an emergency
- **Snow notebook:** Use a mechanical pencil (pens freeze)
- **Clinometer:** To measure slope angle
- **Optional:** Saw, snow crystal card, and loupe for analyzing snowpack

Avalanche gear is essential—but worthless if you don't know how to use it. Before heading into the backcountry, take an AIAIE Level I Avalanche Course to learn how to evaluate terrain and snow conditions, use safety gear, and know what to do if an avalanche occurs.

First aid kit

- Band-aids, bandages, and butterfly strips
- Gauze
- Tape
- Antibiotic ointment and wipes
- Ibuprofen
- Benadryl
- Blister kit: moleskin or 2nd Skin, duct tape
- Emergency blanket: use for warmth or an emergency shelter



The Ultralight and Watertight Medical Kit .5 by Adventure Medical Kits (\$17; adventuremedicalkits.com) is a good starter kit with room to add extra supplies.

Repair/safety kit

- Duct tape: A million uses. You can even slap it on a hot spot to prevent blisters
- Bailing wire: Use alone or with duct tape for fixes on the fly
- Zip ties
- Spare batteries
- Multi-purpose tool
- Matches/lighter
- Whistle
- Cell phone



Turn off your phone.

Phones interfere with beacons, even in airplane mode, so turn them off completely when in avalanche terrain.

How To Pack

Place things you use the least at the bottom of the pack. Keep what you need to access frequently at the top. Load heavy items in the center or just below center, close to your back. Use pockets for smaller items that might be hard to fish out of the main compartment. Many ski packs have a separate pocket for avalanche gear. You can also use this to separate wet and dry items.

Where to pack what

Bottom: repair kit, shell, headlamp, extra layers

Middle: water, extra gloves, balaclava or buff, sun hat

Top: food, down sweater

Avalanche gear pocket: shovel, probe, first aid kit, snow notebook, saw, clinometer, crampons

Small pack pocket: camera, snacks, multi-purpose tool, ski straps, goggles tucked into hat, compass, map

Clothing pockets: camera, sunscreen, lip balm, snacks

Outside: Minimize gear on the outside of your pack. You should have a loop for your ice tool. Some packs even have a dedicated helmet stash.

Carrying Skis

If there's no snow at the trailhead or you're in steep terrain, strap your skis together and put them on your pack either diagonally or in an A-frame. Load skis high enough so they don't bump your legs as you walk.



Tips For The Trail

At the trailhead: Wear warm clothes while getting ready, and then shed all but a layer or two. You should be slightly chilly at the start since you'll heat up quickly once you're moving.

Climbing: Strap your helmet to your pack. Shed layers as you heat up to avoid sweating. When using an ice axe, tuck one or both poles horizontally between your pack and your back.



Breaks: Immediately put on an extra layer to conserve body heat. Eat and drink whenever you take a break in order to maximize the efficiency of your stops.

Transitions: Tuck skins into your jacket for the descent. This way, when you finish a run, you'll have them ready for the next climb.

Descending: On the descent, make sure your shovel and probe are accessible—not buried under anything. In an emergency, you'll need this gear quickly.

An advertisement for Redfeather Snowshoes. It features a young boy with blonde hair wearing a blue and black winter jacket and snowshoes. The background is a snowy outdoor setting. Text on the left side reads "Redfeather.com" and "800 525 0081" with a small American flag icon. In the center, there is a logo for "REDFEATHER SNOWSHOES" with a red feather graphic. Below the logo, it says "Celebrating 25 years" in large yellow letters and "SNOWSHOES" in large white letters. The bottom of the image shows a close-up of a snowshoe on a snowy surface.