

Off limits: get the kit!

Want to duck under the ropes and get away from the crowds? Whether it's a short boot over a col or a full-blown tour miles from the lifts, these are the essentials you need to make escape as easy as possible

Recommended by Martin Chester, British Mountain Guide

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1 TOURING BINDINGS, AROUND £300

Both www.backcountryuk.com and www.skiequipmentuk.com have a good range of bindings.

They're not cheap, but get some quality touring bindings on your favourite all-mountain skis (release the heel for the up, and lock them down for the descent), and you need never faff over what to ride again. Add some skins and you'll be cruising uphill away from the crowds, whilst others flounder, up to their armpits in powder, carrying (and cursing) their heavy skis.

For the odd bit of hike and ride action, the Marker Duke is perfect. While for dedicated ski tourers, the Dynafit/G3 Onyx pin bindings give stripped down, race-tuned, uphill performance. But they offer very limited adjustability and require dedicated touring boots. So for the perfect all rounder (without compromising performance), the Fritschi Freeride Pro gets my vote. The bindings are easy to adjust, and allow you to swap footwear to suit the conditions, so you can even use downhill boots with them. In short, you can go anywhere and ski anything.

2 ALPINIST SKINS, FROM AROUND £100

For my money, the choice is simple, get some G3 skins if you want the lightest skin, smallest pack size, and most bombproof fitting available, with www.mountainspirit.co.uk selling them for £120.

Get some and they'll change your life. Anyone who has ever shouldered their skis and booted up will know what a laborious pain in the arse it is. Skins make

Going touring? Don't forget to pack your map



www.mountainspirit.co.uk



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it effortless to go uphill and break free; skins to ski that awesome pitch and be sure you can get out the bottom, like an insurance policy. I always throw my skins in my pack, so woe betide anyone following my tracks if they don't have skins in their bag! Modern blends of mohair and nylon (instead of seal skin) give excellent glide and durability. Coll Tex and

Black Diamond all make great skins with a perfect combo of good plush, performance adhesives, and efficient tip and tail fix systems to suit varying ski designs.

3 TOURING BOOTS AND CUSTOM FOOTBEDS, AROUND £400

I love my Scarpa Matrix boots (£300, www.scarpa.co.uk), while for fitting, try Colin Martin (www.solutions4feet.co.uk) for shells, liners and Superfeet footbeds.

We are spoilt for choice these days, with so many manufacturers making excellent touring and freeride boots. Most have a range spanning from downhill performance (with the occasional climb); through lighter weight touring boots, good for a bit of both; to stripped down and featherweight boots for uphill racing. Decide where you fit on this scale, then choose the manufacturer that best fits your foot shape. Just don't get something too stiff. Fail to bend your ankles and you'll be wondering why you



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leave your arse behind. The best advice for boot buying is not to skimp on price or fitting. We've all bought an off-the-shelf bargain and regretted it, so go to a specialist and take their advice. If you must rent, at the very least get some custom footbeds as they'll make any boot feel more like your own.

4 MAP AND COMPASS, FROM £30

As well as your compass (I like the Silva type 4, £26 from www.cotswoldoutdoor.com), an altimeter watch is useful, with the Suunto Core (£230, again from **Cotswold Outdoor**) being my choice.



Get a proper map (not an erratic tourist board sketch) and learn how to read it, use a compass with it, and life gets much better, and safer. Most Alpine countries have ski routes on their maps if you buy the right series. Try Stanfords, in London, who have a huge range. The best ones are the SwissTopo ski maps (www.swisstopo.ch) in a scale of 1:50k. This is a double winner – because Switzerland has a border covering some of the best bits of France, Italy and Austria! You will recognise these maps by their blue cover and the suffix (S) to the serial number. Easy to read, they have shaded red all the terrain which is steep enough to avalanche. Furthermore, all the routes are coded, with masses of phone numbers and other useful information printed on the back of the map.

5 TRANSCEIVER AND PROBE, AROUND £350

Mammut Pulse (£269 from www.v12outdoor.com) and G3 Carbon Speed Pro 240 (£79).



Buy the best transceiver you can afford. It must be a latest generation, digital unit with three antennae. Try a few out and choose the display you find easiest to understand. I like the Ortovox S1 as a working tool with some neat features and a clear display but if I ever need to be rescued, I'll be hoping my mates and clients have a Mammut Pulse! Based on years of training folks in avalanche rescue and watching the results, this unit really gives the best blend of sophisticated functionality, along with simplicity of use.

Now, for the probe, I think the G3 Carbon Speed Pro 240 avalanche probe (£79 from www.mountainspirit.co.uk) is the one. Beautifully designed, quick to deploy, rapid to fix, and reliable in all conditions. I've gone for carbon because the saving in weight encourages me to carry a probe that is long enough to do the job. Make sure to buy a probe that is at least 240cm long. With median depth of burial at 1m50 – a 2m probe will have you probing slowly and inefficiently, bent down over the surface.

6 METAL SHOVEL, FROM £50

Try www.mountainspirit.co.uk in Aviemore for both the shovels named here.

The plastic ones don't work. Trust me. And if you are digging for someone, you really don't want something that snaps or bends badly. The BCA tour is the lightest on the market, but to make a strong blade out of less metal usually involves a complex 3D shape, which can be bulky to pack. The G3 SpadeTech is great for a strong and trusty tool that packs flatter than most. Clients regularly ask to try it out and they even make a women's version (how cool is that?). It's not the lightest, but the telescopic handle leaves the pounds where you need them most – in the head. The cutting edge is, therefore, strong and effective, and the packed size is the smallest I've seen for a shovel that works. Stronger, sharper, smaller to pack, and with a good

length handle (and still the total weight creeps in under my last shovel), it is impressive!

7 AVALANCHE AIRBAG BACKPACK, FROM £600

See www.snowsafeco.uk for all the options. Just make sure you use it to make life less risky and not as an excuse to go where you shouldn't.

These are now de rigueur for big mountain pros and Alaska addicts but they're also very useful if you're out a lot in



sketchy, early season conditions. You can choose from either ABS or Snowpulse models, with both packs operating along the same lines, albeit with a little tweak here or there. In short, get in an avalanche and you should inflate the system (by pulling a handle) to avoid complete burial and to give you some protection.

The manufacturer figures are really mighty impressive. The Swiss Federal Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research (SLF), which has been documenting avalanche accidents over the last two decades, states that when an ABS airbag was used, 105 people survived, and only one died. Hopefully you'll never be one of those statistics, but should you be able to afford an ABS or Snowpulse backpack, we think it makes for a very good investment indeed.



GET YOURSELF A GUIDE



Martin Chester is director of training at Plas y Brenin, the National Mountain Centre in north Wales. He also wrote the Off Piste Essentials DVD, the ideal way to learn how to use all the kit mentioned here. See www.pyb.co.uk/ski for more information.

