

Under the ropes: get the kit!

Planning on heading into the backcountry this winter? Whether it's a short boot over a col or a full-on multi-day tour, Martin Chester has the low-down of essentials you don't want to leave without

ovel? Check.
be? Check.
zard bag? Check.
re set to go!

1 MOUNTAIN EQUIPMENT ARETE JACKET FROM £110

Now I'm no Gok Wan – so even after several decades of packing a rucksack on a daily basis, I still struggle to decide what to wear. Being on the 'chubby side' I like to keep the layers down, especially if skiing hard – so this means I need that reassuring 'extra layer' in the bag for when we need to stop, or for when the weather gets really burly. This particular jacket is hard to beat. Top notch down insulation in the lightest shell you can think of, makes for a truly packable product. It's way warmer than a spare fleece – and a fraction of the packed size or weight. Having their tried and tested He30 shell means that, whether you sweat your cobs off, or grovel around in spring slush, it'll still be warm no matter how damp it



gets outside. Whether this is your insurance policy or comfort blanket – it's great to have one on board! Best of all, it comes in a range of colours to suit your get-up.

➔ www.mountain-equipment.co.uk

2 ORTOVOX 3+ TRANSCIEVER FROM £270

Wherever your off-piste forays take you, there's no way of guaranteeing that an avalanche won't occur. But you can ensure you're prepared with the right gear to increase your chances – and your fellow skiers' chances – of survival. Which is where a transceiver comes in.

I've been a staunch advocate of the Mammut Pulse since Manuel Genswein and his team set the bar for 'digital units with three antennae' a few years ago.

Since then, a lot has happened in transceiver technology – with designs from the simple and foolproof, to the complex and

sophisticated, which can detect multiple burials.

The needs of a regular professional like me (in charge of a group on a daily basis) are different from those of the occasional user, who would rather ski than practice avalanche drills! Hence, I've called on my most objective test team: Joe (4) and Annie (6). They don't DO instruction manuals – but they do win plenty of sweets off their old man when playing a round of 'hunt the transceiver' with this year's latest model.

The Ortovox 3+ is definitely the design of choice for those who want to be prepared for the likelihood of multiple burials, but want to keep it simple. The 3+ doesn't do anything other than the basics – but that's probably a good thing for kids, and stressed-out adults alike.

Ortovox also do the details really well: the styling is beautiful; the harness is comfy and easy to use; the display is crisp and clear. I also happen to like their graphics for the pin-point search – but that's a matter of taste. Personally, I'll keep using my Pulse for work – but if simple is what you're after, then the 3+ is hard to beat.

➔ www.facewest.co.uk

➔ www.ellis-brigham.com



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3 G3 ALPINIST SKINS FROM £130

Of all the skins on the market, these G3 Alpinist skins are the lightest and most flexible on the market. Not only do they pack down smaller, but the fancy 'double hook' tip attachment means you



won't be kicking them off in a hurry, either. Until someone makes better, lighter skins, I'll stick with these. They're my 'get out of jail free' card. Fancy the look of that untracked bowl, but uncertain where it'll end up? These will get you back out again. Fancy a trip over that next col, but can't be wading up to your nuts in powder? These are the answer.

➔ www.mountainspirit.co.uk
 ➔ www.skibartlett.com

4 LAERDAL POCKET MASK FROM £15

I hope by now you can trust to the fact that I'm not the sort of plonker that carries loads of clobber that I could do without. But this one is a fairly harsh (but lightweight) concession to the reality of the situation.

You wear a transceiver right? You carry a shovel and probe at all times? Well, I'm sorry to do this to you, but here's the grim truth: if you successfully dig one of your mates out of a pile of snow they're going to need resuscitating – and this could make all the difference between success and failure.

I said sorry to do this because now you've thought about it, like me, you could never forgive yourself if refusing to carry one ever let you (or your mate) down.

➔ www.medicalwarehouse.co.uk



5 GRIVEL JORASSES 2 ICE AXE FROM £150

I never thought there could be such thing as a 'bling' ice axe. It's a tool as far as I'm concerned – and this one is a veritable one-size-fits-all multi-tool at that. It's short enough to slip down the back of your pack (so you don't need to look like a plonker, or snag it up and lose it in the first chair lift you encounter).

It's got a one-piece head that'll take any kind of abuse, and a well-crafted and sharp adze for cutting steps (cos you forgot your crampons – again). It has a nifty sliding grip too, so that when it all gets a bit steeper than planned you can climb your way out of trouble.



This is where the reassuringly technical pick comes into its own. It comes with a handy lanyard which, for our purposes, you can take straight off and stash in that box of 'handy guff' you like

to keep in your kit cupboard.

And you can leave it there too – as this axe does everything you need without it.

Just don't let go!

➔ www.snowandrock.com

6 LIFE SYSTEMS BLIZZARD BAG FROM £30

This is the one piece of kit I hope to never use. In the depths of winter, it lives down the bottom of my sack, and gives me the extra confidence that, should things go wrong, I stand a chance of coping with the consequences. Come spring, I'll gladly leave it behind for its

lighter, less insulated baby brother – but if you should ever have to leave a casualty for a while, or spend a night out in a snow-hole, this would make all the difference. It's a one size fits all, emergency sleeping bag that's light enough to ignore, and expands on opening. You'll rustle like an oven-ready turkey, but you're sure to stay toasty.

➔ www.lifesystems.co.uk



“You'll rustle like an oven-ready turkey”

7 G3 CARBON SPEED PRO PROBE FROM £70



If you think a probe is just a probe, think again. Every so often you get a piece of kit that appears to have been made by someone who actually cares. From the first time you get it out of its handy pack you'll think: 'Aye up, this has been knocked up by someone who understands me.'

They're so light you'll never be tempted to use your poles as a probe again (you shouldn't) and so quick to assemble, there's one less thing to worry about when the s#!t hits the fan. Size matters, too: length and girth are both equally important, as a 3m probe will stop you bending double every shot. The stability that comes with a fatter probe will ensure you have an accurate idea of where the tip is ending up.

➔ www.mountainspirit.co.uk



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.



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