

## 60 second guide to backcountry

If you haven't already discovered the pow-haven/adrenalin-pumping/awe-inspiring thrills that ducking under the ropes brings, here's our concise (ish) guide to all things backcountry.

WORDS MARY CREIGHTON



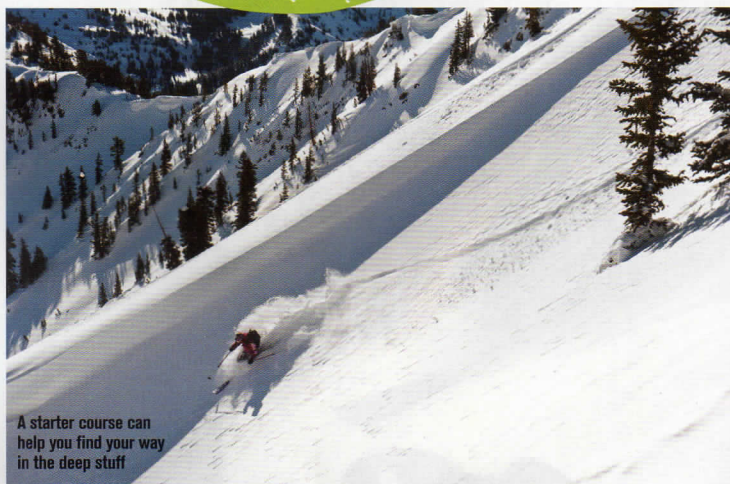
Cue riding off into the sunset-style pun...

PHOTO COURTESY OF VOLKL

**1** **CASTING OFF**  
Transitioning from an expert piste or pow skier to backcountry supremo is no easy feat – not only does the technique take some practice, there's also numerous safety measures to contend with. So before you go planning your trip across the Haute Route, consider spending a day or two in-resort learning the basics. Our backcountry guru Martin Chester suggests starting gently by just venturing

slightly off the piste while you work up courage. Fall-Line's other backcountry aficionado Eric Kendall recommends joining a starter course: "Not only do you get taught to do things properly, it's the best value guiding you can buy, as the costs are shared and you get to know potential ski-buddies." Plus y Brenin and Piste to Powder both offer courses that will help you find your way in the deep stuff.

[www.pyb.co.uk](http://www.pyb.co.uk) & [www.pistetopowder.com](http://www.pistetopowder.com)



A starter course can help you find your way in the deep stuff

PHOTO ALEX O'BRIEN/AC



Skins open up the mountain

PHOTO GRANT GUNDERSON/BLACK DIAMOND

**2** **GET THE KIT**  
The drawback of leaving the crowds behind is that it also means leaving the safety of patrolled, groomed, avalanche-protected pistes, so at the very least make sure you include these on you, or in your rucksack:

- Avalanche transceiver
- Shovel
- Probe
- Spare clothing (don't forget a spare pair of gloves)
- A compass, map and altimeter

And, above all, make sure you know how to use them! Anything else? Well, a pair of skins and touring bindings can really open up the mountain – booting it up is longer, more exhausting and not always possible. Boarders don't need to be left out either, splitboards will change your life!

Make sure you've got an avalanche transceiver, probe... and spare gloves



“ Make sure your insurance covers off-piste and touring – you don’t want to be on the receiving end of a mountain rescue bill... ”



**Martin Chester’s...**

**...golden tips**

- Whatever you do, don’t skip on equipment – get a metal shovel, not a flimsy plastic one, and invest in a digital transceiver – dodgy analogue ones don’t cut it in an emergency.
- Start off somewhere with plenty of wide, open terrain without the added risk of crevasses.
- Company is a blessing so find some fellow ski-buffs – try a ski club such as the Eagle Ski Club ([eagleskiclub.org.uk](http://eagleskiclub.org.uk)).
- There’s more to life (and skiing!) than the classic Haute Route between Chamonix and Zermatt.
- Buy some comfy, well-fitted touring boots – you’ll never look back.



It's worth the climb... we promise

PHOTO MICHAEL WEISS/OWATI



**Eric Kendall’s...**

**...golden tips**

- Learn what 30° looks like: that’s the angle above which snow really starts to slide in spectacular ways...
- Forget your pole straps – in trees, rocky terrain and avalanche-prone slopes they’re a hazard (and they can even do your thumb in a simple fall); they are not nearly as crucial as some suggest and I never seem to drop my sticks...
- Clothing: comfortable for sitting round drinking beer = uncomfortable for climbing. Get the best technical kit you can afford – you’re looking for fit, stretch, and not too many pockets or bells and whistles.
- Camelbacks suck. Hoses and bags leak and freeze... Take a mineral water bottle instead – they’re light and durable.
- Duct tape: wind a long strip round your water bottle and/or pole for repairing feet (or Camelbacks!). Not medically approved, but field-proven and unlikely to exacerbate the problem unless the person happens to be allergic to the glue...

**3 BEFORE YOU GO...**

- Make sure your insurance covers off-piste and touring - believe us, you don’t want to find yourself on the receiving end of a hefty mountain rescue bill...
- Those Yanks can get pretty strict, with some resorts even confiscating lift passes from those who dare slide under the rope, so check before you shred!
- Book a guide. Not only can they reduce the chance of you getting into trouble on the hill, they’ll also help you get the very best out of every corner of the mountain!
- Even if you ski with a guide, know how to read the mountain. The North Face have a rather good online guide (check it out at [snowsafety.thenorthface.com](http://snowsafety.thenorthface.com)), and lots of resorts offer good old-fashioned paper pamphlets that are well worth a scout.

**4 GET OUT THERE**

Backcountry fiends have endless possibilities, from the Alps right through to Antarctica. But for beginners here’s a few, er, more accessible suggestions, from swift hikes to longer jaunts...

**Flute Bowl, Whistler-Blackcomb**

If you’re after the daddy of powder, you can’t go wrong in Flute Bowl. It is actually in-bounds, but it’s a 45-60 minute hike before you start skiing...  
[www.whistlerblackcomb.com](http://www.whistlerblackcomb.com)

**Maroikopf, Stuben**

A 20-minute skin (or a 30-minute boot) to the summit gives a huge amount of choice, with the western descent towards Langen offering freshies days after a snowfall.  
[www.stuben.at](http://www.stuben.at)

**Bishorn, Zinal**

Ready for a big hike? Climbing up the Bishorn means a well-deserved hut-stay in the Cabane de Tracuit before ascending the final 1,000. Just make sure you get up early – you have to get back down too...  
[www.skizinal.com](http://www.skizinal.com)

**Saint Veran, Queyras**

Base yourself in one of Europe’s highest villages, and climb and ski the Tête de Jacquette (2757m) and Tête du Longet (3146m). Guaranteed to turn you into a backcountry addict.  
[www.queyras.com](http://www.queyras.com)

**Fanes, South Tyrol**

You won’t want to leave the Rifugio Fanes – it’s the ultimate base for day tours. For your first time there’s a gentle 500m ascent to the Col Toronn. And once you’ve mastered that, there’s plenty more backcountry to master.  
[www.suedtirol.info](http://www.suedtirol.info)