

More Than Just Gear

Avalanche safety courses are essential for exploring winter and spring backcountry safely.



BY ALLISON WOODS

As snowshoeing and winter hiking continue to increase in popularity, so too shall the likelihood of increased avalanche-related incidents. This season's fatal accidents led me to ask my friends and colleagues about their winter backcountry habits. What I discovered is that the majority of them, particularly the snowshoers and "in-bounds backcountry" skiers, have no formal training in assessing danger levels. Even less of them have avalanche-related safety equipment. This is a serious concern. Many, if not most, of our prime snowshoeing destinations pass through avalanche terrain. Rather than test some super-cool piece of gear this month, I set out to test some "gear for your brain" in the form of a basic avalanche course.

In February, I took the Avalanche 1 Course offered by Pro Guiding Service. Pro Guiding is owned by Martin Volken, renowned Swiss guide and local ski guidebook author. He runs two ski shops, one in Seattle, and one in North Bend, and offers a wide range of courses and trips in climbing, mountaineering, and ski touring through his guide service. The course I took is the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education



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Know your snow: avalanche safety instructor Ben Haskell explains baseline pit analysis.

(AIARE) Level 1 certification, and as such, follows a prescribed curriculum.

The Course

We started Day One at Alpentel Lodge for a few hours of classroom time. Our class consisted of seven students. The two instructor/guides were Scott Schell and Ben Haskell. The pair complemented each other nicely, with Scott having a modern perspective, and Ben possessing an endearing old-school crustiness that belies his age. The first two lectures were devoted to the formation of snow pack and avalanche conditions. Afterward, we headed out into the

Alpentel backcountry. There we looked at different types of terrain and learned some essentials of snow travel. In the afternoon we talked about weather and trip planning, and did some field analysis of the snow pack in Edelweiss Bowl. Day One wrapped up with a short debriefing session in the lodge.

Day Two started early with a slide show at the North Bend shop. We looked at images of different avalanche situations. After the morning lecture, we drove back up to Alpentel, arriving just as the sun was burning off the clouds. There we broke into teams to dig a couple of snow pits. Ben led us through the somewhat complicated aspects of baseline pit testing, and

then Scott taught us to do a Rutschblock test. These tests may seem like an awful lot of gobbledygook to a snowshoer or backcountry skier, but there is a huge amount of information buried in the snow pack. We concluded the morning session with a single buried transceiver search.

After lunch, it was back out in the sunshine for more transceiver work. It's simply not enough to own the equipment. Like ice axe arrest, beacon search takes quite a bit of practice to master, particularly in the case of multiple burials.

We wrapped up Day Two with a debriefing session in North Bend, where the entire two day session was

reviewed and discussed. The course was concluded with an informal question-and-answer period on the materials covered.

Impressions

The AIARE curriculum is solid. Ben and Scott did a great job of taking us through it. They allowed for tangent discussions as questions came up. The course was fast-paced and interesting, and really opened my eyes to snow hazards. Much more time was spent on what they call "terrain management" than on crisis interven-

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Above: Avalanche safety essentials, left to right: collapsible avalanche probe, snow shovel, and avalanche beacon.

The Essentials: Beacon, Shovel, Probe

Our instructors emphasized over and over how important it is to carry all three of these tools when traveling in avalanche terrain. The tools together comprise a safety system; without all three components, you might as well not carry any of them. For this course, I used:

Backcountry Access Tracker DTS, \$300

The Tracker is the most popular transceiver on the market. Why? It's incredibly easy to use. I found the beacon's controls and functions simple and intuitive in both induction line and grid searches. The digital processing did hiccup slightly when performing multiple victim burial searches, but with practice, this beacon can be your best friend.

Voile XL Shovel, \$40

This super-light shovel weighs just under a pound. The scoop is of standard size, but the handle is stubby and doesn't extend. When digging snow pits, the short handle put me at a disadvantage compared to those with full-length shovels. This might not be the best shovel to use in the case of an avalanche burial situation. Add a telescoping handle, and well, that's another story.

Black Diamond QuickDraw Tour Probe 190, \$39

The Black Diamond Tour probe assembles in a jiffy, and is sturdy as can be. Colored pole sections allow for quick depth assessment. For another \$9 and 2.5 ounces, upgrade to the BD QuickDraw Super Tour Probe. You'll gain an additional 75 centimeters of probe length and a more comprehensive measuring system.

tion, and rightfully so. Safe snow travel depends largely on research conducted prior to leaving the parking lot. Transceiver work is not part of the AIARE curriculum, but Pro Guiding includes it in their program. That additional training is both valuable and a lot of fun.

Something you might not think about when considering taking an avalanche class is student to teacher ratio. It hadn't crossed my mind until I took this course. Pro Guiding's ratio for Avalanche 1 is no more than five students to one teacher. This allows

for open dialogue on every topic, and a fair amount of individual time with the instructors.

Course cost is currently \$180, and includes roughly 17 hours of training. Participants can be outfitted with alpine, AT, telemark, or snowboard gear, and are expected to be at least "strong intermediate" skiers or boarders. I might amend that last bit to say "very strong" as the terrain covered is all expert level. Steep terrain is a necessary element in learning to assess slope stability. Safety equipment is required. It can

be rented at either of the Pro Ski shops. A ski lift ticket is needed for Day One, and is not included in the cost of the course. As of publication deadline, there are no more Avalanche 1 courses scheduled for this ski season. If three or more students are interested, another session can be taught. Pro Guiding plans to expand the Avalanche 1 course to include an additional three-hour evening lecture prior to the first day at Alpentel. This will allow for more time in the field. Course cost is expected to increase slightly to \$199. ♦

Avalanche Resources

Pro Guiding Service

(425) 888-6397
info@ProGuiding.com
www.proguiding.com

Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain

By Bruce Tremper
2001, The Mountaineers Books

American Avalanche Association

www.avalanche.org

Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center

www.nwac.noaa.gov

Avalanche hotline

206-526-6677
(Local mountain weather and avalanche conditions).

What's Hot in Gear

A report from the Winter OR show...

I recently made my twice-yearly trip to the Outdoor Retailer show, held in Salt Lake City.

OR is the place where gear manufacturers and retailers get together to buy and sell. The gear and apparel seen at the Winter '04 show will be in stores this coming fall. Here are a few things that caught my eye.

Trends

Many more variations on the **softshell**. Jackets made from many different fabrics for better performance. Insulated soft-shells. Hoods, hoods, hoods.

Welded seams everywhere. For the consumer this equals lighter weight, more flexible seams, and more waterproof garments.

Durable Water Resistant (DWR) treatment on nearly everything.

Cool products

Malden Mills dazzled with an array of new **Polartec** fabrics. Lighter weight softshells, hard-finished fleece, patterned and textured fabrics, and a very cool new take on Monkey Fur fleece.

A new line of camera bags from **Mountainsmith** ranging in size from pocket camera to fully suspended day pack.

Ultralight snowshoes from **Mountain Safety Research** that look like nothing you've ever seen.

The lightest, most absorbent pack towel ever, from **Cascade Designs**.

Inflatable sleeping pads with Primaloft insulation from **Big Agnes**.

Sierra Designs joins the elite ranks of the sub-four pound, three season, two wall, freestanding tent set. This is the first tent to enter the market with carbon fiber poles.