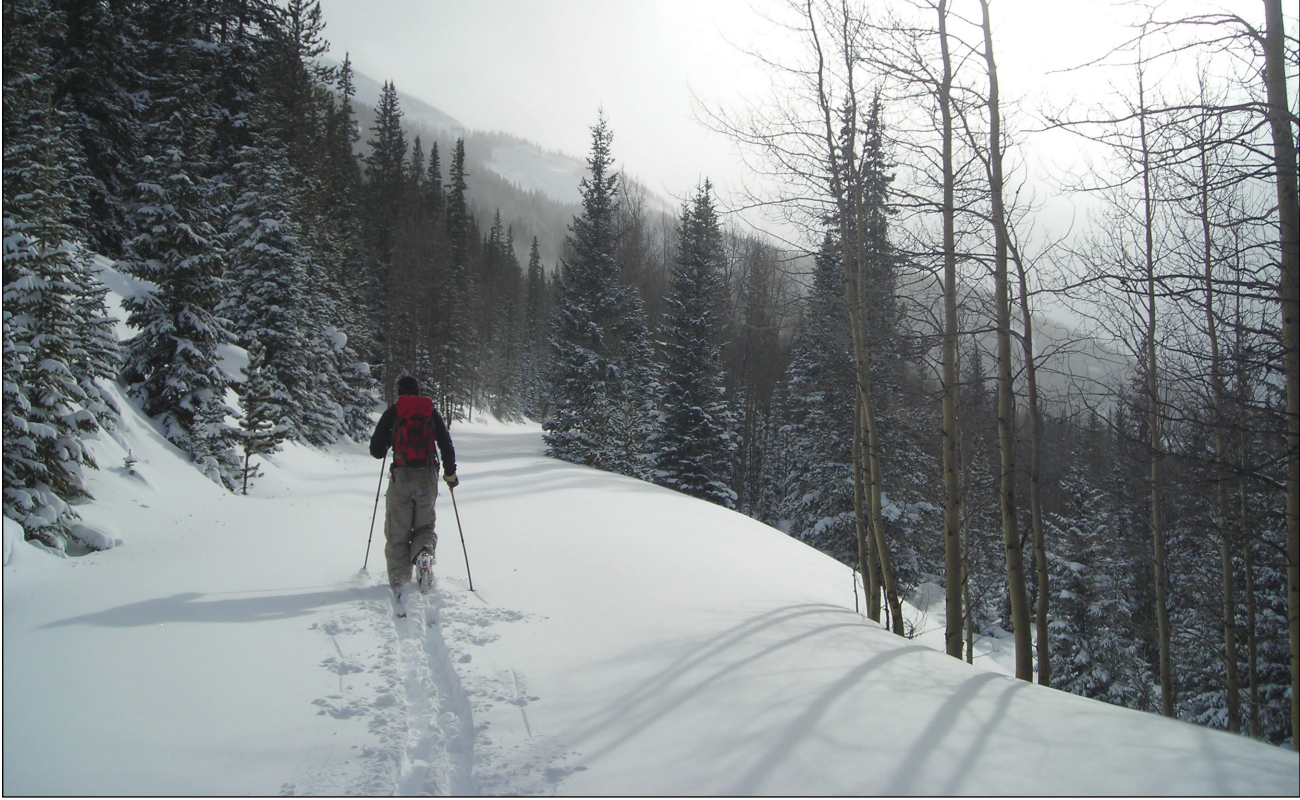


# Backcountry Touring

By Casey Flynn



## Safely Explore the Bountiful Backcountry

Clumps of new-fallen snow slough off tree branches as you slide up the trail. The swish of your skins and the subtle crunch of the weighted snow underfoot are the only sounds in the forest. You stop to catch your breath and a drop of sweat falls from the tip of your chilled nose. Silence. You gaze up at the untouched slopes on both sides of the valley. Steep trees, open glades, and alpine bowls. Sound like a dream? It can be a reality. While

ski resorts continue to raise lift ticket prices and slopes become more crowded, backcountry skiing and snowboarding opens up a new realm for exploration. This peaceful world of powder can be yours to play in, too.

**Get educated** The American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education's website ([avtraining.org](http://avtraining.org)) is a great resource. You can supplement with the recently updated classic, *Snow Sense* by Jill Fredston and Doug Fesler. And finding an experienced partner who you can learn from helps a lot.

### Keeping Warm

When touring in the backcountry, hypothermia is a major concern. Without a lodge or lift house to duck into and warm in, you have to take extra care to keep your body temperature up. Ingrid Backstrom explains how she stays warm.

- **Layer strategically.** Wool-blend, wicking baselayers will keep you warm and dry. Shell pants and hooded jackets that are breathable, waterproof, and have good vents let you easily adjust your temperature.
- **Open your vents while climbing** to prevent overheating. Sweating too much and getting wet can quickly become serious.
- **Have a puffy down layer easily accessible.** Whenever you stop to rest or refuel, throw on this insulating layer beneath your shell to keep in all that hard-earned heat.
- **An extra pair of warm mittens in your pack** will make you smile when your hands get chilly.

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## Hydration

Hydration can be difficult in the cold. Fill your bottles with warm water in the morning to make it go down easier in the field. Leave the bladder home. Hoses and mouthpieces freeze easily in winter temperatures, even with insulating sheaths.

## Nutrition

Staying well-fueled is critical to keeping up your energy. Snack every 15–30 minutes while skinning. High calorie foods that don't get too stiff in cold temps are good choices. Ingrid goes for nuts, cheese, and peanut butter sandwiches.

See page 74 for our ski, snowboard, and snowshoe gear recommendations. Plus, discover the backcountry accessories that made our short list!

## Hazard recognition

"If you don't know, don't go," Ingrid says. "If you didn't scout it beyond a shadow of a doubt, or you didn't climb up what you're planning to ski down then don't just drop blindly into something."

- **Know the difference between hazard and risk.** Hazard is what the mountains present us with: weather, avalanches, rockfall. Risk is hazard with consequences. Ask yourself, "What will happen to me?"
- **Watch out for thin snow.** Especially early and late in the season, shallow snow cover can hide rocks, trees, and stumps that you could snag on. If you can see anything poking up out of the snow, there is likely more hidden underneath and you should steer clear.

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—Jill Fredston, avalanche  
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### Choosing Your Terrain

"When in doubt, terrain is your friend," says Jill Fredston, avalanche expert and author. "Knowing nothing at all about snow conditions or avalanches, you can still minimize or completely eliminate your hazards if you just control your terrain." Jill shares more guidelines for choosing the right terrain.

- **Know what's around you.** What slope angle am I on? Are there steep slopes above me that could slide? Are there cliffs below me I could go over if I slip or fall?
- **Evaluate terrain going up and down.** We tend to pay more attention to our line of ascent, since it takes more time and effort. Pay equal heed to whatever you plan to descend.
- **Navigate micro-terrain features.** Going ten feet to the left or right can make a big difference. Avoid convex rolls, where low-angle terrain drops abruptly onto steeper slopes, areas of wind-loaded snow, and isolated trees or rocks that could act as trigger points for an avalanche.
- **Choose areas with lots of terrain options and slope angles.** If conditions aren't what you expect, you can always dial back the difficulty.

## Weather

Continually observing weather changes is key. Online mountain weather forecasts and regional avalanche reports are great sources for weather analyses. Avalanche danger is highest during and immediately after storms, and a good rule of thumb is to wait at least 24 hours after a storm before heading into the backcountry. But remember that a blue bird day doesn't necessarily indicate stable snow conditions.

High winds can also increase danger as they transport snow onto leeward slopes and load avalanche starting zones. Wind speed and direction since the last storm will help you determine which aspects have been loaded.

## Breaking Trail

Breaking trail can be exhausting especially in new, unconsolidated snow. Here are a few tips on skinning from professional extreme skier Ingrid Backstrom to help save your legs for more turns.

- **Practice good posture.** Relax your body, stand up straight, and tuck your butt underneath you. Keep your arms close to your sides and use your core to keep everything tight.
- **Glide, don't step.** Maintain contact with the snow and only lift your leg as much as you need to while sliding it forward.
- **Find a happy medium between too steep and too many switchbacks.** If you go straight up the slope you may slip backwards or burn yourself out. Too shallow of a grade and you'll be switchbacking all day without gaining much elevation.

## Whiteout Navigation

Staying in the trees is a safe bet in a whiteout. If you get caught in a storm above treeline and you are losing visibility, turn around and follow your tracks back down before they get erased.