

HUMAN-POWERED SKIING

Ski mountaineer, adventurer, and environmental justice advocate Caroline Gleich crafts a personal how-to guide to one of her biggest passions: backcountry skiing.

TEXT CAROLINE GLEICH PHOTOS ROB LEA

In its purest form, backcountry skiing is a simple activity. Essentially, it's going for a walk in the snow with skis on your feet. It's similar to hiking in the summer, except you get to glide the whole way down. What makes backcountry skiing so magical is how it allows your mind to reset. When I'm in the mountains, searching for the best snow and turns, all my worries disappear. Some people wonder how I can survive the long days in the cold and snow. But once you start doing it, there's something so natural about it—you just feel at home out there.

The backcountry is land that has been set aside for conservation and outdoor recreation. It can be right outside a ski resort's boundaries, or kilometres away from any roads or man-made structures. Sometimes it is formally designated as wilderness, a state or national park, or a national forest. You can make any kind of ski trip out of your time there, from a one- to two-hour tour to get fresh air and exercise to a multi-day traverse across an entire mountain range. You can focus on finding untracked powder snow, with an entire slope to yourself, or use it as a tool for fitness, as a way to stay active and healthy in the winter.

Realizing the need to protect the places we play

As a professional skier, preserving the backcountry skiing experience for future generations is of the utmost importance to me. Backcountry skiing depends entirely on the protection of public land. It's imperative that skiers mobilize as a political force to speak up for the value of the land. Skiing has also inspired me to discuss climate change, as I've started to witness first-hand the effects on our snowpack and on glaciers around the world. While glaciers are retreating at unprecedented rates, more snow is falling as rain onto our local snowpacks. It's affecting the snow sport industry and our local communities. We have to be proactive in mobilizing to fight for carbon reductions, as well as lowering our own carbon footprints. I've taken action by partnering with non-profit organizations such as Protect Our Winters, Winter Wildlands Alliance, and The Wilderness Society. We speak at local rallies and hearings about social energy, clean air, and federal leasing processes for coal and gas. We go to Washington, DC, to speak to our elected officials about solutions and to make our presence known as a force for positive change. It's important to remember that for all that nature gives us, we must give back and be a voice for the snow, the mountains, and the trees.

The best way to get started is to enroll in an avalanche course. There, you will get an introduction to safety and rescue equipment, learn how to identify and travel in avalanche terrain (see "The Survival Guide," p. 106), and (most importantly) find other like-minded folks to go backcountry skiing with. Start with an introductory course, and then move on to a level 1 or level 2 certification. You will most likely already be hooked by then!

PICK YOUR PLAYGROUND

There are some of the most beautiful backcountry areas in North America, with options for both newbies and pros.

01

Spend a week in a hut: in the interior of British Columbia.

You can access remote huts by helicopter or snow-cat and spend an entire week backcountry skiing from that site. It is a wonderful way to immerse yourself in the mountains and the sport. You can choose many options depending on group skills and budget, going self-guided and self-catered, or having your own mountain guide and chef. Two of my favourite huts are Valhalla Mountain Touring and Meadow Lodge.

02

Ski the Wasatch backcountry in Utah.

The Wasatch is home to some of the most accessible backcountry skiing terrain in the world. Within a 30-minute drive of Salt Lake City, you can access dozens of trails from Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons. I recommend downloading the Wasatch Backcountry Skiing app, and be sure to check the Utah Avalanche Center forecast before heading out.

▲ Photo: BESIDE



03

Ski the Teton backcountry in Wyoming.

Underneath the towering peaks of Grand Teton National Park lies some of the best backcountry skiing. The Tetons have terrain options for every skill level and boast impressive snow totals every year.

04

Snow camp the Alaskan way.

One of my favourite backcountry trips ever was getting dropped off by plane in the Tordrillo Mountains of Alaska, establishing a base camp and then hiking and climbing for our lines. It was a cost-effective way to ski Alaska, and I'll never forget the sunrises, sunsets and moonrises we saw while camping on the glacier.

05

Ski the East.

There is a rich history of backcountry skiing in Québec's Chic-Choc Mountains, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Tuckerman's Ravine on Mt. Washington in New Hampshire is a major classic. Check with the Appalachian Mountain Club for more ideas.

06

Backcountry ski the Cascade Volcanoes, between British Columbia and Northern California.

In the springtime, Mt. Hood, Mt. Shasta, and Mt. Rainier offer up some of the longest ski runs in North America. These are more advanced outings, but are highly recommended.

THE GEAR CHECKLIST

Here are some insider tips for backcountry beginners.

SKIS – Pick the lightest skis possible so that they’re easy on the way up and comfortable on the downhill. Every ounce you can save will make the experience more enjoyable. I also choose slightly shorter skis than I would normally use for skiing at a resort because they’ll be more manoeuvrable in the backcountry.

BOOTS – Take the time to find boots that fit properly. It’s recommended that you size up from what you’d normally wear in a resort so that you can wiggle your toes freely to keep the circulation flowing throughout.

SKINS – I like a mohair/nylon combination to get the best glide and durability.

HELMET – A helmet is a must for backcountry skiing. Find something lightweight and comfortable.

JACKETS – I bring a hardshell and an insulating layer, and if it’s really cold, a mid-layer as well. I prefer lighter layers to one big insulated jacket so I can find the right combination that works for changing temperatures.

PANTS – Softshells are nice for warmer, drier climates, but for the heart of winter, a hardshell will keep you better protected from wind and snow

AVALANCHE BEACON/SHOVEL/PROBE – These are all essential safety and rescue items. Whichever brand you choose, practice using them so you’ll know what to do in case you need to be rescued.

BACKPACK – I have an avalanche airbag pack that I use during the heart of winter, and then a lighter pack for spring ski mountaineering when avalanche layers have subsided.

MAPS/COMPASS/EMERGENCY GPS OR SATELLITE COMMUNICATOR – I use my cell phone for maps but I always carry a backup battery as the cold tends to wear them down. In places without cell coverage, I bring a device that allows two-way text communication in the event of an accident or rescue.

RADIOS – A two-way radio, or walkie-talkie, can be very helpful to allow for communication with your group in the backcountry.

Backcountry ski equipment can be a big, upfront investment, but remember, there are no lift tickets to pay for out here, so consider spending more up front to get higher quality gear that will last a long time.



PERSONAL TIPS

There’s the magnificent landscape, and all the moments you’ll share with friends, but fun in the backcountry also relies on the art of packing, eating, and sleeping comfortably when in the winterlands.

Packing

Whenever possible, I try to have my pack ready the night before. I talk to my partners about what they are going to bring. After a long day of skiing, I start drying all my equipment, making sure none of my items are stored wet. It’s especially important to take boot liners out of boots, because if you don’t, they can freeze the next day.

Eating

I eat before I get hungry and drink before I get thirsty; that way, my reserves never get too depleted and I can keep my energy up consistently. I eat a variety of Clif bars, gels, and other snacks, and for a long day out, I bring pizza or a sandwich. In the winter, I bring smaller, non-insulated water bottles that I keep in a jacket pocket or in my pack. I don’t use a hydration reservoir because the hoses freeze too often.

Sleeping

When you are sleeping in small huts and lodges, take earplugs and an eye mask in case of a snoring partner. For winter camping, add hot water to a Nalgene water bottle right before bed and take it into your sleeping bag with you. It will keep you warm and toasty all night!

MASTERING THE TECHNIQUE

When you’re skinning uphill, keep an upright body position. Set skintracks at a lesser angle and do more switchbacks. Keep body weight centred over the feet. Take smaller steps, and keep your feet on the ground, dragging skis against the surface of the snow instead of picking up the feet as you would with running. Be mindful, precise, and efficient with each step. Press energetically off of poles to give each leg a bit of a rest.

What I love about backcountry skiing is how the experience bonds you with nature and with your partners. At times, it can seem like a lot of effort to manage all the gear and to get ready to go. But when you are out there, deep in the wilderness, moving under your own human power and experiencing the magic of winter with your friends, there is a distinct joy that is difficult to find anywhere else in life. It is beneficial to the mind and body. ■