

Backcountry Skiing at Jackson Hole:

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Over the years we have accumulated at AIC a sizeable group of backcountry skiers who make tours that are a pleasant social experience, fun, and a spectacular wilderness adventure. For easy tours to places we know well, in fully safe conditions, we (the regulars) take out parties ourselves, and in very safe conditions and areas the tour can be done without avalanche transceivers. For longer and more adventurous tours to places we do not know that well, or if there is any issue regarding avalanche danger, we use the services of the most expert local guides, and all skiers must buy (rent if that is possible) or borrow avalanche transceivers.

What is backcountry skiing? We drive to a mountain and climb it (we do not use the lifts at the resort). Climbing is done with bindings that allow the heel to lift, and with skins on the base of the skis or snowboard that allow forward motion, but prevent sliding (backward) downhill. We then descend in what is almost always fresh untracked powder snow.

Three types of equipment and methods of descent are most typical. Most common these days is what is termed 'Alpine Touring' or Randonee': One uses normal downhill ski equipment, but with a special binding that allows the heel to lift freely for walking uphill. The heel is locked down for the descent, which takes place in the usual way experienced at the resort (albeit in untracked powder, wilderness, and with a backpack). Less common is 'Telemark' gear and ski style. In this case the heel remains free for both ascending and descending. To descend, one must either learn the telemark turn technique, or learn how to make parallel turns with the heel free. Least common is snowboarding, because one must either 1) have or rent a 'split snowboard', which comes apart lengthwise into what are like two wide skis, for walking uphill, and is put together for normal snowboard descents, or 2) walk uphill with snowboard on one's backpack, using special short and wide skis, or snowshoes, to ascend, switching for the descent (in a few places, such as Mt. Glory from Teton Pass, there is a maintained boot-path allowing all types of skiers to walk to the top with their skis or snowboards on their back). The gear can be rented locally. However, split snowboards are not always available (in recent years splits have only occasionally be rentable across Teton Pass, in Idaho). Avalanche transceivers need to be purchased.

Those who tried any of these approaches to backcountry skiing believe backcountry to be one of the world's best sports, combining the best elements of hiking, scenery, wilderness, fitness, powder skiing in untracked conditions, and sheer fun.

Some of us go into the backcountry every day at AIC (and sometimes days prior and after). Other skiers join less often. We are happy to take newcomers along and introduce them to the sport, though an introduction tour may be suitable only for certain tours, and such decisions will depend on the fitness and general expertise of the skier who wishes to try the sport for the first time. Any skiers wishing to join one or more tours should discuss the possibility with me. Some people, especially first timers, can find the climbing hard due to fitness and altitude, or find the downhill skiing hard, due to inexperience with deep powder. The general level of fitness needed is similar to that needed for a summer hike of similar vertical feet (say at least 2000-3000 feet) at similar altitude (about 6000 feet

at the base near Jackson Hole). For anyone worried about danger, note that our main aim is to have fun and generally mellow skiing, not a life defying and hair raising descent. I will give a powerpoint slide show the first day of AIC that illustrates the sport and might spark your interest. Let me note that almost everyone who has tried the sport over the years has enjoyed the experience immensely.

Note for those wishing to join: If you do not already have the necessary gear it must be rented no later than the prior day, because we tend to leave before the rental shops open. We leave early in order to return in time for the talks (a goal we often manage to attain). There are a number of places to rent gear, in Teton Village, Wilson, the town of Jackson, and in Idaho. I can provide such information. If you are interested in joining one or more backcountry tours, please contact me and let me know (shiffrin@indiana.edu, or 812-855-4972, office, or 812-219-5893, cell).

I look forward to seeing you for a quintessential experience in the environs of greater Jackson Hole.