

Backcountry Skiing in Breckenridge, 2012.
Rich Shiffrin

As has been usual at past AIC conferences, backcountry skiers will be organizing trips daily, conditions permitting. Backcountry skiing offers descents in untracked (or mostly untracked) powder, outstanding wilderness scenery, and is a delight using any type of gear. There are no lifts (unless one takes the mountain lifts and skis out of bounds, but such ventures are really more similar to lift-serve skiing). One climbs a wilderness mountain or slope prior to skiing it. This greatly reduces the number of downhill turns per day, but most people enjoy the climbing as much as the descents: The climbing portion encapsulates a winter version of the best part of summer hiking, with outstanding scenery, congenial conversation, occasional stops for food and drink, and all without insects or excess heat (even in the coldest conditions, one's body heat when climbing keeps one quite warm, and in fact it is usual to strip off much clothing during a climb). It is possible for lift served skiers who have never tried backcountry skiing, but who can ski in powder, to transfer to backcountry skiing with little difficulty on the very first day (using AT gear, or split snowboards--see below). Backcountry skiing does require enough fitness to climb before skiing down, an especially important criterion because Breckenridge is at an even higher altitude than Jackson Hole, but the rate of climbing is adjusted to be comfortable, at a pace such that sweating should not take place. Lift served skiers who are fit enough for summer hiking at altitude should have enough fitness for backcountry skiing. The amount of climbing per day can vary from perhaps 2000 ft to 5000 ft., but it is often possible for the fitter skiers to do 'yo-yos' (re-climbing and descending some slope) while the less fit skiers rest.

Backcountry skiing can be done with:

- 1) Alpine touring gear (AT). AT uses downhill skis with bindings that leave the heel free for climbing but lock down for descending, and hence is essentially downhill skiing. The descents are most controlled and easiest with AT, especially when descending narrow passages between trees or chutes.
- 2) Telemark gear, which leave the heels free for both climbing and descending. The descent can be done with parallel turns (much as in downhill skiing) or telemark turns.
- 3) Split snowboards. Splits come apart into two 'wide' skis for climbing, but lock together into a more of less normal snowboard for descending. There is some extra time is needed whenever the board must be separated or reattached.

All three types of gear use 'glue on' skins for climbing, and the climbing motion is very like walking, but with a gliding motion rather than stepping. Skins allow very steep slopes to be climbed, but on steep slopes one often zig-zags, which requires kick turns at each change of direction, This is the one skill that must be learned by first time backcountry skiers, but is easy to acquire. The skins are removed (peeled off and packed) for descending.

One skis with a backpack (for clothing, food and drink, skins, etc.). An avalanche transceiver is highly recommended, and is often required if one hires a professional guide (who in most cases may be able to supply them, but not always). Avalanches in the backcountry are an omnipresent danger, and require care in selecting places to tour. With reasonable care, however, the danger is very low. Our

backcountry groups at AIC are much more interested in fun and pleasure than death defying descents in gnarly terrain, and we select venues accordingly (in forty years of backcountry skiing I have never been in or near an avalanche, though I have seen a few coming down steep cliff faces in the general area where we have been skiing.).

Some backcountry skiers will have the necessary gear, while others will need to rent all or some. There are two places for backcountry rentals at Breckenridge:

Mountain Outfitters

112 S. Ridge St.

Breckenridge, CO 80424

<http://www.mtnoutfitters.com/>

[970-453-2201](tel:970-453-2201)

info@mtnoutfitters.com

Open daily in Winter from 9 a.m - 7 p.m.

Their website gives these rental prices: **Telemark Demo Package \$48.00; Telemark Demo Ski Only \$38.00; Telemark Boot Only \$28.00; A/T Demo Package \$52.00; A/T Demo Ski Only \$42.00; A/T Demo Boot Only \$28.00; Climbing Skins \$15.00; Splitboard \$58.00.** A good and comfortable fit for boots is critical, given that much of the day will be spent climbing. For AT skiers with comfortable boots, note that it is often possible to fit the AT bindings to those boots, but note that comfort when downhill skiing only does not always translate to comfort when climbing: Downhill boots tend to be stiffer and heavier than backcountry boots. There are no discounts for multi-day rentals.

Note well that it is almost always the case that backcountry skiers must leave early in the morning so as to return in time for the conference. Thus gear rental must be finished the day prior-- there is no time to rent on the day of the tour, given that the shop opens at 9 AM. Finally, I note that gear may be reserved by email to Mountain Outfitters for any given day or days.

Their website gives these rental prices: **Telemark Demo Package \$48.00; Telemark Demo Ski Only \$38.00; Telemark Boot Only \$28.00; A/T Demo Package \$52.00; A/T Demo Ski Only \$42.00; A/T Demo Boot Only \$28.00; Climbing Skins \$15.00; Splitboard \$58.00.** There are no discounts for multi-day rentals. Gear may be reserved by email to Mountain Outfitters for any given day or days.

AMR Ski and Board Shop

City Market Plaza # 9a

400 North Park Ave.

Facing the Gondola, Across from the Bus Stop, Attached to the Breckenridge Accommodations Check-In Area, In Between the Barber Shop and Wells Fargo

Phone: 970 - 453 – 6921, Fax: 970 - 453 – 7065, Dave's Cell: 970 389 2375.

Email: skiboard@colorado.net.

Open daily 8 AM – 9 PM.

AMR doesn't rent AT or splits. They do rent a new telemark system that is now becoming the

norm everywhere (they say). The bindings are step in, not cables. [I think these are the ones: http://www.rei.com/product/823880/rottefella-ntn-short-telemark-bindings-with-110-brakes?cm_mmc=cse_froogle--datafeed--product--823880&mr_trackingCode=E1A4E6AC-D9DB-E011-9A77-001B21631C34&mr_referralID=NA]. The boots are a little bit heavier, and the movement is less flexible (less forward lean), but control is much better, and it is much easier to parallel. (Their skis have three widths). One may have to rent the package, rather than use one's own boots, depending on whether your own boots will fit the bindings. Only a few of their skis have skins, but they will try to find packages with skins. The prices for a week are 36/day plus tax, for five days (the sixth and seventh days are free) and there is a 20% discount for phone reservations in advance.

Mountain Wave, 600 S. Park Ave. 1-800-453-3050; 970-453-8305. website: <http://MTNWAVESNOWBOARDS.com> . HRS: 8 AM - 9 PM daily, rents both Split Snowboards and AT gear (not telemark). The costs for the full backcountry package are \$43 1-day, \$40 2-5 days; \$38 5+ days.

Cross Country Skiing rentals:

Breckenridge Nordic Center: 1200 Ski Hill Rd. Breckenridge, Co. 80424. [970-453-6855](tel:970-453-6855); nord@colorado.net. Their hours are a bit inconsistent. I believe this center only rents cross-country ski gear and snowshoes, and they have miles of groomed fairly flat trails.}

Backcountry skiing in the Breckenridge area is quite possible, with a number of areas within an hour drive (or much less). Compared with Jackson Hole, the base altitude is higher, but the vertical feet for the climbing and descent is in most cases less (so yo-yos might be more often used). I am told that the snow conditions are more variable than in the Jackson area, and as a result, it might not always be possible to find a good venue for backcountry skiing on any given day. I have been in touch with some backcountry skiers from Boulder who are attending AIC and who know the area moderately well (e.g. Shaw Ketels), and have been in touch with a few local professional guides, whom we might use on one or more days.

If you want to join a backcountry tour, whether you are a regular or occasional backcountry skier, or someone trying the sport for the first time, please contact Rich Shiffrin at shiffrin@indiana.edu, 812-855-4972, or at the conference hotel.