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Safe Ski Mountaineering

10 Recommendations from Club Arc Alpin

Ski mountaineering, snowshoe tours and snowboarding tours are a great way to get fit, experience nature and socialise. The aim of the following recommendations is to effectively respond to the risks in the mountains in winter. The practical skills are taught in training and avalanche courses; you will gradually gain more experience.

1. Be in good health and fit

Ski tours are an endurance sport. They make your heart, circulation and muscles work hard, so good health, a high fitness level and a good assessment of your capabilities are required. Avoid having to rush but adopt a pace without anybody in your group getting out of breath. Make sure you pace yourself and have enough energy for the descent.

2. Plan your tour carefully

Maps, guidebooks, the internet and experts are good sources of information about routes, distances, differences in altitude and the current conditions. Pay particular attention to the weather forecasts, as cold conditions, strong winds and poor visibility greatly increase the risk of accidents. Also plan alternative routes and find out the emergency number for the country's mountain rescue service (European emergency number: 112).

3. Use complete equipment

Make sure you have the right equipment for winter conditions and your specific destination. For avalanche emergencies, an avalanche transceiver, shovel and probe are standard equipment as well as a first-aid kit, bivouac sack and mobile phone. An airbag system increases the chances of survival. Check your equipment before setting off and take a repair kit with you.

4. Study the avalanche report

Before starting the tour, find out details of the avalanche risk: Which level? Where? What? Pay particular attention to information about the danger level (1-5), about dangerous areas (where is it dangerous today?) and the types of danger (what is the main danger today?).

5. Weigh up the avalanche risk

Detecting avalanche risk is a very difficult endeavour. Base your decisions on strategic risk assessment methods (reduction methods) and learn to recognise signs of danger in the landscape. Avoid dangerous areas and turn around if there is any doubt.

6. Take breaks and orienteer

Liquid, energy and breaks are required to maintain performance and concentration. Hot isotonic drinks are ideal for quenching your thirst and keeping you warm. Continually get your bearings ("I know where I am") and be wary of following any existing tracks.

7. Keep your distance

Keeping your distance reduces the load on the snowpack and your risk. A distance of 10 m between mountaineers when ascending steep slopes also makes kick turns easier. On downhill sections, always maintain a distance of at least 30 m. Ski down very steep slopes one by one.

8. Avoid falls

Falls on downhill sections are the main cause of accidents on ski tours. They are also a major additional load on the snowpack. Good skiing techniques and a suitable speed for your ability reduce the risk. A ski helmet can protect against head injuries! Careful! There is a higher risk of falls when the snowpack is frozen and on rocky terrain.

9. Go in small groups

Small groups (up to six people) are safer. Communication with other winter sports enthusiasts and mutual consideration prevent dangerous situations. Stay with the group. Inform someone you trust of your destination, route and return time. Important note for solo skiers/ snowboarders: minor incidents can turn into major emergencies.

10. Respect nature

The mountains provide a valuable environment for experiencing wilderness. Enjoy this freedom! Be considerate of wild animals, respect protected areas and do not enter reforestation areas. Use public transport or car-share to get to your starting point.

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