



INTRODUCTION TO CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

WELCOME TO XC-SKIING

A day out on cross-country (XC) skis is much like a day-walk with skis on. You will need the same things that you would take on a walk, allowing for the fact that it will probably be cold. You will also need ski gear (skis/boots/poles).

This introduction provides basic information on:

- What to wear
- What to take
- Where to go
- What it costs
- Safety
- Snow camping

CLOTHING

Clothing should be warm and waterproof, but not too warm as you will be burning up some energy once you get moving. Clothing designed for down-hill skiing is generally not suitable (they spend a lot of time standing in queues). What to wear will depend on your personal preference. Having several thin layers is better than one thick one as it allows for adjustment for the weather and the level of activity.

We recommend the following:

- Thermal skivvy, light top (shirt or sweater).
- Trousers should be warmish but flexible; nylon ski pants are best. Wool trousers (eg. ex-army) or shorts & thermals are good alternatives. Under no circumstances wear jeans.
- Warm socks, wool or Explorer style - 2 pairs if needed.
- Warm jacket (Polar fleece recommended) or a wool sweater.
- Waterproof parka and over-trousers (light nylon ones are OK).
- Gloves or mittens (wool or thermal fabrics). Water/windproof over mitts are good to have.
- Warm hat, beanie or balaclava. A light sun

hat or visor is also useful in clear weather.

- Snow gaiters.
- Sunglasses or ski-goggles should be carried at all times. These should be effective rather than fashionable.

IN THE PACK

- Lunch and plenty of high energy snacks.
- Water: plenty. You can get surprisingly thirsty in the snow.
- Sunscreen should be used on the face and any other exposed skin.
- Torch and matches (in a waterproof container).
- A small piece of close-cell foam mat is useful to sit on at lunch or rest stops.
- Bring a change of clothing to keep in the car.
- If driving your own car, you must carry wheel-chains to enter any of the resorts (4WD included). Sometimes you will need to use them, so be sure you know how they are fitted.

SKI GEAR

Cross-country skis come in all shapes and sizes to suit different types of use (track skiing, back-country, racing, telemarking, etc.). If you are new to the game, go to the hire shop, tell them where you are going and they will give you the right equipment; probably a pair of light touring skis with boots and poles.

Make sure that the boots are comfortable: they should be a snug fit so that your feet do not move around but not so tight as to hurt - feet will get cold in tight boots. Toes should have room to move so they stay warm. The soles of the boots should be fairly stiff so that you can control the skis. It is a good idea to hire your gear at the resort so that you can change it if it is unsatisfactory.

It's a good idea to hold off buying your own

gear until you have done a few trips to see whether you like it, what sort of skiing you expect to do and to get a feel for the gear that will suit you.

SAFETY IN THE SNOW

- **Do not ski alone .**
- **Let someone know** where you are going and when you will be back.
- **Stay warm and dry:** adjust your clothing to suit the weather and your level of activity.
- **Beware of the sun:** UV in the mountains can be intense and is reflected from the snow. Use a good sunscreen, especially on the nose, ears and face. Use good sunglasses or goggles too - snow blindness is very painful.
- **Weather:** Always obtain the latest weather report before you set out and watch for changes, which can be swift in alpine areas.
- **Navigation:** The country looks quite different under snow as tracks and familiar landmarks disappear. Take special care with navigation to avoid becoming lost.
- **White-out** is a particular danger in snow when the cloud comes to ground level. Visibility may be reduced to only a few metres and lack of contrast makes it difficult to tell whether the ground is rising or falling. Navigation in white-out conditions is extremely difficult.
- **If lost,** seek or make shelter and STAY PUT until conditions improve or searchers find you. DO NOT GO DOWN ridges or gullies as these will usually lead into impenetrable country. All resorts have Search & Rescue teams.

COURTESY GUIDELINES

- Do not walk on ski tracks.
- When skiing on a cut track, stay in the track or right out of it. A well cut track makes for pleasant fast skiing, so don't mess it up.
- Toileting: try not to. You can't see what's under the snow, you can't bury things properly and the remains will be there for all to see when the snow melts.

SKI TECHNIQUES

- **Diagonal Stride:** the classic touring action for getting about. Stride along, don't shuffle.
- **Skating:** a faster but more energetic technique favoured by the ski-racers.
- **Snowplough:** the basic way to stop, especially on tracks.
- **Step turn:** a simple way to turn on tracks and amongst trees.
- **Stem turn:** an alpine style turn which works for XC skis too.
- **Telemark turn:** the expert's favourite, adaptable to many situations.
- **Sitzmark:** that hole that you just made in the snow.

WHERE TO SKI CROSS-COUNTRY

If there is snow on the ground then you can XC ski. The best areas near Melbourne are:

- Lake Mountain (Marysville): closest to Melbourne with a good network of tracks.
- Mt St Gwinear (Baw Baw Nat. Park): tracks, slopes and broader touring terrain.
- Mt Stirling (Mansfield): more challenging tracks and open slopes on the summit.
- Bogong High Plains: the Falls Creek resort has easy tracks. Out on the High Plains there is something for everyone.

WHAT IT COSTS

Most of the accessible ski areas are in or near 'resorts', eg. Lake Mountain, Falls Creek. These will charge a fee for entry (2009 prices were St Gwinear \$10.30, Lake Mountain \$35, Falls Creek \$31, Mt Stirling \$31 for a car). There are no separate trail fees at St Gwinear or Stirling but both Lake Mountain and Falls Creek charge \$12 although if you go beyond the resort area you can ski all over the High Plains for free. Ski hire will cost about \$25 to \$30 per day.

WEATHER & SNOW REPORTS

- Newspapers & TV: the ABC news includes a snow report on Thursday night.
- Internet: www.ski.com.au
- Snowcam. www.vicsnowreport.com.au
- Outdoor & hire shops usually have information too.

SNOW CAMPING

Camping in the snow allows for extended trips and exploration of remoter areas. In many areas there are huts that can be used for shelter, but these have their limitations and should not be relied upon. The ability to camp in the snow gives you freedom to go where you please and security in poor conditions.

Before attempting snow-camping you should be a competent skier and have experience of bush camping. The combination of skiing with a laden pack and making camp in hostile conditions will be a test of your skills.

Warning - Most ordinary people will think you are totally mad when you announce that you intend to *camp* in the snow. But that's half the fun!

EQUIPMENT

- Tent: Tents for use in snow should be self supporting, stable in high wind, strong enough to stay up when covered in snow and quick to pitch. This is commonly known as '4-Season' rating. Dome or tunnel styles are best. There should be minimal dependence on pegs, as these are hard to secure in snow. Use wide bladed metal or plastic pegs, not skewers.
- Warm sleeping bag.
- Sleeping mat: Thermarest (recommended) or closed cell foam. Either standard or light weight Thermarest will do, but full length is recommended
- Clothing: In addition to the normal ski clothing, you will need a little more to cope with the night-time cold (eg. thicker jacket, longjohns). Carry a spare skivvy and socks so you can have a dry layer next to the skin.

- Insulated bootees are nice to have in the tent.
- A fuel stove is essential: Popular ones are the Trangia which burns methylated spirits, various shellite stoves such as the MSR Whisperlite (shellite can be dangerous in the confined spaces of a tent vestibule) and the gas canister stoves using a butane/propane mixture, such as an MSR Pocket Rocket or the Kovea brand. The shellite stoves will need a support on the snow (eg. a cork mat or board).
- Torch & spare batteries.
- Pack
- Day pack: a light one is useful for excursions from camp.
- All gear that needs to stay dry should be packed in plastic bags.
- Catch 22: You need more equipment for snow camping, but it is harder to carry a pack on skis than on foot. So think carefully about what you take and keep the weight to a minimum.

BACKCOUNTRY SKIING

- Skis for backcountry skiing (with a pack) should be wider and heavier than used on formed tracks. Metal edges are highly recommended for control in icy conditions.
- Boots will also be heavier for proper control of the skis.
- The pack should be well balanced and well fitted so you can maintain your balance in turns, etc. A waist strap is essential.

TIPS FOR STAYING COMFORTABLE

- The only way to dry wet clothing is to keep on wearing it, but put something dry next to the skin to keep yourself warm.
- Small items can be dried by putting them in the sleeping bag with you.
- Synthetic fabrics tend to repel water and dry more easily than cotton or wool.
- Keep some water in a water bottle inside

the tent where it won't freeze. Keep your boots there too.

MAKING CAMP

- Make camp early so you have time to get organised before it gets dark. Skiing conditions usually deteriorate in the late afternoon as the snow becomes icy.
- Look for a site which is well sheltered from the wind. Bear in mind that the wind direction may change.
- Avoid frost-hollows, overhanging snow laden branches and cornices.
- Note landmarks so that you can find your way back to the site in poor conditions.
- Access to running water is an advantage.
- If the snow is soft, compact the site under the tent using your skis, boots or a snow shovel, if you have one. A firm level base will give you a good night's sleep.
- On sloping ground you can carve out a level platform.
- First Rule of Snow Camping: If at all possible, don't camp on the snow! (Find a nice patch of snowgrass).

FOOD

Food for cooking should be simple to prepare and fast to cook, in case conditions are bad. Assume that cooking will be done in the tent or vestibule. Bring a high proportion of ready to eat food (scroggin, biscuits, etc.). You may have to melt snow to obtain water for drinking and cooking; this consumes a lot of fuel, so get running water if you can.

Carry some extra food in case you are snowed in or otherwise delayed.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Wild magazine has regular reviews of equipment, descriptions of trips, etc.
- "Mountain Skiing" by Vic Bein (The Mountaineers, 1982) is an excellent reference for ski techniques.
- "A Handbook of Cross-Country Skiing in Victoria" (STAV/ORC).
- Skiing & Bushwalking shops will have several good and more up to date books.