It’s the Winter of Backcountry. Here’s How to Start Safely.

The pandemic has many people wanting to avoid crowded slopes. Going into the backcountry requires avalanche knowledge or a guide. Here are suggestions for taking part across the United States.

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Jake’s Peak in Lake Tahoe, California, offers a spectacular view over Emerald Bay. Ming Poon

By David Goodman and Karen Schwartz

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Travel and travel planning are being disrupted by the worldwide spread of the coronavirus. For the latest updates, read The New York Times’s Covid-19 coverage here.

Backcountry skiing and snowboarding have exploded into the mainstream this year. As ski resorts are limiting access because of the coronavirus pandemic, skiers are looking for alternative ways to recreate while staying physically distanced. The backcountry boom is also being driven by a new generation of Alpine touring skis and snowboards that make it easier for newcomers to transition from skiing and riding at resorts to the backcountry. REI reports that sales of backcountry ski equipment have tripled since last fall (you can rent it too).

Backcountry skiing's new popularity has also been driven by a quest for connection. In the East, a vibrant grass roots movement is drawing scores of skiers to develop new backcountry ski terrain. Uphill skiing — a.k.a. "skinning" — is now a popular before and after work ritual in ski towns across the country.

While it's easier to ski in the backcountry these days, there is a crucial caveat: "If you are getting into backcountry skiing you need to know that avalanches are a real risk," cautions Brian Lazar of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center. The Utah Avalanche Center is anticipating a surge of new backcountry skiers this year and will for the first time be posting "avalanche ambassadors" at popular trailheads to educate people about backcountry hazards. "We're ramping up for what could be an unprecedented winter," said Craig Gordon, a forecaster for the center.

One way to learn backcountry skills safely is to hire a qualified guide through a group like the American Mountain Guides Association. If you go on your own, you should be self-sufficient and have some knowledge of navigation, first aid and avalanches, and if skiing in avalanche terrain you should carry an avalanche beacon, shovel and probe and know how to use them, and check the local avalanche forecast.

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Many guide services and outdoor organizations offer introductory courses on backcountry skills and avalanche awareness. You can find listings of avalanche courses in your area at the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education and Avalanche.org, which also posts local avalanche forecasts. Know Before You Go is a valuable online avalanche primer, and a simple backcountry responsibility code can be found at Ski Kind, a consortium of backcountry organizations.

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The backcountry ski boom has been accompanied by a trailhead parking crunch. If you can’t park, you can’t ski. Check local backcountry skiing, state department of transportation and U.S. Forest Service websites to learn about potential area closures and overflow parking for the more popular trailheads, and plan to start your ski day early. Learn about less-traveled destinations from guidebooks and have a backup plan in case parking is unavailable.

Spreading out will also minimize the risk of coronavirus infection, as will following local travel and quarantine rules.

If you’re a fit and strong intermediate resort skier and have the right equipment and training, where does a newcomer to the backcountry go? Here are some of the country’s best introductory spots for those who want to experience the wild side.

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The “Sherbie,” in New Hampshire, is the most popular backcountry trail in the East. Cait Bourgault

The East

NEW HAMPSHIRE

The **John Sherburne Ski Trail** — the Sherbie — is the most popular backcountry ski trail in the East. It was cut on the side of Mount Washington in 1934 by the Civilian Conservation Corps, providing passage to and from New Hampshire’s famous steep skiing playground, Tuckerman Ravine. After a steady and sweaty 2.4 mile uphill ski you come to views of the craggy flanks of Mount Washington, a skiing pilgrimage site for nearly a century. Consider a side trip to Tuckerman Ravine (. 7 of a mile farther) to try your mettle on steeper terrain, or just to ogle the majestic scenery (Tuckerman Ravine is prone to avalanches — check for the latest advisory). The descent of the Sherburne begins just beyond the Appalachian Mountain Club caretaker’s cabin, a.k.a. HoJo’s. The Sherburne Trail lulls you in gently, but the pace quickens as it steepens and weaves back and forth down the mountain like a restless snake. The Sherbie is about as steep as a high intermediate trail at a ski area, but natural conditions make it interesting and challenging.

Backcountry skiing has blossomed into a community-supported ski movement in New England, and the Granite Backcountry Alliance is at the vanguard. Each fall, it organizes volunteers to cut glades and trails in New Hampshire and western Maine, and then offers their creations to the skiing public. These “glade zones” offer a perfect introduction to the backcountry experience. In 2018, alliance volunteers recut the **Maple Villa Trail,** in Intervale, which was created in 1933 by the Civilian Conservation Corps. This sprawling backcountry ski area showcases world-class views and excellent skiing spread over three peaks. Trail descriptions and maps can be found at the alliance’s website. — D.G.

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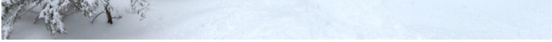
Wright Peak in Lake Placid, N.Y., is an Adirondack classic, twisting and turning all the way down. David Goodman

NEW YORK

The ski tour on the **Wright Peak Ski Trail** in Lake Placid is an Adirondack classic. The trail, cut in 1938, features an enjoyable climb in the heart of the Adirondack High Peaks and a descent packed with turns. The tour begins at the Adirondack Mountain Club High Peaks Information Center outside Lake Placid, where maps and info are available. As you skin up the hiking trail to Algonquin and Wright Peak, the green forest gives way to a white-on-white world of birch trees just below the intersection with the Wright Peak Ski Trail. On the descent, the trail gradually opens to about 15 feet, and then enters a huge birch glade. The ski trail snaps back and forth numerous times throughout its downhill journey. The Wright Peak Ski Trail captures the spirit of the best 1930s-era trails, rolling with the terrain, twisting and turning all the way down, constantly surprising you. For gear rental and guides, contact High Peaks Cyclery and Guide Service in Lake Placid. — D.G.



Brandon Gap in Vermont has the country's first officially sanctioned and managed backcountry ski glades on Forest Service land. Brian Mohr/ EmberPhoto

VERMONT

Brandon Gap has become one of Vermont's most popular backcountry ski destinations. In 2016, hundreds of volunteers organized by the Rochester/Randolph Area Sports Trails Alliance, in partnership with the Green Mountain National Forest, flocked to Vermont from around the Northeast to create the country's first officially sanctioned and managed backcountry ski glades on Forest Service land. Brandon Gap now offers four glade zones from two trailheads. For high energy tours, head for the 1,300-vertical-foot descents through steep old-growth birch glades in Bear Brook Bowl. For more gentle outings, try the 500-foot descents on mellower terrain in Sunrise Bowl. Look for signs of wildlife such as moose and deer scat, and take in views of the soft, rounded summits of the Breadloaf Wilderness to the north. Details and maps can be found at the alliance's website.

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Bolton Valley's backcountry area spans 12,000 acres. David Goodman

Bolton Valley sits high atop the Green Mountains and reaps some of Vermont's deepest and most reliable snow. Downhill skiers gravitate here to ride the chairlifts of Bolton Valley Ski Area, while backcountry fans head across a parking lot into a warren of ungroomed but well-maintained trails that span 12,000 acres. Stop at the Bolton Valley Sports Center to purchase trail passes, rent backcountry skis and splitboards, and get advice on where to go. You can also hire guides and sign up for group outings.

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You can climb to Bryant Cabin, built in the 1920s by Edward Bryant, a Boston conservationist who first purchased the surrounding land. From there glide out on Gardiner Lane, a forest thruway that links low-angle glades, including JJs, A1A and Gotham City. If you're in the mood for steeper skiing, head uphill to the Stowe View Chutes or Paradise Pass, where you can ski powder through wide-open hardwood glades before climbing back out. Bolton is also the starting point for the Bolton-Trapp Trail, a classic tour that connects with the famous Trapp Family Lodge (car shuttle required). Information and maps are available on the mountain's website. — D.G.

The West

CALIFORNIA

Jake's Peak is a Lake Tahoe favorite. Overlooking Emerald Bay, "it appears as if you are skiing straight down into the lake," said Jeremy Benson, the author of "Backcountry Ski & Snowboard Routes in California." "It's one of the more beautiful places in the entire world." Jake's Peak is an approachable mountain boasting a 2,300-vertical-foot descent through old growth trees. This is a very popular backcountry ski tour, so you will likely have company on the mountain and parking can be a problem, especially on weekends. Like any Sierra backcountry tour, avalanche awareness and equipment is essential and you should check the avalanche forecast. This tour is safest to ski in the spring when avalanche hazard is lower. Alpenglow Expeditions does not guide Jake's Peak but offers guided skiing and backcountry skills clinics around nearby Alpine Meadows and Squaw Valley ski resorts.

June Mountain, a small ski resort a half-hour from Mammoth Lakes, may be "the best lift-accessed backcountry ski area in the U.S. that no one's heard about," claims Howie Schwartz, an owner of Sierra Mountain Guides, which offers guided ski tours off the back side of the ski area. After buying a lift ticket and taking the highest chairlift, you can glide down into a gorgeous but accessible mountain range known as the Negatives, a landscape of steep couloirs and lower-angle faces that beckon skiers of all abilities.

From the 10,000-foot June Mountain summit, a relaxed tour descends to beautiful Yost Meadows, which is ringed by skiable slopes. You can continue on to reach 2,000-foot long Devil's Slide, which delivers you to Double Eagle Resort and Spa, a civilized way to finish a day in the wilds. — D.G.

Bluebird Backcountry is a new patrolled, all-backcountry mountain in Colorado. Bluebird Backcountry/ Castner Photography

COLORADO

The shallow snowpack, cold temperatures and other factors combine in the Colorado Rockies to create the most extreme avalanche danger of the three snow climates found in the United States. That said, one destination that beginners can safely explore until their legs turn to Jell-O is **Bluebird Backcountry** in Northern Colorado, about 30 minutes from Steamboat Springs. It is a unique ski area dedicated to inbound, patrolled backcountry skiing. It also offers equipment rentals, instruction, a warming hut, guides for hire and parking. To ensure social distancing, it's limited to 200 skiers a day this season. The main area on Bear Mountain offers 1,200 acres, while those with avalanche training or with a guide can explore an additional 3,000 acres, including some great aspen glades. The base is at 8,600 feet while the highest elevation is 9,845 feet.

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It's possible to get into the backcountry throughout the state with a certified guide, available for hire in any ski town, said Chris Davenport, a two-time World Extreme Skiing champion, who guides for Aspen Expeditions Worldwide. He said tours of the Elk Mountains near Aspen and Snowmass that are suitable for novices. Mr. Davenport also recommended exploring the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado with San Juan Mountain Guides. "Basically anywhere in the San Juans," he said. "It's so spectacular."

For overnight or multiday adventures, he recommended a guided trip to one of the huts or cabins run by the 10th Mountain Division Hut Association "Most hut trips are all inclusive, and come with all your equipment and your sleeping bag and guide. Meals are prepared and everything," he said. "The only issue is that this year they are almost all booked for the entire season." — K.S.

MONTANA

Bozeman and Big Sky are the most popular backcountry spots in the state, according to Ben Werner, the author of "Backcountry Skiing Bozeman and Big Sky."

"Montana is incredibly fortunate to have over 27 million acres of public lands," he said. "For a simple gear test essentially any public trailhead that has snow on it will do, but we also have some lovely low angle meadows that are great places to enjoy easy powder turns without having to worry too much about avalanches."

For a relative beginner, he recommended **History Rock,** which is accessible from Bozeman in less than 30 minutes. It's about 2.5 miles to the top, and starts at an elevation of 6,500 feet, going to 8,440 feet.

"You're not talking about big cliffs and chutes, it's more rolling terrain," he explained. "There are spots that have better snow, but I like it because it's an easy place to get to from town, and it's fairly forgiving terrain. That's not to say avalanches aren't possible there, but you're on the lower end of the risk spectrum."

He cautioned that parking, especially on weekends, can be difficult.

For guided trips, he recommended Beartooth Powder Guides out of Cooke City, near the northeast entrance to Yellowstone Park, or Big Sky Backcountry Guides out of Bozeman.

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Beartooth runs trips from the Mt. Zimmer Yurt and the Woody Creek Cabin, while Big Sky Backcountry runs them out of the Bell Lake Yurt. — K.S.

Willow Fork in Utah's Big Cottonwood Canyon offers a great deal of moderate terrain. Tyson Bradley

UTAH

There's one good option in Utah that not only has gentle slopes to lower avalanche risk, but it also has parking, a commodity coveted almost as much as good snow during prime ski times.

Willow Fork is in Big Cottonwood Canyon in the Wasatch Range, about 30 miles southeast of Salt Lake City, just across from the Solitude Mountain Resort where parking is available on a sliding scale from $20 to $5 per day based on the number of people in the vehicle.

“There’s a great deal of moderate terrain, including a place called U.S.A. bowl,” said Tyson Bradley, author of the book “Backcountry Skiing Utah: A Guide to the State’s Best Ski Tours.” He said the slope is less than 30 degrees, and faces south and west, both factors that can lower the chance of an avalanche.

It’s also fairly easy to get to. “It’s an hour of skinning max to get up in there,” he said. Total elevation gain is about 1,700 feet, with a top at around 10,000 feet.

For guided trips, the most popular location is Grizzly Gulch in Little Cottonwood Canyon, near the Alta Ski Resort. Another good choice is Cardiff Fork on Mount Superior, but again, skiers should go with a guide since it’s in an area prone to avalanches, said Mr. Bradley, who is a part owner of Utah Mountain Adventures.

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“It’s very iconic, and very popular with backcountry skiers,” he said. “There are dozens of beautiful runs everywhere you look.”

The Wasatch Range doesn’t have the sort of hut system that skiers find in other parts of Utah, but there are yurts in the Uinta Mountains, the highest range in the state.

“The friendlier one to get into is the Castle Peak Yurt,” about 30 miles from Park City, which is approached by skinning up a road while gaining about 2,000 feet in elevation, Mr. Bradley said.

He also recommended the Steam Mill yurt and the Bunchgrass yurt, in northern Utah near Logan, which are approached through the woods.

The area tends to be less crowded and quieter than the Wasatch, and, he said, with its aspen and conifer trees, “It’s typical beautiful mountain scenery.” — K.S.

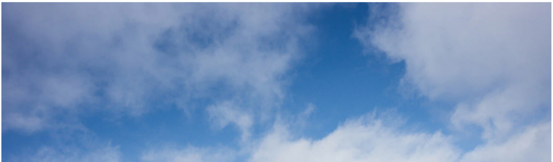

Table Mountain, in Washington, has excellent moderate skiing and stunning views. Scott Rinckenberger

WASHINGTON

The tour on the distinctive flat-topped **Table Mountain,** in Glacier, combines breathtaking scenery with excellent, moderate skiing. The area around Mount Baker is also one of the snowiest in North America. "It's wild and scenic from beginning to end and it's attainable," said Martin Volken, the owner of Pro Guiding Service and the author of "Backcountry Ski & Snowboard Routes: Washington." "It offers everything a good ski tour should offer without trashing you." The tour begins at the Heather Meadows parking area of the Mount Baker Ski Area and follows a snowcat track before passing the ski area boundary. You climb beneath the craggy summit of Table Mountain (these are avalanche-prone slopes) to Ptarmigan Ridge. From this shoulder of Table Mountain you have spectacular views of Mount Shuksan and Mount Baker. A popular descent follows the powdery north-facing slopes of Table Mountain nearly 2,000 vertical feet to Bagley Lakes, a beautiful frozen basin. Pro Guiding Service offers guided ski tours.

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Just an hour from Seattle lies Snoqualmie Pass, home to several ski areas and vast backcountry skiing terrain. The ski tour to **Pineapple Pass** is a classic for its quality terrain and gorgeous setting. Starting from the parking lot of the Alpental Ski Area, you ski up following the South Fork of the Snoqualmie River into Pineapple Basin. The basin is ringed by the thousand-foot walls of Bryant Peak, Hemlock Peak and the Tooth. It is a spectacular landscape.

After skinning up Pineapple Pass (the upper section can be wind loaded and avalanche-prone), there are views to the south of the massive profile of Mount Rainier. The scenery is rewarding enough, but another highlight awaits on the 1,800-vertical foot ski descent back the way that you came. "The ski touring is moderate but the terrain is spectacular," said Mr. Volken. There are many options for expanding the tour to venture further into this dramatic mountainscape. Pro Guiding Service offers tours. — D. G.

WYOMING/IDAHO

Teton Pass is a good option for relative beginners to backcountry skiing and riding, and is accessible as a day trip from Jackson Hole, according to Thomas Turiano, the author of the "Teton Pass Backcountry Guide" and, "Jackson Hole Backcountry Skier's Guide: South."

"Teton Pass has a lot of moderate terrain that is 25 degrees or less," he said. But, he cautioned, there are usually a lot of tracks going every which way, and a skier shouldn't assume they are safe and follow them. "You do have to be selective. You want to stay on the ridges and out of the gullies and off the steep faces," he said.

While Teton Pass usually has great snow, it doesn't have enough parking for the number of users, so it fills up quickly. There is talk of a permit system, which could go into effect next year.

For guiding companies, Mr. Turiano recommended Exum Mountain Guides, in Moose, the Mountain Guides in Jackson Hole, and Teton Backcountry Guides, just across the state line in Driggs, Idaho.

Teton Backcountry Guides owns four yurts that are available for winter use. The company will rent them without guides to experienced parties, or, for $1,200 per person, it offers three-day, two-night trips for all levels of skiing and riding that includes two guides for up to six guests, catered meals and porters to carry all the food.

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In Idaho, the Galena Summit pass, at an elevation of about 8,700 feet and about 30 minutes from Sun Valley, has good options, with the Cross being a suitable area for beginners, said Chris Lundy, the co-owner of Sawtooth Mountain Guides. In addition to a quick approach, "it is pretty low angle," Mr. Lundy said, while still cautioning, "there are some small spots that are steep enough to avalanche."

Parking is on pullouts and there are no trailhead markers, so those unfamiliar with the area might prefer to go with a guide. Sun Valley Guides also offers trips in the area.

"There's a ton of one-day destinations that people can go with a guide," Mr. Lundy said. "It's a great place for someone to learn to backcountry ski. You're skiing within short order instead of hiking all day and doing one little run.”

For those who want a longer adventure, Sawtooth Mountain Guides owns a yurt in the area, and Sun Valley Guides runs trips to the six that are owned by Sun Valley Mountain Huts. Boulder Yurt is a particularly good option for beginners, since it’s only 1.5 miles from the trailhead. — K.S.

David Goodman is the author of “Best Backcountry Skiing in the Northeast: 50 Classic Ski and Snowboard Tours in New England and New York” (Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2020). He lives in Vermont.

Karen Schwartz was raised in the Canadian Rockies and now lives in Colorado. Follow her on Twitter: @WanderWomanIsMe.