Avalanches

Skiing a 55-degree face. Navigating two-inch visibility. Ripping your lungs out at 16,000 feet. None of that compares to the difficulty of assessing avalanche danger. Avoiding avalanches requires many skills that are gained from mentors, maintaining an active interest in learning about avalanches and regular avalanche courses. Multi-source avalanche education is essential because skiing in Southcentral is often not on steep and stable snow under clear skies. Far from it. To survive the backcountry, you need to adjust your mindset to several key priorities for safety that are unique to Southcentral.

Southcentral Avalanche Information Links


The south face of Sunburst releasing on February 23, 2008, after a four-day storm that dumped six feet of snow. The fracture line at the top of this avalanche was 1,500 feet across and up to 15 feet thick. The skier was buried over 20 minutes, but found and dug up alive by avalanche forecaster Matt Murphy. Photo by Peter Knape.
Nick Parker in the Williwaw Avalanche path in Portage in February 1983. The avalanche was 36 feet deep at the rappel site and extended 1,700 feet across. Trees 500 feet up the opposite side of the gorge were broken off. Picnic tables and outhouses were swept from the Williwaw Campground and trees 14 inches in diameter snapped off at ground level on the far side of Portage Creek, where the slide stopped. The debris was up to 100 feet deep and covered an area the size of 22 football fields. Photo by Doug Fesler.
Avalanches

Tips to Avoid Avalanches in Southcentral

*Have trip alternatives.*

Alaska requires flexibility. If you are flexible, the rewards are huge. In avalanche classes, you learn to discuss route alternatives with your group to avoid single-minded goals that lead to accidents. In Alaska, alternatives become even more important. To pull off a big Alaska ski trip, not only do you need route alternatives for each day, but you also need complete trip alternatives. If you plan on skiing Turnagain Pass on January 10-12, it might be storming and avalanching. Instead, plan on skiing Turnagain Pass or Hatcher Pass on those dates, with Alyeska Resort as a third option.

*Be your own avalanche forecaster.*

For the Turnagain Pass and Hatcher Pass areas, you can get avalanche information from the Chugach National Forest Avalanche Information Center and the Hatcher Pass Avalanche Center, respectively. Almost everywhere else in Southcentral has no avalanche advisory. You will need good terrain- and snow-assessment skills, plus an ability to socialize at Midnight Sun with the Turnagain Crew.

*Be extra patient.*

Remember the mantra: There are old skiers and bold skiers, but no old, bold skiers. Southcentral has world-class steep skiing, but enjoying it takes patience. You must wait, and wait, until you are crazed. Then you will be rewarded with stable slopes, deep powder and clear skies. These conditions occur more often in March and April. If you see others skiing 45-degree gullies during a “considerable” avalanche danger rating, remind yourself that the odds will catch up with them one day. To ski steep, exposed lines, wait for very good snow stability with no red flags, then go have a noncommittal look.

*Turnagain has an identity crisis.*

The Kenai Mountains near Turnagain Pass don’t fit neatly into a single snow climate category (maritime, intermountain or continental). In some seasons, Turnagain Pass has a fully maritime snow climate, where each storm dumps a fat, warm layer of snow. By waiting a day or two, the snow may stabilize to be skiable anywhere in the area. In other years, the climate at Turnagain is more continental; more persistent weak layers remain in the snowpack for weeks. Initially, the snow at Turnagain may appear as a solid, stable, maritime snowpack, but it’s probably more unstable than it appears. When you first arrive in Southcentral, dig to the snowpack base and study the layers before deciding whether to ski. Also, check cnfaic.org and hatcherpassavalanchecenter.org for weather and snowpack history.
Don’t call for help.
Cell phones don’t work in most of Southcentral. Even if you do get a call out, organized rescue is two plus hours away. More importantly, if your buddy gets buried and you get on the phone before attempting a rescue, your buddy will die. Instead, of relying on a phone call—cell or satellite—practice companion rescue every year so you can do the right thing at the right time.

It’s big here.
The runs in Southcentral are no longer than in the Tetons, or the Wasatch, or the Sierra. The difference is they feel bigger. The lack of trees is mostly to blame. After finishing a run there’s often no safe zone. Just the exposed valley floor below the monster face you just skied. Your safest hideaway might be tucked under a small cliffband. You’ll feel exposed and out there...welcome to Alaska!

Expect full alpine with no trees.
Treeline in Southcentral is about 2,000 feet. That’s low. Above that it’s all avalanche terrain and that’s where the good skiing is. While this lack of trees forms the classic huge Alaskan faces, the skiing is often too dangerous if it’s storming or unstable. Most slopes have no trees for visual reference during storms, no tree islands of safety and no trees anchoring the snowpack. For skiers, the lack of trees is the primary contributor to the Alaska factor.

Avoid glide cracks.
In the fall, most big slopes at Turnagain Pass have glide cracks. These massive cracks are 40 to 300 feet across and one to 15 feet wide. The entire snowpack is creeping downhill on the smooth, tundra-covered ground. It can release into a forest-crushing glide avalanche. The good news is a skier won’t trigger a glide crack avalanche. The bad news is they release when they’re in the mood. As with a serac, you can sneak under a glide crack with a low probability of getting nailed, but if you camp under it, you set yourself up for a Darwin Award.