Avalanches

Ski movies show athletes ripping down monster Alaska faces with sluffs roaring alongside. They launch from cliffs and over gaping crevasses. They high-five below the face and discuss the fortunes of the good life.

The problem is that the ski movies gloss over reality. They don’t show the multiple helicopters nearby, each loaded with rescue personnel and safety crews posted on the ridge and base. They’ve waited weeks for the right conditions and snowpack. A team of snow safety personnel has worked full-time to assess each run. The athletes themselves have vast experience and knowledge in the arena.

Skiing in Southcentral Alaska is often not on steep and stable snow under clear skies. Far from it. Avoiding avalanches requires an active interest in learning about avalanches and the self-control to apply this knowledge. Take regular avalanche classes to stay current with this dynamic topic and practice companion rescue each year.

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 for 20 minutes, but found and dug up alive by avalanche forecaster Matt Murphy. Photo by Peter Knape.

Southcentral Avalanche Resources

- Alaska Guide Collective: alaskaguidecollective.com
- Alaska Avalanche School: alaskaavalanche.org
- American Avalanche Association: avalanche.org
- Chugach Avalanche Center: cnfaic.org
- Hatcher Pass Avalanche Center: hpavalanche.org
- Mountain Weather: mountainweather.com
- Valdez Avalanche Center: alaskasnow.org/valdez

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 in flat light, 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.

The runs in Southcentral are no longer than in the Tetons or the Wasatch or the Sierra. The difference is they feel bigger. After finishing a run there’s no safe zone. Just the defenseless valley floor below the monster face you just skied. Your safest hideaway might be the ridge, tucked under a small cliff band, or back in your car. You’ll feel exposed and out there.

Loki spots The Viking at Turnagain Pass. Photo by Kathy Still.
Avoiding Avalanches in Southcentral Alaska

Have trip alternatives
Alaska requires flexibility. If you are flexible, the rewards are huge. In any avalanche class, you learn to discuss route options 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, you not only need route alternatives for each day, you also need complete trip alternatives. For example, if you plan to ski Thompson Pass on January 10-12, it might be storming and avalanching. Be ready to switch to Hatcher or Alyeska Resort.

Be extra patient
Southcentral has world-class skiing, but enjoying it takes patience. You must wait, and wait and wait until you go crazy. Only then will you be rewarded with stable slopes, deep powder and clear skies. These conditions occur more often in March and April. If you see others skiing 40-degree chutes when the avalanche danger is rated considerable, remind yourself that they are probably more lucky than smart. The odds will catch up with them one day. Big Alaska ski terrain requires stable snow, stable weather and stable partners. Then you have permission to go for a noncommittal look.

Be your own avalanche forecaster
You can get avalanche information for Turnagain, Hatcher and Valdez from cnfaic.org, hpavalanche.org and alaskasnow.org/valdez. Almost everywhere else in Southcentral Alaska has no avalanche forecast. That means you are the avalanche forecaster. Take a recreational level two avalanche course so you know how to forecast.

When you first arrive in Southcentral, ease into avalanche terrain if your assessment runs show no signs of unstable snow. Dig quick pits to see and feel the layers. Also, check the avalanche center websites for a weather and snowpack history.

Be humble
Have you skied some big lines? If so, ask yourself: “Was it experience or luck that allowed me to succeed?” If you think you’re pretty good, then you’re probably pretty young and pretty lucky. Alaska mountains are bigger and better than you will ever be.

Save your stoke for spring
Snowpack generally becomes more stable in March through June, allowing you to get into big avalanche terrain. Midwinter is just training for spring.

Avoid glide cracks
Glide cracks can be massive, up to 300 feet across and 15 feet wide. Turnagain Pass in particular has a glide crack and a glide avalanche problem. The entire snowpack slowly creeps downhill on the ground and can release into an alder-forest-crushing glide avalanche. The good news is that many glide cracks won’t become an avalanche and a skier won’t trigger a glide avalanche. The bad news is they can release at any time. As with serac fall, you can sneak under a glide crack with a low probability of getting nailed, but if you take a break under it, you set yourself up for a Darwin Award.
Find safe spotting zones
Alaska’s long ski runs often bulge and turn, taking the skier out of the spotter’s view. But it can be a trade-off between spotting and safety. Take time to find a safe spotting zone that is protected from an avalanche: under a cliff, out on a spur or an adjacent ridge.

Manage your sluff
Sluff avalanches—dry loose avalanches—can pummel you down the mountain, over a cliff and into the alders. To avoid being sluffed, make turns diagonally down the slope. Ski small ridges that shed the sluff to either side. Don’t cross your sluff. Another option is to can ski fast and stay out of the freight train’s way, giving a frequent Chugach look over your shoulder to monitor the sluff’s location. It’s wiser to take it slow and let the sluff move past.

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 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, practice companion rescue each year and don’t get caught.