

Ten Tips for Backcountry Snowshoeing and Winter Bruce Easton



The Snowy Mountains Main Range and High Plains of Victoria and Tasmania are at their most spectacular in winter, but also at their most challenging. Multi-day trips camping overnight out in the wild require improved planning and preparation and can be especially hard on you and your gear. Here are Bruce Easton's pointers for safe and successful backcountry snowshoeing and winter adventuring.

Bruce Easton, a mountain and snowshoe tour guide at Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales
Lisa Hogben

1. Planning is everything

In winter, daylight hours are significantly shorter, the weather can be much more serious, and you'll be carrying a heavier load. Winter backpacking is a much tougher proposition.

It's a good idea to be less ambitious when planning a multi-day winter trip. Your daily distance covered will be lower than walking in summer months, and while you might happily romp up multiple peaks in a day on a summer outing, this is going to be far more challenging in winter. Be realistic about your abilities and experience, tailor your route to the predicted conditions. Have Plans B and C, alternatives you can fall back on if the weather is worse than forecast or expected, or if the snow is slow or cannot be crossed. Plan to reach camp early, say 3.30 pm, and try to eat while it's still light if you can.

2. Hone your skills

Navigation is more important in winter. Paths are often buried in snow, making casual navigation difficult, and bad weather may include a whiteout. In such conditions it can be hard enough to tell up from down, let alone north from south. Needless to say, your map and compass skills will have to be up to the task; dialled in and well practised if your route takes you up onto the tops. Do not rely on electronic equipment, consider them as back ups.

Get used to assessing the snow conditions and snowpack. Learn how to identify wind slab, spot wind-scoured areas that might prove safer to walk on, and dig a test pit to look for common indications of hazardous layers within the snowpack.

3. The right gear

Look for lightweight winter hardware. Trekking poles are really useful in winter, especially when coupled with snowshoes you are familiar with and carry spare parts and repair items. Don't forget a good head torch with a powerful beam plus a set of spare batteries; or better yet, a spare torch.

“It's a good idea to be less ambitious when planning a multi-day winter trip.”

When selecting a tent, wind resistance is the top feature to look for. Lightweight, one-person summer tents can be used, but they are less resistant to high winds and snow loading so you'll have to be much more careful when selecting a location to pitch and camp. In winter, using summer tents above the snowline is not advisable. A good four-season tent is suggested - any brand - but ensure you have pitched it at home or on a bushwalk prior to the snow trip and ensure you have sufficient snow pegs, stakes or snow anchors. A good shelter will weigh about one kilogram per person.



Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales
Lisa Hogben

I don't actually carry a four-season sleeping bag in winter. Modern synthetic sleeping bags are very functional and can stay dry relative to down bags used by inexperienced winter campers. Synthetic sleeping bags are both lighter and more compact these days with modern technical fibres, plus they are affordable if starting out. I have a quality three-season down bag rated to freezing, which I use in conjunction with a thermal or silk sleeping bag liner, doubled up foam sleeping mats, and my clothing system. I've found this to be effective down to about -10°C, but everyone is different in this respect – cold sleepers may well need more insulation. If in doubt, invest in a four-season down bag. You may also need a thicker sleeping pad/mat than you would use on summer trips.

“Packing light is all about removing the “just in case” items ...

4. Food and eating

It's colder in winter, and you're working far harder to carry more gear and travel through snow. That means you're burning many more kilojoules and also to stay warm.

In winter I choose items dense in kilojoules and resistant to freezing. Food like chocolate bars might be useful for an impromptu belay anchor, but there are stories of nearly breaking teeth on frozen chocolate. Many experienced people don't carry chocolate in winter. Porridge is good for breakfast, and I have yet to find a better food for during the day than black bread. In the evening, something hot and filling is best – Pasta 'n' Sauce with extra cheese and toppings always works well.

Allow for extra brews of tea or hot chocolate, which always perk people up and bolster spirits.

5. Wild camping or huts

Winter camping can either be a wonderful experience or downright misery, but a little preparation can make all the difference. As it takes a lot to warm up the space, huts can be cold places and invariably it's folly to rely on any wood, especially dry material that will burn and likely not throw off any heat. Hut stoves are inefficient. You will also discover

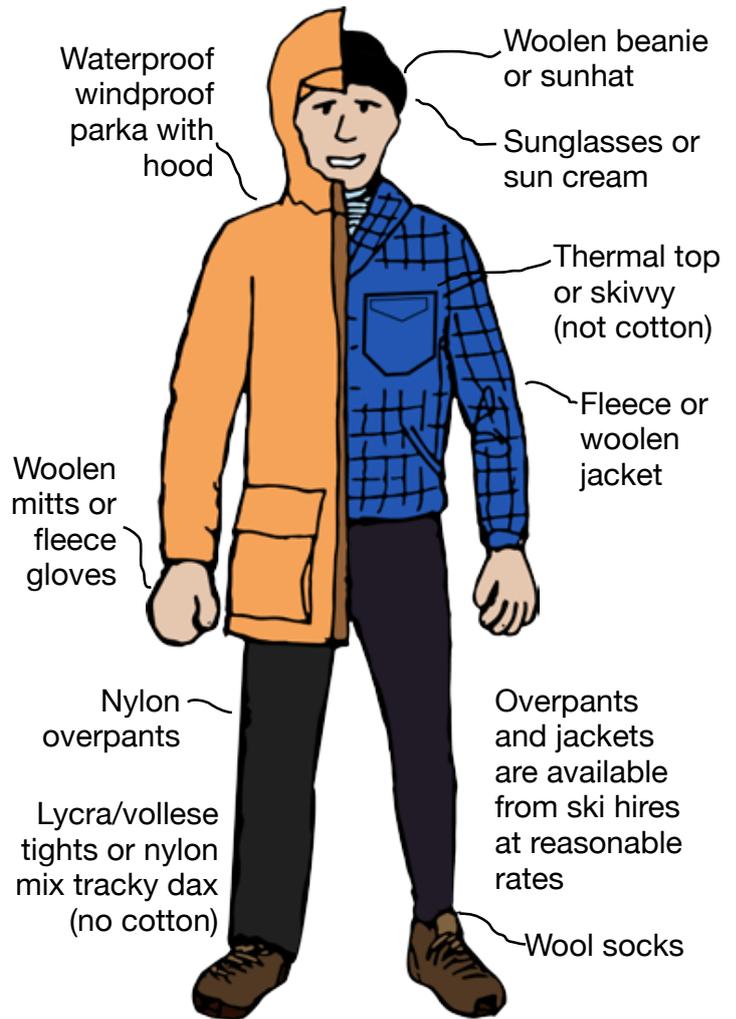
why the mountain animals like huts that are also not too hygienic. By all means use them to shelter in but tents are warmer and cosier for guaranteed sleep.

Please ensure you carry out all refuse and waste. This includes faecal waste. Ensure when you clean dishes that you're well away from water sources and minimise your impact on the environment. Liquid hand sanitiser is smart to use and lightweight.

“Winter camping can either be a wonderful experience or downright misery, but a little preparation can make all the difference.

6. Tech gear

Most bushwalkers carry a head torch, mobile phone, a camera, and maybe a GPS too. Batteries do not like freezing temperatures – you might find devices unexpectedly dying on you unless you keep the batteries warm.



A useful trick is to keep a spare, fully charged battery in an inner jacket pocket, ready to swap with a cold battery. Of course, this only works if the device has a removable battery. Devices such as cameras that you use during the day should be carried in an inner pocket. Solar chargers are useful for extended trips, but only if you anticipate good weather.

“ Snowshoeing can be tough. ... But the rewards can be very special.

7. Light is right

You'll need more gear in winter, but that doesn't mean you can't still pack light. The more experienced you are, the more you will learn about yourself and about what you really need and more importantly actually use. Packing light is all about removing the "just in case" items where (and only where) it's safe to do so. Base this on the forecast and your planned trip, and replacing older heavier items with new lighter alternatives. There are limits to sensible weight saving and there are certainly some absolute essentials that you should not leave behind in winter:

spare head torch batteries (or, better, a spare torch/emergency light), ample stove fuel, multiple pairs of gloves, sufficient warm layers, and spare dry socks!

8. Sound information

Effective planning needs quality information. I recommend speaking with the staff of a local outdoor/ski store who have recent experience in the mountains and current snow and weather conditions. Nowadays there's a huge amount of information available online, although reliance on the web can be misleading; compared to first-hand and knowledgeable personal information. Much of it applies equally to summer or winter. A good map is the best starting point. Next on the list should be a reliable and up-to-date weather forecast.

9. Be inspired

Snowshoeing can be tough. It's hard work, your pack weighs a ton, and finding the perfect place to pitch your tent can feel impossible when the wind is gusting and spindrift is hurtling in all directions. But the rewards can be very special. These include



full moon jaunts to ridge tops and mountain peaks; the starry skies and southern lights; skills learnt for journeys and exploration to other places and higher mountains; satisfaction of staying warm in wintry places following blizzards and gale-force winds with large snow falls.

10. Remember to have fun

Explore new places and use maps to go to different locations and also change the directions you travel to reach those places.

What you need to remember, especially with snowshoes, is that it's essentially like walking. Snow is the variable and so more time is needed on the trip to plan ways to get to places.

This winter a number of "Come & Try" Snowshoeing Events at Perisher plus also a number of dedicated snowshoe trails for you to experience. Check www.wildernesssports.com.au for more information.

The original snowshoe race in Australia is the Snowy Mountains Snowshoe Stomp at Perisher on 27 August, with 6 kilometre and 12 kilometre races and also some fun events over the weekend.

Other events to watch are the new [Bigfoot Snowtrail Event](#) a new distance event at Falls Creek on 17 September, 27 kilometres and 42 kilometres.

Look for some additional events in Perisher like Snow Rogain and Orienteering Events plus "Come & Try" Events.



Bruce started guiding in the early 1980s, working with World Expeditions, and has over 25 years Telemark teaching ski experience. Bruce has made [Wilderness Sports](#) in Jindabyne into Australia's largest backcountry hire and guiding business, attracting passionate and knowledgeable staff. He simply loves the mountains and the sports which occur in them! He knows a lot about the history of the ski and outdoor industry over the last couple of decades, the equipment they used and the future direction and future of the mountain sports. You can follow him on facebook.com/OZWildernessSports.



Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales
Lisa Hogben



Kosciuszko National Park, New South Wales
Lisa Hogben