



With its own set of rules, the *ski pack niche* comes into its own.

THERE IS SOMETHING EXCITING GOING ON IN ONE niche of the pack world. In the past couple seasons, GearTrends® has noticed the emergence of well-designed ski packs when before there were virtually none. Until recently, backcountry skiers, snowboarders and resort skiers who ventured out-of-bounds made do with packs designed for summer hiking or alpine climbing.

Although skiers and snowboarders can adapt to packs designed for other activities, these models are not optimal since they lack features that enhance winter sports. Mesh backs, for example, ventilate well in the summer, but hold snow and are difficult to brush off. GearTrends® decided to take a look at some of the new designs and other special features in ski packs. We found they run roughly between \$80 to \$150 at retail based on their features. With a broader view of the market, stores can do a better job of stocking and selling this burgeoning category.

WINTER PACK DESIGN

Usually, the first thing skiers do when they take a snack break or reach a summit is remove their pack and flop it in the snow. But, if the pack has skis attached, it's difficult to access the contents of a top-loader. Either a side access zipper, such as the Arc'Teryx Silo 50, or a rear panel that opens, as seen on the C.A.M.P. X3 Evo, is a desirable feature for any top-loading ski pack.

Though traditional front-loading packs offer the convenience of access, when skis are attached they often force the user to lay the suspension system in the snow. These packs can be rather unpleasant to put back on afterward, even if the snow brushes off, since they are often wet. Thus, rear-entry packs—such as on the Marmot La Meije, Mountain Hardware Glisse or Osprey Switch 26—have a decided advantage for winter fun.

Another popular alternative are hatchback packs, like the Black Diamond Revelation or Osprey Switch 16 and 36.

For a time, there was a moderate demand for small, side-country packs that could be used for lift-served skiing.

BY CLYDE SOLES

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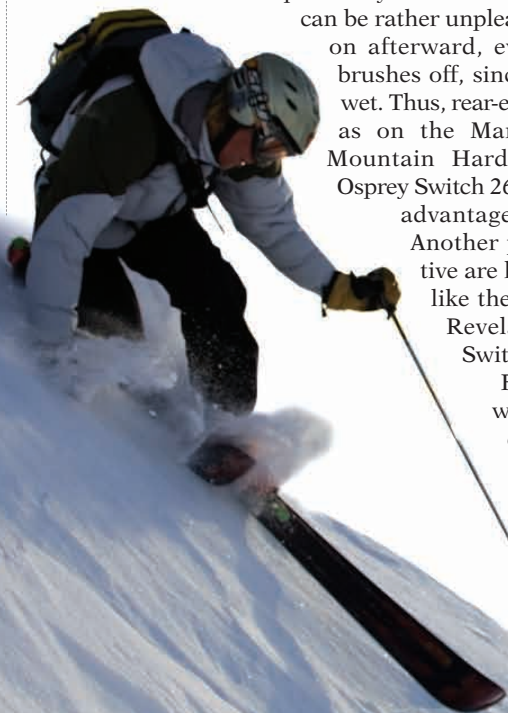
These packs carry little more than an avalanche shovel and probe pole, plus some water, and are slim enough that they won't push a skier out of a chair. We found, though, this was a very limited market that appears to have been filled. According to Dave Furman at Mammut, "A few years ago, everyone wanted 10- to 20-liter packs, and I think they've figured out that that's not big enough. Based on our sales, we've settled on roughly 30 liters as being the most generally useful size."

A survey of popular pack lines shows that most ski packs on the market are now in the 25- to 35-liter range. It is worth pointing out to customers that packs in the 30- to 40-liter range can be carried with a down parka fluffed up inside (this greatly increases flotation should the wearer be caught in an avalanche).

No matter the style or size, ski packs for day use generally do not need a substantial suspension system. Typically, the loads on day trips are fairly light (under 20 pounds), since heavy packs throw off a skier's balance. As a result, aluminum stays are seldom seen, except in the largest of ski packs. Even these packs usually just have a single stay and it's often removable.

Hip belts also lean toward the minimalist side in terms of padding. Shoulder straps on ski packs generally are lined with smooth

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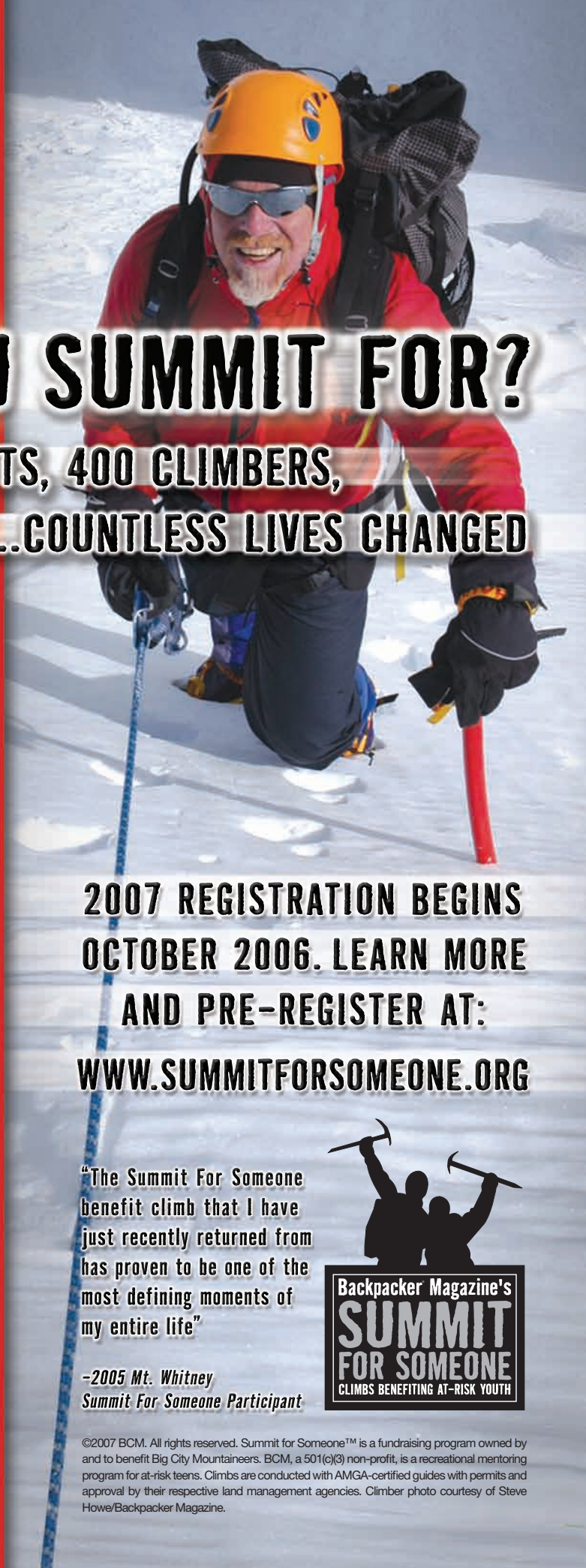


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fabric instead of the mesh commonly found on summer packs.

SKI FEATURES

It's the little things that separate a true ski pack from a run-of-the-mill daypack. The most refined designs don't merely add bells and whistles, but cleanly integrate details that are truly useful while keeping things streamlined—the less places that hold snow after a fall, the better.

Among the most important features for any ski pack is storage for an avalanche shovel and probe pole, so they are both secure and readily accessible. This outer pocket is usually padded with foam to keep the hard shovel blade from wearing a hole in the outer fabric. Internal slots hold the probe and shovel handle—sometimes even a snow saw. Most packs also have a small zippered pocket for snow study items. Since this pocket often is used to carry climbing skins, which can be wet, some models have a drain hole.

The traditional method for carrying skis is an A-frame configuration using the side compression straps to trap the binding and a ski tie to hold the tips together. This is stable and works well for longer hikes on

flatter terrain. It does have its downsides: it's slow to rig, doesn't work well when the pack is partly empty, the steel edges can chew up the pack, and the ski tails often hit on rocks when walking downhill.

The modern alternative is a carrying system that holds a pair of skis together diagonally across the front of the pack. Most ski packs now allow both methods of carrying skis. Both C.A.M.P. (Campack and X3) and Granite Gear (Q2) offer a convenient diagonal carry system that doesn't require taking a pack on or off, which greatly speeds transitions for racing

or getting first tracks on powder days.

Packs with diagonal carry systems often are designed to carry snowboards and snowshoes vertically. Some, such as Mountainsmith's Off-Piste and The North Face's Off Chute Duo, also allow a snowboard to be carried horizontally.

Perhaps the most widely copied feature in the ski pack market is the insulated hydration sleeve built into the shoulder strap—a concept pioneered by Backcountry Access several years ago. Now the sleeve can be found on packs from Gregory, Mountain Hardware, Mountainsmith, The North Face and Osprey. Granite Gear offers

a Winterizer Kit that insulates the hose and bite valve of any hydration system. It even has a pocket for a chemical handwarmer to keep the bite valve flowing in extreme cold.

One of the most useful features a ski pack can offer is pockets on the hip belt. Among brands that offer this are Black Diamond (Revelation), C.A.M.P. (Campack and



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WHY CHECK OUT THESE PACKS AT THE SHOWS?

- » **Black Diamond Anarchist:** Avalung
- » **C.A.M.P. X3 Evo:** Rear opening & fast ski carrier
- » **Granite Gear Q2:** Compactness & fast ski carrier
- » **Gregory Targhee:** Unique suspension
- » **Osprey Switch 26:** Lightness & well-rounded feature set

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X3), Gregory (Drift and Targhee), Mountain Hardwear (Glisse and Windpack), Mountainsmith (Off-Piste and Vert), The North Face (Shuttle and Off Chute Duo), Osprey (Switchback) and Patagonia (Outer Limits). These belt pockets are ideal for sunscreen, snacks, a compass, and possibly a small camera. When traveling on a glacier, a belt pocket can stow crevasse rescue gear where it can be reached in an emergency, although some packs offer a gear loop instead.

Considering that quality goggle lenses scratch more easily than sunglasses and aren't cheap to replace, it's understandable that skiers would like to protect them. For this reason, a soft inner pocket can be found on ski packs from Lowe Alpine (Fall Line, Powder Line and Snow Attack), Mountain Hardwear (Glisse and Huckster) and The North Face (Off Chute and Steep Tech). The Osprey Switch packs have a detachable fleece pocket inside the top pocket for goggles.

Since the use of ski helmets is becoming ever more prevalent, and it's often desirable to remove them while climbing, many ski packs now offer external helmet carrying systems. All of Osprey's Switchback packs

have top pockets with stretch material that will accommodate most helmets. The Black Diamond Anarchist has a retractable mesh panel for helmets, while the Revelation has a detachable bungee system. All six models of Mammut ski packs come with a removable helmet holder.

Less notable details that should be standard on any ski pack include zipper pulls that can be used while wearing gloves, smooth back panels (no bumps or ridges) that can be brushed off easily, light colored fabric lining to make it easier to find things, large glove-friendly haul loops, strap holders to reduce flapping, and a whistle on the sternum strap.

A few packs have features shared by no others. For example, the ArcTeryx Silo 40 and 50 have roll-top closures like a dry bag. Gregory's new ski packs, the Drift and Targhee, are designed to use the skis as part of the suspension system. The North Face Off Chute Duo features a back panel that folds out to

become a chair. And the avalanche shovel pocket on Mountain Hardwear's Windpack detaches, so it can be used as a small pack for day tours when on a hut trip.

And we can't forget Black Diamond's Anarchist and Covert packs with built-in Avalungs, which can greatly extend the time someone can breathe while buried by snow. Now that they're available, we expect that sales will be brisk in regions where avalanche is a great risk.

The \$190 to \$270 price tag is unlikely to daunt serious backcountry skiers. However, the same models without the Avalung,

though \$90 less expensive, do not compare as well with other ski packs on the market.

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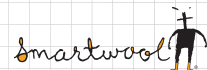
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