

Level 1

AVALANCHE TRAINING

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My first winter in Mammoth was pretty much unbeatable. I'd moved up here with a pass in my pocket, unemployment checks in the mail, and the prospect of another 500-inch season on the horizon. But after sharing powder days with thousands of other people all season, the peaks outside my window started to look less like scenery and more like an escape from heinous lift lines. But I knew I had no business getting after it without the right gear, knowledge and understanding to be safe out of bounds.

I found my opportunity when I signed up for Sierra Mountain Guides' Level 1 avalanche course this past March. Over that weekend, I learned that being in the backcountry is about more than snow; it's about asking the right questions, collecting and evaluating as much data as you can before you even leave the house, and constantly reassessing your plan along the way. Earning your turns means making multiple critical decisions.

THE BASICS ▶

Each day began and ended in the classroom, a mix of guidebook reference, video watching, and intense discussion. The course kicked off with an overview of the nature and behavior of avalanches. We saw examples of snow in all its forms and how it changes over time; learned the difference between maritime, continental, and intermountain climates; analyzed case studies; observed weather effects. We added sexy new words to our vocabulary: faceting, rounding,



Class in session.

depth hoar, whumphing, stauchwall. Tools were presented, and we learned how to use them: topographical maps, binoculars, clinometers, beacons, probes, avalanche reports, and compasses.

APPLIED KNOWLEDGE ▶

But memorizing facts in the classroom, though



crucial and highly interesting, was only half of the experience. When you're in the backcountry, you're responsible not just for yourself, but for everyone you're with—which is why, once we dissected the anatomy of a slide, we headed into the field to practice getting someone out of one. The biggest factor in nearly all avalanche accidents

“YOU’VE GOT JUST ENOUGH KNOWLEDGE NOW TO MAKE YOU DANGEROUS,”

is the human one, and learning how to read your partners, then make choices and plan rescues as an organized, efficient group, is bedrock.

Every afternoon, we stuffed beacons into backpacks, buried them, concocted scenarios for each other, and took turns against a stopwatch using our own beepers to locate the “victim,” feeling for her “body” with probes, then digging her out. It didn't matter that what was under the snow was just a pack and a signal—I was panicking. A rescue that takes just nine minutes to complete feels like two hours. You're hyper aware that the longer it takes, the less chance she has of surviving. The only way to really be prepared to handle this in real life is to practice over, and over, and over.

Scary as slides are, though, a “considerable” or “high” avalanche danger rating in your local advisory doesn't mean you have to stay home. It's just one factor in a complex, decision making process that determines where you go (terrain selection) and how you'll go (travel techniques). What surprised me most was learning that

snow stability tests—the aforementioned pit digging shouldn't be your primary source of safety analysis, but your last reassurance. Before you've packed up the truck, you should have already scouted the terrain, memorized the avalanche bulletin, checked the weather, tested the batteries in your beacon, chosen ideal and alternate routes, and established clear, honest communication with your companions...all of which should tell you how risky it is to go where you'd planned. In fact, on the last day of the class—an excursion to a local peak, planned and led by us students—we didn't break out the shovels until we were well into the trip. Rather than relying on the results of compression and board block tests from one (albeit large) cross section of snow, we'd been checking the conditions all along the way: poking ski poles through crust, jumping on rollovers, and squeezing moisture out of snowballs.

At the end of the last day, I proudly accepted my certificate of completion...and promptly realized that I was now scared shitless of stepping foot anywhere patrol wouldn't be throwing charges. “You've got just enough knowledge now to make you dangerous,” my instructor joked. He was right. Armed with this much information, you go from cowering under the covers to feeling confident that you can make good decisions out there. But knowledge offers choices, and though I have many hours of beacon practice and map math ahead of me, it feels really good to know that although I moved to a resort town, now I live in the mountains.

Special thanks to Neil Satterfield and Sierra Mountain Guides for a thorough and interactive experience. All SMG instructors are trained by the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education. For info about AIARE courses in your area, visit www.avtraining.org.