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Out and About on Snowshoes



Isolated snowflakes drift silently through the bare trees; otherwise, there is silence. The snow swallows up all sound. The sun is reflected a thousand times in the snow. Here and there, you can make out animal tracks.

This article is from a Forum magazine issue.

The snow crystals crunch beneath our snowshoes—which make this hike through the wonderful winter landscape possible in the first place—far away from crowded slope-side restaurants and lines of skiers waiting their turn. Slowly but surely, we make our way past frozen streams, barely recognizable trail markers, and heavily laden fir trees. And as the moon, which has now risen, bathes everything in its mysterious silver light, we know: This is winter as we've never experienced it before.

Boom

Snowshoes are booming—though quietly, without media hype or large-scale advertising. Yet snowshoes have been around for a long time. From Central Asia, they made their way across the Bering Strait to Alaska, where Eskimos and Native Americans still use them today as a means of transportation for winter hunting. Back then, snowshoes were made of wood, animal tendons, and fur; today, they are high-tech constructions made of aluminum and plastic.

Fascination—Off-Road

is what it's all about. This is where snowshoes really shine. And you don't need to learn much to get started: just strap them on and start walking.

Terrain

There's no such thing as "snowshoe terrain." Snowshoes are suitable practically anywhere you can walk but can't make headway in hiking boots because of the snow. The pre-Alpine terrain is particularly well-suited for snowshoeing. Unlike off-piste skiing or snowboarding, hiking through the

forest doesn’t disturb wildlife, since you move slowly on snowshoes and don’t scare the animals away. However, it’s still essential to behave appropriately. Even though snowshoes are often used in alpine terrain as an aid for ascending on ski tours, their true strength lies in flatter terrain, and they will never be truly suitable for summiting peaks. In addition, tours in alpine terrain require a fair amount of expertise to correctly assess dangers and respond appropriately (avalanches, weather, remote routes, no cell phone reception).

For this reason, J+S, for example, recommends choosing routes that generally remain below the tree line.

Cross-country ski trails are a good guide, as they almost without exception run through terrain suitable for snowshoeing.

Snow

The great thing about snowshoes is that the depth and quality of the snow hardly matter. As long as you don’t sink half a meter into powder snow even with snowshoes, you can handle any kind of snow with ease. And even when there’s not much snow: snowshoes are lightweight and can easily be attached to your backpack until you’ve left the snow-free or low-snow areas behind.

Snowshoes

There are many different types of snowshoes: made of aluminum/neoprene, plastic, or wood; with claws or spikes; some with climbing aids; large ones, small ones, with plastic bindings, with quick-release buckles, with backpack straps, with rubber straps, extendable ones, expensive ones, less expensive ones, and cheap ones.

The most important factor when choosing is that the binding is flexible, so that the heel can lift off the ground.

Furthermore, the size should be chosen so that you can place one foot in front of the other without having to do the splits. The size of the appropriate boots depends on the wearer’s height and weight as well as the snow conditions (extendable models are practical here).

To make the decision a little easier: It’s best to rent different types as a group and take turns, so you can walk a bit with each pair.

Tip: When making your selection, be sure to check out the snowshoes from MSR—they’re more affordable than most others and still high-quality.

What else do I need?

Depending on the route and weather, not every piece of gear is equally important, but the necessary equipment always falls somewhere between hiking and skiing gear. You don’t need to buy a whole new wardrobe—you can achieve comfortable solutions simply by cleverly combining items like sweatpants and rain pants. The rule of thumb is simple: underwear, something to keep you warm, and something to protect you from wind and weather. Suitable footwear includes hiking boots, though it’s a good idea to maintain them and equip them with additional thermal insoles. But soft boots and other winter boots also do the trick. You should also bring:

- Ski poles (telescopic poles, if you have them)
- Small backpack (thermos / dry T-shirt / spare gloves)

Techniques

There's really only one thing to keep in mind here: When traveling in a group, take turns breaking trail—with the second person breaking the trail, meaning they don't step in the footprints of the person ahead, but right between them. This creates a nice trail that those following can walk comfortably along.

Dangers

You can't learn how to deal with dangers from a magazine, so here's just a summary of where potential dangers might lie:

- Maps look very different when you can no longer see the trails because of the snow, so you have to rely on safety lines
- It's difficult to estimate the time needed for a specific route, since it depends primarily on snow conditions. There are no reliable factors for calculating travel time.
- Cold is often underestimated, especially when you're sweating and taking a break.
- Avalanches can reach dangerous proportions even on the gentlest slopes. Therefore: Never traverse slopes steeper than 30°, and do not pass directly below such slopes either—instead, give them a wide berth.

Snowshoeing with Children and Teens

Snowshoes are suitable for children starting around age nine. The key factor here isn't the level of skill required, but rather the child's stamina. If you can take a child on longer hikes, they can also go on a snowshoe hike.

When hiking with children, the following points are especially important to keep in mind:

- Guides often have better equipment, whereas children will reach their limits sooner simply because of this.
- Children need breaks more frequently than adults
- It's better to take a shorter hike and "burn off" the remaining energy with snow games than to overwhelm the children with demanding hikes.
- Children often don't realize when they're exhausted or suffering from hypothermia. That's why it's very important for the guide to "sense" how they're doing. Paying close attention is especially important here.
- Children who are cold don't warm up as easily as adults. They need outside help to warm up (hot tea, warm shelter).
- Even when it's cold, you still sweat. That's why it's important to drink enough.
- Plan escape routes: Where can you break off or shorten the hike if necessary?
- Always scout out your routes in advance! Conditions can change quickly, so it's a good idea to revisit a route you've already scouted shortly before setting out.

More Information

Books

The BESJ Shop (Dorfstrasse 10, 8155 Niederhasli, 01 850 69 52, shop [at] besj.ch (shop[at]besj[dot]ch)) carries

- suggestions for snowshoe tours
- Yeti snow games

Courses

Snowshoe hiking is possible under the J+S program. If more challenging hikes are undertaken, or if you plan to spend the night in accommodations without secure access or in igloos, these activities involve safety considerations. Such activities may only be conducted by trained leaders. The BESJ offers corresponding courses.

Rentals

hajk Scout & Sport

Rubigenstrasse 79 3076 Worb SBB Phone: 031 838 38 38 www.hajk.ch

Scout Store

Güterstrasse
8640 Rapperswil
055 210 84 44 www.rappi.ch/scoutstore

okaj

Wasserwerkstr. 17 8035 Zurich www.okaj.ch
01 366 50 10

Various sporting goods stores

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References



- **Content and image:**Forum Kind, Issue 4/02, pages 25 and 26. The author explains what to keep in mind when going on snowshoe excursions. © Copyright www.forum-kind.ch
- **Author: Niels**Abt is a BESJ regional director and an avid snowshoer.

Weitere Informationen

Categories
Technology and outdoor activities

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