What to Check Before a Heli Skiing Trip in Alaska

Heli skiing in Alaska offers access to vast, remote terrain that few skiers ever see. The Chugach Mountains, with their steep faces and deep snowfall, draw experienced riders looking for untracked lines. But the same qualities that make this kind of trip exhilarating also demand careful preparation. Before you board the helicopter, there are several things you need to confirm, pack, and understand. This article walks through a practical backcountry safety checklist for anyone planning a heli skiing vacation in Alaska.

Avalanche Forecast and Snow Stability

The first item on any backcountry checklist is the avalanche forecast. In Alaska, conditions can shift quickly. A stable snowpack one morning can become dangerous by midday as temperatures rise or wind loads a slope. Check the local avalanche forecast daily, and understand what the ratings mean for the terrain you plan to ski. Your guide will have the latest information, but you should arrive knowing how to interpret the basics: what a "considerable" or "high" danger rating implies about slope angle, aspect, and elevation.

Snow stability is not just about the forecast. It involves reading the snowpack as you move through it. Look for signs like cracking, collapsing, or recent avalanche activity. Talk with your guide about the snowpack history for the region. Knowing whether the base is strong or weak, and how much new snow has fallen, helps you make better decisions on the hill.

Beacon, Probe, and Shovel Skills

Every person in a heli skiing group should carry avalanche rescue equipment: a transceiver (beacon), a probe, and a shovel. Owning the gear is not enough. You need to be proficient with it. Practice beacon searches before the trip so that finding a buried signal feels automatic. Time yourself. In a real rescue, seconds matter.

View the location on Google Maps

Probe and shovel technique also requires practice. Probing in a systematic pattern and digging efficiently can cut rescue time in half. Many guides will run a quick skills check on the first day. If you are rusty, ask for a refresher. The goal is to make rescue protocol second nature so that if something happens, you react without hesitation.

Emergency Equipment and Communication

Heli skiing takes you far from roads and cell service. Your group should carry emergency gear beyond avalanche rescue tools. This includes a first aid kit, a satellite messenger or personal

locator beacon (PLB), and a repair kit for skis or snowboards. A headlamp with fresh batteries is essential, because days are short in winter and a helicopter delay could leave you out after dark.

Communication devices are critical. A two-way radio allows you to stay in contact with the helicopter pilot and other groups. Know how to use it. Practice calling in a position report and requesting a pickup. Also understand the protocol for an emergency: how to signal the helicopter, what to do if you become separated, and where to regroup.

Guide Briefing and Group Communication

Before the first flight, your guide will hold a safety briefing. This is not a formality. Pay close attention to the plan for the day: the terrain you will ski, the avalanche danger, the weather forecast, and the communication signals. Ask questions if anything is unclear. A good briefing covers the rescue plan, the meeting points, and the procedure if a member of the group gets lost.

Group dynamics matter in the backcountry. Everyone should be honest about their fitness level and skiing ability. Heli skiing often involves long runs, deep powder, and variable snow conditions. If you are tired, tell the guide. Pushing beyond your limits increases the risk of injury and slows the group. The best days are those where everyone skis within their ability and communicates openly.

Flight Visibility and Wind Conditions

Helicopter operations depend heavily on weather. Flight visibility is the most important factor. If the pilot cannot see the landing zone, the helicopter does not fly. This means you may wait on the ground for hours or even days until conditions improve. Pack patience and a good book. Wind conditions also affect flying and snow stability. Strong winds can create wind slabs that make slopes unstable, and they can ground the helicopter entirely. Your guide and pilot will assess these factors each morning and make the call.

Understanding these conditions helps you plan. If you book a five-day trip, expect that not every day will be a flying day. The best trips build in buffer days for weather. Use down time to review maps, practice rescue skills, or rest your legs.

Physical Preparation and Packing

Heli skiing in the Chugach Mountains demands endurance. You will ski at elevations between 4,000 and 9,000 feet, often in deep snow that works your legs and lungs. Train beforehand with squats, lunges, and cardio. Arrive in Valdez a day early to acclimate to the altitude and the cold.

Pack layers. The temperature can range from well below freezing at the summit to above freezing in the valley. A base layer, an insulating mid-layer, and a waterproof shell are standard. Bring gloves, a hat, and goggles with interchangeable lenses for flat light. Sun protection is also critical: the sun reflects off snow and can burn exposed skin quickly, even on cloudy days.

Understanding the Terrain and Risks

Alaska mountain skiing is not resort skiing. The terrain is big, remote, and exposed. There are no groomed runs, no lift lines, and no ski patrol. The risks include avalanches, tree wells, crevasses (on glaciers), and hypothermia. Every skier in the group shares responsibility for managing these risks. That means staying alert, following the guide's instructions, and speaking up if you see something dangerous.

Finally, remember that the experience of guided Alaska heli skiing is built on trust between the guide, the pilot, and the group. When everyone comes prepared, the day runs smoothly and safely. The goal is not just to ski amazing lines, but to return home in one piece and want to come back next season.

Pulseline Adventure is also on Facebook.

Pulseline Adventure, located at 300 Airport Rd Ste 120, Valdez, AK 99686, USA, provides guided Alaska heli skiing and snowboarding trips in Valdez and the Chugach Mountains. You can reach them at +1 412-397-8573 for more information about planning your trip.