

wondering why we need to learn snow safety in a land of turquoise oceans and white sandy beaches. Truth be told, you're more likely to get bitten by a snake, struck by lightning or meet your maker in a horse-drawn carriage accident than you are to die in an avalanche in Australia.

Our climate and alpine weather patterns offer a more stable snowpack compared to international counterparts, and our storms tend not to deposit the large heavily loaded snowpacks synonymous with high avalanche danger. Combine this with our relatively flat topography and we can assume it is unlikely any of us will find ourselves in an avalanche emergency situation, certainly not within resort boundaries, nor hopefully outside the piste.

However, this does not mean we should all go and duck the ropes and head backcountry tomorrow. The bane of ski-patrol is the same attitude that allows us to explore and enjoy life: the good ol' Aussie 'I'll give it a go' attitude.

Don't get me wrong, it's a bloody good attitude to carry, but combined with lack of knowledge it can land us in some pretty hot water. If you add the excitement of 'ducking the ropes' or the growing accessibility and numbers of snow goers seeking side country and backcountry fresh-tracks, then suddenly we find ourselves in a situation with an increased risk of an avalanche incident.

For the many of us who choose to challenge ourselves with international destinations in search of bottomless powder, we will most likely find ourselves in steeper terrain with more snow loading than we have previously experienced, so we may well be blindly skiing into disaster.

Our uniquely safe environment is not always so safe however and Simon Murray Director at Mountain Sports Collective is quick to inform us there are plenty of ways to get into trouble in the backcountry.

"We have plenty of concerns aside from avalanches. Nearly 75% of search and rescue medical admissions are in fact critical hypothermia related, 20% associated with injuries from uncontrolled slides & falls, and 5% from avalanche. But avalanches do occur here in Oz. We are aware of seven avalanches in the Victorian and NSW Alps last year alone of which the majority were triggered by skiers or boarders. Three notable slides occurred within a period for which the warning rating was considerable, and one 'Sizeable', human triggered, and potentially fatal judging by the mess they made of the snow gums."

Adam West Director of Mountain Sports Collective and Owner of Snow Safety Australia reiterates Simon's thoughts.

"Backcountry is presently the largest growth sector in the ski industry and most Australians know very little about cornice safety, ice hazards and bad visibility," says Adam. "These same people head to destinations like Japan and suddenly find themselves in a far more exposed environment with little understanding of even basic backcountry etiquette such as 'don't ski above others', or 'don't follow ski tracks.' Anybody heading to such destinations and thinking of venturing outside of resorts, even just side country, should as a minimum know who the local avalanche advisory service is, and ideally have a solid knowledge of snowpack formation and ideally some formal backcountry and avalanche training."

But lets get back to Oz. The reality is if you're a park-rat or resort skier, you'll likely never have need of a transceiver

or need to know what a convex roll is; but it wouldn't hurt.

Just ask experienced skier Mike Grace who ducked the rope to hit an unmarked run called "Hipcheck" at Thredbo in 2014. Unexpectedly, he triggered an avalanche that resulted in being buried nearly three-metres deep for one hour. Statistically he shouldn't be alive.

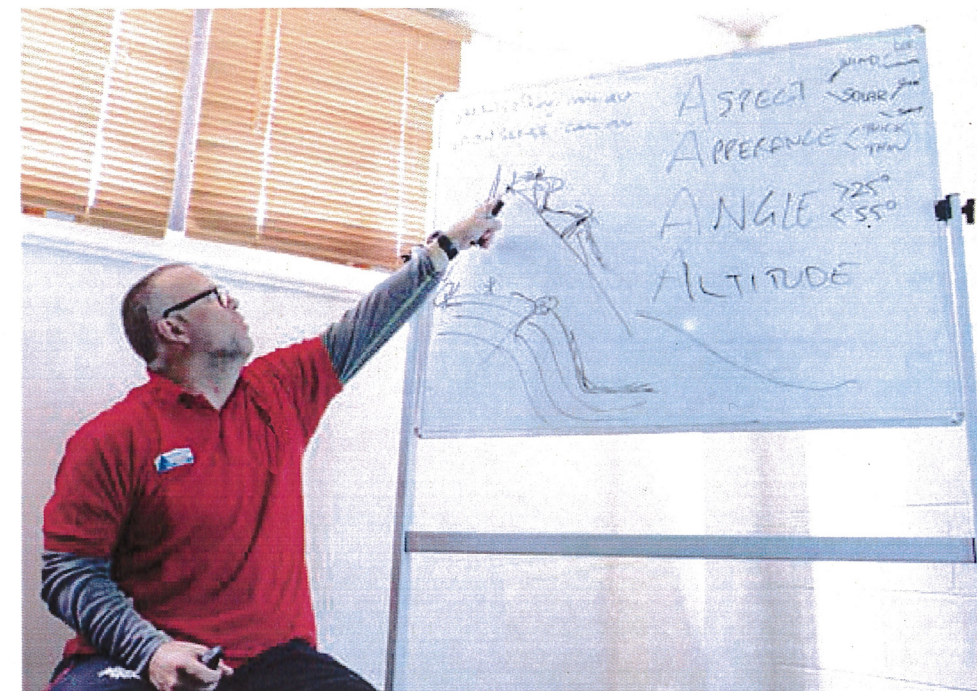
Whilst 92 per cent of avalanche victims survive if discovered within 15 minutes of burial, only 30 per cent survive at the 35 minute mark, and survival then becomes impossible without an air pocket. After 90 minutes, victims gradually succumb to hypoxia and hypothermia, unless the air pocket is open to the outside. Grace was very lucky indeed.

In Grace's defence, NSW had recently received it's heaviest snowfall in over a decade after two storms dubbed "Snowmageddon" and "Snowzilla" deliver close to 1.5m of snow on the NSW alpine region in only a few days. What may have been a thrilling run in any other year suddenly became heavily loaded and was just waiting to give way... but it is this knowledge we need if we want to avoid growing fatalities as the side and backcountry scene flourishes.

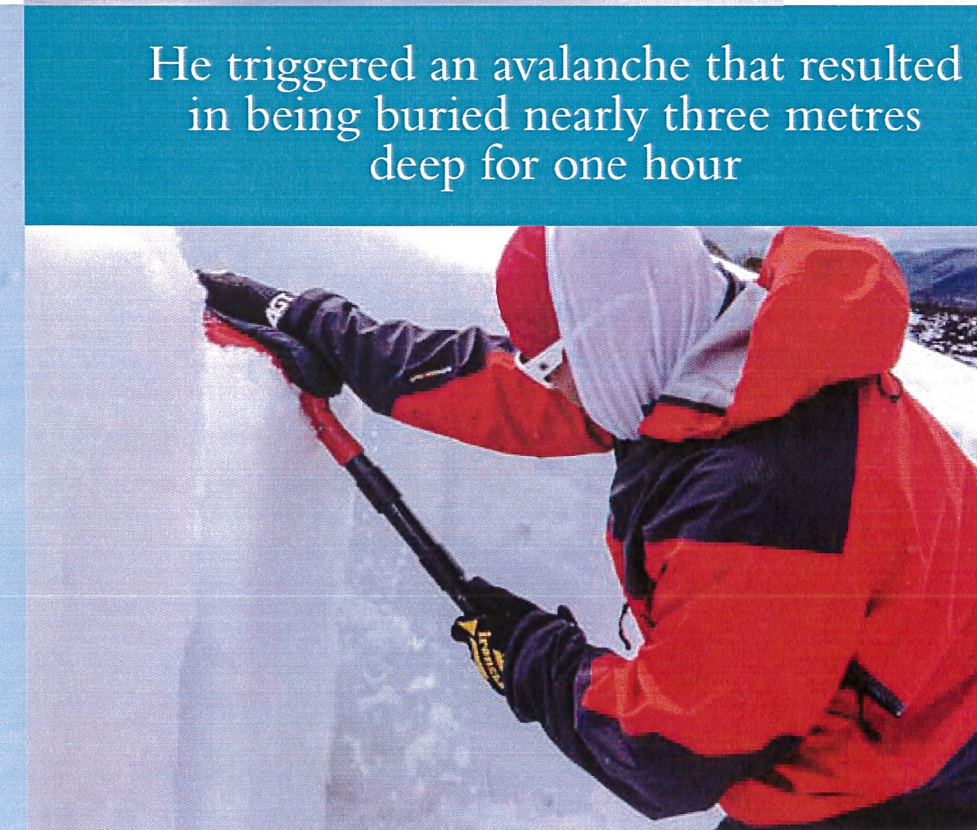
And so the question arises: "How do we learn such knowledge?" The good news is that many of us are already on the right track.

DIGGING HOLES AT THE BEACH

"Go and start digging holes at the beach," Adam West told me when I started inquiring about Avalanche Canada's AST1 course (Avalanche Safety Training - Level 1). He wasn't joking; he was singing the praises of three-antenna versus two-antenna beacons... I still had a dual-antenna beacon and a good way of training is to grab a mate, bury a transceiver on the beach and start practicing.



He triggered an avalanche that resulted in being buried nearly three metres deep for one hour



Clockwise from this pic New Zealand big mountain skier Fraser McDougall negotiates old avalanche debris touring from Prince William Sound in Alaska; classroom lessons during AST1 course in Jindabyne, NSW; Mark Watson wearing transceiver even whilst in camp in Alaska; beacon search training during AST1; burial and probing techniques during AST1; Adam West of Snow Safety Australia demonstrates digging a pit and snow pack assessment; avalanche seen from plane in Alaska assists ski and film crew to analyse terrain and aspect challenges ahead.