



Clockwise from above AST1 training... Digging a pit; layer assessment; Analysing snow and ice crystal formations; shear (weak) layer; digging column for snow stability compression test.



Aside from proving I need a beacon upgrade, course teachings revolve primarily around trip planning



I didn't have to dig holes on the beach however because a few weeks later I was in the NSW Alps undertaking my AST1 qualification — and proving a three-antenna beacon is at least two to three minutes faster at finding a victim than my dual-antenna model.

Aside from realising I need a beacon upgrade, course teachings revolve around trip planning, identifying avalanche terrain, slope evaluation and good travel habits.

Ski-Mountaineer guide Ben Johns (Association of Canadian Mountain Guides, Avalanche Canada Professional Member) explains:

"Most people who take an avalanche course leave the course with more questions than answers. They don't realise how big of an educational journey it is, it's a life long process. Even for me I am learning so much every year. I've been playing in the mountain my whole life and working in them for 15 years."

When I'm teaching people are always looking for the easy answer to these questions,

"Is it safe or is it dangerous?"

"Should I ski it or should I not?"

Students need to get used to hearing the answer "IT DEPENDS!"

Whilst the above might seem simple, there are a few tidbits that might just surprise you...

Key to this info is recognising potential avalanche terrain and what might come as a surprise is it's not the gnarly Alaskan spines or steep icy chutes of Chamonix that are our only danger. The reality is, avalanches occur on any slope angle over 25 degrees, which happens to be the most attractive slopes for skiing and boarding. In fact the highest danger for avalanche occurrence lies between 30 degrees

and 45 degrees, of which is about as steep as the slope of that untracked bowl you've been eyeing off all season. I began to wonder how the hell I'd survived all these years.

"Five years ago you couldn't even get this certification in Australia, people had to go to New Zealand," explains Adam. "Since we started teaching just two courses four years ago we've seen incredible growth and now certify 250 people over 20 courses. For those wanting to better understand snowpack, avalanche awareness and rescue, gaining your AST1 certificate is a certainly good start."

Over the next two days we covered the basics of avalanche formation and release, how to identify avalanche terrain, knowing the steps required to plan and carry out a safe trip, using an Avaluator™ (Slope evaluation Card) as a decision-making tool, learning Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale (ATES) and how to obtain ATES terrain ratings if a trip is not rated, appropriate travel techniques in avalanche terrain, and how perform basic shear tests and dig a pit to assess snowpack layers. Finally we carried out a companion rescue, including a multi-burial rescue in case the that 'sh#t hit the fan' moment does occur.

Far from putting you off attacking that untracked bowl you've been eyeing off all season, the course teaches you to be prepared just in case something goes wrong. However, I might just invest in that new three-antenna transceiver, and I might just hit the beach with my old beacon when there's no surf, and I'll make sure my riding buddy buys that beacon, probe and shovel kit on sale, and gets the training to know how to use it... and all this for a 'just in case' moment that we'll probably never encounter.

It all sounds like a bit of hype right? But why the hell wouldn't you want to learn this stuff? I never really thought I'd need to know CPR, but then last year I had to resuscitate a guy at my local beach. So the same goes for avalanche training; hopefully you'll never need it, but one day you might. ☑

A layer of depth hoar (top of inverted slab) provides a weak layer in the snowpack and is a common cause of natural and human triggered avalanches.



THE ESSENTIALS

For those of you reading this and thinking a little more knowledge might be a good idea, whether it be for backcountry touring, because you want to ski-patrol/guide outside of Australia, or because you're heading to the USA on a road trip, or a holiday in Japan, then the good news is you can now do your AST1 qualification in Australia with Snow Safety Australia.

There are courses available in NSW and Victoria for 2018 the cost is just \$300. See www.snowsafety.com.au for more information.

