

# Backcountry Packs

By Susan Schnier

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**T**hough some folks like to show off their latest piece of flashy equipment, in the backcountry the best pack should actually be invisible, or at least feel that way. Ideally, you want a pack that molds to your back and becomes an extension of your body. If the straps adjust easily to your proportions, the compartments tuck away all of your gear in a low-profile package, and the pack provides security and support without too much extra weight or bulk, you'll forget you're even wearing a pack until you hit the top and find that your skis, extra clothing, and lunch made it there with you. From back-to-basics designs for retros, to tricked-out, compartment-crazy packs for new-schoolers, the newest crop of packs offers something for everyone. This review highlights the key features of each, including hydration systems, padding, fit, adjustability, carrying systems for boards and skis, compartments for shovels, probes, and ice axes, pockets, and the general look and feel of the system. First size up your style, then choose the one that's right for you.

## ARC'TERYX

### M20

3 lb 3 oz · 1200 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.arcteryx.com](http://www.arcteryx.com) · \$150

Unique top loading design uses dry bag technology, allowing wide-mouth access to the main cavity.

- Traditionally a snowboarder pack, but can carry skis in an A-frame
- Top loading pouch is accessible but small. It's difficult to fit a helmet
- Outside shovel blade pocket doesn't fit a larger shovel
- Bladder pocket, hose exit and external hose clip
- Easy to adjust shoulder straps and form-fitting hip belt distribute weight and make for a comfortable fit with hipbone protection. The pack molds to the shape of your back perfectly, especially nice for skiing
- Hook and eye attachments for ski poles or an ice axe on both sides. Adjustable, removable ice axe loops
- No-slip, tear-resistant fabric



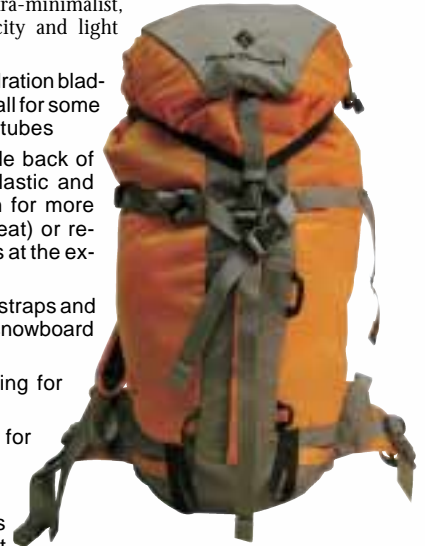
## BLACK DIAMOND

### SPEED 28

1 lb 11 oz · 1725 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.bdel.com](http://www.bdel.com) · \$68.50

For the speed demon and the ultra-minimalist, this pack shines in its simplicity and light weight.

- Large inside pocket for hydration bladder, but exit hole is too small for some bite-valves and insulated tubes
- Zippered pocket on inside back of pack holds a sheet of plastic and foam that can be kept in for more rigidity (and used as a seat) or removed, for weight savings at the expense of a solid frame.
- Skis attach using two side straps and are secured vertically, no snowboard attachment
- Ice axe loops and webbing for more gear attachments
- Top pocket stores items for quick access
- Tapered fit
- Shoulder and hips straps have minimal padding, but mold comfortably to you
- Reinforced rubber handle



## BACKCOUNTRY ACCESS

### STASH ALP 40

4 lb 4 oz · 2850 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.backcountryaccess.com](http://www.backcountryaccess.com) · \$165

A simple, top-loading design with an integrated hydration system and waterproof zippers made this a favorite for our testers that liked a straightforward design with full-functionality.

- Main compartment (no inner pockets) has a drawstring closure and is roomy enough for a helmet and all your gear
- Pack has a tapered fit for a low profile
- Waist strap and shoulder straps have good adjustments, but padding is a little light
- Integrated hydration system, with bladder between main compartment and shoulder straps
- Very rigid frame for great support
- Top pocket for small storage, clips down to lower pack for good vertical load compression
- Front pocket with waterproof zipper for shovel or other gear
- Plastic-reinforced webbing clips from side of pack to chest-level on shoulder strap for gear storage
- Skis are carried A-frame with lower loops and upper reinforced Velcro closure or diagonally, no snowboard attachment
- Simple size adjustments



## DA KINE

### PRO II

3 lb 5 oz · 1458 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.dakine.com](http://www.dakine.com) · \$88.95

If you like to have a place for everything and have everything in its place, the Pro II pack has all the bells and whistles for organizing your backcountry outings in a sleek, low-profile design.

- Horizontal and vertical snowboard carry
- Diagonal ski carry with stash pocket when not in use
- Small hydration pouch in main compartment with good-sized hose exit hole
- Two water-resistant, translucent compartments store smaller items outside of main compartment
- Shovel blade fits under front flap when board is carried horizontally, but must be stored in the main cavity when board is vertical or when carrying skis
- Front flap has large pocket, and top flap has smaller pocket for valuables
- Side loops with clips secure shovel blade and probe
- Back and hip padding is minimal but sufficient, and back padding flaps down so you can sit on it during breaks
- Wide range of adjustment on waist belt and sternum straps
- Side straps unleash front and back panel so items stored outside of the main compartment or pockets will come loose when you open the straps



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## DANA DESIGN

### TATOOSH 35

3lb 3oz · 2208 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.danadesign.com](http://www.danadesign.com) · \$179.95

A low-profile pack with a tapered fit that has ample room for all your gear and easy access to the two main compartments.

- Fully-featured frame system. Low profile hip belt reduces weight and bulk making it more comfortable over jackets and pants. Dual waist compression straps pull evenly for a balanced fit to lift the load onto your hips
- Shoulder straps have a unique self-locking, cam-style buckles. They can loosen easily and need to be readjusted
- Outside pocket provides storage for backcountry essentials
- Skis can either be mounted vertically or diagonally across the back. In both locations, abrasion resistant rubber is used for reinforcement. Access to main cavity when skis are mounted is limited
- Top loading pouch is dual purpose with room for lip balm and snack food and a separate padded compartment for sunglasses or goggles
- Roomy main cavity separates into two compartments—one for extra layers, gloves, and a helmet, the other as a bladder pouch with hydration hose exit
- Padded shoulder straps make for a comfy fit and molded lumbar support distributes weight
- Side ice axe loops
- Waterproof zippers



## HYDRA-PAK

### SNOWSTORM

2 lb 14 oz · 1500 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.hydrapak.com](http://www.hydrapak.com) · \$99.99

Three points of access to the main compartment, two on the side and one on the top, provide easy access and the top access point can be used when skis are attached. The shovel is easy to store and remove, and the back pads are very comfortable.

- Tube sewn inside main cavity for probe
- A-frame ski storage; not snowboard compatible
- Great back padding, but slim shoulder padding and no hip padding
- Shovel and blade stored in burrito-style exterior straps
- Fleece-lined top pocket for goggles and sunglasses
- Hydration compartment and exit tube in main compartment, Velcro strap for hose on shoulder
- Medium-sized pocket on front of pack with inner pouches for storage and organization of valuables, avy journals, snacks, etc.
- Comes with Hydra-pak bladder (roll-up closure) and bite valve (ours leaked)
- Zippered mesh pocket on top inside of pack



## INDIGO EQUIPMENT

### VENGO

4 lb 10 oz · 2000 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.indigoequipment.com](http://www.indigoequipment.com) · \$145

A tapered fit, waterproof zippers, and Indigo's unique Pocket of Liquid Delights (PLD)—an easy access storage pocket on the top of the pack for a small water bottle—define this durable backcountry pack.

- Top loading pack with drawstring closure and top pouch that clips down over the opening
- Side entrance to main compartment with waterproof zipper
- Rubberized, reinforced vertical ski loops with clip closure on either side of pack, no snowboard attachment
- Inside tool box protects contents of pack
- Inside or outside sleeve with clipped bottom for shovel handle or probe
- Mesh pocket on underside of top pouch, large main top pouch pocket
- Contoured back, shoulder and hip padding with pivoting hip belt
- Hydration pocket and port
- Removable aluminum frame
- Gear loops and bungie cord across front of pack



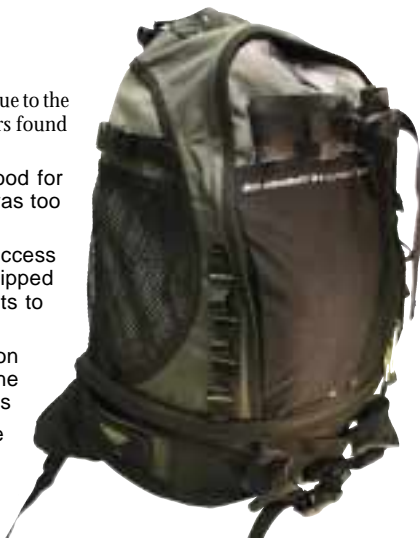
## LAFUMA AMERICA

### YAKOU 35

3 lb 8 oz · 2200 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.lafumausa.com](http://www.lafumausa.com) · \$79

Cushy comfort was the name of the game with this pack due to the squishy gel inserts on each of the shoulder straps. Testers found this to be one of the most comfortable of the bunch.

- Stretch pocket on the front of the pack is good for stuffing a jacket or accessories, however it was too small to fit a shovel blade or helmet
- Pack opens from the top and bottom for easy access to the main compartment. Or a barrier can be zipped up between the top and bottom compartments to separate wet clothing
- A pouch inside the main cavity holds a hydration bladder, and there's an exit hole at the top of the pack, though it's too small for some bite-valves
- Skis can be carried vertically on the sides of the pack using a lower bracket and upper strap. Lower bracket does not accommodate the fattest of skis
- Vertical snowboard attachment with Hypalon
- Two side mesh pockets
- Main compartment pockets for probe and shovel handle
- Ice axe holder



## LIFE-LINK

### GUIDE

3 lb 1 oz · 2500 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.life-link.com](http://www.life-link.com) · \$124.95

A lightweight pack for carrying all the necessities with no extra bulk.

- Large, top-loading main compartment with two Velcro inside pockets for a probe and shovel handle and hydration pocket with exit hole. Closes with drawstring and clip.
- Outside, easy-access shovel pocket with bungees on top to secure extra gear
- Top pouch clips down for vertical compression and has large zippered pocket with inside zippered mesh pocket for valuables
- Diagonal straps for carrying skis and vertical straps for carrying a board
- Ice axe loops
- Shoulder and waist straps are lightly padded but offer good comfort, support and adjustability



## MAMMUT

### LIGHTSPEED 35

3 lbs · 2200in<sup>3</sup> · [www.mammut.ch](http://www.mammut.ch) · \$115

A simple, mid-sized, top loading pack made for climbers, but has all the essential ingredients for a perfect backcountry day pack. At 35 liters it's big enough for spare clothes, food, emergency gear, even a hydration compartment and tube vent.

- Well-padded internal frame
- Skis attach A-frame style with two adjustable straps and tail slot
- Hip belt easy to adjust and has ice-tool loops
- Shoulder straps have Velcro straps for routing hydration tube
- Voluminous main compartment with separate hydration divider
- Top Lid has waterproof zipper for main access, and smaller compartment accessed from within for valuable items
- Single strap secures top lid easily, and securely
- Easy access to main compartment with skis attached



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## MOUNTAINSMITH

### TAIGA 2200

3 lb 9 oz · 2200in<sup>3</sup> · [www.mountainsmith.com](http://www.mountainsmith.com) · \$130

Front pouch easily stores a shovel. Pouch is also detachable with a waterproof backing and can be used as a seat at lunch time.

- Removable padded waistbelt has attachment points compatible with Belt Pouch and Side Kick Series accessories
- Two ice axe loops
- Skis attach vertically via side loops whether front pouch is attached or detached. No snowboard carry
- Pack cannot be opened when skis are attached
- Large inside hydration pouch with small exit hole—too small for some bite-valves
- Small inside zippered pocket stores keys and valuables



## NORTH FACE

### OFF CHUTE 35

4 lb · 2150 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.thenorthface.com](http://www.thenorthface.com) · \$119

A ski-specific pack with unique ski carry system. Four individual non-slip straps secure skis vertically across the pack, for quick and easy placement and removal.

- Long, slim inner hydration pocket with small exit hole for tube (some bite valves would not fit through hole)
- Roomy, fleece-lined sun-glass/goggle pocket on top of pack
- Cannot access compartment with skis attached
- Snowboard version is Chugach 35 and the Patrol 45 Duo is combo pack
- External side pockets for water bottles or other quick essentials
- Front shovel pocket does not accommodate larger shovel blades
- Padding in back and hips is slim, when fully loaded, it is rigid and does not conform to the curves of the back
- Tool loops on hip belt
- Two clipped loops on bottom of pack for ice axe or other storage
- Good waist and shoulder strap adjustability



# LIFE-LINK DYNAFIT

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL LIFE-LINK AT 800.443.8620 EX 175/ [www.life-link.com](http://www.life-link.com)

## ORTOVOX

### CHALLENGE 35

3 lbs 8 oz · 2136 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.ortovox.com](http://www.ortovox.com) · \$135

Ample padding with great ventilation, convenient shovel and probe pockets, and an excellent hydration tube exit hole define this well-thought out pack.

- A single main compartment cinches shut with a drawstring
- Main compartment has a pouch for a hydration bladder and an exit hole with a Velcro flap that keeps your clothes dry when you're not using a hydration tube
- Lots of pockets throughout pack including fleece-lined goggle pocket and additional padded compartment on top pouch, zippered mesh pocket on inside of top pouch
- Diagonal zipper and Velcro pocket holds a shovel blade easily on front of pack
- Velcro probe pouch on side of pack
- Mesh pocket at bottom front of pack has its own buckle so you can secure contents and get in and out without opening whole pack. Great for skin storage.
- Hip belt has roomy Velcro pocket and gear loops
- Sturdy rubber grip for transport
- Skis are stored vertically using basic side loops, no snowboard attachment



## SOURCE VAGABOND

### TRAILER RIDE

3 lb 2 oz · 1526 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.source-vagabond.com](http://www.source-vagabond.com) · \$110

Durable, built-in, cold-weather hydration system with screw cap for security is the highlight of this simple day pack.

- Bladder is made from taste free, antimicrobial material.
- Good molded back panel with breathability and decent rigidity
- Waist strap is not very padded but has a little stretch air mesh for wicking and comfort
- Comes with rain pack cover
- Main compartment has tubes for probe and shovel handle storage and detachable key ring
- Two mesh pockets on sides of pack and one on bottom front of pack
- Bungee cord and gear loops on front of pack as well as small, zipper compartment running length of pack
- Shovel can be stored inside pack or using cords on outside of pack
- Two clips on outside front and bottom of pack hold an extra layer for a short hike
- Skis attach in an A-frame using one or two side loops; no snowboard attachment



## OSPREY

### SWITCH 55+5

5 lb 6 oz · 3400 + 300 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.ospreypacks.com](http://www.ospreypacks.com) · \$239

With its unique 3-in-1 design, the Switch 55+5 was the most versatile pack in the review. Larger than the others, it is spacious enough for multi-night hut trips with a detachable day pack for yo-yo tours. There are two smaller packs in the Switch series that use the same design concepts. Despite its versatility, some felt this pack was too "tricked-out" for their tastes.

- The AquaSource Snow (detachable shoulder straps) serves as a torso adjustable shoulder harness when inserted in the back panel of the main pack or as a stand-alone hydration pack
- Front compartment can be detached from main pack (hook and eye system) and used as a day-pack when combined with the AquaSource Snow. Hydration tube is routed through shoulder strap for additional insulation
- Main pack only opens from the backside
- Pocket at top of main pack for goggles, snacks, etc
- Sturdy loops for carrying skis vertically on the main pack, but not on the AquaSource Snow
- Stowable diagonal ski-carry loop
- Snowboard can attach vertically to main pack when day-pack is removed
- Mesh pocket on front of main pack can be used to store shovel, but is only readily accessible when smaller pack is detached
- Compression straps on main pack distribute load
- Side pouches on the hip belt are useful for sunscreen, keys, etc.
- Shoulder and hip straps are lightly padded, but have good structure and the pack has a rigid frame for support



## VORTEX

### 1800

1 lb 12 oz · 1800 in<sup>3</sup> · [www.vortexbackpacks.com](http://www.vortexbackpacks.com) · \$125

This pack fit like a glove because of its articulated molding on the spine and hips combined with its low-profile storage compartment; many testers even forgot they were wearing it on long slogs.

- Internal frame
- Skis attach in an A-frame using two side flaps, snowboard attachment uses same flaps
- Can access main compartment with skis/board attached
- Hip and shoulder strap adjustments are easy
- Expandable exterior shovel pocket, hidden probe pocket
- Fits a helmet well
- Slot accesses main compartment from back
- Two small pockets on hip straps for quick essentials like sunblock, keys, wallet or snacks
- Two medium-sized inside pockets (one mesh, one opaque)
- Interior opaque pocket fits a 96 oz hydration bladder that Vortex has made especially for its packs
- Burrito-style pack provides good compression for a low-profile
- Straps all have wide ranges of adjustment and retainers for the loose ends, eliminating messy tangles

