

Where to Shop

SKI SHOPS

Picking a good ski shop is an important first step. Some have a lot of staff turnover, while others retain their employees for years and train them well. For the best service, seek out a specialty shop that has been around for a long time. Avoid chain stores that emphasize price over performance in their advertising. The money you might save at such a place (and there's a good chance you won't save any) will be a poor trade-off for the level of knowledge and service you're likely to get, especially if you end up with inappropriate skis or poorly fitted boots. I don't know about you, but I'd rather discuss my ski equipment needs with someone who specializes in ski equipment, not someone who was selling jockstraps and baseball gloves in another section of the store last week. As one friend puts it, "I don't buy my skis at the same place I buy my fishing license."

If you're thinking of buying new equipment before leaving on a ski vacation, consider waiting and buying it at your destination. When you get to the mountains, you can try different models of skis

HARD GOODS VERSUS SOFT GOODS

Skis, boots, bindings, and poles are, in the lexicon of the ski industry, "hard goods." This is the stuff that ski junkies get worked up about every fall as they prepare for the upcoming season. The term "soft goods," in contrast, refers to ski clothing—parkas, shells, pants, vests, fleece jackets, underwear, socks, gloves, and hats.

in different lengths to find just the right pair. If you're in the market for boots, this could be a good time to buy, as you'll be able to return to the shop—several times if need be—to get them set up just right.

A ski town will have a lot of ski shops, and some will be better than others. To find a good one, ask for recommendations from ski instructors, patrollers, and other locals. Go to the shops that get the most votes. Ask for recommendations on specific salespeople, too. Ski town populations are transient, and not everyone has the same level of expertise. This goes double for boots.

Regardless of where you shop, go when the store isn't busy and you've got some time to spend. Try shopping on a weekday, when the salesperson can spend time with you. This is true when shopping for boots, in particular. Boot selection and fitting take time.

Human nature compels us, some more than others, to say what we think will impress the salesperson. Impress him or her with your frankness and candor; don't oversell or undersell yourself.

SALES

Ski shops start to put equipment on sale as early as February and March, and this is the best time to pick up good deals. If you see something you like in December or January, don't be afraid to ask when the store will start its spring sale. Find out who else carries the product you're interested in.

By the time the fall sales come around, you'll have to look harder to find the good stuff, as these sell-offs emphasize leftover gear from the previous season that nobody wanted.

Where to Shop

BUYER BEWARE

When looking for equipment that is on sale or used, know what you're looking for. Never go to a ski swap or sale with just the vague notion that you want a new pair of skis or boots. Instead, learn about new gear during the main part of the season (when prices are highest), but don't buy it then. Learn from knowledgeable salespeople what gear is right for you. Then wait for the sales (at the end of the season) and swaps (at the start of the next season) and go looking for those particular things. Never buy anything just because it looks like a good deal.

SKI SWAPS

Virtually every town with a sizable ski club or ski team has a decent ski swap in the early fall. Every year overequipped skiers bring in their old gear, hoping to clear out a bit of space in the garage for that new snowblower. The ski club keeps a cut of the proceeds. Some ski swaps also accept merchandise from retailers who have overstock from previous seasons.

Swaps are good places to find not only hard goods, but clothing, too. They are also good places to unload some of your old stuff. Watch your local newspaper in September and October and ask around at the local ski shops to find out when the swaps are scheduled.

The problem with ski swaps is that it's easy to buy the wrong stuff. Again, the best approach is to go looking for specific things. If you don't know exactly what you're looking for, seek out a counselor. At a swap organized by a competition-oriented ski club, ask to talk to one of the coaches.

USED SPORTING GOODS STORES

Stores specializing in used sports equipment are very good places to shop if you know what you are looking for and how to evaluate it. They are also good places to sell your old equipment. Good gear can also be found on eBay.com, but of course you won't be able to handle or try on the merchandise before you buy it.



Find a good shop that specializes in skiing, with a stable, knowledgeable staff.

Where to Shop

Preparing To Shop

A good ski shop salesperson will ask you a lot of questions in order to match you with the right gear. So before you walk into a shop, be prepared with answers to the following:

- Why do you ski? Do you ski for excitement or for pleasure? Do you ski because you love being outdoors with your friends and family, feeling the wind in your face and the snow under your skis, or because you love the feeling of slicing a tight arc at warp speed?
- How much do you ski? How many years have you been at it, and how many days a year do you ski? If you plan on skiing more often than you have in the past, you'll be improving more quickly, so take that in to account, too.
- How accomplished a skier are you, and how keen are you on improving? Think about the specific runs and conditions on which you feel comfortable and the ones you don't and mention them to the salesperson. Be honest with yourself. If you get skis or boots that are designed for a much better skier, you won't have as much fun, which is what skiing is all about.
- How aggressive a skier are you? Are you looking primarily for high performance or comfort and convenience? Some skis and boots want to be your chauffeur. Some want to be your copilot. Which are you looking for?
- In what part of the country do you do most of your skiing? On soft snow or hard snow? If you ski a lot in the East or Midwest, where the snow is likely to be hard more often than not, you'll be looking for a ski with a narrower waist

and more edge grip, and more precise, stiffer boots. If you ski in the West most of the time, a somewhat wider ski and softer boot may make you a happier skier.

- How do you like to ski? Do you spend most of your time on groomed slopes, unpacked snow, or in bumps? Do you prefer blue-square or black-diamond runs? Do you like to make short, quick turns, long cruising turns, or a combination of both? Moguls favor a narrower ski, from tip to tail, and boots that allow a lot of ankle flex. Ungroomed snow favors wider boards. Most people ski steep, challenging terrain better on short, deeply shaped skis derived from slalom racing designs. For big-mountain cruising, look to bigger types of skis from the giant slalom family tree. Short, snappy turns are facilitated by stiffer boots.

EQUIPMENT FOR WOMEN

In case you haven't noticed, women are physiologically different from men. Of particular importance in skiing are the differences in mass distribution, relative limb length, hip width (specifically, the distance between the ball-and-socket joints where the legs join the pelvis), angle of the upper leg as it comes out of the hip, and shape of the calf muscle. If you are a woman, the more typically feminine you are in these respects, the more seriously you should consider women-specific boots and skis.

EQUIPMENT FOR CHILDREN

Most good ski shops have special equipment programs for children that enable kids to ski on gear that matches their bodies and skills as they grow without

Where to Shop



Many ski shops have children's equipment programs that keep the cost of equipping your kids reasonable.

putting their parents in the poorhouse. A typical setup goes like this: You pay \$100 for skis, boots, and bindings. The next season, if your child needs bigger skis, you swap the skis from the previous year for a longer pair at a cost of \$20. Larger boots also cost \$20. If you need to change anything in the middle of the season, there is no additional charge. The initial buy-in of \$100 keeps you in the program until your kids are too big for the equipment the shop uses in the program, usually at around middle school age.

GETTING ADVICE

Instructors

A ski instructor from whom you've taken a lesson is an excellent source of advice on equipment. He or she will know your skiing style, ability, and temperament. Instructors will usually be happy to help you shop for skis or boots after your lesson. This is an opportunity you should take advantage of.

Friends

Don't rely on advice from your friends and acquaintances. Most people, even your

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