

You've been playing it safe all day. Even though the avalanche bulletin called out "Considerable" hazard for the day (natural avalanches are possible and human-triggered are likely), you haven't observed any signs of instability while skiing lower angled terrain in the trees. Close to where you've been skiing, there's an untracked slope—and it's only slightly steeper and just a little more open. It would be so nice to make bigger, faster turns. So, what do you do?

Every backcountry skier will face this situation at some point—sometimes many times in a season. This doesn't have to be a tough question: if you are rational, humble and patient the answer will come more easily, and you will ski that slope when the time is right.

Be Rational: The emotional reward of skiing can often get the best of us and tempt us into more dangerous terrain. So, while you're warm, dry and well fed—and, therefore, thinking rationally—determine where you will NOT ski that day based on the current avalanche hazard. Making this decision ahead of time can prevent a lot of trouble later.

Before getting to the trailhead or leaving the resort, spend some time looking over the avalanche bulletin and discussing your goals with your partners. Whether it's the night before or the morning of, make sure you are comfortable, not hungry and enjoying the appropriate beverage. This may sound silly, but it really works, and helps you make a much more rational decision about which terrain is appropriate for the day.

Once you come to a decision, state this goal: Where will you NOT ski? Guides are required to write this down while working, which is why you hear so many guides preach the importance of writing down your decision as a reminder in the field. For many, this isn't realistic so, at a minimum, make sure to state it aloud and have agreement from everyone in the group.

Be Humble: Being humble in the mountains means being honest about your abilities and experience and knowing that no amount of skill will keep you safe in the wrong terrain.

If you are new to backcountry skiing, be conservative with your travel plan. If you only understand the "Danger Scale" on the public bulletin, think of the scale as a percentage of the terrain that is off limits. The higher the hazard, the more limited you will be—the farther you need to stay away from avalanche terrain. This can feel unsettling when coupled with a lack of experience reading terrain. For this reason, it is important to understand the specific avalanche problems listed in the bulletin and improve your ability to recognize avalanche terrain.

Your level of backcountry travel skill will determine how accurately you can define the area you want to avoid. Ski guides and savvy backcountry skiers don't possess special powers that allow them to ski steeper terrain on higher hazard days; they understand the environment, can read the terrain and are able to skillfully navigate to safe terrain, even if it is close to more dangerous conditions. Even when the margin for error is narrow, they have the ability to thread the needle. But they are still aiming for safer terrain and giving themselves some room to move in case of an unforeseen event.

Be Patient: If you follow your plan to avoid pre-determined terrain, you may not observe signs of instabilities. This can often inspire confidence, and you may be tempted to ski the steeper, more open terrain that calls to you. Before you do...

Go back to the rational decision you made before clicking into your skis—you cannot override this decision. Is the slope in question part of the no-go terrain? If so, avoid it. If not, ask the following question, "Why should we ski that slope?" If the idea to "dig a pit and see" comes up, this could be a great idea; but it should not serve as justification to ski the slope—after all, you've already determined the slope is no-go terrain.

If you think a slope you had previously ruled out could be safe enough to ski, follow the example of professional guides when they are at their best: gather information on a safe, representative slope, then stick to your plan for the day. Take the information back home and, once you're warm, dry and well fed (and therefore thinking rationally), compare your observations with the bulletin and observation of others traveling in the backcountry that day. Armed with this information, evaluate the day and discuss a plan for the next day.

The irony of having a solid plan and making good decisions is that it will inspire confidence and often tempt you into stepping it up a little, which can be a risky proposition. Always go back to the rational decision you made before entering the backcountry. Be humble about your abilities and eager to learn more. Be patient while traveling. And come back to get that slope another day.