



## Outside - Buyer's Guide

Winter 2014-2015

Backcountry Packs

Featuring: Mutant 38

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To shave weight, you can easily strip the framesheet, stays, extra straps, and main lid on the Osprey and Mountain Hardwear.

**SKIN OR BOOT-PACK?**  
Good question. Which one is more efficient depends on a host of factors.  
**Slope angle:** Skinning is almost always faster on lower-angle slopes, but if the best route gets so steep that you're forced to make difficult kick turns, booting is a better option.  
**Avalanche danger:** Boot-packing makes it easier to follow low-risk features like rock bands when navigating sketchy areas.  
**Terrain:** No room to switchback in the couloir? Uneven or lumpy slopes? Ditch the skins.  
**Distance:** Switching from downhill to uphill mode and vice versa takes at least a few minutes. If it requires less than ten minutes to get to the top, keep the skins in your pack. —R.S.

**4. Osprey Mutant 38 \$160**  
**BEST FOR:** Ski mountaineering.  
**THE TEST:** At first glance, the 38-liter Mutant (it's also available in a 28-liter version, pictured) looks like a bare-bones pack. There's no side access to the main compartment and few obvious bells and whistles. But dig a little deeper and a bunch of vertically inspired features appear, like the zigzag webbing that pulls double-duty as both compression and ski-carry straps. With adjustment points in three spots, "it's quick to open, close, and fine-tune," said our most experienced tester, a mountain guide in British Columbia. It also downsizes nicely for shorter missions. The top lid is removable but doesn't leave the pack exposed: Osprey sewed in a flap that covers the opening and can be used to cradle a rope.  
**THE VERDICT:** Likes to go fast. 2.7 lbs; ospreypacks.com  
**CARRY COMFORT:** 4 / **FUNCTION:** 4.5

**5. Mountain Hardwear South Col 70 \$300**  
**BEST FOR:** Multi-day traverses, base-camp touring.  
**THE TEST:** When heading to base camp, the question often becomes: Take a second, small pack for day missions or make do with your cinched-down load hauler? The South Col kills the quandary. Despite its slim cut, one tester fit everything he needed—including a bottle of bourbon—for a weeklong hut trip. For day trips, he ditched some of the straps, the suspension, and the padded waist belt (cutting weight by more than a pound), then cinched up the compression system to create a surprisingly comfortable scaled-down bundle. Smart: a reinforced crampon sleeve and always-accessible exterior zip pocket store skins and avalanche tools.  
**THE VERDICT:** Best of both worlds. 3.9 lbs; mountainhardwear.com  
**CARRY COMFORT:** 4 / **FUNCTION:** 5

**6. Atomic Backland 18 \$130**  
**BEST FOR:** Light loads.  
**THE TEST:** Upon initial inspection, the 18-liter Backland seems a bit chintzy—the neon orange and black color scheme and odd-looking waist straps do it no favors. But it's tougher than it looks, especially considering that it weighs two pounds. And though there are just two pods of cushioning at either hip and no real suspension system (only a relatively thin back panel), testers found it carried the essentials just fine. "Nothing fancy here," said one, "just a simple, lightweight daypack." Our only real quibbles were the fiddly ice-ax attachments, which often required bare hands to work. Snowboarders should look elsewhere: no carry options for you.  
**THE VERDICT:** Streamlined, lightweight, and great for travel—it takes up very little space in your luggage. 2 lbs; atomic.com  
**CARRY COMFORT:** 4 / **FUNCTION:** 3

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**THE VERDICT:** Likes to go fast. 2.7 lbs; ospreypacks.com  
**CARRY COMFORT:** 4 / **FUNCTION:** 4.5

