



## Avalanche Balloon Packs: CMH introduces rental program

From Rob Rohn  
Director of Mountain Operations



Hello CMH'ers,

All of us at CMH are eagerly anticipating another great ski season and making all the necessary preparations to ensure your trip with us is exceptional. It's been snowing in the mountains and ski tourers have already been getting the first turns of the season. We're excited, knowing that our first Heli-Skiers will be hitting the powder a month from now!

Our first priority has always been [safety](#). We devote a lot of effort to incrementally improving the safety of the experience we provide for you and our staff, and are always investigating ways to achieve that.

Recently there have been articles in the media and questions from our guests about avalanche floatation devices and I wanted to share our perspective on this technology with you. Our team of senior mountain guides has been actively reviewing avalanche balloon technology since its inception and like many products linked to the safety of our staff and guests; we weigh the pros and cons very carefully in relation to our operation.



Along with the most experienced guiding team in the industry, we are fortunate to have Dr. Jeff Boyd as our medical adviser. Jeff is a mountain guide, until recently was the head of the emergency department at the Banff Mineral Springs Hospital and he is also the Canadian delegate to the Medical Commission of the International Commission on Alpine Rescue (IKAR). We work closely with Jeff on this and many other issues, and rely on his expertise to help us make informed decisions.

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### Avalanche Balloon Packs – Backgrounder

Avalanche floatation devices, or avalanche balloon packs have been used in some parts of the world (primarily the Alps) by ski tourers and off-piste skiers for many years now. They have also shown up in our areas occasionally when guests have brought them on their CMH Heli-Skiing trip. Our position has been to allow their use, but we haven't actively encouraged it.

At first glance the benefits seem obvious. Tests in Europe have shown that wearing an inflated avalanche balloon pack increases your odds of ending up on top of the debris rather than being buried in it.

However there are other considerations that have prevented us from fully endorsing their use.

- All the test results are from Europe where most skiing is done on open slopes and the leading cause of death is asphyxia. In North America we spend much more time skiing in the trees and trauma is the cause of death in a significant number of avalanche fatalities. Studies have shown that with some devices you are more likely to end up in a head downhill, face down position after they're deployed. Not a problem on an open slope, but potentially a big problem if you're being carried through trees.



- Even with the few balloon packs we've had in our operations we've had a number of accidental deployments, and some of those around the helicopter. This is obviously a potential hazard.
- Together with Alpine we've worked really hard to eliminate unnecessary weight from the helicopters. Adding 12 balloon packs per group would reverse some of these gains.
- Because of the small but very serious risk of an accidental deployment during an emergency exit from the helicopter the packs cannot be carried in the main compartment of the helicopter. They must be stowed in the ski basket or a netted off jump seat. This means that the waist and leg straps must be unbuckled and the pack removed on every run. Even our guests who regularly use balloon packs outside of CMH have found that this can be inconvenient.

Through his work on the IKAR Medical Commission Jeff has been involved in a study of the efficacy of avalanche flotation devices. The Canadian Avalanche Association will also be coordinating a study of avalanche balloon packs in the Canadian context starting this winter. We look forward to seeing the results of that study.

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### Rental Packs Available this Winter

To arrive at a truly informed decision on the net safety benefit of avalanche balloon packs we have decided to gain more first hand operational experience. This winter you may notice that some of our guides will be using balloon packs. We are also launching a rental program for interested guests.



To use a pack or not is your choice; we aren't requiring or even encouraging their use. But we'll do our best to make one available if you would like one for your Heli-skiing trip.

None of this lessens the importance of staying out of avalanches in the first place. As always, this will be the primary focus of our guides, each and every day.

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### How does the rental program work? - IMPORTANT - book before you go!!

**To guarantee that a pack is available for your use, please reserve one at least two weeks prior to the start of your trip.**

To reserve your balloon pack:

- Contact your CMH agent or representative.
- Balloons packs are available for a weekly rental of \$200. Fees will be charged to your trip bill at the area.
- You will be required to sign a rental agreement / waiver at the area.
- We'll give you a short orientation on its use before you start skiing.
- REMEMBER – you will be required to take the pack off and to secure the trigger device at the bottom of each run! We will supply you with a shovel and probe to use for the week. You'll still need to take your turn carrying a guest radio and skiing at the back of the group.

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### Which avalanche balloon packs will we be offering?

There are two main suppliers of avalanche balloon packs.

- ABS designed and manufactured the first avalanche balloon pack and it has been undergoing continual development for many years - [www.abs-airbag.com](http://www.abs-airbag.com)
- Snowpulse is a more recent entrant onto the scene and has a different design - [www.snowpulse.ch](http://www.snowpulse.ch)

These two models will be offered as follows:

- **ABS** will be offered for rent in the [Bugaboos](#), [Bobbie Burns](#), [Cariboos](#), [Valemount](#), [McBride](#) & [Silvertip](#).
- **Snowpulse** will be offered for rent in the [Monashees](#), [Gothics](#), [Adamants](#), [Revelstoke](#), [Galena](#) & [Kootenay](#).

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### More information?

Check out Dr. Boyd's posting on our blog – <http://blog.canadianmountainholidays.com>

If you have any questions please feel free to contact us at [safety@cmhinc.com](mailto:safety@cmhinc.com)

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On behalf of everyone at CMH I'd like to express our appreciation to you for coming to ski with us this season. We're really looking forward to hosting you and to sharing some unforgettable experiences in the incredible mountain playground we feel so fortunate to call home.

See you soon!

**Rob Rohn**

Director of Mountain Operations



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