

Turn, Again

A Backcountry Ski Guide to Turnagain Pass, Alaska

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1 Home

1.1 Map

1.2 Current Conditions

1.2.1 Avalanche

1.2.2 Weather

2 Current Conditions

Part I

General Information

3 Terrain, Snowpack, and Weather

3.1 Terrain

3.2 Weather

3.2.1 Wind

In many other areas, wind tends to have consistent behavior. For example, in the Bozeman MT area, storms often blow in from the West. The mountain ranges there are these isolated, discrete zones, surrounded by plains. This leads to the winds in the mountains *also* being relatively consistent from the West, throughout the entire forecast zone. Everywhere you go on a single day, the windloading is going to be found on the same aspect.

On the other hand, wind is complex in Turnagain Pass. As you travel throughout a day, the prevailing wind might come from many different directions, and many different aspects will be windloaded. Now, even if the wind aspect is inconsistent between *different areas at the same time*, the wind is often consistent between *the same area at different times*. For example, the cornice on the ridge of Gold Pan always forms on the same side of the ridge every year, even if maybe a kilometer away the cornices all form on the other side of the ridge.

3.2.2 Rain

It can rain here. It is common for rainline to climb all the way to 3000 feet several times a winter.

The magic number to pay attention to is 1000 feet: That is the highest elevation of the road, and often around the elevation you park at. If it's higher, you can still have good skiing, but you are going to have to pay the toll of climbing through the rain line to get it.

3.2.3 Solar input

The sun has less effect in Alaska than you might be used to if you are coming from more equatorial areas, and it is less focused. In other areas, in the middle of winter (Dec to Feb), you often need to be aware of how the sun is affecting the snow. Even if it isn't warming it enough to cause wet slides, it still could be causing melt-freeze crusts, etc. In Turnagain Pass, unless there are exposed rocks to absorb the heat, or it's a very warm day, I usually don't think about the solar input that much until the springtime. If it's a super sunny pow day in January, as long as it's fairly cold I wouldn't write off skiing a direct South line.

The weak solar input is caused by several things: First, until around the equinox on March 21, Alaska gets fewer hours of daylight than further south. Second, the orbits the horizon instead of arcing straight overhead, which generally leads to any one patch of snow being hit by direct sun for a smaller fraction of the day. Third, it's a lot cloudier than Colorado.

3.2.4 Radiative Cooling

The "inverse" of solar input is radiative cooling. This is when the snow emits UV radiation that travels through a clear sky and makes it out to space, taking thermal energy with it. This clear sky is important: on a cloudy day, the UV radiation hits the clouds, the clouds absorb it, the clouds heat up a tiny bit, and then the clouds emit UV radiation of their own, which travels back to the ground, where the snow absorbs it, regaining the energy that they gave away at the beginning. This is similar to on a cold autumn morning when the ground exposed to the sky is frosty, but any ground covered by vegetation or a tent fly is not frosty: both bits of ground emitted the same amount of UV radiation, but the UV from the covered ground got absorbed and re-emitted by the covering object.

Turnagain Pass often has less radiative cooling effect than other areas, because we are so cloudy.

Radiative cooling really is important for the corn cycle that happens in the spring. To make corn snow, the top few inches of the snow needs to melt during a warm day, and then freeze solid at night. Around here, because of the moderately warm ambient air temperatures, the freezing at night often requires a clear sky. We can have bad corn seasons when we don't get those clear skies consistently: the snow melts during the warm day, but then sort of just stays as slop at night.

Typically, this radiative cooling has the most effect at night, but it can also be significant during a clear day if you are in a shadowy north-facing zone.

3.2.5 Common Patterns

There are several common patterns that the weather follows.

3.2.5.1 Gulf Storm

A storm system comes from the Gulf of Alaska and hits Turnagain Pass from the West, spilling over Portage Pass from Prince William Sound. This is the most common storm system that gives Turnagain Pass snow. When this happens, the areas that are favored for precipitation are Portage (not covered in this guide) and the North end of the Pass. Because this is the most common, this is reason why in general the snowpack is deeper on the North end of the Pass than the South end. These storms can sometimes just sit on Turnagain Pass and DUMP precipitation for 5 days straight.

3.2.5.2 Cook Inlet Storms

These storms move up Cook Inlet and come over the Kenai Mountains to hit Turnagain Pass from the Southeast. These storms are more rare than the Gulf Storms. When this happens, the Seward and Summit Lake areas (not in this guide) are favored with precipitation, as well as the South end of the pass, where the North end of the pass is skipped.

3.2.5.3 Northern Outflows

Oftentimes a high pressure system from the center of alaska flows South past Anchorage and down Turnagain Arm, blasting Turnagain Pass with high winds at first, which then settle into a period of clear and cold weather. It's a bummer when these happen too strongly, because the initial winds can ruin the snow from the previous storm, and then you are stuck with this beautiful weather but a bunch of terrible snow. When this system moves in with less wind, then this pattern can make for excellent riding conditions.

3.3 Snowpack and Avalanches

Turnagain Pass has a maritime snowpack, receiving hundreds of inches of snow (and often, rain) a year.

The local avalanche center is [CNFAIC](#) (Chugach National Forest Avalanche Information Center).

3.3.1 Ground Hoar

We don't usually get it. Hurray! So that means we don't usually have to worry about avalanches breaking at the ground.

3.3.2 Glide Cracks

We DO have a hazard that is a lot less common in other zones: glide cracks. This is when the entire snowpack creeps along the ground, and a glide crack appears where sections separate. They are more likely to be active during warm periods and rain, but they can still be active at other times too.

They present as a 1-10 foot wide gap in the snowpack that is open all the way to the ground below, which can sometimes be 10 or 15 feet below. This is one hazard of them: if you are careless or if the visibility is bad, you can ski off a non-insignificant temporary cliff!

They also are hazards when they release as catastrophic avalanches. This actually is pretty rare, most glide cracks we see become inactive and then new snow fills in the crack. But when they do release, they release usually to the ground, and very large. Usually you can't trigger them yourself, but you just want to minimize your exposure by not lingering underneath them.

In general

- try to avoid them if you can
- be especially cautious in bad visibility
- if there is no better route, I wouldn't think it was crazy to quickly scoot around them

4 Resources

4.1 Facebook Groups

The [Alaska Backcountry Ski Addiction](#) Facebook group is a great place to ask questions, share photos, and find partners. It's probably the most active backcountry skiing group in Alaska.

If you're a woman, a less gatekeepy and bro-y alternative is the [AK Chicks Who Backcountry Ski/Splitboard](#) Facebook group.

4.2 Strava Heatmap

Use the [Strava Global Heatmap](#) to find where people commonly go. Even if people are secretive about their favorite spots, they still post their tracks to Strava. If you use GaiaGPS, you can add the Strava Heatmap as a layer by following [this tutorial](#).

4.3 Stores

- [AMH](#) is a locally owned outdoor store in Anchorage. It has a comparable/better selection than REI, especially for specialty and technical gear.
- [REI](#) is a national outdoor store with a location in Anchorage.
- [Hoarding Marmot](#) is a consignment store in Anchorage offering new and used technical gear.
- [Powder Hound Ski Shop](#) is a ski shop in Girdwood. They are a little more resort-oriented (since they are at the base of Alyeska), so they don't have as wide of a selection of backcountry gear (eg skins) as AMH, but otherwise are great.

4.4 Guide Services and Courses

Do you see someone missing? Contact me to add them!

- [Alaska Guide Collective](#) is a guild of AMGA guides in Alaska. They often offer avalanche courses.

- [Remarkable Adventures](#) is a guide service based in Girdwood ran by AMGA Certified Ski Guide Nick D'Alessio.
- [Joe Stock](#) is an IFMGA Mountain Guide based in Anchorage.
- [Elliot Gaddy](#) is an IFMGA Mountain Guide based in Anchorage.

Part II

Areas

5 Areas Overview

Explore the map above to find an area to study.

6 Eddie's

7 Tincan

Tincan is the most popular area in Turnagain Pass, and one of the most popular areas in all of Alaska.

There is a wide selection of terrain available.

7.1 Parking

There is a pulloff on the East side of the highway, on the outside of a curve. It is one of the better-plowed parking lots in Turnagain pass, usually plowed either during or the day after a storm.

This is a dangerous parking lot. In 2021, [a semi truck pancaked three cars](#) that were parked in the lot. I try to not linger in the parking lot for very long after I park, and put on my gear near the guardrail where I am at least marginally protected by the parked cars.

Once you park, it's a chaotic scramble/slide down the embankment and across the meadow. On the far side of a meadow, CNFAIC usually has a beacon checker machine. Slide past it one at a time to verify that your beacon is working.

If you want a break from downhill skiing, on a clear day it is fun to nordic ski North through these meadows. You go gradually uphill until you reach a crest where you are treated to a beautiful view down the length of the whole of Turnagain Pass, all the way down to Turnagain Arm 1000 feet below. You better watch out though, or you might run into a roving band of retired ladies from Girdwood drinking gin and tonics and eating cake for someone's birthday.

Very very rarely is the parking lot so full that there is no room. When this happens, choose a different zone, or continue South up the highway to the Center Ridge parking lot, and you can access the Tincan ridge from the slightly longer and lower quality "Blue Diamond" approach trail.

7.2 Approach

Cross the parking lot meadow and then head basically up the fall line to the ridge, and then continue following that. See the GPS track. You will almost always have some track to follow.

The skintrack is generally low angle and fairly easy. It continues all the way to very near the summit, the starting point of Tincan Common. You are out of large-scale avalanche terrain the entire time. There are a few small but steep rollovers that I might be concerned about on the highest danger days, but in general it is very safe. If it's a high danger but good weather, a very nice route is to skin all the way to the top of Tincan Common, enjoy the awesome views, and ski right back down the skintrack.

7.3 Deproach

The most surefire way to get back to the parking lot is to reverse the main uptrack, skiing down the ridge the whole way.

If you are at the bottom of Tincan Trees, there is also a deproach track that takes you back to the parking lot with only minimal scooching along a few flat meadows. This is the most popular way to deproach Tincan. The benefit of this route is that it allows for slightly better skiing through tin can trees on your last descent; the skiing down the ridge is slightly worse. The downside of this route is that it can be confusing if you don't know where you are going. Usually you will find a track from others before you, although if it hasn't snowed recently these tracks can become a maze of people skiing and skinning in all different directions. If you follow the GPS track you will be fine.

7.4 Tincan Trees

The meadows on the north side of the ridge are known as "Tincan Trees". The terrain is composed of many small lumps and rollovers, with a mix of open meadows and dense stands of trees, with tight passages connecting the meadows. There are many complex mini drainages and ridges, so if you are adventurous you can often find less-touched snow if you venture out of the obvious runs. The laps are fairly short, maybe 800 vertical feet, but the uptrack is easy so it doesn't feel totally stupid.

If the weather is stormy, Tincan is one of the better options in Turnagain pass. This area has enough trees to provide visual contrast, where many other areas would be whiteout conditions.

It is fairly easy to stay in low angle terrain, out of avalanche terrain, but if you are careless it also is very possible to ski over a small but steep and abrupt rollover and trigger a slide in high avalanche conditions, eg if you are skiing in the middle of a storm. These would be small, but with terrain traps, or if your partners aren't watching you, it could be serious. On many storm days I have seen small slides triggered in this zone.

7.5 Tincan Common

This is the main, W facing bowl from the summit that faces straight at the parking lot. You can skin straight to the top on the main uptrack, and it is easy to do laps on this 800 foot {??} run.

7.6 CFR (Cornice F#%\$ing Run)

This goes from the summit of Tincan Common down the NW ridge, the lefthand skyline when looking at Tincan from the parking lot. This often is wind-affected, but when it has good snow, it is a long, consistent, fairly safe run that is often overlooked and untouched. I've only skied it once, usually I opt for lapping Tincan Common, but it is a nice alternative to have in your back pocket.

7.7 Todd's Run

This is the obvious, huge, steep NW facing bowl on the North side of Tincan ridge that you see as drive up the pass from Anchorage. It is named after [Todd Frankiewicz, who died in an avalanche on December 6th, 1988](#). It often avalanches naturally, and has a steep and committing entrance that makes it hard to enter safely. When it is safe though, it is an excellent steep run. You get here by skinning the main uptrack to the top, and then booting back along the ridge until you get to the dropin.

8 Sunburst

9 Magnum

10 Lipps

11 Pete's North and South