



AIDED CLIMB: A SIERRA MOUNTAINEERING INTERNATIONAL GUIDE USING A SHORT ROPE BELAY.

out there, so bottom line—ask around and get references no matter whom you hire. So, here are my top reasons why you should hire a guide:

JUDGEMENT

With a good guide, you're hiring her or his judgment, derived from years of experience. Is the slope safe to ski? Is the route in condition? Fun, successful guides include clients in decision making, too, which means more (and faster!) learning in the field.

SECURITY

Within each of the AMGA disciplines, guides must demonstrate a minimum competency for self-rescue. Blow out a knee in the middle of a 45-degree couloir, 1,200 feet up? Check. Rope stuck after dark, six pitches off the deck? Check. Unplanned bivy at 12,500 feet? Check!

LEARNING

There's no more efficient means to learn good habits, fundamentals, and the dark arts of alpinism than with a guide. A good guide will highlight certain parts of your day to improve your skills. A lame guide will just try to finish a route as quickly as possible and score a fat tip. Find one who's willing to tailor the outing to your needs... and then give the fat tip!

RISK

Climbing and skiing are inherently risky, to some extent. A competent guide is always minimizing and mitigating risk, even when you might not notice. Efficiency. Ever wasted a day of vacation on a blown approach or bonheaded navigational error (me: never!)? Anybody who has kids knows about maximizing days in the backcountry. Hire a local guide and make every minute count.

FUN

Most guides—condom jokes notwithstanding—are pretty cool. You'll cover more ground, learn more, and enjoy yourself with the right guide. Do yourself a favor and hire one!

EO contributing editor Rob Coppelillo is currently pursuing his international guiding certification. Read his Master of None blog on ElevationOutdoors.com.

READER RESPONSE FROM THE WEB

Because in the world of anonymous online comments everyone has a say.

"The physical and mental challenge of solo backcountry adventures is part of the experience. I can't imagine having someone to do some of the 'work' for me."

—Craig

Get ready for our next question, dear readers: **belt drive singlespeed bikes... lame or ticket to fame?** Let us know and butt heads at ElevationOutdoors.com

Guide Lines

Should you hire a guide when you go out on an adventure in unfamiliar terrain? We asked EO readers if they would rather hire a guide or go solo, and an overwhelming 94 percent of you said you would do it on your own. But we damn well appreciate guides, and while Casey Flynn takes the majority opinion here, we also asked AMGA guide-in-training Rob Coppelillo to explain just what you are missing.

go solo

Training wheels are nice. Those cute little things give you guidance when you don't yet have what it takes to drive your new rig on your own. They boost your balance and confidence, remove some of the risk and help you get comfortable before you strike out without them. Then comes the day when it's time to take the training wheels off.

Exploring the mountains is like that. Some assistance at the beginning can go a long way toward familiarizing yourself with new skills and conditions. An experienced friend, a solid book (like the Mountaineers' *Freedom of the Hills*), or a guide can help with those first steps out of the gate. But then it's time to fall down a few times and start learning for real.

I've fallen down a lot. Some pretty serious injuries, frightening moments and enormous uncertainty have resulted from my pursuit of self-taught expertise. But when I fall down, I remember. When I make a mistake that scares the hell out of me or sends me wandering through the darkness for a few extra hours, the

experience sticks. My decision-making skills sharpen and my encyclopedia of mountain travel grows. I'm learning how to ride on my own.

You miss out on something, too, when someone else does all the planning and deciding—a core experience disappears. The intense concentration of poring over maps and route descriptions. The buzzing electricity when racking up at the base of a wall at dawn. The anxiety in your gut while scouring reports of avalanche conditions for an upcoming tour. This stuff gets lost when someone else is steering.

Guides are helpful in many ways, but they aren't infallible. It's important to cultivate your own powers of observation and intuition, to avoid becoming a passenger on an alpine journey. The best way to do that is to research what you need to know to manage risk and go do it. Expose yourself to the hazards, fall down a couple times and be stoked those training wheels are collecting dust back at home.

Casey Flynn has made many mistakes on his path to self-educated exploration and thinking back on them makes him smile.

go pro

"What do mountain guides and condoms have in common?" asks IFMGA guide Joe Vallone. His answer: "Safer with, more pleasure without."

Perhaps it's our rugged individualism or just the pernicious influence of Fox News, but Americans just don't hire guides like Canadians, Euros or Kiwis do. Our loss.

Keep in mind—I'm talking about *good* guides. The American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) certifies guides in the rock, alpine, and ski disciplines, and that's a good starting point. There are also quality, uncertified guides