

Pieps Freeride

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Pieps offers budget conscious avy beacon - Digital processing with a single antenna for under \$200

Sleek, lightweight, and under budget. Pieps Freeride: \$195.00

Pieps Freeride

Only a year after Pieps announced the concept of the Freeride avalanche beacon they showed a working product model at the recent Outdoor Retailer show in Salt Lake City. The Freeride is a simple, low cost avalanche transceiver intended for skiers and snowboarders who want to venture out of bounds occasionally and know the importance of wearing a beacon, but aren't dedicated backcountry aficionados (yet).

In an age where the trend is to ever more complex avy beacons that use multiple antennas and sophisticated processing algorithms to help users quickly find multiple victims, the Freeride seems an out of step throwback. Pieps sees the Freeride as a safety device that fulfills a niche overlooked in today's beacon market, an avy beacon whose price won't scare away potential customers. Smarter beacons may be a smarter buy for anyone spending more than a few hours in the backcountry, but many skiers simply go out of bounds and trust that they won't get caught, and thus don't need to spend over \$300 on a piece of safety equipment that they—hopefully—won't ever use. Pieps is betting that if the price is low enough, less than \$200 USD, more skiers will see a Freeride avy beacon as a prudent piece of insurance, and not that expensive.

The Freeride is a simple, single antenna beacon. As such, it cannot, by itself, provide direction information. However, as the Freeride display proves, with a modicum of digital technology wedded to that single antenna signal relatively intuitive clues can be provided to make finding a single buried victim a relatively simple exercise.

Display when aligned with flux line

Display when poorly aligned with flux line

Distance to a victim is easy to deduce based on signal strength and that distance is shown numerically. A five level pyramid above the distance reading gives an indication of how well aligned the beacon is with the flux line. Due to the pyramidal shape it implies direction, but that is only valid if all five levels are visible. As the beacon loses alignment with the flux line, the number of levels of the pyramid drop, indicating less accurate direction. Of course, if alignment is good, and the numbers are dropping as you move forward, that pyramid could be interpreted as a direction arrow, but only if you keep it aligned so all five levels are on, reminiscent of Ortovox's M2, but without the real-time analog sound.

The audio signal is the now common sequence of beeps that increase in frequency as you get closer to the victim. Although the Freeride doesn't have special algorithms for separating and finding multiple victims, it will at least indicate the presence of more than one victim by displaying three additional dots underneath the single victim icon.

Besides the impressively low cost, the next best thing about the Freeride is the optional harness. Long the weak p

of Pieps digital beacons, the new Pieps harness is intuitive, and holds either a Freeride or DSP beacon securely at your side.

Not only does the Freeride only have one antenna, it uses only one AA (LR6) battery. Turning it on requires you to switch the gray lever at the bottom so it is flush with the shape of the case. It automatically begins operation in send mode, and a LED above the LCD display will flash, approximately every second, when the beacon is transmitting. To switch to search mode, press the membrane button on the R, top side of the case 3 times. Don't think you'll remember that? Read the front panel under the LCD display, where it tells you to switch to SEARCH PRESS 3X. To switch back to SEND - HOLD 3 sec. Simple, and reminiscent of Barryvox's Opti 3000, but without the programmability. When you first turn the beacon on, it will tell you the battery power numerically in percent, and with a bar graph.

Finally, a nice harness from Pieps.

While some may argue that it is irresponsible to offer a beacon as simple and limited in search capabilities as the Pieps Freeride, that only seems a valid argument when considering sophisticated beacons such as the Pieps DSP. Even though it may require a bit more practice to be proficient in searching with a Pieps Freeride, no one is accusing Ortovox of a similar lack of responsibility for continuing to offer the plain jane analog F1. Considering that many avalanche victims are found without any beacon at all, the option of a low cost beacon might be viewed a downright charitable offer, or at least one that shouldn't be refused.

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