Light Touring Gear Reviewed

Contributed by John Dostal, Photos by Sawyer Sutton

Waxless Wonders: Thrill on the hill

Metal-edge waxless touring skis are making a resurgence. Following the success of the Karhu Guide, companies like Madshus, Rossignol, Fischer and Marquette are jumping full on into the light-touring scene. This January, we put the latest gear to the test, and here are the results.
Waxless Wonders: Thrill on the hill

If we had normal northern Vermont weather, we would have had ideal conditions for testing metal-edge waxless touring skis. Meaning within ten days we’d see powder, rain, ice, glop sludge, corn. What we got? A couple of weeks of cold pow, some of it wind-stiffened—sifted, you might say, if you’re a baker.

But the rides were good. As I wrote in the February issue of BCM, the game changer for the ski industry was the Karhu Guide. They sold numbers that made competing companies take notice.
{rokzoom album=|2011_light_touring_skis| title=|[Photo] Sawyer Sutton|}images/stories/gear_reviews/light-touring-skis/light-tour-ski-test-going-up.jpg{/rokzoom}

So for this year’s testing we had the perpetrator—the Karhu Guide that’s now the Madshus Annum, altered only in its graphics and a new bevel for better edge hold—and the contenders: the Fischer Sbound 112 and Sbound 98, along with Rossignol’s big BC125—all named after tip size. We also had—as a curiosity—the stubby form of the Marquette Backcountry ski. All were mounted with the venerable—and just re-introduced—Voile 3-Pin Cable tele binding.

We skied on an array of touring boots, three of which (Alpina’s BC 2175, Fischer’s BCX 875, Rossignol’s BCX 875) incorporate the hinged plastic cuffs of Cross Country skate boots, along with them, the all-plastic Garmont Excursion. We weren’t doing a simultaneous boot test, but all were capable of powering the biggest skis.

We ran all the rigs up and down Cote Hill, a notable, tree-studded slope north of Stowe, Vermont whose 20-30° pitches my neighbors and I have been skiing for 20 years: Prime backcountry terrain, though close to a road.

Here’s the quick take after several hours of testing: the Fischers climbed the best, the Rossis floated the best and the Madshus melded those two capabilities. Click the skis below for a review of each.

{mospagebreak title="Rossignol 125"}
Rossignol 125

125-90-115mm | 6lb. 6oz. | $400

The Rossignol 125 drew nearly unanimous praise for their turnability. “They turned easily,” said one female tester. Another added, “They almost turned themselves.” And the floatation of these widebodies was also noticed. “In this slightly heavy snow it’s amazing what a difference an extra 12mm [underfoot] makes,” said one tester, comparing its waist to those of other skis.

{mospagebreak title="Fischer Sbound 112"}
Fischer Sbound 112

112-78-95mm | 5lb. 11oz. | $395

The Fischer Sbound 112 climbed like crazy, largely, we thought, due to a waxless scaled pattern—inset in a sintered base—that was about three inches longer than those on other skis. But they turned with alacrity. “On the descent they were very quick—and suggested shorter turns,” said one tester. Could we feel their “Nordic Rocker?” Hard to tell, though the fore body seemed to have a long, even flex.

{mospagebreak title="Madshus Annum"}
Madshus Annum

109-78-95mm | 5lb. 13oz. | $340

We’re with David Byrne on the Madshus Annum: “Same as it ever was.” Karhu to Madshus, no disruption. Same thing with the ski: an overall smoothie. As one tester put it: “The Madshus was by far the nicest descending ski. It’s fast, quick to turn and the radius seems right. The climbability was not overwhelming but adequate, and the lightness in a tour is nice—I’d take these out.”

{mospagebreak title="Madshus Epoch and Fischer Sbound 98"}
Madshus Epoch

99-68-84mm | 5lb. 9oz. | $310

Fischer Sbound 98

98-69-88mm | 5lb. 9oz. | $350

We also got on the Madshus Epoch and the Fischer Sbound 98 with predictable results. In Vermont, the Madshus had the edge on glide while the Fischer was a slightly better climber. Biff America had the Fischers in the Breckenridge backcountry and concluded: “Breaks trail like a champ and floats and carves in fluff. Turns superbly and climbs like a goat.”

{mospagebreak title="Marquette Backcountry"}
Marquette Backcountry ski

150-135-140mm in a single 135cm length | 9lb. 4oz. | $179

Then there were the Marquette Backcountry ski. The company bills it as “30% snowshoe, 70% ski, 100% fun.” One tester inverted the first two figures, exclaiming “snowshoeing has never been so much fun!” As another said, “None of us skiers can figure out what this is.” Despite climbing scales half the size of dominos, grip was indifferent. Going down a figured 40° pitch might get them running. Or a crust rendered by freezing rain—but then there are no metal edges. “Backcountry skis?” asked another tester. “They’re backyard toys.”

{mospagebreak title="Final Note and Photo Gallery"}

A final note: Waxless skis work best in powder less deep than what we had. And they shine in wetter snow—consider them corn snow cohorts, Sierra sneakers. I really got the point a few years ago when I skied the same areas and lines in the Sierra that I’d skied 15 years earlier. Only I wasn’t ripping and reattaching hides with the maddening frequency that I had before. Paired with light Garmont AT boots and Silvretta Pure bindings, waxless Karhu Guides were a joy. Think of this as a premlinary test. Check the BCM website; we’ll be updating. And more models are on the way.
Light Touring Gear Review Photo Gallery
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Many thanks to my fellow Trappazoid testers—all of us associated with the Trapp Family Lodge Ski Touring Center—Charlie Yerrick, Bill Henchey, Tim Griffin and Sam von Trapp, along with testers Holly Howard and Carrie Cook. And a big mahalo to my neighbors for favors great and small: Doug Cross, Brian Cote, Tom Cote and John Monett, the latter for some deft plowing that let us stash gear-laden cars. —JD