

SKI POLES FOR NORDIC BACKCOUNTRY SKIING

First off, **hiking or "trekking" poles will not work for skiing!** Hiking poles are far too delicate for skiing. They will break. I've broken many. Get poles designed for skiing.

If you're a "recreational" cross country skier -- as opposed to a racer -- then the poles you choose for use in the backcountry won't be all that different from what you're already used to. Just make sure the poles you use are durable enough that they won't break if you fall on them, or if they get caught between a couple of trees, or get a tip stuck in between the slats in a snowmobile bridge. Your backcountry poles should also have larger baskets so they stay on top of deep snow.

Ultra-lightweight poles for racing just won't cut it in the backcountry.

Some folks use their poles as a sort of rudder when skiing downhill. You can hold them together with one hand up by the handles and the other lower down, then out to one side, with the tips dragging hard in the snow. Or if you're really brave, you can hold them together below the handles, stick the poles in between your legs with the tips in the snow, and sort of sit on the mid-section of the poles, putting leverage on them to dig into the snow and slow you down. (I'd *never* use that technique...) If you use any of these maneuvers, make sure you get really sturdy poles.

I've seen some pretty spectacular "explosions" of cheap fiberglass poles. XC ski poles are generally not expensive. You can afford to get good, sturdy ones. I'd say an aluminum or carbon fiber construction should be good.

Downhill ski poles in a longer (cross country) length will work, but can be a bit heavy. This might or might not bother you. It's easy enough to find downhill poles in thrift stores, so it might be worth it to give a pair a try.

LENGTH:

For most of us, a single length, non-adjustable pole will do fine.

Here's a pair of [single-length ski poles designed for backcountry use](#) that are pretty much the same as standard recreational poles:

To choose the length, size it so that it just barely fits under your armpit when you're standing straight up. The tip of the pole should be on the ground, and the top of the handle should fit firmly under your armpit. It shouldn't make you raise your shoulder much at all. A little bit too long or too short is OK, just not too far off. Longer poles will work better for diagonal stride ("kick and glide") but will get in your way when you're skiing downhill or negotiating tight turns. Shorter poles will be better for skiing downhill or getting through the trees, but will be a little worse for diagonal striding. It's a compromise. I can't tell you exactly what will be best for you. You'll have to feel it out for yourself.

If you're not planning on doing any telemark or other style of "serious" downhill skiing, you won't need adjustable length poles. However, if you have a heavier ski setup and you want to learn to tackle real downhill techniques (like the telemark turn), then you should have adjustable length poles. The [Black Diamond Traverse](#) is a favorite.

You can quickly switch from cross country length (longer) to downhill length (shorter). You can also adjust one short and one long, for long traverses (shorter on the uphill side, longer on the downhill side). They also make fine hiking poles, or for snowshoeing.

The length adjustment mechanism should be of the "[Flick Lock](#)" type, with a lever that clamps down on the pole to hold it to length.

I have had bad experiences with the "twist collar" type of length adjusters (like those on Leki hiking poles).

MATERIALS:

You want to know for sure that the pole you choose will stand up to the bruising requirements of backcountry skiing.

BASKETS:

If you seek out fresh snow to play in, or like to break trail, you might want to find a pair of poles that can accept "[powder baskets](#)." These baskets are much larger in surface area than the type on poles meant for in-track skiing at nordic centers. The larger surface area compacts the snow as you plant the pole, giving you a platform to push off from. Too small of a basket and your pole will try to find the hard ground underneath the snow. That's OK if there's only six inches of fresh snow, but can be a problem if you're out in a few feet of powder. (Hey, it could happen ya know!)

HANDLES and WRIST STRAPS:

I like the handle to be nicely shaped and easy to grasp, even with big mitts on. The straps should be easily adjustable, again, even with gloves on. The strap adjustments should not require the removal of any small parts, as I guarantee you'll lose any loose pieces in four feet of snow one day.

You also want to be able to get in and out of the straps quickly. You should get out of the straps when you're in thickets or skiing fast in the trees. You don't want to have your hand strapped into a pole if it gets stuck hard while you're skiing fast! That could dislocate a shoulder, or worse. On the other hand, you want to strap your hands in when you've got a long section of flat terrain to stride over. I like to get my arms swinging with my hands nice and relaxed, and the wrist straps keep me from flinging my poles off behind me.

Another feature I like is a foam grip that goes down the pole from the handles. This lets me "choke up" on the pole when I need to switch temporarily to a shorter pole length, but I don't want to take the time to shorten and then re-adjust the length of the poles.