



Leslie Ross, above and top right, founder of Babes in the Back Country. Her women-specific trips (right and upper left) teach women to trust their intuition and each other, as well as teaching backcountry skills.



COURTESY OF BABES IN THE BACKCOUNTRY (4)

# Babes in the Backcountry

Breckenridge-based outfitter offers outdoor adventure education with a twist. By Ron S. Doyle

**I**t's Saturday night at Francie's Cabin, a Summit Huts Association cabin five miles south of Breckenridge. The wind outside quietly sculpts wave-like cornices on the rooftop. Inside the cabin a group of women seem to be relaxing, sipping wine, loosely chatting about everything from politics to parenting. In reality, they are learning how to survive in a backcountry emergency.

Leslie Ross, 41, has discovered something profoundly counterintuitive about avalanche and backcountry travel education: Women learn about the topic differently, and safety is as much about trust and comfort as it is technical knowledge.

Ross is the founder of Babes in the Backcountry (BIB), a pioneer organization in the women-specific adventure sports industry. Focusing primarily on backcountry travel, telemarking and safety education, BIB offered its first avalanche course twelve years ago. BIB pushed for a shift in avalanche safety education, which Ross says used to exclusively target scientists and snow professionals. To do so, they designed an avy course that's intuitive, easy to digest, but still meets American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE) and American Avalanche Association (AAA) standards.

"We need women to be part of the decision-making process in the backcountry," says Ross, "for everyone's sake." Research would agree, because involving women in backcountry decisions may not only be positive for women—it could save men's lives. A 2005

study of mountaineers shows men are less able to perceive risk in the mountains when compared to their women counterparts.

BIB's success parallels a nationwide trend, says Susan Hays, editor at the Boulder-based *Women's Adventure Magazine*: "Women are showing their purchasing power, and companies are responding to women making their own buying decisions." Companies realize they can no longer take a product for men and merely shrink it and pink it for female consumers—they now design products that meet the specific needs of women.

BIB winter courses come with perks—they include meals, wine tastings, access to backcountry gear ("Women should have a chance to try things before they buy," says Ross), even dressing with a little flair on the first night of a multi-day clinic. BIB also incorporates yoga into every course, even avalanche safety, because Ross believes smart choices in the backcountry come from learning how to tune into one's body, environment, and the traveling group.

Many new courses are open to men, too, and some are specially created for couples. This winter in Colorado, BIB will offer telemark clinics at Arapahoe Ba-

sin and Loveland, an introduction to the backcountry course in Breckenridge, and a three-day "Sisters in the Steep" clinic in Silverton. Several other courses will be offered at Lake Tahoe resorts and Sugarbowl in California.

But BIB aspires to do more than simply offer a unique educational product—it brings adventurous women together. "I had no female mentors, only brothers and guy friends. There were few women in

the huts. I was asking myself, 'Where are the women at?' That's why we take groups of women to huts, give them an opportunity to get into the backcountry with knowledgeable female guides," says Ross.

While the occasional birthday, bachelorette party or reunion may fill up a workshop, most women arrive alone or in pairs, which Ross encourages. "A hut trip is a real bonding experience," says Ross, "and that's what we're here for, to provide a place where women can meet other other gals to go out with in the future, women that they are comfortable with and know they can trust." \*

For additional information, call 970-453-4060 or visit [www.babesinthebackcountry.com](http://www.babesinthebackcountry.com).

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