

A SUMMARY OF THE DIFFERENT AIRBAG SYSTEMS FOR OFF-PISTE USE

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1. AIRBAGS – DO YOU NEED ONE ? I've heard a lot of people say that they don't need an airbag off-piste. I've also heard others say that they affect your judgement. Well I've heard the same arguments about ski helmets. Still unconvinced ? Here is an interesting statistic involving a total of 102 people in reported European avalanches: Where the victims either did not have or did not deploy airbags, there was a 36% mortality rate. In the SAME avalanches, those people who deployed airbag systems had a 1% mortality rate. Source – "Time is Life" DVD. This is a sobering statistic for anyone regularly riding off-piste.
2. So, if you're interested in buying an Airbag, which one are you going to go for ? In my honest opinion, the differences between the current systems are not as big as some people like to make out. What is important, is that you get one, and that you use it ! I regularly see people who own airbags skiing without them, and others wear them but don't have the trigger mechanism activated – what's the point ?!
3. Below is a summary of the 3 main systems currently available in Europe. Other systems are being developed and will be described briefly later.



ABS



Snowpulse



BCA

	ABS	Snowpulse	BCA
RRP (£)	669 for Vario 25L	699 for 30L Guide Lifebag	629 for Float 30
Weight (g)	2980 (with 25L sack)	3000 (with 30L sack)	3357 (with 30L sack)
Canisters self fillable	No	Yes. Done at either paintball or dive centre.	Yes. Done at either paintball or dive centre.
Modular system (Y/N)	Yes. Rucksacks can be easily changed if you select the Vario system.	No	No
General Comments	The release handle contains a small explosive charge which is not liked by airport security firms (although it is certified safe for flight).	Some people find the shoulder straps too bulky. While the head is protected after initiation, vision is restricted if still skiing.	The heaviest of the current airbags. Pressure gauge on canister is a great way to see whether the canister is fully charged. Although not yet available in UK, it looks like the import duties will actually make the price the same as ABS and Snowpulse. The airbag keeps the victim upright, but does not restrict vision.
Bag sizes available	5-50L, with many choices	15-45L, with several choices	15L and 30L
Safe for Air Travel	Yes. Take the IATA documentation.	Yes. Take the IATA documentation.	Yes. Take the IATA documentation.
Lighter versions	Save 200g, by buying the carbon canister (RRP £75).	No carbon canister available	No carbon canister available.
Bag release system	Two airbags, one each side of the pack. Disadvantage is that victims are usually found face down in the snow.	Curved single airbag, which inflates around the head, thus keeping the body upright and the head protected	Single rectangular bag, out of the top of the sack.
Other comments	Made in Germany, so Euro prices are stable.	Made in Switzerland. This may force prices to rise due to the current exchange rate.	Made in USA. Now available in Europe.

Other Systems:

Avivest: Avivest is essentially an airbag system that is fitted into a vest, rather than into a rucksack. The advantage of this is that the weight is spread better around your body rather than all being on your back. The disadvantage is that you cannot vary the storage volume. Avivest weighs 2.72kg and costs \$625USD. Also available from the same company is the Avipack, a 33l airbag system in a rucksack (price \$699). Currently these systems are only available in the US. More details: www.thewary.com



Avivest



Wary Airbag 33

Air and Snow: Details are still coming in on this new innovation from Switzerland. I hope to see it in February 2012. The manufacturers are still in the development stage, but they are confident that the system will come in around 1600g weight. Price not yet known. It is hoped that this system will be available for the 2012/13 winter season. More details: www.airandsnow.com and <http://www.facebook.com/#!/AirandSnow>



Independant Airbag systems. There are several companies working on independant Airbag systems. These will be bought separately, and then attached to your rucksack. Details to follow.

Other Systems. Interested in other systems to help keep you safe in avalanches ? Recco, Airball, Rotkauf, and others to be reviewed shortly. Watch this space.

Training Courses. Avalanche Academy run safety training courses every week in Chamonix. Log on now to find out more: www.avalancheacademy.com