What Skiing Level Do You Need for Heliskiing in Alaska?

Heliskiing in Alaska is not a place to learn the basics. The terrain is demanding, the snow conditions can shift quickly, and the consequences of a mistake are serious. Most operators, including those running trips in the Chugach Mountains near Valdez, expect guests to arrive as solid advanced or expert skiers or snowboarders. This article explains what that means in practical terms and how you can prepare.

Why the standard is high

Alaska heliskiing takes place in remote, steep, and often exposed terrain. You are dropped at the top of a line that may involve long, uninterrupted vertical descents. The snow might be deep powder, wind-affected crust, or everything in between. You need to be able to link turns confidently at speed, adjust your technique to changing snow, and stay in control for the full run.

Avalanche terrain is another factor. You will travel through areas where the slope angle, snowpack, and weather combine to create real hazard. While a guide handles the route decisions and snowpack evaluation, every member of the ski group needs to move efficiently through that terrain. Being able to make quick, stable turns on a slope of 35 to 45 degrees is a baseline requirement. If you struggle to hold a line or need to stop frequently, you put the whole group at risk.

What operators typically require

Most heliskiing operators ask for a strong intermediate to advanced ability at minimum. In practice, that means you should be comfortable skiing or riding black-diamond runs at a major resort in variable conditions. You should be able to ski parallel turns on steeps, handle moguls, and manage powder. If you rely on wedge turns or have not skied off-piste in challenging snow, you are not ready.

View the location on Google Maps

Snowboard ability is judged on similar criteria. You should be able to link turns on steep, ungroomed slopes, maintain speed in flat sections, and navigate through trees and variable snow. A snowboarder who cannot traverse well or who needs to stop repeatedly to regroup will struggle in the big, open faces typical of Alaskan heli terrain.

Specific skills that matter

Beyond a general rating, a few specific abilities make a big difference in a heliskiing environment.

- **Speed control in powder.** Deep snow requires a different stance and turn shape. You need to be able to float the tips, keep your weight centered, and make short-radius turns when the slope demands it. Practicing in deep snow at a resort or during a ski touring trip is the best preparation.
- **Glacier travel awareness.** Many heli runs end on or near glaciers. You should know how to move in a rope team, how to self-arrest, and how to respond if someone falls into a crevasse. This is not something to learn on the day.
- **Efficient group movement.** Heliskiing is a group activity. You ski together, stop together, and communicate about snow conditions and hazards. Being able to ski at a steady pace without constant pauses keeps the day flowing and reduces exposure time in avalanche terrain.
- **Fat skis or a powder-specific board.** While not a skill, having the right equipment is essential. Fat skis with a waist width around 105 to 120 millimeters help you float in powder and provide stability at speed. Your gear should be tuned and ready for deep snow and cold temperatures.

How to assess your readiness

A good way to check your level is to ski a black diamond run at your home mountain in poor visibility or after a fresh dump of snow. If you can make smooth, controlled turns the whole way down without your legs burning out, you are in the ballpark. If you find yourself skidding, falling, or stopping every few turns, you need more practice.

Another benchmark is the ability to ski a consistent line on a slope of 35 degrees or steeper. You do not need to be an extreme skier, but you need to be comfortable with sustained steepness. Many heli runs in the Chugach range start on pitches that require immediate turning on a steep face. Hesitation or poor technique there can lead to a long slide or a fall into rocks.

If you are unsure, consider a progression. Start with a guided backcountry or cat-skiing trip to experience deep snow and steep terrain in a controlled setting. Then move to a heli trip. Some operators, like Pulseline Adventure, work with guests to match terrain to their ability. They do not push people into lines beyond their comfort zone. But they also expect that you are honest about your skills so they can plan a safe and enjoyable day.

Preparation beyond skiing

Fitness matters. Heliskiing days are long, and the physical demands are high. You will carry a backpack with avalanche safety gear, hike short distances to get to or from landing zones, and ski run after run. Your legs need to be strong enough to maintain good form even when you are tired. Cardiovascular endurance helps you recover quickly between runs and stay alert in changing conditions.

Training should include squats, lunges, and core work. Ski-specific exercises like wall sits, single-leg balances, and jumping drills build the muscles you use most. Cardio can come from running, cycling, or using a stair machine. The goal is to arrive in shape so you can focus on technique and enjoy the experience rather than fighting fatigue.

What about ski touring experience?

Alaska ski touring experience is not strictly required for heliskiing, but it helps. Ski touring teaches you how to read terrain, manage your energy, and handle variable snow. It also builds avalanche awareness and group travel skills that transfer directly to heliskiing. If you have done a few multi-day tours in big mountain terrain, you will feel more at home in Alaska.

That said, heliskiing is different from touring. You do not earn your turns, so the pace is faster and the vertical is higher. You need to be able to ski well from the first run of the day, not after a warmup. If you have only toured in mellow terrain, you may still benefit from additional resort or lift-served steep skiing before a heli trip.

When to say not yet

It is better to wait a season or two than to show up underprepared. A heliskiing trip is expensive and remote. If you spend the day struggling, you not only risk injury but also diminish the experience for yourself and your group. Most guides prefer to turn someone away before the trip than to manage a guest who is in over their head.

Pulseline Adventure is also on YouTube.

Signs that you need more experience include: you cannot ski parallel on steeps, you have never skied powder deeper than your knees, you are not comfortable with group dynamics in avalanche terrain, or you have not skied a full day in challenging conditions without significant fatigue. Address those gaps first. Take lessons, ski more varied terrain, and consider a guided backcountry trip to build confidence.

Final thoughts

The answer to what skiing experience you need for heliskiing is clear: you need to be a strong advanced skier or snowboarder who can handle steep, deep, and variable terrain while moving

efficiently in a group. That level is not out of reach, but it takes honest self-assessment and deliberate practice. If you put in the work, the reward is some of the best skiing on earth in the wild Alaskan mountains.

Pulseline Adventure provides guided Alaska heli skiing and snowboarding trips in Valdez and the Chugach Mountains. They are based at 300 Airport Rd Ste 120, Valdez, AK 99686, USA, and can be reached at +1 412-397-8573.