



ASK ANDREW ?

Q: I've heard you'd rather eat glass than use ski crampons. Why?

—Jessica Quinn, Tahoe, California

Sad but true. Having spent much of my formative backcountry-skiing years carrying around a variety of ski crampons, I now have an allergic reaction to them. Just the thought of them makes my bases itch.

The seed of my discontent started in the Wasatch Mountains where we are cursed with copious piles of deep, soft snow in which ski crampons are not very effective, so I carried them but never used them. In turn, I was so used to *not* using them that I left them out on expeditions to icy places where I, most likely, *could* have used them, which reinforced my ski 'poon bitterness. I carried them when I didn't need them, then didn't carry them when I did. Ski crampons are kind of like condoms in that sense.

The silver lining on this dark crampon cloud was that I learned how to skin on steep, icy slopes. The key is to stay off of your slick edges, roll your ankles to maximize skin to snow contact, press through your heels, don't "pound" your skins to try to get them to stick, and, most importantly, focus. Skinning on slick surfaces is akin to friction climbing on smooth granite—it seems desperate at first, but once you develop a feel for what will hold, you can motor uphill with a minimal amount of effort.

Professional guides swear by ski crampons and hate heel lifters, whereas I swear at ski crampons and love heel lifters. During an AMGA Ski Guides course in icy Alaska, instead of skinning straight up a 20-degree slope, we were forced at piolet-point to stick to the regulation 12-degree climbing angle, which was *múch* harder, as it required low-angle edging on ice. I inquired why we didn't just flip up our lifters and skin straight up. "Heel lifts are too tipy for clients, and they can't handle steep skinning," was the answer, which, for me, killed two birds with one stone.

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I decided I wasn't cut out for guiding and gave away my ski crampons as a matter of pride. Death before harscheisens.

Ski crampons are a crutch, and you would be doing yourself a favor to ditch them and learn how to skin. Once you do, your crampon cravings will begin to subside. As an added insidious danger of these evil inventions, they allow you to climb into steep, icy terrain, where once they do slip, you'll go for a big ride. I'd rather patch out down low where it's safe, then go to boot crampons if need be. Some of the worst ski 'poon offenders are the Saber-toothed Tiger style, with four-inch fangs. These have zero glide on the flats, force you up on your toes on moderate climbs, and then barely penetrate the snow when you are in your highest lifter mode. They may be heavy and bulky, but at least they're expensive. If you are going to succumb to ski crampons, at least get the ones which stay on your skis, not your boots/bindings.

Where ski crampons work best is for extended low angle climbing traverses like the Haute Route. A key issue here is "extended," in which case I would either try to find a slightly steeper line straight up which I could skin, or drop back, punt, put on aluminum boot-crampons and motor straight up, which is going to be much faster AND more secure. I would have to be forced into ten miles of 12-degree icy traverse climbing to even be tempted by ski crampons.

Now that I've gotten all of that ski crampon angst off of my chest, I will undoubtedly be cursed with endless icy traverses...but I'll keep those thoughts to myself.