

Shovels That Span the Divide Between Heaven and Hell

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This project was carried out under the patronage of The Austrian Alpine Club. All equipment has been purchased and paid for by the authors and none of the involved parties are in any way involved in the manufacturing, sales or promotion of any of the tested equipment. The equipment was tested during the field tests for two recent research projects—the V-shaped Excavation Strategy (avalanche.ca vol 84 p 57-60 Spring 2008) and Companion Rescue with Minimal Training (avalanche.ca, vol 86 p 57-60, Fall 2008).

Scope and Description of the Test

The publication of the V-shaped snow conveyor excavation strategy has triggered many questions concerning the quality and efficiency of the working tools—in particular the avalanche shovel. To our big surprise, shovel models that were rated “recommended” by certain European mountain magazines utterly failed during our field tests. It is clear that these shovels had been rated without any serious testing in snow and hard avalanche debris.

Our test focused on avalanche shovels that can be carried in a normal sized backpack. Specialized rescue shovels with large steel blades have not been taken into consideration. The same is true for plastic shovels. They usually break in cold temperatures and hard debris before the first buried subject can be excavated. There are even some shoveling tools available without a shaft. These have not been taken into account due to the inefficiencies of their mechanical and/or ergonomic design.

Only correct shoveling technique was used during the test. All participants were shown how to cut blocks and specifically instructed not to break up the debris by leveraging the handle with a lot of force. All failures and observations were seen during regular use of the shovels and probes in avalanche rescue, the application they are primarily designed and sold for.

Besides testing a selection of the currently available products, the aim of this project is to provide a detailed overview on the many important characteristics and functions of a shovel. The resulting criteria may be used as an evaluation guide for future products. The manufacturers of the tested products have been asked to comment the test result for their product. Their reaction may be found at: www.bergundsteigen.at

1. Shovel selection criteria

From all major manufacturers, only the one or two most promising (mechanically strong, ergonomic, light weight) versions were selected for the test. We purchased three of each of the selected models in a regular mountain sports shop. In addition to a few heavier and larger versions weighing approximately 800 grams, we purposely selected a few lighter shovels in order to see if they can offer comparable properties/qualities as the larger versions. The lighter models were also an attractive choice for those who preferred plastic shovels.

The shovel selection was made with three user groups in mind:

- Professional user—no compromises in mechanical stability, ergonomics and scoop volume
- Randonnee and freeride—lightweight, sturdy and ergonomical
- Light & Fast —ultra light and sturdy

The testers aimed to include at least one product for each user group in the “All Mountain” category. Unfortunately, this goal could only be achieved by adding a third product from one manufacturer to the selection.

2. Shovel Categories

“Hellish”

Shovels in this category not only break, but also damage other equipment during regular use. Shovels with serious safety issues belong in this category, along with shovels likely to break before the first subject has been excavated. Plastic shovels are often preferred for their light weight but are more likely to break in cold temperatures and on hard debris. Furthermore, when plastic shovels do break, typically the entire tool becomes useless. Since there is no weight difference between plastic and the lightest metal shovels in the “mountain” category, plastic shovels should not be considered.

“Life’s a Beach”

Shovels in this category allow you to excavate one or two buried subjects in hard avalanche snow, but are not designed to withstand the stress an avalanche shovel is exposed to without being damaged. After short use, these shovels show irreversible structural failures and need to be replaced. Considering that shovels in the “All Mountain” category are not more expensive, and some models are even cheaper, there is no justifiable reason to purchase a “Life’s a Beach” shovel. These shovels always fail due to inferior properties of the metal.

“All Mountain”

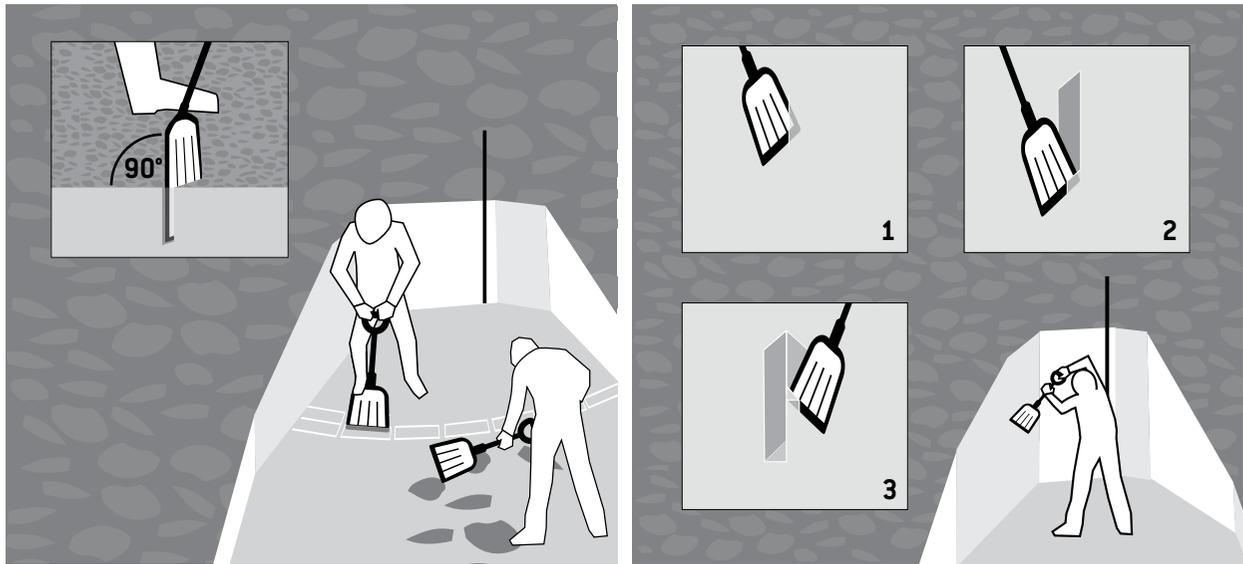
These shovels are made for year-long use in avalanche rescue. These shovels are neither heavier nor more expensive than shovels from the beach or hell categories but all of them are made from durable, heat treated alloys. These shovels do not suffer damage when chopping through hard debris.

“Heavenly”

Unfortunately these do not exist yet. Imagine a prototype of a solar-powered shovel with high energy lithium batteries...to be released in the near future.

3. Predominant Failure Patterns

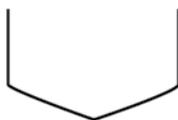
Most mechanical failures occurred while chopping blocks in hard debris. Blade deformations were often caused while jamming the shovel blade into the debris by stepping on the blade with a ski boot. When cutting into hard side walls, it was often not possible to cut into the debris by using the entire front of the blade. By using only the corner of the blade, the same applied force is concentrated in a smaller area and therefore more effective. However, in several models, the blade could not withstand this mechanical stress, which led to irreversible deformations.



4. General Description of Important Characteristics and Features

Blade

Shape:



A triangular shaped blade is offered by a few manufacturers. Theoretically the concentrated point of attack is advantageous when chopping hard debris. Unfortunately practice shows that in hard debris the triangular shape creates an unstable position which forces the blade to twist sideways. If the material could withstand the concentrated stress at the tip, or enhance a sideways attack with the blade, one could theoretically see this shape as an advantage. In practice, however, it has been shown that applying force across the full width of the blade while chopping snow leads to more efficient snow removal.



A serrated leading edge, with several exposed points of attack on a straight line, delivered the best cutting characteristics.



A straight front line of the blade provides a very stable leading edge of the shovel while chopping snow. The mechanical integrity of the main line of attack leads to the greatest blade durability.

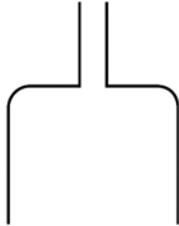


In general rounded tips offer good characteristics for cutting snow, although the rounded shape can lead to some instability.

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- Rescue instructions on the shovel blade make sense from an educational point of view: The equipment is always with the owner and therefore offers a good opportunity to familiarize them with the basic rescue instructions. The print should not however, lead to snow sticking to the blade.
- Shovel blades with mounting holes are useful to connect with the tips of the skis or the bindings for improvised, terrestrial transport of a patient.

Design:



A flat top provides a good platform for stepping on while pushing on the shovel from the back in hard debris.



When the top of the blade slopes to the sides at an angle, the boot simply slides off preventing any energy from being transferred from the foot to the shovel. This wastes energy and causes the shoveler to become discouraged.

Radius: Small radiuses in the shape of the blade will lead to more mechanical stress being concentrated in those specific zones of the blade. Therefore, small radiuses are more vulnerable to deformation and eventually cracking.

Size: Small blades take less energy to wield, but make snow chopping and transport less efficient. Contrarily, larger blades can move a lot of snow quickly, but require a very strong person.

Material: Only shovels with blades made of 6061 alloy with T6 heat treatment made it into the “All Mountain” category. Certain other manufacturers claim to work as well with specially treated alloy, but the test did not see the efficiency of alternative materials or heat treatments. It is advised to be very suspicious if 6061 *and* T6 are not clearly specified. The Black Diamond R&D department stated to us in writing that “The mix that we use has taken much work and dedication in order to perfect. For this reason we do not share the specifics.” Too bad. We do share with you that their top of the line product ended up in the “Hellish” category.

Scooping Characteristics: The more the cross section of the blade resembles a U-shape, the more reliably the snow will stay on the shovel while lifting or transporting snow.

Angle of the blade in relation to the shaft

The angle between the shaft and the blade is a compromise between efficiency while chopping and efficiency while transporting snow. Whereas the shaft and the blade should be in a straight line for chopping blocks, a more angled version is preferred while transporting snow in rowing motions.

- Alternative blade-shaft angle: Some models offer the possibility of pivoting the blade to be approximately at a right angle to the shaft, thereby transforming the shovel into a hoe. For certain applications, this can be advantageous. However, the versatility of this feature can compromise long-term durability, and is not always ergonomically superior.

Shaft

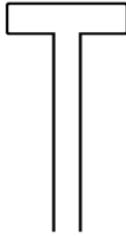
Connnection: Round shafts offer less resistance while adjusting length, but are prone to rotating while adjusting. This means more time is required to ensure proper alignment between the extension holes and alignment pins. Shafts with an asymmetric cross section, such as oval or trapezoid shapes, exhibit more resistance while mounting, removing or adjusting the length, but will not waste time aligning the push-pin with the extension hole.

Length: All testers complained continuously about the inefficiency and discomfort of short, non-telescoping shafts. Short shafts mandate an uncomfortable work position and dramatically reduce the effective range of motion. As soon as you use your shovel for what it is meant for—shoveling snow—you will not regret the extra weight a telescoping shaft adds. Telescoping shafts need sufficient overlap between the two segments in the extended state in order to provide enough mechanical stability.

- The opening of the shaft needs to be covered so that no snow may enter the shaft while shoveling. Snow entering the tubular shaft leads to malfunctioning of the locking mechanisms and the compressed snow will melt into the interior of the backpack after use.
- Some manufacturers supply an additional grip on the shaft of the shovel. The concept of this shaft grip is to provide more precision and stability while shoveling.

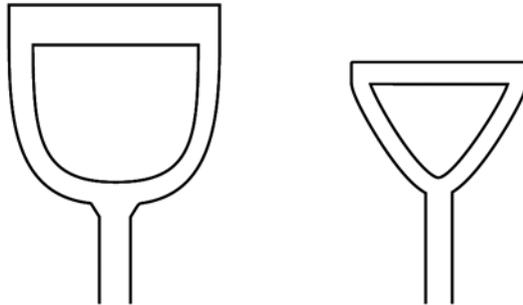
Handle

T-shaped handles



This is the least efficient and least ergonomic version. Newer versions of the T-shaped handles with more rounding show fewer problems, except for rescuers with small hands, where the entire handle is too big and does not allow a proper grip any more.

D-shaped handles



This is the most comfortable grip, although a minimum depth and width must be determined for each person's hand.

5. Report on the individual shovels

“Hellish”

Black Diamond Transfer 7

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

The Transfer 7 shovel cracked where the ramp angle of the blade starts to change towards the shaft of the shovel. The small radiuses on the upper end of the shovel blade do not withstand the force applied to the shovel when cutting blocks and pushing the shovel with the ski boot into the snow, leading to severe deformations.

- Like all smaller Black Diamond shovels, the Transfer 7 has a sharp edge on the top side of the blade. As the blade design has a rounded top, it is necessary to step with the ski boot right next to the shaft onto this cutting edge feature. After the ski boots of three participants had been severely damaged by this sharp edge the shovels were removed from the test.

The Vibram soles of the ski boots were severely damaged. In one case even the rigid plastic shell of a Scarpa Denali boot was almost destroyed.

Conclusion

Besides cracking and deforming, Black Diamond's largest and most rigid shovel caused much damage to plastic ski boots. Due to the rounded shape of the top of the blade, it is hard to step on it with boots, making cutting blocks harder. The trapezoidal shaft is strong with good surface structure on the metal. The T-grip has a good ergonomic shape, better than most T-grips, but the size is too big for a person with fairly small hands.



Black Diamond Transfer 7

“Life's a Beach”

Pieps Pro

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

Unfortunately the Pieps Pro shovel broke before two holes of 2 m burial depths could be excavated. The initial failure starts in the front center of the blade parallel to the company logo which acts as a weak spot. Even when purchasing the shovels, it was clear the blade was far too soft to withstand an avalanche rescue environment. In short order the sides of the blade bent outwards—effectively destroying the structural integrity of the blade.

- The blade cuts snow nicely, but the blade is too weak to withstand the forces an avalanche shovel is subjected to.



Pieps Pro

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- The T-grip was not the preferred shape by most of the participants. Pieps Pro has an asymmetric shape for the locking knobs which allows the shovel to mate easily onto the shaft.
- The additional grip on the shaft is strong but shredded gloves that didn't have a durable surface material.

Conclusion

The Pieps Pro is by far the weakest and least recommended product in the Beach category. Unfortunately it illustrates that some manufacturers do not appear to test their products in the real application environment before they are thrown on the market. In particular safety equipment should be thoroughly tested by the manufacturers, as well as in the hands of end users.

Stubai

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

Rigid shaft, but some deformations of the shovel blade have occurred. Unfortunately, several of the locking pins on the shaft and in the handle broke, rendering the entire shovel useless. The locking pins are obviously weak in the connection between the bolt and the spring.

Conclusion

The small size of the blade limits the amount of snow that can be moved per scoop with this shovel. The overall stiffness is good for cutting blocks. However, removing the blade from the shaft was difficult and required a lot of force. The T-shaped handle felt uncomfortable.



Stubai

Ortovox Grizzly

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

Unfortunately the Grizzly shovel did not live up to the strength implied in its name. The blade cracked where the ramp angle of the blade starts to change towards the shaft of the shovel and the entire front of the shovel was heavily deformed. The large, flat platform on the upper end of the blade makes it very easy to stomp on the shovel, which is very effective for chopping blocks in the snow.

For general comments about the hoe function, please see "alternative blade-shaft angle." Attempts to lock the shovel in the two available positions weren't reliable, especially when the locking pin iced up. It is disappointing that the shaft cannot be locked in the short length, particularly when working in close proximity to the buried subject.

- The hole which holds the locking bolt in place in the hoe working position quickly became ovalized, creating slop in the blade.
- The serrated design of the leading edge of the shovel blade results in excellent cutting characteristics.

Conclusion

The concept of a shovel with a hoe position is interesting, but with the current version many participants felt it was tricky to find the proper locking positions. The lack of a short shaft working position is not optimal. The additional grip on the shaft is very aggressive, even for gloves with a strong leather surface, but still wore out remarkably quickly due to contact with the side of the ski boot when chopping snow.



Ortovox Grizzly

Ortovox Alaska D

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

The blade of the Alaska D shovel deformed very easily. When pushing the blade into debris, it deformed dynamically and almost popped out again. Soon the deformations became permanent. There is too much play at all locking points (blade, shaft and extension). The size of the blade allows large amounts of snow per scoop, yet is not too big for a weaker shoveller.

Conclusion

The Alaska D has a very good D-shaped handle and a nice foam /rubber grip on the shaft. The only complaint about the additional grip material is that snow sticks to it, making it slippery. The Ortovox Alaska D was well liked by the participants. Unfortunately it is mechanically weak. Potentially a great shovel for avalanche rescue, but only if it is manufactured with appropriate material.



Ortovox Alaska D

BCA Chugach Pro EXT

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

The big blade of the Chugach Pro showed little deformation. The shaft slowly started to bend where it meets the blade and eventually broke. Even though the oval shaft is strong for levering, it was unable to handle the forces the large blade exposed it to.

Conclusion

Shovel blades of this size only make sense for particularly strong individuals. All other components, like the shaft, should be designed to withstand these forces. A shovel in this size targets a user group where one would expect the lower shaft to be closed with a cap so that snow won't fill up the shaft.



Tracker Chugach Pro

Mammut Expert

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

The blade of the Mammut shovel deformed very easily. This shovel was in the companion rescue field test in 2008 and the V-shaped excavation field tests in 2007 and consistently showed the same failure pattern with over 10 shovels. Some failures have occurred at the neck of the blade where the soldered back side broke.

Conclusion

Ergonomic handle, almost oversized and therefore rather big in packing size. Very weak blade.



Mammut Expert

“All Mountain”

G3 AviTECH D-Grip

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

The AviTech is manufactured in 6061 T6 and withstood the tests without problems. The shovel has a nice flat top for pushing the blade in hard avalanche snow with a boot. However, the radius is a bit too small towards the upper end so that some minor but permanent deformations could be seen in this zone.

Conclusion

Good sturdy avalanche rescue tool. D-grip handle is too small and not optimal in shape for rescuers with big hands or gloves. Top handle bar should be round for ergonomic glide while shoveling.



G3 AviTECH D-Grip

Voilé Telepro T6

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

All the features one would want are contained in this family of shovels. The Telepro T6 is manufactured with 6061 T6 and withstood the rigors of the tests without any problems. While being subjected to the same abuse as other shovels, Voile blades were unaffected by destruction or deformities. The top of the blade was almost square to allow a good platform to step on, with excellent transfer of power. Though simple, the straight leading edge of the blade was reliable and durable. Finally, it comes with a telescoping shaft and a D-grip, hands down the grip of choice for comfort among our testers.

Conclusion

This a good example of how an avalanche rescue tool should perform: sturdy and ergonomic. A very good choice when you are not concerned that every single gram must count. For serious professional avalanche rescue and daily snow observation.

Voilé XLM Pro

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

The XLM Pro is manufactured in 6061 T6 and withstood the tests without any problems. It has a smaller and thinner blade compared to the Telepro T6, but has a telescoping shaft with an ergonomic D-handle.

There are no images of the Voilé Telepro T6, Voilé XLM Pro or the Voilé XLM due to the fact there was no damage to show.

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Conclusion

A very good choice if you are looking for a sturdy, yet fairly lightweight, ergonomic shovel for touring. The weight is comparable to a heavier plastic shovel.

Voilé XLM

Mechanical Characteristics and Stability

The XLM is manufactured with 6061 T6 and withstood the tests without problems. It has a smaller, thinner blade compared to the Telepro T6, and a very short shaft with a T-grip handle. Participants complained continuously about how uncomfortable shoveling was with such a short shaft.

Conclusion

Sturdy and extremely lightweight. A good choice if weight is the most important criteria, yet the shovel should still be very sturdy, but you are willing to compromise ergonomics. The weight is comparable to the lightest weight plastic shovels available!

Overview of shovels in alphabetic order

	Weight	Packing length	Length short	Length extended
BCA Chugach Pro EXT	1128g	59cm	88cm	109cm
Black Diamond Transfer 7	780g	43cm	71cm	89cm
G3 AviTECH D-Grip	775g	46cm	65cm	87cm
Ortovox Alaska D	905g	50cm	78cm	97cm
Ortovox Grizzly	838g	48cm	Not applicable	87cm
Pieps Pro	738g	46cm	72cm	99cm
Stubai	775g	48cm	67cm	92cm
Voilé Telepro T6	840g	50cm	79cm	99cm
Voilé XLM Pro T6	665g	45cm	71cm	85cm
Voilé XLM T6	520g	36cm	61cm	Not applicable