

## SKILLS

### Zero Beta

*Backcountry expert and educator Luc Mehl shares how to get creative with your trip planning.*

BY JOSETTE DESCHAMBEAULT

By his count, Luc Mehl has traveled—by bike, packraft, skis, ice skates, boots, and more—for over 10,000 miles. To hit a number like that, especially in his home state of Alaska, you have to get creative and off the beaten path, exploring areas, rivers, and peaks, that you're not going to find in a published guidebook. "In Alaska, most everything is 'off-trail' so planning with very little information is our bread and butter," he said. The adventurer has made it his focus to get out in ways that preserve a strong sense of adventure, and he's created programs to teach fellow backcountry enthusiasts how to plan trips effectively and wisely in the same vein. We chatted with Mehl about how he approaches planning those missions.

#### IF YOU'RE ITCHING TO PLAN A TRIP THAT'S NOT IN GUIDEBOOKS OR IS OFF-TRAIL, WHERE'S THE BEST PLACE TO START?

Google Earth is the key. The value in seeing the landscape in 3D and the ability to initially explore the area virtually cannot be understated. I'll start planning a trip by looking for a main attraction—a river, a beautiful valley, a caribou trail that looks interesting. The imagery is so high quality that I can get a feel for the area beforehand. Real-time satellite imagery like NASA's Worldview is so helpful because it's only days old. Refine your research with a navigation app like Caltopo or Gaia, then pull in your weather research from sites like Windy.com.

#### HOW DO YOU KEEP ALL YOUR RESEARCH STRAIGHT?

Create a trip document. All information lives in that document, from food planning to weather data to a detailed list of what folks at home can do if something goes wrong. The more work you do beforehand, the more you can concentrate on the experience.



#### WHAT RESOURCES DO YOU USE TO PLAN SUCCESSFUL TRIPS?

Online trip reports and forums are immensely helpful for me. Getting information from someone who's been there tells me a lot about conditions, special hazards, or even potential travel delays due to difficult terrain. I've gone onto Instagram and searched for a location tag for photos, and reached out to public accounts for beta. When vetting what info to trust, look for clues as to how these travelers recreate—are they good environmental stewards? Do they have good reputations in the outdoor community? Do they own up to what went wrong, as well as what went right on their trip?

#### WHAT'S THE IDEAL GROUP SIZE FOR AN OFF-TRAIL TRIP?

Four is a good group size for me. We can split into two and two if someone's injured, or if someone wants to bail, or if someone wants to pick up the pace or needs to slow down. The concept of moving as

PHOTO: LUC MEHL



▲ Luc and his team during a 10-day combined hike and paddle trip that covered roughly 180 miles in southeast Alaska.

independent “nations” has worked well for me; we hope to travel together, but we can split into our separate groups' for a day and come back together at camp that night.

### **WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN GOOD ADVENTURE PARTNERS?**

Folks that are able to laugh at the hard parts. So often something goes awry, and I appreciate the folks who are comfortable not taking things too seriously and who are adaptable and fluid. Good problem solvers are essential. Gear repair-ers are clutch. But especially people who are comfortable talking about risk and decision making—alongside having fun.

### **HOW CAN YOU BE A GOOD ADVENTURE PARTNER YOURSELF, IN THE PLANNING STAGES?**

Reality is, not everyone has as much time as some might. You should contribute what time you can to lighten the load—one person looks at a specific glacier, someone else talks to a pilot about a pass. Using a Google Doc for a trip document alleviates 100+

email threads, and folks can add comments or questions simultaneously. I'd suggest setting expectations in that document, too, for upfront discussions about what the group is looking for and expecting from this trip to mitigate conflicts out on the trail.

### **HOW DO YOU FRAME GO/NO-GO CHOICES WITH YOUR GROUPS?**

You need to leave room for the spirit of discovery, but there needs to be a gut check-in about if continuing is worth it. If you take the time to identify “what's the right thing to do?” it's shockingly easy to identify. The right thing to do might be to have an extra safety boat, or a hard turn around time. The conversation to have with your group is, “Can we justify that decision to not do the right thing?” and to know what your hard cut-offs are. It might be a physical location to determine whether you need to turn around, or a river height, or a weather forecast. But talk about that beforehand to make the conversation easier out in the wilderness.