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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Splitboarding in the Alps

Gotta split: is it a board? Is it a pair of skis? Both, actually. We try splitboarding in the Alps

Sean Newsom Published: 8 February 2015



Divide and rule: the splitboards are split into two skis and the climb begins...

The world of winter sports loves lifts. Cable cars, gondolas, chairlifts, button lifts, T-bars — the mountains are littered with them. And they give pleasure to millions of people every winter, whisking them into the heart of what would otherwise be a wilderness.

Only now, for a growing number of snowboarders, they're old hat. These hardy souls are choosing to leave the lifts behind and walk up the mountain instead. How? Using a new bit of kit, the splitboard, which divides into two halves to be worn like skis. It's a neat blend of ski touring and snowboarding — the ultimate split-personality pastime.

Add a couple of glorified walking sticks, a rucksack of avalanche safety equipment, spare clothing and as much drinking water as they can carry, and — hey presto — these splitboarders are no longer slaves to the piste map.

Sure, they're swapping a few minutes of effortless elevation for hours of sweaty toil. And, typically, they'll get only a few minutes of old-school boarding as a finale. But it doesn't seem to matter. For them, up is the new down.

Paul Bonthron, 37, a civil engineer from Glasgow, is one of this new breed of "splitties". He first learnt to snowboard 10 years ago. "At first, all I wanted was to learn how to ride a piste without falling over," he recalls. Then he went on a hike with an instructor, loved it, and wanted to do more.

The instructor pointed him in the direction of Neil McNab. A snowboard instructor who's lived in the Chamonix valley since 1997, McNab holds the gold-standard IFMGA mountain-guide qualification — and is one of the world's leading splitboarders.

Now splitboarding is all Paul does. "I love the sense of adventure," he explains. "Getting away from the lifts, into the deep quiet of the mountains, really clears my head." I join him, McNab and a small group of splitboarders in Chamonix for a taste of uphill adventure, and from the moment I take my first steps up the mountain, I have the feeling I could become an addict, too.

By way of an introduction, McNab has picked a fairly straightforward ascent: a long, concave slope that opens out beneath the 2,852-metre Aiguille de la Glière, in a



... at the top, the boards are clipped back together...

sector known as Flégère. It's not technically difficult, but it is steep, and pretty soon I feel as though my heart is going to burst out of my ribcage and go bowling down the mountain.

Even so, the beauty of the cloudless day and the slow, steady rhythm of the climb create an extraordinarily calm and meditative state. Of course, we're alert to the dangers: I, for one, wouldn't go anywhere near this place without the company of McNab. But the quiet sense of menace beneath the sunlit smile of the weather just adds to our focus.

With each step, the rest of the world slips a little further from view. All there is now is this one slope and the next lungful of air. We climb for about 90 minutes and spend 10 more converting our skis back into snowboards, then reattaching the bindings.

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... then, swoosh, it's a glorious descent through virgin powder

slope," he says. "The next day, I'll give them a choice — splitboarding or conventional riding? Usually we spend the rest of the week on splits."

Finally, it's time to surrender ourselves to gravity. It's six years since I last rode a snowboard in earnest. But as we set off down this plunging slope, I'm reminded how much easier, and more enjoyable, it is to surf deep, powdery snow on one plank than it is on skis.

It helps, of course, that McNab has found some of the best snow left in the valley. And having worked so hard to earn this ride, every turn feels sacred. Does it matter that it lasts only a couple of minutes? Not at all.

The only disappointment comes when we get back to the world of lifts and pistes, and I notice how urgent and impatient the atmosphere is. Everyone seems desperate to get onto the next slope and the next turn, rather than enjoying what they already have. It's the antithesis of what I've just experienced on splits.

Suddenly, I'm desperate to start climbing again.

NEED TO KNOW

Backcountry Intro Course for experienced snowboarders who want to try splitboarding, for £1,235pp; and a five-day Off-Piste Freeride Clinic for £1,095pp (0141 416 3828, mcnabsnowboarding.com).

Collineige has seven nights at the Mazot Les Tines chalet, sleeping four, from £725, self-catering (01483 579242, collineige.com). A week's car hire from Geneva starts at £148 with Carrentals.co.uk. Fly to Geneva with BA, Swiss or easyJet.

Other courses

A Splitboard Intro Week in Chamonix, beginning on March 22, costs £1,399pp, including chalet accommodation (0870 068 7030, rudechalets.com). A seven-night Split'n'Mix in the Portes du Soleil, which blends splitboarding and off-piste boarding, costs £995pp, with accommodation (0844 887 1348, theridersocial.com).



Splitboarding explained

A splitboard is a snowboard that can be split lengthways to create what is, essentially, a pair of touring skis.

The two parts are held together by clips and by the binding system for the boots. Before the start of a climb, the clips are undone, the bindings come off and the board parts. The bindings are then reattached, one on each ski, facing forwards.

Next come the "skins", bristly strips of plastic that are attached to the underside. The bristles point backwards, which means they lie flat against the snow as the ski slides forward, but bite into the slope as you push back.

Extendable walking sticks give the splitboarder stability during the climb.

At the top, the skins come off, the two skis are reconnected and the bindings are attached side on. This takes a few minutes. Then the splitboarder is ready to cash in on all that hard work.

Jones splitboards start at £555 at TSA (snowboard-asylum.com). At Bergzeit.co.uk, a pair of Karakoram Split 30 bindings cost £435.

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