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ISSUE No 85 MARCH 2019 £4.99



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# SPLIT DECISION

Maxwell Roche and Piers Villet shoulder snowboards and voyage to Verbier in search of virgin powder. **They adopt two heavily contrasting methods** of backcountry access and endeavour to uncover which is the better..





**H**uddling hard against the heli-blast, I squint goggleless up towards the Aiguilles Dorées. Its iron-rich, red granite form scratches away at the billowing snow cloud like a clawing beast, revealing a brilliant Byzantine sky above the Mont Blanc Massif. Accelerated breathing, brought about by a sudden spike in altitude and drop in temperature, causes my nose hairs to crackle and fizz ferociously. The welcome and familiar taste of a clean raw mountain wind mingles with exhaust fumes at the back of my throat. As the Eurocopter upends and falls away beyond the precipice, a small measure of calm is restored. Our guide Gilbert pops forth from his temporary snow hole and with heavily frosted eyebrows addresses the crowd: “Nous sommes arrivés, mesdames!”

Heliboarding

“We only allow expert snowboarders in ze helicopteer guys, did you not get ze email?” says Gilbert. My friend Piers and I, both conscientious and pragmatic adventurers, lock anxious eyes across the minibus. “No,” I reply, “but the website said strong intermediates were OK?”. “Not for the group drop, guys,” says Gilbert with a stern look. After an incommensurable silence, he adds, “But I’ll make a special exception today, since conditions are perfect!” I bar my teeth and salute quasi-gratefully, worried Gilbert’s kind exception may very well mean our grizzly end. “OK, harness, beacon, probe, shovel, boards, goggles, helmets, are you all set? C’est parfait, allons-y team two follow me!”

BEFORE ME, BATHED IN BLINDING SUNLIGHT, IS A GIANT SNOW BOWL, SCOOPED LIKE SORBET OUT OF THE MOUNTAINSIDE

The pilot lifts his glasses and winks cheekily as I climb into the cockpit next to him, while Piers and the rest of the team bunch up in the back seats. Seconds later, following a delicate surge of stomachs, we’re suspended high over dark snow-dusted spruce forest, making our whirly way up toward the source of Saleina Glacier, 3,519m high on the Mont Blanc Massif. As I chew the tail end off a Tracker bar and stash the wrapper, my ungloved fingers tingle, the temperate being well into the double negatives. French voices trickle back to me through the gloom. I crank the ratchets on my bindings and start to side-slip my board, following in fresh tracks. Since we’re set to descend the 2,000m to Chanton atop a glacier, Gilbert has instructed us to follow in his tracks at all times. Fortunately, we’ve been equipped with harnesses, rendering us retrievable should a yawning crevasse do us a dastardly disservice. Feeling slightly ill at ease, I load my heel edge and come to a halt inches from what appears to be a near vertical drop; as the gathering wind sweeps heavy clouds asunder, my suspicions are confirmed. Before me, bathed in blinding sunlight, is a giant snow bowl, scooped like sorbet from the mountainside. Gilbert is waiting for me at the bottom. Following broken bones, a year-long remedial period has elapsed since last I set foot on a snowboard, so it is with some trepidation that I spin onto my toes and throw shoulders over the brink.

I catch the group and join the rear ranks for a narrow traverse between rocks below the Aiguilles. We round a rocky escarpment and spill forth from the bottleneck. Blinkered eyes, aimed at the floor in concentration, now rise in relaxation to survey the 300° panorama. Mont Dolent, a notable summit marking the tripoint between Italy, Switzerland and France takes centre stage, ribbons of cloud snag on its zenith like sheep’s wool on a wire fence. I squint in awe, narrowing my optical aperture until the sun becomes a star, and then drop chin to survey the immediate terrain.

Before us stretches the Saleina Glacier, four miles long, wider than 50 pistes and cloaked top to bottom in knee-deep powder snow; a heart-melting prospect indeed, except for one dreadful detail... our route has been torn to smithereens by a succession of skiers and boarders in the days preceding. Disappointment turns to horror as the 20 or so raucous GoPro wielding renegades who accompany us blaze off ahead, shredding up every last remnant of untouched snow. By mid-afternoon, after an enjoyable but by no means perfect day of boarding, we’re safely back with the minibus in Trient, enjoying a small glass of après vin rouge with Gilbert and the Adrenaline Heliski team; our dreams of untracked powder still beyond tangible bounds.

Splitboarding

A far cry from the diamond-encrusted gilets and jacket-wearing bogeyed chihuahuas of Verbier, on the opposite side of the valley, is the contrastingly serene ski area of Bagnes. Nestled alongside the uppermost lift station in Bagnes is the quintessentially Swiss Restaurant de Moay. Wood smoke puffs gently from a solitary chimney on the restaurant’s low projecting roof as Piers and I scooch over from the lift. We lean our boards against the blackened larch facade and climb a trio of icicled stairs to the balcony. Against the far balustrade, behind a cloud of coffee steam and frozen breath, silhouetted against a milky monochromatic morning sky, sits a solitary figure. We walk over to introduce ourselves and, as we do so, I can’t help but note how utterly still and





SOON WE ARE MARCHING  
SINGLE FILE, ENCASED IN  
GREY AND WHITE, MAKING  
STEADY AND SATISFYING  
HEADWAY UPWARDS



peaceful the man looks as he enjoys the silence of the morning amid the elements of his birth. “Bon matin,” he says, as we take up seats around his table. “I’m Christophe Berclaz, your splitboard guide,”... and then with a curious smile, “Va savoir pourquoi!” (“your guess is as good as mine”).

Christophe leads us to the edge of a deserted piste and flashes his palms, bringing us to a halt. “D’accord garçons, now we prepare for the ascent.” At the breakfast table that morning, we’d agreed to follow him to the summit of a mountain named Six Blanc, where, he has vowed, our dreams of carving lines through untouched powder would finally be realised. In the absence of Gilbert and his chopper, today we climb under our own steam, a reality which, after the chaos of the Saleina Glacier, we are both rather relishing.

Prepare to be amazed

Under the close instruction of Christophe, we commence the simple, if a little fiddly, process of preparing our splitboards for the ascent. First, we remove the bindings and set them aside; this allows us to then unclip the boards down the middle, creating as we do so, two separate skis. We then reattach the bindings via a toe clip, one to each ski, facing forwards rather sideways. Finally, we stretch a hairy fabric



called a skin over the bottom of each ski to give us the traction we require to progress up hill. The process takes all of about 15 minutes, but Christophe assures us seasoned splitboarders can do it in five. With the flourish of an orchestral conductor, Christophe signals for us to follow. Soon we are marching single file, encased in grey and white, making steady and satisfying headway skyward.

After three hours, we’re nearing the summit of Six Blanc, its outline eerily backlit like one of Turner’s famous oils, faintly discernible amid the pallid gloom. A furious, ever-strengthening wind has driven and compacted snow up toward the summit cornice. As we traverse to gain our desired approach route, the tough crust makes it increasingly difficult for us to sink our edges and stay upright. The steepening terrain and heightened chance of a sideways slip toward the abyss forces us to abandon skis altogether, strap them to our backs and climb straight up, on all fours, kicking steps as we go. Aerobically challenged for the first time, I focus on my breathing and feel the blood retreat slowly from my snow-sunken fingertips. “Ça te changera les idées,” (“takes your mind off things”) cries Christophe in his idiomatic Swiss fashion from the slopes above. “He’s right,” I think as we negotiate the last few feet to the summit. For the first time since landing in Switzerland, I’m lost. Together with close friends, tussling with the elements, insignificant specs on the mountain, keeper of incredulous souls, just us and our wits, burning calories not fossil fuels, steadfastly seeking powder snow, that ethereal matter; gateway to the most singular of sensations.

Boards rebuilt, back under our feet and pointed down the perfectly powdered mountain, Piers and I wait for the green light. Christophe’s peremptory pole goes up, almost indiscernibly, a long way below. The corners of Piers’s mouth dart towards his ears in merriment. I slap him hard around the head and set off quickly downhill with an excited “Yeeew!”

For the next four hours, we chase Christophe back to Bagnes. As he jumps expertly yet awkwardly from side to side trying to avoid sinking his skis in the deep

snow, we lean back on our boards, forget about edging, and with subtle sweeping motions float weightlessly in his wake. The airy and enlightening sensation is enhanced yet further as we drop down from the higher slopes and bounce across the feather-pillowed floor of the forest. As we pull up under an evergreen, crack the thermos and take a moment of respite, a gentle snow begins to fall. Piers uncorks the flask and the fragrance of roasted beans mixes with earthy larch bark. “Votre santé,” says Christophe as we touch cups and take sips of the warming draught. Muscles aching pleasantly, I struggle to remember a moment of greater contentment. Thanks to Christophe, and the ingenious invention that is the splitboard, we’ve found the ethereal matter we came looking for and surfed its silky surface like never before.

No pain, no gain

Over a fondue later that evening Piers and I come to the conclusion that, despite the fun, thrill and glamorous allure of the whirlybird, the only truly fulfilling way to seek out hidden, boardable, powder-glazed terrain, is under one’s own steam. Helicopters have the capacity to unlock many hours, even days, of perfect snowboarding in a matter of minutes, but it’s almost too easy, not to mention pricey. Furthermore, pain is often in accordance with gain, and any gain obtained via the copter is tainted with guilt, environmental ramifications considered. Given that snowboarders, when descending at high speeds, are inclined to keep their eyes focused on the snow, I think it’s fair to say, making steady progress upwards on foot/ski before the descent, ensures that the beauteous environments within which we undertake our sport, are fully appreciated, and not tragically missed. The journey we found to be as enjoyable as the destination. Vive, la splitboard!

**NEED TO KNOW IF YOU WANT TO GO**  
**To book your own Swiss powder pilgrimage,**  
**see [heliskiing-switzerland.com](http://heliskiing-switzerland.com) and [guideverbier.com](http://guideverbier.com)**