

You Gotta Get Up To Get Down

TW's resident guide breaks down splitboarding and other backcountry transportation.

By John Buffery

Some years ago, I received a phone call from Baet Steiner, a filmmaker shooting a project called *Exit*. Baet asked me if I could guide his crew (including Tex Davenport, Jason Ford, and Craig Kelly) up in the Kluane National Park in Northeastern B.C. For the first time in history, Parks Canada had given our heli team free range to fly an A-Star around this Yukon Park area in search of lines that were not disruptive to the wildlife. I experienced the power of watching professional snowboarders let loose on the most insane terrain imaginable. Admittedly, I felt a tad apprehensive seeing Tex spin off Artic Circle cornices, and Craig and Jason chase each other down huge, 5,000-foot couloirs between crevasses that would have swallowed up entire skyscrapers.

One evening back at the ranch, Craig asked me what I did for a living. I told him I was a guide in the Canadian Rockies at a remote lodge and described how we would tour up over 10,000 feet, look at the views, and then ride back down to the lodge at 6,000 feet. He asked me what I meant by "ride." I told him I'd ripped a snowboard down the middle for climbing randonnee-ski style and had fashioned a way to clamp it together at the top for riding down.

The following winter, Craig tracked me down in my hometown of Nelson, B.C. He'd come to surf the deep, soft snows of the Kootenays along with photographer Gordon Eshom and a Burton prototype splitboard. Those adventurous turns on a real splitboard grew into the most enriched years of my life.



Coast Range, B.C., Canada. PHOTO: Eric Berger

SPLITBOARDING BASICS

- The best choice of transportation in the backcountry depends on your day's objective. If you have a large objective in the Alpine, then a splitboard is the way to go. When the snow is knee-deep, setting a safe splitboard track at a ten-degree angle is more efficient than randonnee-ski touring—mainly because of the larger surface area of the split skis. The wide planks displace more side torque crossing icy slopes. Splitboard crampons also give you even more stability on firm snow.
- When breaking trail, think about sliding your foot forward instead of lifting it on each step. Keep your bindings and boots loose to help facilitate ankle hinging. With each step, swing your hip forward and rock from one side to the other. As you transfer onto your higher foot, straighten your leg out fully and get a micro rest using your skeletal system.
- Kickturns at switchbacks suck. To keep from falling, work your upper ski toward tree wells, stumps, or other natural humps on the slope to get better purchase.
- The second you get to your summit, start assembling your board for the ride down. Carry a small snow scraper in your pocket, keep your bindings out of the snow, and put that sucker together as fast as you can. Craig Kelly could transition to downhill mode faster than most skiers.
- If you're having a hard time with the skins being too sticky, roll them up rather than folding them, and make sure you dry your skins when you get home.
- I always spray my splitboard parts with Pam cooking spray before a trip. Just like all true love, this system is finicky and needs extra attention, but with a little effort and practice, the rewards are bliss.

OTHER BACKCOUNTRY TRANSPORTATION

- **SNOWSHOEING:** If your day's objective involves yo-yoing on shorter slopes, then snowshoes are probably the way to go. Collapsible ski poles help with your balance. My favorite snowshoes have front points toward the toe. Have the person behind you alternate steps and make a flat trail. The biggest hassle I find with this system is having the heavy board on my backpack swinging in the breeze and knocking snow off the trees and down my neck.
- **BOOT-PACKING:** No snowshoes? Believe it or not, there's an easy way to kick up a boot pack. Pick a straight line at 40 degrees and heave your board into the snow with the heels up to pull on as you climb. Keep the steps as wide as your shoulders, and don't lift your foot higher than your knee. Roll your weight side to side with these small steps.
- **SNOWMOBILING:** If you're riding a sled into the mountains; be sure to have your self-rescue equipment on your back and a helmet on your noggin. Get your sled ready the night before, or all those morning stops will push your daylight to night too early.

Get out and ride hard. Ride safe so you can ride tomorrow.