



LET'S SPLIT

Splitboarding is a hybrid of cross-country skiing and snowboarding that gives powderhounds access to untouched backcountry runs and limitless adventure. By **Tim Spicer**

Splitboarding lets you explore terrain beyond the boundaries of the ski resorts.

Opening up virgin, off-piste locations that would normally be out of reach (in some cases even to snowmobiles and helicopters), this new approach to snowboarding is revolutionising the way we ride. What was previously unattainable is now within reach.

"These days, a lift pass in Australia costs over \$100 a day, and you're not guaranteed access to the entire mountain," says Adam West, owner of FirstLight Snowboards, a splitboarding adventure company based in Sydney, NSW. "Runs are sometimes closed due to poor cover, or lifts are on hold due to wind," he says. "With splitboarding, the only limiting factor is you."

What is splitboarding?

This growing sport, pioneered by US snowboarder Jeremy Jones, is an amalgamation of skiing and snowboarding that leaves crowds

behind and heads into the wild for something considerably more adventurous. And all it takes is a simple bit of customisation.

Specialists divide a normal snowboard lengthwise down the middle, then adapt snowboard bindings so they can be switched into front-facing ski bindings. This means you can snowboard downhill, then traverse cross-country and uphill using the skis.

When riding on the snowboard, the skis are held together by the normal snowboard bindings, which attach to special base plates. The plates fasten across both halves of the board and are secured by a pin. There are also hooks on the nose and tail to stop the ends flapping, and across the midsection to stop longitudinal movement. When you want to ski uphill, you just pull the pin and hooks from the bindings and slide the skis apart.

And for extra traction, you stick

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grippy fur skins along the bottom of each ski. Like a dog's fur, it's smooth one way and resistant the other, allowing forward movement, but reducing backwards slip, so you can ascend hills with relative ease.

Where can I do a trip?

FirstLight Snowboards organise splitboarding adventures out of Sydney to Jindabyne, where the expeditions begin. Most trips last three days and two nights, with the nights spent camping out under the stars. You'll build a fire, cook up



Split the board in half and you've got a pair of skis.

dinner and crack open a beer. And with a maximum of four people allowed on each trip, it's a great chance to bond with mates on a proper adventure.

Jindabyne makes a good base, as it gives the option of both the Perisher/Guthega and Thredbo areas. FirstLight are one of the only touring companies in Australia that offers purely splitboarding tours, but skiers are welcome to tag along too.

The night before the trip, a safety briefing is held in Jindabyne to evaluate each rider's ability and the weather forecast. A route is then mapped out for the following days and gear is divvied out. This includes a splitboard, skins, a backpack, poles, a shovel, probe, transceiver, spare thermals, food and water. Riders can use either normal snowboard boots or Alpine touring boots. Most people stick with normal resort boots, but Alpine boots are better suited to boot-packing up steeper sections.

Setting off early, you will traverse New South Wales' virgin hinterland before tackling the slopes of either Mt Twynam, Mt Anderson, Blue Lake, Rams head or Mt Anton – and carving fresh tracks downhill. These backcountry trips can ascend as high as Mt Kosciuszko (2228 metres), Australia's highest peak, but the boarding there isn't too flash. The Main range offers the most options in Australia, with Mt Twynam and the surrounding areas offering the longest runs.

How much experience do I need?

"As long as you can ride from top to bottom in the resorts on the majority of the runs, you're well equipped for

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the back country in terms of the ability required in Australia," says West. "The main requirement is good aerobic fitness."

Splitboarding in Australia isn't that technical compared to other countries, and no mountaineering or climbing experience is necessary. Guides teach basic navigation techniques using maps, compasses and planning with a GPS. There is also an introduction to using transceivers before leaving, then a lunchtime refresher in the backcountry using a hidden beacon.

You'll be taught uphill movement techniques, how to choose a line when ascending a mountain and how to dismantle and reattach your



Ripping up flawless backcountry snow.

splitboard. Then, it's all about making fresh tracks on the descent. Although Australia doesn't offer the world's best snow, you will get knee-deep powder most days and, when riding low enough, there are some seriously good tree runs.

FirstLight trips run for three days and two nights, and cost \$400 per person, for a group of three, and \$100 extra per person per day. Splitboard hire is \$50 a day. Longer excursions are available, but more planning is required, taking into account weather and extra supplies. firstlightsnowboards.com.au



Camping out overnight in the Snowies.

SPLITBOARDING GEAR

If you already have your own snowboard, you can have it split and fitted with the necessary hardware and bindings for \$950. Climbing skins (\$195) and collapsible poles (\$95) are essential, and an avalanche probe (\$75), shovel (\$60) and transceiver (\$300) should be carried in a backpack at all times. In total, it's a fair investment, but cheaper than a season pass and new board. firstlightsnowboards.com.au



Climbing skins, \$195



Avalanche probe, \$75



Shovel, \$60

Collapsible poles, \$95