

SPLIT PERSONALITY

SEEKING POWDER REWARDS IN THE DOLOMITES

After scoping Italy's famous Three Peaks the previous summer, photographer Dan Milner could see they had potential. With three top riders in tow, he returned the following winter to get the goods – by any means necessary.



shuffling..."
Forrest
ing his FAO



Patience is key when shuffling, and on a splitboard there is a lot of shuffling to be done. You don't get anywhere fast. The last time I ventured along this same ridge there was a bike tyre ahead of me, twisting back and forth as I hammered sinuous singletrack trail. The adrenaline hit of riding a rock-strewn path is now a distant memory, but you've got to weigh up the pros and cons. The last time I traversed this ridge, there weren't cornices to negotiate and exposed faces to cross. Nor was there almost a metre of fresh snow to push through. I might have railed some sweet bends in the trail, but I didn't drop into any couloirs and shred them at Mach-1 from top to bottom. One thing remains constant though: the scenery. I'm shuffling through one of the most incredible landscapes I've ever laid eyes on: the Dolomites' Tre Cime (Three Peaks) National Park. Luckily for me, shuffling is just the right pace at which to take it all in.

It's the Tre Cime's pointy peaks, thrusting upwards to almost 3000 metres, that have lured me back to this zone with my splitboard; landscapes like this hold a certain magnetism. It's almost inexplicable – they are, after all, just big, useless lumps of rock – but while shooting here for The North Face during one of their gruelling 96-kilometre Ultra-Trail running marathons, the jaw-dropping beauty of the Tre Cime hit me for six. I came back with my bike and, while riding the trails nearby, peered at the surrounding slopes through calculating snowboarder's eyes. And bang! Here I am, puffing my way across a ridge in the company of a handful of other splitboarders, seeking the rewards of our labours among the bowls and chutes of some prime Italian backcountry real estate. But such rewards aren't easily won.

Rewind a few days and you'll find me half way down a snow-filled gully, hiding from the police. A dense stand of fir trees makes it easy to escape. Nearby I can make out the huddled forms of American shredders Forrest Shearer and Blair Habenicht, along with Italian Luca Pandolfi.



o 'split'...





“KICKING STEPS INTO A NEAR-VERTICAL
SNOW-STUFFED CHUTE ABOVE A GAPING VOID
TAKES A SPECIAL KIND OF MENTALITY, OR
MAYBE AN ITALIAN PASSPORT”

We're good at keeping still. The cops give up and are gone in a puff or snowmobile fumes. It seems they don't like you going off-piste in Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Cortina is just one of Italy's ski resorts. Like all the others it's crammed with on-slope restaurants each marooned in a sea of deckchairs, themselves occupied by leathery-skinned women who have long given up hope of dodging skin cancer. This

is skiing in Italy: sun loungers and macchiato. You don't go off-piste. Yet only a stone's throw from the Tre Cime park, Cortina earned legendary status among snowboarders as its many steep, unforgiving couloirs took a starring role in the early snowboard flicks. Unfortunately the resort can't decide if it likes you to enjoy its powder or not, leaving us like kids with Attention Deficit Disorder let loose in a Toys-R-Us. We watch as a couple of other shredders drop a line in bounds, sparking the immediate interest of the piste police. They crank up their snowmobile and give chase. Meanwhile, take a lift and drop off the backside of the Cristallo resort area – something that would have any US resort filing law suits – and you're welcome to shred as much pow as you want. Which is lucky, as there is a lot to shred.

Our arrival in the Dolomites is met by three days of continuous snow. We have an agenda of sorts: to hit Cortina, smash out some of its legendary couloirs as a warm-up and then head to the backcountry on the splitboards. At the back of my mind hovers the Tre Cime park, and I'm eager to see if all that terrain I saw from the bike would actually translate into epic riding now that the snow has fallen.

For now, though, the Tre Cime can wait; we have couloirs to ride. We grab the Forcella Staunies chairlift to its top station at





"You prat, I threw the GoPro right to your hands!"



A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPLITBOARDING

In skiing's earliest days, the Scandanavian pioneers would attach seal skins to the bottom of their planks in order to trek uphill with relative ease. 'Ski touring' in this manner is still done today, albeit with synthetic materials. For snowboarders, the only option at first was to put their boards on their backs and use snowshoes or short 'approach skis' to access the backcountry. Eventually they realised that splitting their board into two skis for the hike was much easier. Not only did it mean less kit to carry, it was also a far more efficient way of getting through the deep stuff. Utah legend Brett 'Cowboy' Kobernik is generally credited with creating the first prototype in his basement while nursing an injury in 1991. Once Mark Wariakois of Voile saw it, the two teamed up to refine the idea and released the Voile DIY Split Kit in 1994, with factory-made models not far behind. The wider snowboard world was slow to catch on, mainly due to the fact that it was still a very niche market. Dave Downing worked with Burton in the late 1990s to develop the technology, and even filmed his entire part in Standard Films' *TB9* on a Burton Custom splitboard. However, sales were sluggish and the project was cancelled. Things have picked up recently, though, as the park rats of the '80s and '90s have grown older and shifted their focus to the search for powder. Jeremy Jones' series of films (*Deeper*, *Further* and the forthcoming *Higher*) have played no small part; strictly a heli-and-snowcat-free zone, the movies have showcased the splitboard's ability to access some of the gnarliest lines ever ridden. Most of the major manufacturers now offer a range of splitboards, and conversion kits are still available if you'd rather make your own. Furthermore, companies like Stentiford Snowboarding offer bespoke splitboarding courses in backcountry Meccas like Chamonix. Put simply, if you want to "earn your turns", it's never been a better time.



Well won gets the

2900m, squinting into the grey void through horizontally blown snow. We cower behind a rime-encrusted concrete building that sports a thermometer. It reads -10C. The wind is making it feel more like -20C. The blizzard that has enveloped us is shrouding the nearby ridgeline. I have no idea of what's around us. Luckily we have along an Italian in tow, who knows Cortina well.

Luca, a Jones snowboard rider whose hands are more familiar with ice axes than lift passes, soon has us scaling a precarious set of stairs to the side of the lift station. They cling to the exposed, vertical rock face, defying gravity, more via-ferrata than footpath, and lead to a narrow, snow-choked rock chimney. It's not far away, but by the time I reach the bottom of this last steep boot pack I'm questioning what we're doing. Luckily for me Luca, already reaching the top and breaking out into the full force of the storm, has decided to retreat. The whiteout makes finding our planned couloir a distinctly dodgy affair. I'm happy with his decision, as are the rest of the group by the look of it. Kicking steps into a near vertical snow stuffed chute above a gaping void takes a special kind of mentality, or maybe an Italian passport.

Our retreat is not in vain. It brings us back to the lift station and to the entrance of Cortina's most infamous descents, the North Staunies couloir; a 700m, 35-degree straight pitch. Under the enthusiastic cheers of the lifties we slide into the couloir one by one, and instantly the howling wind and blowing snow is gone. In the shelter of the narrow chute, away from the finger-biting cold and the blinding spindrift, we each get to find our focus.

The next day, with a couple of couloirs ticked off and the storm beginning to break, we turn our attention to playing in-bounds. The sun is warming the snowpack and we need to let it settle. We traverse

"IT'S A SCHIZOPHRENIC EXPERIENCE, A MIX OF POWDER ROOSTERS AND FRUSTRATING THIGH-DEEP SNOW WADING EXERTIONS AROUND RIVER CANYONS"





“REWIND A FEW DAYS AND YOU’LL FIND
ME HALF WAY DOWN A SNOW-FILLED GULLY,
HIDING FROM THE POLICE”



from the chairlift and duck into dense tree runs to dodge unwanted attention from the cops. We find a roller that gives Blair some decent airtime, and Forrest picks out an ambitious spine line. It’s his first taste of Dolomite limestone and, despite the 90cm of new snow, it doesn’t take him long to uncover some sharp rock. Snagging his base halfway down the spine, he pulls it together and narrowly escapes a headfirst fall down some spiky rock. It’s time to head out of the resort. The Tre Cime are calling.

In summer this World Heritage site is festooned with welcoming refuges, but winter is a different story. Snow covers the access road up to the Auronzo refuge and its carpark. In summer, it’s here that coaches spew out cargoes of camera-touting tourists to mill about snapping pictures that will fill a thousand family albums. It’s here that I remember the feeling of fulfilment after having ridden and carried my bike for five hours up the 1500m climb from Auronzo town far below on the valley floor. This time the pain will be eased.

We check into Chalet Lago Antorno refuge, the single option if you want to tour into the Tre Cime park in winter. It’s a basic set up, with bathrooms that are squeezed into modified cupboards. But it has beds and food, serves wine by the litre, and to our surprise, a snowmobile shuttle service up to the Tre Cime park. We book places for the next morning.

The refuge’s snowmobiles are like its bathrooms – past their prime – but it beats skinning up. Over the last few days we’ve



"Shuffle
shuffle!"

hiked and skinned to various backcountry couloirs, dropped epic descents to battle our way out through dense forest, and across streams to rejoin our vehicles at the roadside. So this time we're all happy to let the sleds take the strain. We climb into a little trailer hooked onto the back of a snowmobile and are soon whizzing past assorted holidaymakers, hiking the track with sledges in tow.

At the Auronzo Refuge car park we step onto our splitboards and head across the ridge towards the bowls that caught my eye only a year before. The scale of our surroundings is hard to fathom and we struggle to calculate how long it will take to reach any of the faces or couloirs that split and separate the clustered peaks. The scene is breathtaking. Before us is a sea of peaks so pointy they could be lifted straight from the pages of a fairy tale. Ask a kid to draw a mountain, and they will scribble the peaks of the Cadini di Misurina. It's possible that Gollum lives here.

We have ambitions to tour right out to the back wall of this play arena, but already time is against us. Frustration rises for a moment, but is quelled within minutes. As we skin onwards along the ridge we discover a set of spines that, in true Dolomite fashion, will deliver both powder rewards and a scare or two. Pandolfi drops first, slashing wide onto the exposed flank of a tight couloir before straight-lining through its exit. Blair finds his own solace in an open powder field that feeds into a narrow cut of rock, an uncompromising exit for his lazy powder turns. He nails it without hesitating. And then Forrest rides into his line, another challenging spine that, from where I am shooting, seems almost over-vert. It all looks good for a moment, but the Dolomite limestone has him firmly in its sights, again. He snags and almost goes over the bars, recovering and riding down the spine by the skin of his teeth. I realise I haven't breathed for a minute.

Hours later we'll be slashing our way back down the mountainside, heading towards the long cat track exit back to our refuge. Like any other day of the trip, it's a schizophrenic experience, a mix of powder

"WE DISCOVER A SET OF SPINES THAT, IN TRUE DOLOMITE STYLE, WILL DELIVER BOTH POWDER REWARDS AND A SCARE OR TWO"



roosters and frustrating thigh-deep snow wading exertions around river canyons. When it's dark, we'll raise a glass of wine, not caring about the leaky bathrooms or creaky beds above our heads, thankful that we've made it this far. It's been emotional, a heady cocktail of near-miss adrenaline shots blended with the peaceful, soul-finding pace of splitboarding. That's the Dolomites, it seems; a place of hard earned rewards whether it's on a bike, or shuffling. Shuffling. Shuffling. 🍷