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Uphill IS THE NEW downhill

Alpine touring, ski mountaineering, telemark, randonee, split-boarding — these sports are now accessible to anyone willing to work for their turns

by AARON H. BIBLE

While the sports of uphill skiing, ski mountaineering, alpine touring and off-piste skiing have been booming in Europe for decades, it's safe to say the adrenaline-fueled activities are experiencing a true renaissance in North America.

Some say it's the lighter gear: better touring-enabled bindings, lightweight hike-able ski boots, lighter weight and more versatile skis. Let's jump right into what is commonly referred to as AT, randonee or alpine touring. Split-boarding, of course, has progressed rapidly in the past several seasons, allowing snowboarders to access off-piste (off area or ungroomed) riding without having to use snowshoes, which are slow and don't slide downhill. Not to say snowshoeing isn't a completely valid way to access the backcountry, but let's stick to snow sliding for now.

"Don't be afraid to ski up hill," said Eric Henderson, Dynafit communications manager, Boulder. "If you like hiking, you will love Ski Mo or AT skiing. Plus the down is that much better and easier on your body."

The best advice for entering these sports is to connect with experienced ski mountaineers who can help show you the way. Sure, they might leave you in the dust or make you carry their thermos at first, but eventually you'll earn your keep. Take as many avalanche-awareness classes as possible so you can contribute to snowpack study and wise decision-making. Beware the group mentality (be prepared to do your own avalanche assessment), don't be a Go-Pro hero, and always ski with at least one experienced partner.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

In addition to safety equipment and the proper apparel, uphill skiing requires two things: a binding with a releasable heel for climbing and a pair of skins for the bottom of your skis.

Skins literally have their roots in horse and cattle hides, whose hair when laid backwards against the snow provides an amazing amount of traction for climbing. Today's skins aren't much different, although they are made from various synthetics instead of hair and leather. Modern skins use a few different reusable glue formulas to adhere to the bottoms of skis. Some of these glues work better than others but perform best when kept warm next to your body between uses. You'll have to experiment and see what your local retailer recommends for your particular skis. Some skins are cut-to-fit, and other brands are paired with specific ski models for an exact fit.

Binding options will be intimidating at first, and everyone has their opinion. When it comes to alpine-touring bindings, there are two general types: tech and step-in (ISO alpine norm). Tech bindings were pioneered by Dynafit and are the lightest weight, using a sophisticated pin tension system in front with a releasable heel. Alpine-style step-in touring bindings use your regular alpine boot soles with a wide variety of releasable plate systems to free the heel. These are more intuitive for the beginner, who will often upgrade to tech bindings and lighter boots after a few seasons. There's a major trend right now in alpine boots toward tech-binding

GET THE GEAR

For an overview of some of this year's hottest alpine-touring gear, see High Gear on page 6.