

Backcountry grooves

English expat Jason Savidge organises backcountry trips for skiers and boarders. Here, Jason – an experienced snowboarder – leaves the marked piste and takes us on a tour of some of Graubünden's best freeride areas.

By Jason Savidge |

My first attempt at snowboarding ended up with me snapping my knee joint while on the kids lift! Upon regaining my fitness, I decided to stick to skiing since I'd done that for the past seven years without injury.

But I was still a typical British skier – all speed and no style – with only the briefest, embarrassing foray off piste.

Having lived in Switzerland since 1990 I figured that I should be gracefully cruising in the powder as the locals do. Fortunately during the 1998-99 winter season it snowed so much that the alpine village where I live in Graubünden was cut off from the outside world. The temptation to have one more attempt on a snowboard proved to be the start of an ongoing love affair with the mountains.

Suddenly it wasn't just about racing down the pistes, but ditching the crowds and heading deep into the backcountry to experience the beauty and serenity of unspoiled nature.

Trail blazing

Eight years later I'm standing at Arosa's Hornli ready to drop into the 'Safari Tour' – a backcountry ski/snowboarding tour in Graubünden – that links Arosa with Lenzerheide via Tschierschen. The purchase of the Safari Pass allows us to use the ski

lifts in the three resorts but a few short hikes are required to get away from the pistes and to reach the powder fields.

A cloudless, crisp March day greeted our small group of three snowboarders and one skier. A fresh 20 centimetres of snow the night before had covered any existing tracks so the first lines were ours and each turn left a spray of snow behind us. The descent took us through rolling meadows and on down the steeper notorious 'Geist hang'. Then a long path through the conifer forests emptied us into the small resort of Tschierschen.

Stunning panoramic views of the Schanfigg valley greeted us as we took the lifts up Gurgelletsch.

From the top of the lift, a 20-minute hike to the summit of Gurgelletsch left a few of us wheezing as knee-high snow at 2,700 metres on a steep incline proved that we were on the wrong side of 30!

Little did we know then that later in the summer of 2007, the Graubünden bear would make this same trek as he looked down on the civilisation of Chur and the Rhine Valley. No wonder he turned on his tracks and returned towards the wilder Albulapass and Italy.

From the summit, sharp eyes spotted a golden eagle soaring on the morning thermal and a family of steinbock watched us as



we silently blended into the landscape leaving only tracks behind.

The north-facing saddle of Gurgelletsch, high above Chur, lies in an avalanche corridor where it pays to be cautious. But on this particular day nothing moved and we continued safely on to flatter fields and winding paths down to the village of Parpan.

A final ride on Lenzerheide ski lifts brought us to the summit of the Rothorn and the start of our final descent, “Sanaspans” to Lenzerheide village.

On selecting a safe route into the huge bowl on the south side of the Rothorn, we cruised to a stop to take in the breathtaking scenery that surrounded us: a horseshoe of connecting peaks with steep gullies running down their sides enveloped by complete silence.

As we ended the day with a descent through the forests to Lenzerheide and some après ski, we were left with weary legs but a happy heart and a clear head for days to follow.

Access by helicopter

A month later in April 2007 we arrived early at Air Grischas Helibase at Tavanasa in Graubünden. This time we were four experienced snowboarders, with our mountain guide, Paul, on skis.

After a safety briefing and a browse over the map with regards to our planned route, the helicopter reversed vertically out from the narrow landing pad, turned and headed west over the Todi Massiv to land on the Hufi Glacier at just over 3,000

metres.

Following closely in our guide’s tracks to avoid falling into a hidden crevasse, we boarded slowly over the flattish higher section of the glacier. Towards Zurich in the north lay a huge cloudbank that came all the way up to the Linthal and Glarus region.

Fortunately, we were in dazzling sunshine and enjoying the virgin carpet of a fresh snowfall.

After a few kilometres the gradient steepened to reveal a wide gorge and seemingly endless rolling powder fields. Now out of the danger zone we could ride where we liked with the group jumping off natural kickers and carving out big powder turns.

The lower we went the heavier the snow became, so we were relieved to see the helicopter waiting for us in the valley below.

A quick, breathtaking taxi flight back up over the crevasses and blue iced seracs delivered us near the entrance of the Russein Valley and a perfect, feather-light landing on a narrow ridge. Contrary to popular belief there is no jumping out of the helicopter! Far from it, as the safety standards are of the highest level and helicopters can only land at permitted landing points through out Switzerland.

Holding on to our boards, beanies and backpacks as the downdraft of the rotor blades stirred up a mini-blizzard, the helicopter soared away leaving us with a view of a thousand peaks and the sound of silence.

The high alpine plateau was ‘straight lined’ as we boarded flat out to try and keep up with our guide before assembling above a steep section which we cautiously descended one at a time.

As the Russein Valley is south-facing it was necessary to be out of the high-sided valley before the warmth of the sun triggered any afternoon avalanches, which we easily managed to do.



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Then we picnicked by a stream on the valley floor some kilometres further on.

As we approached the tree line we rounded the corner on our path to suddenly find that we had run out of snow. It was time to strip down to t-shirts and carry the boards. After all it was spring and we were below 1,500 metres. My knee did not appreciate the walk, but at least I had finally been heliboarding.

I would highly recommend a day in the Swiss wilds for any skiers or snowboarders with a few weeks experience in riding off-piste terrain.



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The golden rules of freeriding

It has to be stressed that skiing and snowboarding off the marked pistes is dangerous and the threat of avalanches is real. Be sure to complete a mountain safety/avalanche awareness course. Never go off piste without a transceiver and backpack containing a shovel and probe. Hire a guide and never freeride alone. Always check the National Avalanche Bulletin at www.slf.ch.

Also good to know:

- Do not leave the marked pistes on avalanche bulletin level 4 or 5, which indicate high or extreme danger of avalanches
- Avoid slopes over 30 degrees where possible
- Avoid windblown, north-facing, shady slopes
- Be geographically aware of your location in the event of calling the mountain rescue services
- Carry a mobile phone (switched off) to use in the event of an emergency. REGA's number is 1414.
- Complete all springtime tours and freeriding by lunchtime due to the afternoon heat

With luck and the right equipment, you could actually survive an avalanche. The mountain sports company Black Diamond has introduced 'the AvaLung' to the European market, which allows a buried avalanche victim to breathe under the snow while awaiting rescue.

Joining REGA – the Swiss helicopter mountain rescue service – for a minimum donation of SFr 30 is the final 'must' before heading off into the backcountry terrain.

Recommended websites

The Safari Tour:

www.arosa.ch
www.schanfigg-tourismus.ch
www.lenzerheide.com
www.truevalues.ch
www.abcarosa.ch

Heliskiing/Heliboarding in Switzerland:

www.airgrischa.ch
www.helibernina.ch
www.bohag.ch
www.heligotthard.ch
www.suddenrush.com
www.heliservice.ch

Mountain guides & tour experts:

www.swissrockguides.com
www.4000plus.ch
www.alpventura.ch
www.swissalpineguides.ch
www.davosdreams.com

Jason Savidge worked as a professional DJ around Switzerland in the 90s and in 2002 founded Snowmotions – the specialists in tailor-made Swiss ski and snowboard holidays.
www.snowmotions.com