



# SPLITBOARDING FOX GLACIER

Words and Images by Colin Boyd

Fox Glacier is a small town on the West Coast of New Zealand nestled between the Tasman Sea and some of the highest alpine peaks of the Southern Alps. Because the glaciers flow so close to sea level there is supreme access to the alpine terrain, which is just a short and scenic chopper ride away.

While the windy and claggy weather sorted itself out up top, we consumed coffees, checked weather charts, fired off emails, packed and repacked the bags ensuring nothing would be left behind. When we got the call that it was on, the pace picked up as all the moving pieces began spinning in sync like chopper blades. The heli pad was alive with another group already harnessed and booted up – clearly they knew what they were up to. In bare feet and with gear all over the place, we must have looked like a bit of a junk show, but were soon loaded up into both choppers and hovering above the West Coast rain forest ascending into alpine glacial territory. With a smirk as wide as the cirque below, my first chopper ride was just as I had imagined, though when we came to land beside Pioneer Hut,

it became clear the load was too heavy for the wind and flat light, lodging my stomach in my throat with each g-force turn.

After a quick re-shuffle of the crew further down the glacier, we were able to make the drop off with a lighter load at our new home base, Pioneer Hut. The professionally guided group in front of us roped up on their way from the drop zone to the hut; I took this to mean that the crevasses lurking below the snowy surface may be more menacing than originally anticipated. After settling in and heating our first brew we headed out on an evening tour to survey the area. This provided a good chance to test the switch stance splitboard I was borrowing [cheers Luke] and sample the snow conditions, which were rapidly changing to ice.

The first evening was full of banter with the guides of the other group, Gary Kuhns and Jim Blythe, both legends in their own respect. Gary had taught my Avalanche Stage 1 course the year prior and is regarded as one of NZ's most active ski mountaineers. Jim has carved out a niche guiding clients to the



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*"It was instantly clear upon arrival that we were far from help and mistakes could turn into critical problems within seconds."*

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The following days were spent touring the glaciers with friends Andy Lagan and Lachlan Humphreys on hard icy snowpack. Andy's long term experience in the French Alps was critical to keeping us safe and he literally showed us the ropes on glacial hauling techniques, roping up, knots and best practice travel techniques. It was instantly clear upon arrival

that we were far from help and mistakes could turn into critical problems within seconds. Having never been on a glacial mission with these guys before, the trip tested our ability to navigate the terrain of each other's minds while sliding through couloirs and around bottomless crevasses.

One of the major reasons I made the effort to get to the glacier was to ride the biggest and steepest lines of my season, no matter what the conditions



were. I didn't head out with the thought of putting anyone's safety at risk, including my own, but I also didn't go there to passively observe what may have been some of the best lines of my year. This is where I discovered that perhaps we were not all on the same page and it called into question my lack of participation in pre-trip objective planning. Rather than charge off into the unknown, potentially jeopardizing safety and new found friendships, I accepted their wisdom, erring on the side of safety with a mellow approach to the terrain on tap, soaking it all in for another time.



The town of Fox Glacier is 3 hours from Wanaka and the helis are easy to book. Within 15 minutes you'll be on snow waving your pilot goodbye, but make sure to book your spots in the huts as they are limited. Remember, this is big mountain glacial terrain exposed to extreme weather so know your shit - first aid, avalanche, ropes and glacial travel knowledge is essential. Stir it up!