



Nomads of the wind !

Snowkite touring in the mountains of Norway

Snowkiting, a secret sport ?

Whilst kitesurfing dominates beaches all around the world, its mountain counterpart, snowkiting, remains a relatively unknown activity, practiced by a small circle of pioneers. Why is that ? Easy accessibility to the sea could be a valid explanation, but other reasons have to be considered ...

In snowkiting, it's natural, although not imperative, to go beyond the limits of a few « conventional » spots and explore the mountain surroundings.

Such a practice requires a detailed understanding of the local aerology together with knowledge of the winter mountain playground. A set of skills that a practitioner can only accumulate through experimentation and experience. But this lengthy acquisition process can be a barrier for those who only partake occasionally.

Yet the potential of this recent discipline is huge, and every year it shows a further evolution pushing its boundaries more. For example, « kite-mountaineering » is now becoming a reality : narrow corridors and 45° sloping faces are now being ridden up by snowkiters. But more than that, it's the number of summits that were in the past only the playground of « randonnée » skiers and are now accessible by snowkiters that best express the potential of this discipline. We are here in the « snowkite touring » or « mountaineering snowkite » world...

The Alps are much better than one can imagine for these games of summits riding up and mountain exploring. But in Europe, one destination certainly stands out thanks to its potential : NORWAY.

Snowkite paradise !

Norway is probably the best place in Europe to practice snowkiting : beyond the forest boundary, mountains and snow-covered plateaus spread almost over infinite spaces.

The Hardangervidda plateaus, in the south of the country, have earned international renown, because they are easy to access and open to all winds. Perhaps also because there is an annual long distance kite race (the Ragnarok) with riders from all around Europe.

However, one thing will always surprise me considering the potential offered by the terrain : even though there are more and more touring snowkite trips (day or multi-day), the majority of participants remain on conventional spots and use LEI (inflated) kites : the spirit of this practice seems much more akin with kitesurfing than mountain kite ... It's therefore funny to note that the evolution of the snowkiting practice seems more advanced in the Alps, even though at first sight, the terrain seems less favourable...

But Norway does not stop at the Hardanger plateaus. You have to know how to get off the beaten track ! The possibilities can be much more interesting elsewhere, especially in the more mountainous areas...

I have been going to the south of Norway for a long time, and I see in the unknown massifs of Setesdal Vesthei and Ryfylkeheiane the ideal compromise for a practice of snowkite touring, while keeping a resolutely « mountain » approach. The terrain is complex and « unstructured ». It's very simple : here nothing is flat - except the hundreds of small glacial lakes that occupy ancient glacial umbilics ! On the other hand, the mountains have moderate vertical gradients that don't totally block the wind ...





New deal...

Previously, we had snowkited plateaus and mountains of the south of this country in various differing styles, which ranged from a few hours to two weeks self-sufficient trips, with winter camping equipment and food carried in pulks (sledges that the rider pulls behind him).

But this time, the complex orography of the areas that we proposed to visit imposed new rules. For the first time, we tried a « nomad » trip without pulks in order to be freer in our movements and explorations. « To go everywhere », to be able to cross all the types of terrain on our route, not to be limited to pass only by the « weak » points of the valleys, combs, and lakes. On the contrary, be able to climb right up the slopes, to get out of combs and gullies, to cross steep ridges, to weave in and out of rocks, to flirt with the huge cornices that are numerous, becomes both a goal and an obligation.

In short, we play with the relief as we do « at home », during our alpine sessions. The distinction being that we move, every day from point A to B. Of course, for this we rely on the excellent network of cabins that the Norwegians have built in these mountains.

What did we put in our backpacks ?

Light ! From the beginning this was the raison d'être of this trip. Even though the idea was to sleep as much as possible in the cabins, we didn't want to compromise on safety. Bivouac equipment, even minimalist (snow shovel, sleeping bag, floor mats, few warm clothes, mini gas cartridge, mini-pot, mini-stove and a little toothbrush), is essential for security. In these mountains, when an incident occurs, reaching a valley, or even the nearest cabin, can be complicated. To be able to protect ourselves from cold during an improvised bivouac seemed to us an obligation - at least morally so.

So to keep freedom of choice on the various possible route options was written into the DNA of our project. Not to be forced to follow the most direct route between two cabins, on the contrary, to be able to move away if the wind or the will pushed us, was a fundamental principle that we did not want to deviate from.

But by taking the decision to be able to be unshackled from taking these direct routes between cabins and thus « freeing » the route of too many restrictions, and thus potentially making it more interesting or more in line with the encountered wind directions, then the risk of being too far away from the nearest cabin became significant. Trying to dig a snow hole without the right equipment was an experience to probably avoid.

At the start, we imagined we could go with backpacks weighing a dozen or so kilos - we are always too optimistic when we plan a trip sat at the desk. The scales quickly rose to fifteen when we began to do serious calculations, and on the day of departure, after having sifted their contents many times, the bags weighed between 18 and 20 kilos ...

“forget light” they say !!

Planning strategy

Ah ha, our good joke ! We had dared to give our concept of a light snowkite trip the pretentious name of « warrior kiting ». Because we had imagined that we could spend one or more nights in the depths of a snow hole hastily dug at the evening of an epic kite or no-wind...

But when one has sampled the comfort of the Norwegian cabins, would a night in a snow hole seem so attractive ? The minimalism of our bivouac equipment left no doubt that a night outside would be much longer than it would be comfortable...

What we found when we were there was a certain cautiousness pushed us to compromise with our big ideas and starting theories. It became obvious that we would have to « pay the price » if we spent a night in the snow ... To avoid this, we gradually resigned ourselves (more than we had imagined at first) to stick to a more or less programmed itinerary. Obviously, going down that route, we lost in freedom what we earned in comfort ...



After time and reflection, the modus operandi, which we will utilise in future trips, is certainly to lighten again and again (by reducing further the bivouac equipment to the strictly necessary for « survival »). While deliberately relying on the cabins network the distances between them can always be covered in 7 or 8 hours of skiing. Apart from a serious accident, that would totally immobilise us and then force us to manage a real crisis, these distances are achievable as long as we are prepared for progression in these surroundings in all conditions - including the worst ...

It might even be interesting to push the reasoning to define a fixed radius around each cabin in which we would be sure to be able to retreat to, even if it's necessary to walk part of the night for it. The transfer of these areas onto a map would allow us to delimit the areas too far from the cabins (like the gaps on a Venn diagram) - and thus determine the snowkiting no-go areas.

Thus lightened, there would be even more mobility, and thus another gain of freedom ...

Limitations of the trip...

They exist, of course. The first of these is aerology : the wind is a complex element, uncertain, fluctuating, transient, indecisive, inconsistent, capricious, unstable, versatile ... Well, in short, never guaranteed!

The second is weather conditions in general : the good weather is not what best characterises these territories. We must therefore acknowledge that the game can become complex, even sometimes not suitable for kite progression...

The third is the relief. If it is distinct enough then progression comes to a stop.

And finally, more localised and predictable, is the presence of vegetation.

In most cases, it's the combination of these constraints that leads to an inability to progress with kites. For example, a headwind is not in itself a determinant factor of an inability to progress, but it becomes so in very bumpy terrain because it's then incompatible with an effective upwind technique – particularly on a whole day's stage. The same goes for the lack of visibility (« white out ») : if GPS progression is not technically a limiting factor, the difficulty of understanding the terrain and anticipating our trajectories is more so. Because on difficult ground where the exploitation of sketchy winds already reach a critical threshold, the absence of visibility dulls our abilities to detect obstacles and make strategic bypass choices (small cliffs, large snow ridges, steep slopes, deep coombs and canyons, there are many). To progress in snowkiting without visibility is like a game of Russian roulette that we don't want to play too often...

To start a trip through relief like this we have to predispose ourselves to the fact that some days will not lend themselves to kiting and to ensure regular progress the climbing skins will need to be utilised.

This is what we did on stages 3 & 5, and partly on the 4th. Mainly because of headwinds, obligatory crossing points, wooded areas, or in deep powder snow in which we waded like wild boar without seeing further than ten metres ... But that's part of the adventure !

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With the kind help of Bruce Corrie for the translation.

I propose to complete this article by recounting in a few short chapters [which could be integrated in the main text as inserts] the most epic moments of our adventure ... + a short insert about the kites we used.



12 days of snowkite touring trip

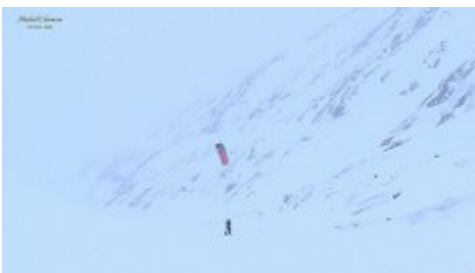
Days 1 & 2:

For a few days we had been looking at the forecasts. No truly dominant wind direction in this area, the choice of the trip direction must be decided according to the current weather situation. East winds tempt us to begin the trip at Hovden village, upstream of the river Otra, north-east of Setesdalsheiane mountains. We quickly reach the "plateau", then the Sloaros and Holmavatnhytta cabins, in already very hilly terrain, which a particularly dull greyness makes tricky...



Days 3, 4 & 5 :

No wind, headwinds, whiteout, big snowfall and woodland ... Weather and terrain put our nerves and bodies to the test. In turn, we kowtow, chomp at the bit, live hand to mouth, face the blizzard, and fight in snow depths never seen here in ten years of skiing trips... In short, we're going through a rough patch. Hoping for better days and resting in comfort at the Bleskestadmoen, Jonstolen, and Krossvatn cabins...



Day 6 :

On the map, it looks almost flat, but I know this terrain really well. When there is no visibility, it's already rough to cross it by ski. So with the kite, it's mission Impossible !

For the while, it's clear enough to go on but the wind pushes us to a sector that I would prefer to avoid. It is Impossible, however, to go upwind in this labyrinth of ridges and ravines ... We try to keep wind in the kites by staying as high as possible, sometimes coming back in our footsteps to bypass small cliffs, only venturing into the hollows when we don't have any more solutions... Interesting and the progression is never easy !

Fortunately, once on the big Blasjo lake, the route become less demanding, even if we have to tack and go upwind. But suddenly, the weather turns bad, visibility reduces, temperatures drop - It smells like a trap ! Instead of continuing on south, we turn back north-east to retreat as fast as possible to the nearest cabin...

Three kilometers from the goal, again in difficult terrain together a violent wind, we cross, almost blindly, snow ridges several metres high... Some doubt ensues... Shall we endure and push on until the cabin in these tricky conditions or shall we change onto a smaller kite ? We pack the 9 m². But rigging the 4 m² in such conditions is nearly impossible and we finish the stage hiking in the storm...



Day 7 :

We sit out a storm from the East. On the program : pancakes and reading... Not so bad...

Day 8 :

We make our way to the next cabin in a good easterly wind, first in the hills, then again on the big lake of Blasjo.

When the wind and the visibility come together in this terrain it totally rocks ! On the southern part of Lake Blasjo, progression is surprisingly on / off. Small reliefs create ultra-accelerated wind corridors. "Sheltered" areas are places of unexpected crazy drifts. Forcing the way through the dam at the end of this reservoir would be like playing Russian roulette. We pack the kites.

At the dam foot, we again rig the small kites, and less than one the minute after, we are literally skinning again because of the violent winds. And the icing on the cake : I'm in trouble with a ski binding that will not engage. The binding insert of my boot just broke ! Why does it happen

here ? No other solution than to finish the stage hiking... a shame because it would go so fast kiting in this strong tailwind...



Day 9 :

It has been a week since the forecasts announced a short period of nice weather for this day. And they were not mistaken - it's incredible how the analytic weather models manage to see such short features coming a week in advance in a unstable climatic slump that characterises this geographical area... !

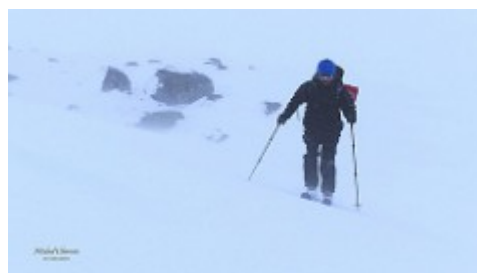
We hike the first kilometres of the day's stage because of no wind, and we arrive at a small col. Here, the relief creates either venturis or no-wind areas. It's necessary to ponder and think about a change of kite size. But the small Peak 4m² is clearly the most suitable kite for a fun progression on the ridges and snow cornices. We ride up on the Storevasnuten heights before riding down to the Kringlevatn hut.

Doubt creeps in again... Shall we take the challenge to cross the next 25 kilometres through the Sirdalsheiane mountains with this light headwind ? Yeah... but finally we play it safe and just go for a small exploration in a dying air on the heights above the cabin...



Day 10 :

Easy things never last here down... No wind at the beginning, then bad weather arrives from the south and it's in a dense whiteout that we finally cross the Sirdalsheiane ridge towards Bossbu cabin... What a pity, this stage in very hilly terrain, would be amazing with good weather and west winds...



Day 11 :

Back again on the eastern edge of the plateau, the relief here is a gentler than on previous days. The cabin is so comfortable that we decide to spend another night here, and ride the small valleys north of Bossbu. It dumps snow and it's fun ! In such strong and unstable winds the Peak 4m² continues to amaze us...



Day 12 :

The nice weather is back, and a gentle and regular north-westerly wind rises after an hour of ski hiking. For this last day, we decide to take the indirect route, riding up on some small tops culminating on the edge of the plateau. Some powerful kite loops drive us directly up through rocks that dot the northern crest of Svarvarnuten summit (1378 m). If the view is great, we don't dawdle a lot because the wind is pushing us towards the 300 metre high cliffs on the eastern side of the mountain...

As the hours go by, the wind gets stronger, giving us the feeling that we could kite a long way south in this infinite maze of hills... But we are still careful not to dive into the hollows of the terrain, preferring to stagger from crest to ridge, between numerous boulders.

Deciding an itinerary on sight, never being certain of what we will find behind each rocky knoll... That's the main interest of this kind of trip. Always move forward, snaking in and out, compromising with the terrain and the winds. A game without limits. Total freedom just in the moving... Awesome trip !

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Pics Michael Charavin & Joël Blanchemain.

Kites : we opted for a limited quiver of 2 single-skin kites and only one bar per person to minimise weight and volume carried. Flysurfer Peak 3 [sizes chosen 4m² and 9m²] perfectly met the specifications for this kind of expedition. The 4 m² is probably THE currently most amazing kite...

