



TESTING THE SLOPES

Skiing and Switzerland—is there any more natural pairing in the world? Perhaps only that of Switzerland with its watchmaking. The Swiss are famously passionate about both. So, when *InSync* decided to design a winter adventure to expose a range of wrist-watches to the unforgiving elements, it was clear we'd have to head to the Alps.

We know of no watch specifically designed for skiing, so we gathered a selection of the toughest watches we could find and took off for the Portes du Soleil, the largest linked ski area in the world, straddling two countries (Switzerland and France) and comprising fourteen resorts, 209 lifts, 288 marked slopes, seven snow parks, three half-pipes and 1,082 ski instructors.

Along the for the adventure were the Tissot T-Touch (\$625), the Reactor Photon (\$200), the Nixon Delta (\$280), Aquanaut's King Cuda automatic chronograph (\$2,600), the Chase-Durer Special Forces 1000 Underwater Demolition Team Chronograph

(\$745) and the Girard-Perregaux R&D01 (\$9,250). It was going to be interesting to see how these watches would fare under real-life conditions in the beautiful but challenging Alpine environment.

As with the watches, we had an eclectic mix of participating testers. I (a novice skier) brought along my sons, Evan (at 20, an accomplished skier) and Kalen (at 22, a great snowboarder). There was also Gary Mack, 32, an expert skier and snowboarder and the manager of a chalet in the region; his charming wife, Kari, 30, also an expert skier and snowboarder; Darren Perkins, 30; Sally Thomas, 22; and Sophie Furley, 35, an accomplished snowboarder. The fact that the skills of the testers varied so widely made them more representative of the people on the mountain—from experienced young skiers and snowboarders to inexperienced older people and everyone in between.

The conditions were ideal. Lots of fresh snow with many feet of base on the mountain, and every day brought clear, sunny skies

with crisp temperatures ranging from 20° to 35°F. Throughout the Portes du Soleil region, there are ski resorts linked by a network of trails and lifts, so it's possible to go from France to Switzerland and back again, never doing the same run twice.

We put on the watches in the morning before hitting the slopes and scheduled to meet for lunch around 1 PM each day. We'd compare notes, swap watches, then head out for more skiing and snowboarding action. The watches spent every minute of the day on the slopes, subjected to all that any winter sports enthusiast would expose them to.

THE LEARNING CURVE

First, we had to be prepared to ski, and I admit to being a novice. I grew up in Ohio and have lived in Pennsylvania for more than 20 years—not exactly ski central. I attempted skiing once as a teenager, giving up when I realized I didn't know how to stop, then once again as an adult, abandoning the effort following an uninspiring lesson that left me frustrated and a little angry. This time, I was determined to give it a good try. I booked lessons with a local

expert, British expat Rory Burton. I would be testing myself at the same time I was testing this collection of watches. And if the watches could stand up to the punishment doled out by a beginner, they would certainly be suitable for the more experienced as well.

My first ski lesson was scheduled for the day I arrived in Chatel. Outfitted with rented skis, boots and poles, I went straight to the bottom of the ski lift to meet my instructor. We wasted no time getting to work. Burton was much more patient and skilled than my previous instructor, and I caught on quickly. Before long, to my surprise, I was managing slight inclines and actually turning and stopping. Within an hour, I was taking the lift up to the top of the green slope, the easiest ski run. I wanted to practice some more, but Rory insisted I give it a try.

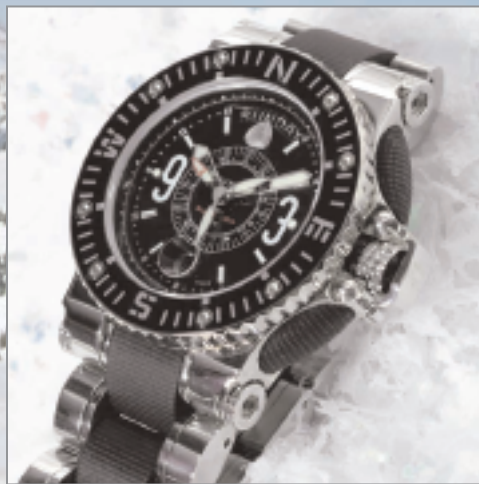
The green slope turned out to be no steeper than the incline we had practiced on but two and a half miles long—plenty of room for practicing turns and stops. By the second run, I began to feel comfortable on skis. At the end of two hours, we reviewed all that I had learned, and

Burton suggested what I should work on in the afternoon. We repeated this schedule for four days.

On the second day, Burton took me to the bottom of the red run. As I started down the steeper slope, I stared at the incline, and everything I had learned vanished from my mind. I went tumbling down the slope. Following Burton's advice, I tried it again and got to the bottom by concentrating on each turn instead of the steepness of the hill. I did the red run several more times that afternoon, feeling more comfortable each time.

The next morning, Rory again put me through my paces, concentrating on controlling speed, turning with the edges of the skis, leaning down the mountain—the most difficult thing, for me—and coming to a stop. After four days of training and practice, I had fallen in love with skiing. I'm convinced that working on the skills under the watchful eye of a competent teacher is the reason I was successful.

On the final day, I was on the blue slope, looking a bit more like a skier, when my sons spotted me from a chair lift. I was skiing well enough that, at first, they didn't



from left—The Chase-Durer Special Forces 1000 Underwater Demolition Team Chronograph with Lycra strap; the Reactor Photon in 47mm 316L stainless steel with carbon fiber dial and leather strap; Aquanautic's King Cuda automatic chronograph, Ref. KCW3H0202, in stainless steel with black dial and bezel.



*above and left—Sophie Furley and Kalen Strandberg on their snowboards.
opposite—The author after eight hours of intensive training and 20 hours of practice.*

“The Girard-Perregaux fit snugly. I adore the dial, which is easy to read and attractive.”

—Sophie Furley

recognize me. When they realized what they were seeing, they started cheering and yelling congratulations. Then I knew, I had stuck with it and conquered my fear, and I’m proud to say that no defenseless children were harmed in the process.

Along the way, some great memories were created. One of best is heading down the slopes with my sons, enjoying the beautiful vistas, the crisp air and the bright Alpine sunshine.

THE VERDICT

All the watches worked well as timekeepers. Despite the number of times we all fell, none of the watches failed in their accuracy. The watches varied greatly when it came to comfort and ease of use, however. One of the problems is that, when you fall and get up again, there is a great deal of wrist flexing. A thick watch or one with protruding crowns or pushers can be less than comfortable. In addition, some were harder to read

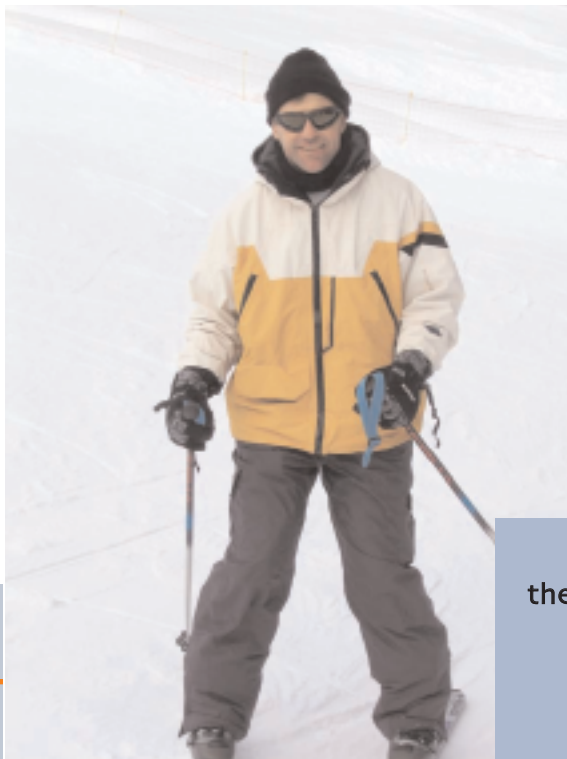
than others. The accuracy of special altimeter and thermometer functions on two of the watches was called into question when we noticed that the ski resort’s posted altitude and temperature readings differed from the watches’ readings.

The **Tissot T-Touch** (\$625) was the testers’ favorite. They loved how lightweight and thin the watch is compared to some others in our test. There’s a “wow” factor in its many functions. Testers invariably found the watch’s compass, altimeter, thermometer, barometer and the touch screen that controls them irresistible. The altimeter reading was very accurate, varying from the

official posted elevations by only a few dozen meters. The temperature reading was more difficult to test because the wearer’s body temperature interfered. When we buried the watch in the snow for ten minutes, we got a fairly accurate reading of ambient temperature. The traditional analog display was easy to read on the slopes.

The **Girard-Perregaux R&D01** (\$9,250) was the best looking watch in our test and performed flawlessly the entire time. The chronograph function was good for timing runs. This was also one of the easiest watches to read at a glance, because of its clear, large numerals and high-contrast hands. The crystal was extremely clear and non-distorting. Having the crown and pushers on the left caseside bothered some of the testers, who spoke of discomfort. This configuration can take time to get used to. As for me, I quickly got used to it and it never bothered me. The testers loved that the R&D01 has automatic winding, and the beautiful finish of the movement garnered a lot of attention. For an automatic, the R&D01 is quite thin, making it well suited to the slopes. As a bonus, it is equally well suited to an evening in and a nice dinner.

The **Nixon Delta** (\$280) offered many of the same features as the Tissot in



Reactor's Photon (\$200) forgoes the bells and whistles, but it's an attractive, rugged watch that can be worn anywhere. Take jumps with no worries, then wear the Photon to work or out to dinner. The carbon fiber dial is great looking, and the large, interestingly contoured and sturdy case doesn't disappoint. The leather strap is easy to adjust, and the contrast stitching is a nice touch.

the ideal snow watch:

- thin
- wearable on top of a ski jacket
- durable
- stylish
- easy to read
- water-resistant to at least 100m
- shock-resistant
- has no protruding crown or pushers

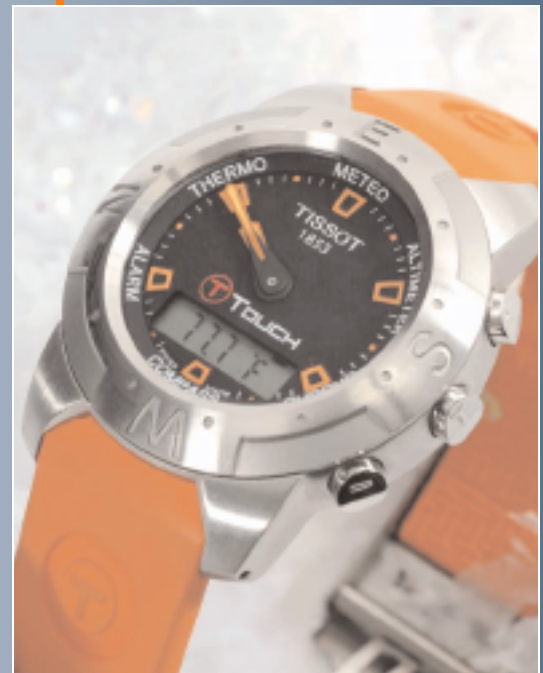
a more conventional, digital sport watch. The watch sits fairly high on the wrist, making it more challenging to get to under gloves and a ski jacket, but the watch was easy to read, except in direct sunlight. There is a nice backlight feature for dark environments, and the case is rugged and attractive. The synthetic strap of the Delta PU is extremely comfortable and stands up to quite a bit of abuse. The altimeter didn't perform as accurately as the Tissot's, varying from official postings by hundreds and sometimes thousands of feet. It might have benefited from calibration, something that was beyond the skills of any of our testers. The other functions—compass, temperature, chronograph, alarms—worked perfectly, regardless of conditions.

The Aquanautic King Cuda (\$2,600) is definitely a statement watch—big, stylish and a little flashy, which appealed to some testers but not others. The styling is probably better suited to chic parties *après ski* than for bombing down the slopes. The case combines rubber with steel, making the watch shock-proof and attractive. The three-finned propeller center seconds hand, took some getting used to, because they are almost the same size as the hour hand.



The Chase-Durer Special Forces 1000 Underwater Demolition Team Chronograph (\$745) not only has the longest name of any watch in our test, it has the lightest and most comfortable strap. Made from a synthetic material, the strap is easy to adjust and feels fantastic on the wrist—almost lighter than air. After the test, the strap still looked brand new. The attractive watch is ultra-legible with its

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from top—The Tissot T-Touch multi-function watch, Ref. T33.1.598.59, in stainless steel with black touch screen analog/digital dial and orange rubber strap; the Girard-Perregaux Re'D01 automatic chronograph, Ref. 49930, in steel with black dial and black rubber strap.



CHALET LE CRÊT

British sense of humor.

The Macks have been managing the chalet for four seasons. “When people come to stay, it’s like having an extended family,” she says. “We may never have met them before, but by the end of the week, we’re friends. The Chatel area is reasonably undeveloped, it’s still a proper farming village. The whole Portes du Soleil area is linked so you can ski in different areas every single day for two weeks and not repeat what you’ve done, and all season (December through April), the snow is fantastic.”

The mountains are open all year round, and in the summer, the Macks host groups for whitewater rafting, rock climbing, mountain biking (the biggest attraction in this area), trail running, tree-top adventure courses, horseback riding and hiking. A number of beautiful mountaintop restaurants that close for the winter are open during this time of year. Chatel, and the Chalet Le Crêt, are truly year round attractions that everyone can enjoy. ❖

For more information, visit <www.alpineretreat-chatel.co.uk> or e-mail <info@www.alpineretreat-chatel.co.uk>.

Chalet Le Crêt in Chatel, France, is operated by Gary and Kari Mack. It was an incredibly welcoming place to stay. Included in the package is breakfast, tea and snacks after skiing and a three course dinner, all prepared by Kari. Coming together for dinner at the end of a hard day of skiing is a great way to unwind and get to know the proprietors and fellow guests.

“We try to make everyone feel welcome,” says Gary. “We run a personal service. We go out of our way to help people. We don’t want guests to be hassled during their vacation with ski hire, lesson arrangements, getting lost on the mountain or anything else. We organize everything. The people who stay here don’t have to think about anything. They can ski all day and have a great meal in the evening and just enjoy themselves.” The Chalet even has minibus service to and from the slopes every day.”

An expert snowboarder and skier, Gary acts as a guide, taking people to the slopes, showing them the best runs so that no one has to struggle with unfamiliar maps. Many come to the chalet just to take advantage of his expertise, not to mention his dry



above—Author Strandberg enjoying the slopes with son Kalen.
at left—The Strandberg boys on ATVs experience an alternative to skis.



photo: Sophie Furley

white hands and contrasting black dial. Its unidirectional bezel, handy for timing runs, was cut so that it caught the light—a treat to look at. The chronograph function is great to have, although with its screw-in pushers, it is difficult to use on the slopes. It can be tough to unscrew the pushers with gloves on, but the feature prevents accidental activation of the pushers and adds to the watch's water resistance. The Special Forces 1000 is relatively thick, making it more difficult to get at on the slopes. The trouble of pulling back your jacket sleeve is worthwhile, however, when



ADVENTURE: DOG SLEDDING

We showed up at the small ski resort of Les Carroz and found the dog man, Philippe Van Compennolle. He and the dogs were waiting for us. Before starting down the trail, we got a quick lesson: stay on the sled; use the foot brake on downhill; help push the sled on uphill; and if you fall, don't let go of the sled. And that was it. Soon, we were on our way, and I found out that the two minutes of instruction belied the difficulty of driving the sled. On the first downhill, I toppled into the waist-deep snow. I started to get the hang of it after about 20 minutes and began to enjoy the trail with its unfettered views of pristine snowfields, majestic mountains, serene forests. Just as I was thinking that it might be fun to dogsled to a remote Alpine cabin and spend the night by a roaring fire, my sled tipped, and I went face-first into the snow. Righted once again, and after an hour and a half of trekking through the mountains, all I could think was, "It doesn't get much better than this." ❖

—Keith W. Strandberg

For more information, visit <www.evasion-nordique.com>.

you get a look at the attractive dial and the black PVD case.

All the watches were easy to use and held up well in the cold conditions. In addition, they withstood the pounding that is an inescapable part of snow sports. While any of these watches would work well for the casual skier on holiday, none of the watches we tested was without some drawback. Until makers offer specially designed winter-sport watches, choosing a watch to wear skiing will be something of a trade-off. So what would the ideal ski watch be? Based on the wide-ranging comments of the testers, the perfect watch

would be: thin, durable, stylish, easy to read, shock-resistant, water-resistant to 100 meters, have no protruding crown or pushers and be adjustable for wearing on top of a ski jacket. Until that ideal snow sport watch becomes available, there are at least six great options to try. ❖

Article by Keith W. Strandberg. Photos by Evan K. Strandberg. For additional information, visit <www.portesdusoleil.com> and the makers' websites: <aquanautic.com>, <[chase-durer.com](http://www.chase-durer.com)>, <[girard-perregaux.com](http://www.girard-perregaux.com)>, <[nixonnow.com](http://www.nixonnow.com)>, <[reactorwatch.com](http://www.reactorwatch.com)> and <[tissot.ch](http://www.tissot.ch)>.



Author Strandberg, above, with a member of his team; Kalen Strandberg, at right, on the trail.