



AAC Publications

The Eiger, North Face, Odyssee

Switzerland

All photos by Frank Kretschmann / Funst.de

I started dreaming of climbing a new route through the steepest part of the north face of the Eiger in 2002. I joined Steph Siegrist on his new project La Vida es Silbar (Siegrist-Steck, 2003) a few times. From my first moment in this small world on the Eiger, the central part of the wall fascinated me the most. While I was working on a free ascent of the Japanese Direttissima in 2003 with Simon Anthamatten, I watched Steph and Ueli Steck bolt my dream line, crying and smiling at the same time. They named it Paciencia.

Simon and I missed the first free ascent of the Japanese Direttissima by one pitch. It was a 7b in the upper part of the route. We didn't want to risk pulling the rope down for one more attempt due to heavy rockfall. Beginning in the summer of 2004, Robert Jasper and I fought another five seasons to completely free the Japanese Direttissima, finally succeeding in 2009.

I felt that Robert and I were the perfect team for Eiger free ascents. We trust each other blindly, and in addition to being a great free climber, Robert has a lot of experience in hard mixed routes like the ones you often find on the Eiger. With our passion to free the great old Eiger routes, we were also able to free the Harlin Direttissima, with the Heckmair exit, in 2010, and in 2013 we freed the Ghilini-Piola Direttissima.

It was time to bring back my attention to creating my own route through the Eiger north face. Robert and I had tried to climb on the sheltered Rote Fluh, the overhanging red wall in the right center of the face, again and again from 2009 on, whenever it wasn't possible to climb on the Harlin Route or the Ghilini-Piola. We made it up the first 16 pitches to the second bivouac on the Czech Pillar (Smíd-Kysilková- Plachecky-Rybicka, 1976).

The year 2014 was supposed to be our big Eiger summer. I was motivated to have my best climbing performance ever, so I spent most of the winter climbing and training in Catalonia. I was able to climb my first 8c, thanks to training input from Dicki Korb and the effective exercises that are described in his book *Gimme Kraft!* I boosted my self-confidence with a free ascent of the route Golden Gate on El Capitan, as well as with a team ascent of the route Fly with Alex Megos, Davis Hefti, and Frank Kretschmann that same spring. (Fly is located in the Lauterbrunnen Valley in Switzerland and consists of 21 pitches graded up to 8c. It was up to Alex Megos to free the first three pitches of the route, which were the hardest.) I also repeated the route Hotel Supramonte in Sardinia, Italy, with Alexandra Taistra, where I missed redpointing the entire climb by just one pitch.

However, even though it took me a while to understand it, my health and fitness were deteriorating. I just climbed too much and too hard before the summer. I didn't get enough rest, had no balance in my training, and stretching was a foreign thing. My arms were ready, my head was set, but my lower back didn't just hurt a little anymore—it was so bad I couldn't sleep without painkillers.

The north face of the Eiger. Green: 1938 (Heckmaier) Route. Blue: Harlin Direct. Gray: Japanese Direct. Yellow Odyssee. Red: Ghilini-Piola.

It started in the portaledge in Yosemite. It got so bad on Fly that I couldn't place my feet precisely on

high footholds. I was able to climb harder than ever in Sardinia with pain meds, but I couldn't sleep or climb without them!

I had a herniated disk in L4 and L5. I tried everything to fix it. I went to countless physical therapists and sports clinics from Switzerland to Spain and all the way to Poland. I contacted countless other climbers that had similar problems.

With the constant hope of finishing our route that year, the weather report from the Eiger was always in my mind. I was able to climb at half speed all summer, but I was always in great pain. Finally the summer ended, and I was able to let go of the Eiger.

I returned to my old performance level during the fall and winter with lots of patience, discipline, and the right mix of exercises, climbing, stretching, and physical therapy. In April 2015 I was able to climb as I had before. On Kalymnos, in Greece, I was able to score a spectacular first ascent with Mich Kemeter and Jürgen Rheinmüller, which we named Alpinstil (135m, 7c+).

I took advantage of this momentum and climbed an amazing line on the northwest pillar of Devils Paw in Alaska with Simon Gietl, the route Freerider on El Cap in a day (unfortunately not all pitches free), and our new line Chappie on La Esfinge in Peru.

The highlight of the season was still to come, though. When I flew to Zurich from Peru, I had no time to rest. The weather had been great on the Eiger since June. The very next day, Robert Jasper and I redpointed the first five pitches on the north face. Uff...welcome back to Eiger!

After a rest day (in the physical sense only) at the outdoor trade show in Friedrichshafen, Germany, we continued on the Eiger. It took us three whole days to exchange all the torn-up fixed ropes leading to the first bivy and to bring up material, food, and a bucket to collect water. Time seemed to be running through our fingers. How could we complete our Odyssee in three weeks? I was supposed to travel to Alaska in August with Simon Gietl!

However, as it turned out, we were short on money for our Alaska project, and so we had no choice but to postpone it until the following year. And now it wasn't just me who had time for the Odyssee, but also Simon. One call was all it took to convince him to join us on Eiger. The Dream Team was complete! We started with the first pitch of the Czech Pillar, the 17th pitch of our route, with new energy. Robert took quite a spectacular fall over the roof's edge when he attempted the redpoint. The sheath of the rope was totally shot. After a long break he sent the pitch with two lead ropes instead of just one. It made the attempt a little less nerve-wracking for me too.

Simon let his motivation and skills run free in his first pitch of the new route. When he reached the belay after 35 meters of tough terrain, he yelled, "Tie Judas into the haul rope!" Our drill was called Judas from then on. I was able to follow the pitch free, and I was really glad that Simon had led it, especially the dynamic move high above the bolt. We had agreed that everyone had to face his own music, meaning that whoever bolted a pitch had to lead it first!

The days and the pitches came and went, until the weather turned bad and we had to retreat. Simon took advantage of the time and made the seven-hour drive home to see his recently born child.

By the end of the week, the weather allowed us to return to the face with lots of motivation. Soon, all that remained was to redpoint pitch 10, which has a very boulder move near the end of the pitch. It's also the steepest pitch in the heart of the north face. Robert had already redpointed the pitch, so I made my move. The first sequence went really well, the pressure was on. It was like in a dream. I put up one hell of a fight and clipped the chains on my last breath! It had taken 17 attempts before I was able to redpoint this pitch. I can't remember ever having to climb such a hard move with so much air between me and the last bolt. This is the hardest pitch in our route Odyssee, for sure. To me it's an

8a+.

Simon was back again, too, after a rest day, and the weather got more stable. We continued our work on the endless seeming Tschechenpfeiler (the Czech Pillar). We made it to pitch 24 with Simon, then the weather turned bad and Simon went home to his family again. Robert and I used the next window of good weather and added three new pitches. Our route ran through the biggest overhangs, where the neighboring routes Paciencia and La Vida es Silbar arch to the left and right, following far less steep terrain.

Robert took on the first steep overhang. Three hours and a few falls later he was able to reach a small ledge. It was already dark. We rappelled, hoping to complete our Odyssee the next time we jumared up the fixed ropes.

Two days later all three of us were hanging at our uncomfortable, super-exposed belay. This was going to be the last really hard pitch of Odyssee. I had to be the first one to go. I was totally motivated to climb into the unknown with pumped arms, to clip with stressed, pumping breath. My fight on the steep, gray water streak took four hours. At the belay I was totally wiped out. No, I was more than just wiped. My batteries were completely empty. The feeling was simply beyond words.

Simon took over the lead. He was full of energy and totally in his element in the sketchy terrain. We stood on top of the Tschechenpfeiler in the last rays of daylight. Yes, we did it! The route was finally done, though we still had to redpoint seven demanding pitches. This knowledge, along with our fatigue, the incoming night, and the strenuous rappelling, kept our party mood in check.

The next morning we woke up pretty beat on the dripping, uncomfortable Czech bivy. We focused on the last and probably hardest pitch on the Tschechenpfeiler: the grey, steep water streak. So once again we were back hanging in the same uncomfortable belay. Each one of us gave it a try. None of us could score the redpoint that day.

We would have to come back when we were rested and jumar 800 meters back up there again. Luckily we were able to free four more pitches on the third day, before we rappelled. We were already happy, having scored a first ascent of our route Odyssee. Sometimes I believe that when the wall is long and tough, alpine and exposed, the redpoint is overrated. Nonetheless, we would have to return.

During our third go as a team, we were able to redpoint all the remaining pitches of the Tschechenpfeiler. Simon scored the last hard pitch. The final were a little easier, at least concerning the grade. But you had to give each one your full effort. I climbed the last pitch, a 6c, clean and exposed, with night falling, in typical Eiger fog and with numb fingers and feet.

To me, the Odyssee is obviously a personal milestone. I was able to give my best with my two friends Robert and Simon. And I am proud of the route, which consists of good quality rock and is great fun to climb. Hard, athletic moves take turns with tricky footwork and old-school climbing at its best. And to top it all off, the protection is an ideal mix of clean, trad, bolts, and hooks, in my opinion. We really only used bolts where we had no other possibilities.

With only a couple of days off, I was back on the Eiger with my friend Mich Kemeter to try and complete the Tschechenpfeiler trilogy. After repeating La Vida es Silbar in 2003 and then establishing and Odyssee, I still wanted to climb my original dream route, Paciencia. Mich and I spent three and a half days on the climb and each redpointed the whole route.

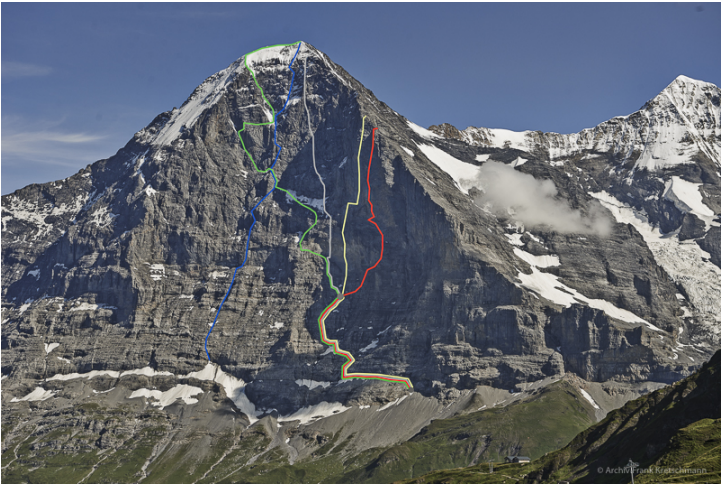
After a very close call with a damaged rope while hastily rappelling the route, we headed straight for the whirlpool at Hotel Aspen. In the pool we didn't feel heroic joy, just a deep thankfulness that we had reached the valley safe and sound, with a big bag full of unforgettable memories. You give your best when it's possible, but you also should be extremely careful when things get hectic or stressful.

Because we don't just want to be good alpinists, we also want to become old alpinists one day!

Roger Schäli, Switzerland

Editor's note: During the first ascent and subsequent redpointing attempts, Odyssee (1,400m, 8a+) was climbed in team-free style, with Jasper and Schäli each redpointing "95 percent" of the route. On the easier upper pitches, only one of the climbers led some of the pitches. The route awaits a continuous free ascent.

Images



The north face of the Eiger. Green: 1938 (Heckmaier) Route. Blue: Harlin Direct. Gray: Japanese Direct. Yellow Odyssee. Red: Ghilini-Piola.



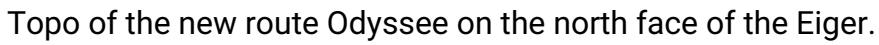
Roger Schäli on the crux pitch (8a+) of Odyssee.



Robert Jasper leading pitch 8 (7c/8a).



Simon Gietl on pitch 22 (7a+).



Topo of the new route Odyssee on the north face of the Eiger.

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