



## AAC Publications

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### Two Climbs Alone

Solo on Mt. Robson's Emperor Face and Torre Egger in Patagonia

**OVER THE PAST couple of years, I've done a handful of ascents that various climbing luminaries have described as "cutting edge."** For those who don't know me, it may seem these climbs were somewhat out of left field. But the truth is, I've been climbing a long, long time. I started in a gym when I was nine years old. By 11, I was scrambling low fifth class in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest. I was doing alpine routes at 14 and started free soloing in earnest (5.10) at 15. I'm 24 now, which many people think is rather young for the kinds of alpine solos I am doing. And yet I've been preparing for this for 15 years—nearly two-thirds of my life. Everything I've done thus far—even just learning how to distribute my weight on steep vegetation and moss-covered fourth class—has led up to this.

In 2016, I did two climbs, in particular, that seemed to cause a stir. One was the first solo ascent of Mt. Robson's Emperor Face, which I climbed during a short weather window in April. The second was the first winter solo of Torre Egger in Patagonia. I did many other climbs in 2016 that were meaningful to me, but somehow Robson and Egger stand out.

#### MT. ROBSON

The truth is, I hadn't intended to solo the Emperor Face last April—at least, not initially. April was more or less reserved for climbing with Luka Lindič (Slovenia). We spent the first two weeks of that month climbing in the Valley of the Ten Peaks, in Banff National Park, and we accomplished some very nice climbs after the weather shut us down on our main objective. Our next big goal was one of the harder routes on Robson—the Haley-House, for example—but we just ran out of time. Luka had to attend to other things. I had talked a lot with Jon Walsh about the Emperor Face, and he had mentioned that Infinite Patience would be a good option to solo. I tucked this away in the back of my head, in case the opportunity ever arose.

Of course, I'd wanted to climb the Emperor Face ever since I first saw a photo of Robson when I was about ten years old. All last winter and spring in the Rockies, I checked the weather forecast for Robson compulsively. It's a really difficult mountain to get in good condition. Even when Luka and I were in the Valley of the Ten Peaks, it wasn't in. It just so happened that when we got out of Ten Peaks following our last new route, I looked at the weather and saw the window. Right then and there, I realized: This is it.

First, I wanted to make sure I was in proper shape, mentally and physically, to tackle the route. So I decided to solo Andromeda Strain on Mt. Andromeda. I had personal history with Andromeda, which had shut me down in 2014 when I tried to solo the Shooting Gallery. At that time, I had never alpine climbed in the Rockies and had no idea how hard it was. I ended up having a very scary experience, bivying in -35°C weather and getting frostbite. I ended up having to climb a desperate, unroped 30 meters, smashing the rock apart with my tools and hooking the leftovers, before I could finally get an anchor and bail. At that time, I realized, I was not ready for soloing there at all.

Every subsequent climb I did in the Rockies was a learning experience. The Greenwood-Locke on Temple, the Stanley Headwall routes, the climbs in the Valley of the Ten Peaks—all of them taught me so much about the Rockies' very particular style, the angles of the rock, the consistency of the snow.

By the end of my trip with Luka, we were really in a rhythm: Find a hook, get your tool in a crack, brush, brush, brush the snow, brush it with your tool, brush it with your hand, blow on it, look at it, get a pick, repeat. By our last climb together, we definitely felt like we knew what we were doing. So I felt comfortable attempting to solo the Strain. And this time on Andromeda, on April 14, I felt completely safe and in control—everything was really clicking. I decided I would give Robson a try.

After Andromeda, I hitchhiked into town and made arrangements to catch a bus up to Robson the next day. The weather window was super short, so I knew I had to go as soon as possible, before freezing levels shot up.

From the start, even on the approach, I was deeply into the experience. Sometimes in the mountains, I'm just thinking about the climb, listening to tunes, my head may be in a different place. But on Robson it was somehow different. I had never been to the mountain before, and I just wanted to take everything in. I was super into all the colors and the little critters that were waking up for springtime. The mountain has such a strong aura. It was like taking psychedelics or something, where you find a clarity that is out of reach in day-to-day life. That night I slept in the open on moraine at the base of the Emperor Face and woke to a glow on the eastern horizon.

As on the Strain, the climbing went very well. There were some hard sections, like the initial ice pillar and a snow mushroom that I had to tunnel through high on the route—probably the crux—but by and large I felt very solid the whole time. It seemed like every time I brushed away the snow, there was a web of thin cracks beneath where I could hammer the pick of my tool, making for very safe and secure climbing. I carried a tag line (which I used to haul my pack twice), and I knew I could bail at almost any moment. In the end, I just never needed to.

I have been asked how fast I was, but I honestly cannot say how many hours the Emperor Face took to climb. I began when I felt ready and I reached the top at sundown.

On the summit I realized my feet were too knotted up and painful to start down right away. I had brought an emergency bivy sack, so I decided to just dig a trench and wait it out for a little bit. I took off my boots and tried to let my feet recover. I made some soup and boiled water to put in my Dromedary. I put the Drom under my hip, since that was where I was losing the most heat, and then I actually fell asleep for a while. When I woke up, I decided to rewarm the water. But my headlamp had died, and I ended up spilling the water all over my bivy sack. I knew right then that it was time to go. I fought to get fresh batteries into the headlamp, forced my frozen boots back onto my feet, packed up the rime-covered bivy sack, and started a cold descent.

As soon as I started down, I found that old familiar rhythm and my world shrank to a six-foot bubble of light, the V-threader, and the rappels. And then it got really awesome. The sun was starting to come up on the other side of the mountain, and Robson's prominence is super huge so its shadow just went on forever. As the sun lit up the world around me, I knew I was in the clear. There was still some tedium to deal with, but I knew I was going to make it out, and I really relaxed into the moment and enjoyed the whole descent.

## **TORRE EGGER**

When the first thoughts of soloing in the Torres entered my mind at the age of 21, Egger was what fanned the flames of my imagination. It was, at the time, the only peak in the Torre group that hadn't been soloed, which made it somehow more mysterious than the others. Later on, when the notion of soloing in the Torres began to manifest physically, and I soloed the Corkscrew on Cerro Torre (February 2015) and Tomahawk and Exocet on Aguja Standhardt (September 2015), I began to realize that I might actually possess the skill set to make the Egger solo happen. It was the first one I thought of and the last one I did.

Colin Haley and I had talked about the idea of soloing Egger. Then, in January 2016, during the austral summer, Haley became the first person to do it. But neither of us—and nobody else to my knowledge—had ever talked about soloing it in winter. I hadn't thought about it myself until I was standing beneath Egger after soloing Standhardt and I began to see the line I might follow. I had to be there in person to even conceive of it as a possibility. Staring up at it that day, I became convinced I would have to try it.

On my first attempt, on September 12, 2016, I started up the east face following a dike and corner on the Martin-O'Neill Link-up (2002). This involved some M6 mixed climbing and an A2 self-belayed pitch in a corner. I slept on the hanging glacier beneath Punta Herron, then followed the line of the peak's first winter ascent (Arnold-Senf-Siegrist, 2010), moving leftward up a groove system to join Titanic (Cominelli-Giarolli-Nadali-Orlandi-Sarchi, 1987), halfway up the tower. I continued up Titanic all the way to a small ledge about 200 meters below the summit, where I made my second exposed bivouac. By early the next morning I was out of fuel and food, and it began to snow. I was forced to bail, and I rappelled in heavy snow and spindrift. The descent was a bit stressful at first, but in the end it went smoothly in spite of everything.

Four days later, I set out to try Egger again. This time, I started up an easy ice gully directly beneath the seracs under Punta Herron. I had vowed never to climb beneath a serac, but in this case I made an exception. The several hours it saved me made the entire climb feel more safe and practical, and in the cold darkness of the morning it felt like an acceptable level of risk. During the climb, I free soloed up to M5 and 5.10, which was well within my comfort zone, and I daisy soloed two short sections on the Titanic headwall. This time the weather cooperated, and the decision to climb the direct line beneath the serac paid off—I reached the summit largely without event. The descent went smoothly as well, and all of a sudden I was back on the ground, hiking toward El Chaltén. The entire trip from my high camp to the summit and back took only 21 hours.

After I returned to town, my high from the climb seemed to remain in the mountains. I have often felt a letdown for a couple of days after what seemed like a really important ascent. In the case of Egger, after all the energy I had put into conceptualizing it and convincing myself it was possible, it turned out not to be that hard, technically. The hardest part, retrospectively, was imagining the climb in the first place.

I've been left with almost more satisfaction from my first try, when I had to rappel in a storm. I had always told people, "If you're high up on Egger and the weather changes, and you're by yourself, you're doomed." When I woke up that morning and it was snowing heavily, I was like, Oh shit, this is actually happening! As I started rappelling, I felt super intimidated, but right in the midst of the situation I had most feared, I just started to draw on all of the experience I'd been building, the systems and know-how in the mountains. I had purposely gone out and climbed by myself in bad weather—a lot—just to build experience. And in the end, it was fine.

I actually feel that I've gotten somewhat less risky in the past few years. The most dangerous climb I ever did was when I soloed Cerro Torre, when I was 21. After that I sort of had a moment where I said, OK, that was a really cool climb, and I'm proud of it, and I think it made sense at that stage in my life, but I don't think I want to expose myself again to that level of risk. I feel like that climb could be the boldness high point of my life, actually, when you take into account the ratio of danger versus experience level.

During the weeks following the Egger climb, many people congratulated me on my "ground-breaking" achievement. But lately I find myself thinking that maybe the only reason my climbs seem so significant is because I'm one of the few people in my generation trying these kinds of things. With very few exceptions, most kids my age don't go to the mountains at all. It just makes me wonder: If more people were going to the mountains, would climbing have progressed at a different rate? Are these climbs even that hard or am I just the only one trying them

**Summary:** First solo ascent of the Emperor Face of Mt. Robson (3,954m) in Canada, via Infinite Patience (ca 2,250m, VI WI5 M5, Blanchard-Dumerac-Pellet, 2002), April 17, 2016. Descent by the west face and Emperor Ridge. First solo winter ascent of Torre Egger in Argentina, via a link-up of routes concluding with Titanic (ca 950m, 5.10 A1 80°), September 17, 2016.

**About the Author:** Born in 1992, Marc-André Leclerc was raised in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, Canada, and now calls Squamish home. Chris Kalman, an AAJ associate editor, interviewed Leclerc for this article in October 2016.

An edited version of the interview that Chris Kalman conducted with Marc-André Leclerc was used to create episode six of the AAJ's Cutting Edge Podcast, which went live in April 2018:

## Images



The author at sunset on top of Mt. Robson, after his solo of the Emperor Face.



Looking down one of the crux passages of Infinite Patience on the Emperor Face of Mt. Robson.

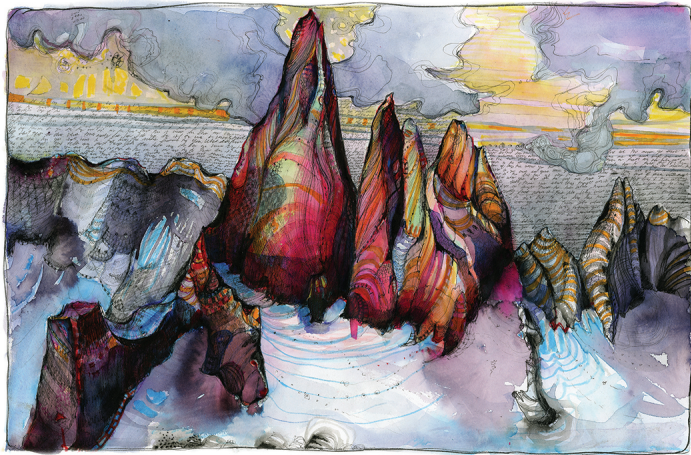


Marc-André Leclerc climbing unroped on Torre Egger during the first integral ascent of Titanic.





The Emperor Face of Mt. Robson, in right center, rises about 7,500 feet above Berg Lake to the 12,972-foot summit.



Torre Egger is the center of the three most prominent peaks shown here, between Cerro Torre and Aguja Standhardt. Leclerc's solo ascent reached the pocket glacier low on Torre Egger and then continued up the shadowed face directly to the summit.

## Article Details

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