



Skiing the Caroline Face: The first descent of the giant southeast face of Aoraki/Mt. Cook

New Zealand, Southern Alps

This historic descent was made in October 2017 but was not previously reported in the AAJ. This is a first-person account.

The Caroline Face—the huge, steep, serac-laden southeast face of Aoraki/Mt. Cook, New Zealand’s highest peak (3,724m), had been in the consciousness of small groups of dedicated steep skiers for some time. There had been several attempts by high-profile teams, and it was widely publicized in a 2010 article for ESPN featuring the biggest, gnarliest unskied faces around the world.

Ross Hewitt and I went for a first attempt in 2015 after our busy summer guiding season in Chamonix was over. Conditions were good that year, and the Caroline looked very white. However, the steep and crumbling middle serac band deterred us from making an attempt. It was only after studying aerial photos that we spotted a potential line, traversing the face far to lookers’ right and bypassing the middle seracs by taking a couloir and face much closer to the east ridge. By the time we envisaged this as an option, we ran short of time and weather.

Ross and I were eager to return. The trip was an easy sell to fellow Brit Ben Briggs and Italian Enrico Mosetti, two of the strongest and most enthusiastic steep skiers I know. Unfortunately, Ross had to pull out due to a back injury. When Ben, Enrico, and I arrived in Aoraki/Mt. Cook Village, Cam Mulvey, the guardian at the Wyn Irwin Lodge, showed us a recent photo of the Caroline in which we spotted a weakness in the middle serac band that hadn’t been there in 2015. It appeared there was some sort of ramp breaking through it. This was confirmed when we flew past the face, en route to the Plateau Hut, and zoomed in on our photos.

Tom Grant in the upper half of the descent of the Caroline Face, above the huge serac bands. Photo by Enrico Mosetti

We set our alarms for midnight on October 27. Leaving the hut just after 1 a.m., we set out toward the east ridge, skinning under the east face to join the ridge as high as we could. On the face we encountered chest-deep breakable crust, and this, combined with a minor route-finding error, cost us some time. Nevertheless, in the absence of a compelling reason for turning back, we toiled on and upward. Reaching the east ridge, we broke trail on some delicate knife-edge arêtes loaded with fresh snow. On a section of exposed ice near the top, we got the rope out and moved together for the last 100m, topping out just before 9 a.m.

Our descent began from Porter Col, at about 3,550m, between the Low and Middle peaks of Aoraki/Mt. Cook. Setting up V-thread anchors, we made two abseils over unskiable 60–80° ice, totalling about 100m. As soon as our team touched down on the face, we were delighted to find cold, compact, and stable powder snow on the sustained 50° face. The skiing was consistent and open on beautiful pitches all the way down to the middle serac band. The three of us ski substantially steeper runs in the Alps, so the skiing itself was not the crux—we had to nail the route-finding in order to ski the face safely and in good time. What looked obvious from below was not always obvious when on the face itself. Skiing into the ramp that we’d spotted on the middle serac band, I set up our final abseil on another V-thread anchor. Only 40m later, we reached the lower slopes.

For the first time we were now fully exposed to the active seracs overhead. The snow got a bit wet but remained very skiable, and we skied a long and fast, leg-burning pitch, trending leftward toward the exit we had scouted, the only feasible way off the face. Ben spotted the crumbling serac cave that we had earmarked as our reference point. An hour and a half after leaving Porter Col we were safely off the face. We exited at around 1,900 meters, having skied approximately 1,650 vertical meters.

The Caroline is the biggest face the three of us have ever skied, and it rightly deserves its mythical status within New Zealand mountaineering. However, the last couple of very warm summers have drastically altered the middle serac band, making it a lot less appealing for ski descents. The three of us couldn't have been happier to succeed when we did, knowing that we had skied it with what felt like a solid margin of safety.

By Tom Grant, U.K.

Additional Aoraki/Mt. Cook Descents: In November 2019, Ross Hewitt and Dave Searle skied a possible new line on the lower Caroline Face, dropping in from the east ridge for a 650m descent. The two also made the second known descent of the Bowie Couloir on the north face. The latter was first skied in 2013 by Andreas Fransson and Magnus Kastengren (Sweden). Shortly afterward, Kastengren took a fatal fall from near the summit of Aoraki/Mt. Cook as he and Fransson began an attempt to ski the Caroline Face.

Images



Enrico Mosetti (foreground) and Ben Briggs ready to drop into the top of the Caroline Face, having just come off the second rap from Porter Col.



Tom Grant in the upper half of the descent of the Caroline Face, above the huge serac bands.



Tom Grant skiing near the very top of the Caroline Face. A perfect 50-degree pitch with compact powder.



The team celebrating back at the Plateau Hut, 16 hours after setting off for the first descent of the Caroline Face. Left to right: Ben Briggs, Enrico Masetti, and Tom Grant.



Aerial view of the ski line on the Caroline Face. The team made three rappels (R) totaling 140 meters on the 1,650-meter descent.

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