



AAC Publications

The Alps and Dolomites: Major Ascents in 2020

Europe, The Alps

Foreshortened view of the Tronchey Wall of the Grandes Jorasses, seen from the upper Pra Sec Glacier. (1) Original Route (1,400m, probably ED2 VI and A2, Gogna-Machetto, 1972). (2) Phantom Direct (ED2/3 VI/5 or 6, Grassi-Luzi-Rossi, 1985). (3) Plein Sud (VI/5 M6+R), climbed to blank rock within a couple of pitches of the Tronchey Ridge in 2010. (4) Part of the Diamond Ridge (1,600m, 5c A0, Richardson-Rinn, 2016), leading to the upper Tronchey Ridge. Photo by Marcello Sanguineti

With COVID-19 restricting top European climbers' travels, there were inevitably many fine ascents throughout the Alps and Dolomites. The following is a small but representative selection of the big Alpine adventures carried out during 2020, some of them before the pandemic surfaced in Europe.

Arguably the most notable ascent in the Mont Blanc Massif, and indeed the Western Alps, was not a new route at all but the second ascent of the legendary Phantom Direct on the Grandes Jorasses.

The south-southeast face or Tronchey Wall rises 1,400m from the Pra Sec Glacier to the summit of Pointe Walker (4,208m), making it the tallest in the range. The lower section is characterized by steep, compact granite, while the upper sports a pronounced central pillar. Italians Alessandro Gogna and Guido Machetto were the first people ever to cross the Pra Sec Glacier, when in August 1972 they climbed the wet, steep lower wall of the southeast face, experiencing Eiger-like stonefall, then the more enjoyable central pillar to the summit of Pointe Walker. Their route likely has never been attempted since and is probably ED2 in today's currency.

Later, the visionary ice climber Gian Carlo Grassi saw another possibility: ephemeral ice smears leading to the huge gully right of the pillar, which in turn leads to the Tronchey Ridge. Over many years he made six "reconnaissance" attempts until, in June 1985, following the snowiest winter for years, he found the ice smears beautifully formed. With Renzo Luzi and Mauro Rossi, Grassi reached the base of the gully to find...no ice. What to do? The three made a delicate and irreversible 200m rising traverse over snow-covered slabs to reach a hanging couloir or depression left of the central pillar, rising toward the top of the Pra Sec Ridge. Grassi's intuition paid off: It was in excellent condition. With a storm closing, threatening to trap the climbers in a vast avalanche funnel, they unroped and climbed rapidly over technical ground to the summit. Since then, a repetition of the Phantom Direct (a.k.a. Gianni Comino Memorial Route: 1,400m: ED3 VI/5 or 6) has been among the most sought-after ascents in the Alps, Grassi having wisely predicted his route "would not be repeated for a long time."

In January 2020, ice routes in the Mont Blanc Range were in splendid condition. On the 21st, Yann Borgnet and Charles Dubouloz, after driving from their homes in Annecy, France, left the valley at 4 a.m. in a temperature of -12°C, and reached the start of the route at 9.30 a.m. Experiencing high wind and poor visibility on the difficult upper section, they arrived on the summit 10 hours later, only two hours faster than the 1985 ascensionists, having just repeated the longest ice climb in the Mont Blanc Massif. They reached the Boccalatte Hut at 4 a.m. the following day.

The Epéna in Winter

In the Vanoise, west of Mont Blanc, the Epéna (3,421m) was one of the last "big peaks" in the Alps to be climbed (1900). The north face—almost 3km wide and up to 750m high—is revered by the French mountaineering community due to the relative isolation, tranquility, and height of this Alpine wall. The limestone on the north face is compact yet often friable, with many small, downward-sloping holds

and poor protection, even if using pitons, and the descent on the south side is long and complex. Making the first winter ascent of this face had been a coveted project for decades, and in February 2019 it finally fell to Léo Billon, Julien Ravanello, and Benjamin Védrines, who succeeded on the classic northwest spur of the Pointe Orientale (765m, TD 5c, Rod-Schneider, 1966).

Manu Pellissier made his first foray onto this face almost three decades ago, and for the last 20 years he has watched for viable ice to allow a winter-conditions ascent; on one attempt he was forced to bail just 130m below the top of the Rod-Schneider. Finally, in 12 hours on November 27, with Luc Mongellaz and Jessy Pivier, he completed the first ascent of The Fridge (900m of climbing, 5c M5 WI5) on the north face of the Brèche Perdreux (3,251m), the col between the Pointe Orientale (3,348m) and Pointe Centrale (3,307m). The three started at the base of the 1966 Rod-Schneider, then worked up the depression to the right, arriving on the summit ridge with the feeling of having achieved something special.

Three days previously, in order to prepare a descent route on the north side, this same team had climbed a west-facing 500m gully at M5 WI5, mostly on new ground, between Pointe Occidentale (3,293m) and the 3,321m Petite Glière to the southwest, equipping it for eight rappels. From the top of The Fridge it took the trio three hours to traverse over the Centrale and Occidentale summits to reach the top of their equipped descent, crawling through the night along the sharp and difficult ridge. They regained their car 20 hours after leaving. The news quickly spread, and the route was repeated by two parties just three days later.

Francois Cazzanelli and Francesco Ratti on the summit of Punta Lioy (3,816m) on the Grandes Murailles Ridge. Photo by Damiano Levato / Story Teller Labs

Winter Valtournenche Traverse

Long ridge traverses or enchainments in the Alps enable climbers to have a full Himalayan experience in length and difficulty (minus the high altitude). There were several remarkable high-level journeys in 2020, but probably the most outstanding was a winter traverse around the northern rim of the upper Valtournenche, the vast bowl south of the Matterhorn, completed by Cervinia guides Francois Cazzanelli and Francesco Ratti. Moving from east to west and then southward, the pair linked the Furggen chain, the Matterhorn, and the Grandes and Petites Murailles—a total of 20 summits, 51km distance, and 4,800m of ascent. They had attempted this project in the winter of 2019, only to fail near the end due to impassable cornices.

At 7 a.m. on January 20, the two Italians left the hut by Theodul Pass (3,295m), and by 1 p.m. on the 23rd they had descended to the valley from the Col des Dames, southwest of Mont Blanc du Creton (3,406m), the last peak of the Petites Murailles. Their first night was spent in the Carrel Hut, having traversed the Matterhorn, and the second and third at the small Perelli and Paoluccio bivouac huts situated on the Murailles ridge. They climbed along the lengthy east ridge of the Dent d'Hérens but did not go to the summit, instead aiming directly for the Col des Grandes Murailles and the Perelli. Minimum temperatures were -23°C.

The first continuous traverse of the sharp and technical rocky ridges of Grandes and Petites Murailles was made over three days in the summer of 1940. Seven years later, another Italian team linked the Matterhorn with a traverse of the Grandes Murailles, also with two bivouacs. In 1985 Cazzanelli's father, Valter, with Marco Barmasse (father of well-known alpinist Hervé Barmasse) made the first winter crossing of the Grandes and Petites. In August 2018, Francois Cazzanelli and Kilian Jornet traversed the Grandes and Petites Murailles in just under 11 hours.

Cazzanelli returned in September 2020 and with Nadir Maguet traversed the Matterhorn via the Furggen and Italian ridges, then continued to traverse the frontier ridge west over the Dent d'Herens to the Valpelline, the whole ca 35km odyssey completed in less than one day.

The northeast face of Piz Badile at the end of November 2020. The approximate lines of (1) Amore

Supercombo, and (2) Crossway of Friendship. Photo by Matteo Della Bordella

Ice Climbs on the Piz Badile

Further east, good ice/mixed conditions on the Piz Badile are extremely rare and ephemeral. Local knowledge is crucial. Toward the end of November, Matteo della Bordella and Silvan Schupbach heard from Marcel Schenk, the preeminent connoisseur of the mountain in winter, that conditions appeared to be perfect. They set out from the Sasc Fura Hut on the 26th with no set plan, plowing through deep snow to reach the start of the north ridge. From here they followed a vague ledge system left across the northeast face for around 400m—thin, poorly protected ice over slabby rock—to below Linea Bianca, the visionary 1978 rock route by Igor Koller and Stanislav Silhan that was the first to breach the steep, poorly protected slabs right of the Cassin Route. The pair followed this “white line,” front-pointing delicate thin ice and mixed to M6, to reach the north ridge, where they continued to the summit and spent the night in the Redaelli bivouac hut. They called their line into Linea Bianca the Crossway of Friendship. This was not the first time Linea Bianca had been climbed during the winter season, but it was the first as an ice/mixed route.

The following day, Schenk himself, along with David Hefti, combined two of his own 2016 routes: Amore di Vetro (800m, M5 R, a beautiful sliver of ice between Memento Mori and the Cassin) and Nordest Supercombo (M7 R) to create Amore Supercombo. The two Swiss found “unbelievable” conditions on Amore Supercombo and even managed to place a few ice screws. Even so, the route had very long runouts. But the word was out, and this new combination only had to wait three days before receiving a second ascent.

Dolomites

Three of the most active climbers in this region, Martin Dejori, Titus Prinoth, and Alex Walpoth from the Val Gardena, managed to solve the “last great problem” of the Pala di San Lucano when they forced a direct route up the great, ca 1,150m south face of the Terza Pala. Guardian of Dreams, climbed from November 1–4, is 1,400m or 34 pitches in length and has a crux pitch of VIII+ A0, which Prinoth climbed with just three pegs and Walpoth, coming second, freed at IX. The whole route was protected with removable gear, including around 35 pitons—no bolts were carried. The route, which has largely excellent rock and lies between the 1972 Anghileri-Gogna-Lanfranchi-Rava on the left and the 2019 Leduc-Vanhee, was climbed ground up.

Among the other highly active climbers here, particularly when it comes to creating big, bold routes without recourse to bolts, are Alessandro Baù and Nicola Tondini. Demonstrating that independent exploration is still possible on the most famous rock faces in the world, in 2019, with Claudio Migliorini, they completed Space Vertigo on the north face of Cima Ovest, to the right of the classic Via Jean Couzy. Rigorous in their approach, opening each pitch from below without using aid, it took three years to finish their dream project, which requires “strong arms, a very good head, and obligatory 7b climbing, often some way above protection.” (Due to the nature of the rock and for portaledges camps on the wall, the belays were bolted, but no protection bolts were used.) The route was done, but the team had not yet freed it in a single push.

In September 2020, the three returned, hauled portaledges and provisions to a point at one-third height, and on the 9th began a free ascent from the ground. Due to slightly damp rock, they were only able to complete three pitches the first day, so they returned to the ground for the night. Next day they jumared their ropes and, with two nights at the portaledges camp, freed the remaining difficulties. On the fourth day they completed the 21-pitch route to the summit. The crux is 8a; five pitches are 7c or 7c+, and another eight are 7a to 7b+. Each pitch was led by at least one member of the team. The route is certainly one of the hardest in the Dolomites.

Also from Cima Ovest comes the remarkable story of Lukasz Dudek (Poland), who made an audacious roped solo of Alexander Huber’s 2007 route Pan Aroma (550m, 8c) on the north face. With Jacek Matuszek, Dudek already had made free ascents of Bellavista (8b+) and Project Fear (8c) on

the same face, and the Spanish route (8b+) on the Cima Grande. Dudek prepared for Pan Aroma by working two days on the route in 2019 with a friend, and did several dozen roped-solo ascents of sport routes up to 8c in Poland.

After inspecting the route alone in July, on August 7 he completed every pitch free on his first attempt and reached the summit after 17 hours on the face. While the roof pitches are spectacular, Dudek says it is the long 60m rightward traverse, the original pitch six, that provides the technical crux. He had timed his ascent to arrive at the meat of the route around midday, when the temperature on this shadowed wall would approach maximum, keeping his fingers warm and the pump at bay. But, then, timing was the crucial factor for all these reported adventures, where the protagonists very clearly “seized the day.”

— Lindsay Griffin

Alessandro Baù on pitch seven of Space Vertigo (21 pitches, 8a) on the north face of Cima Ovest di Lavaredo. Photo by Giovanni Danieli

Images



The northeast face of Piz Badile at the end of November 2020. The approximate lines of (1) Amore Supercombo, and (2) Crossway of Friendship.



Silvan Schupbach climbing the thinly iced Linea Bianca section of Crossway of Friendship on the Piz Badile.



Looking south along the Grandes Murailles Ridge with the Valtournenche to the left and upper Grandes Murailles Glacier on the right. (A) Punta del Cors. (B) Punta Estor. (C) Punta Lioy. (D) and (E) Les Jumeaux (Puntas Giordani and Sella). (F) Becca di Guin.



Alessandro Baù on pitch seven of Space Vertigo (21 pitches, 8a), Cima Ovest di Lavaredo.



Marcel Schenk on the lower part of Amore di Vetro, northeast face of the Piz Badile, during the first ascent in 2016. Behind is the Cengalo.



Marcel Schenk on the thinly iced slabs of Amore di Vetro, northeast face of the Piz Badile, during the first ascent in 2016.



Francois Cazzanelli and Francesco Ratti on the summit of Punta Lioy (3,816m) on the Grandes Murailles Ridge, about to embark on the rappels to the gap below Les Jumeaux. On the crest below and to the left is Punta Estor, further left again Punta del Cors (3,852m), to its right the south face of the Matterhorn, and in the far distance, above the two climbers, Monte Rosa.



Looking south along the Grandes Murailles Ridge as the climbers approach the top of Punta Lioy (3,816m). Behind is the sharp north peak (Punta Giordano) of Les Jumeaux (3,872m).



On the east ridge of the Dent d'Hérens with the Dent Blanche (4,356m) behind.



Traversing the Matterhorn on the 2019 attempt at the winter Valtourneche traverse. Behind, with the seraced north face, is the Dent d'Hérens (4,171m). Francois Cazzanelli and Francesco Ratti continued along the crest to below the final rise leading to this summit, then turned left along the snow-capped ridge leading off picture toward the Perelli Hut and the Grandes Murailles ridge.



Foreshortened view of the Tronchey Wall of the Grandes Jorasses, seen from the upper Pra Sec Glacier. (1) Original Route (1,400m, probably ED2 VI and A2, Gogna-Machetto, 1972). (2) Phantom Direct (1,400m, ED2/3 VI/5 or 6, Grassi-Luzi-Rossi, 1985). (3) Plein Sud (VI/5 M6+R), climbed to blank rock within a couple of pitches of the Tronchey Ridge in 2010. (4) Part of the Diamond Ridge (1,600m, 5c A0, Richardson-Rinn, 2016) leading to the upper Tronchey Ridge.

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