



Une Grande Aventure: A 48-day Tour of Mt. Logan, with a Ski Descent of the East Ridge

Canada, Yukon Territory, St. Elias Mountains

From April 29 to June 10, 2019, a team of French climbers and skiers traveled more than 650km by foot, skis, and boat through the wilderness of Wrangell–St. Elias and Kluane national parks, scribing a great semicircle around Mt. Logan (5,959m), Canada’s highest peak, from east to west. In the middle of this journey, they climbed the east ridge of Logan and descended nearly all of the same route on skis, snowboard, and monoski.

Thomas Delfino, Grégory Douillard, Alexandre Marchesseau, and Hélias Millerioux were dropped off by a fishing boat from the village of Yakutat, Alaska, on the beach by the outlet from Malaspina Lake. At the start of the trip, they had 80kg (176lbs) of gear and food per person. With no snow on the ground after a dry winter, the quartet began an arduous trek up a “moraine from hell,” making three 5km round-trips per day for three days to haul all their gear to the glacier. Once on the ice, they were able to pull sleds, but endured five days of rain as they skied across the Malaspina Glacier. Eventually they entered Canada, crossed the vast icefield of the Seward Glacier, and reached the upper Hubbard Glacier. They established base camp for the east ridge of Logan after 16 days—about twice what they had planned.

An old back injury had flared up for Douillard, and he remained in camp while Delfino, Marchesseau, and Millerioux started up the east ridge of Logan, which rises more than 3,500m from the glacier to the summit. The trio spent six and a half days climbing the ridge, two of them stuck in snow caves because of bad weather. They summited in poor visibility on May 23 and began their descent: Delfino on a snowboard, Marchesseau on a monoski, and Millerioux on skis. They descended nearly the entire ridge in this style, removing their skis, etc., only for two sections of the knife-edged ridge and for a rappel to escape the gully they descended off the south side of the ridge. They were back in base camp in the morning of May 25.

The next day, as the team began its trek out of the mountains, Douillard realized after about 8km that he could not continue. He was evacuated the following day by ski plane. The rest of the team continued down to the west, along the Hubbard and Logan glaciers, first on snow, then bare ice, and eventually 30km of moraine—“a veritable labyrinth of mineral Minos”—using a drone to scout the least demanding path carrying packs of more than 35kg (77lbs) each. On June 2 they reached the Chitina River and the airstrip at Hubert’s Landing. Here, a small plane dropped off a resupply of food and a cataraft and picked up Delfino to return home. Marchesseau and Millerioux prepared for the final leg of the journey: a 300km raft trip down the Chitina and Copper rivers, through the Chugach Mountains, to reach the Gulf of Alaska.

“We totally understood Thomas’ decision,” Marchesseau wrote. “We were already on our 40th day in the trip, and after crossing the moraines of the Logan, Walsh and Chitina glaciers, we were far from the human condition, looking like shit with dust on it, pretty exhausted.” Marchesseau and Millerioux relaxed and recovered along the flat-water stretches of their river run, enjoying fresh vegetables and long days in the sun. Eight days after leaving Hubert’s Landing, on June 10, the two beached the raft for the final time at Flag Point, near Cordova, Alaska, 48 days after starting their epic journey.

The expedition, Marchesseau said, had been Millerioux's idea, motivated by "the irrepressible desire to 'get lost' in order to better find yourself internally." The expedition "was not led by anyone, there was no hierarchy in our group of friends, because it is a combination of four personalities with their own experiences and practices, who found in this project a common goal."

— Dougald MacDonald, with information from Alexandre Marchesseau and Hélias Millerioux, France

Earlier Skiing on Logan's East Ridge: In May 2004, Stephen Canning, Sparky Steeves (both from Canada), and Duncan Maisels (U.K.) climbed the east ridge of Mt. Logan to the east peak (5,898m). During their ascent, as they ferried loads, the trio skied most of the ridge in stages, starting as high as 5,800m. They were able to ski the upper of the two knife-edge ridge crests above 3,500m that form cruxes of the route; Canning and Maisels skied the upper knife-edge on belay and then solo, and Steeves was lowered for the first 60m and then continued on skis. Tragically, after summiting the east peak, Canning was killed in a fall at around 5,500m. — Information from Sparky Steeves, Canada

Images



Hélias Millerioux and Thomas Delfino on the east ridge of Mt. Logan. The 3,500-meter descent took two and a half days and was the most continuous known ski descent of the east ridge.



Cross the vast Seward Glacier to Mt. Logan. Most of the east ridge lies behind the right skyline.



Skinning along glacier meltwater channels.



Camp in a sea of moraine during the exit from the mountains.



The French started from Yakutat, Alaska, taking a boat to the outlet from Malaspina Lake. They reached base camp for Mt. Logan's east ridge after 16 days. After descending from the mountain, they headed down the Hubbard and Logan glaciers. Two members of the team continued by raft down the Chitina and Copper rivers to return to the sea.



Climbing on the east ridge of Mt. Logan.



Day 38: Marchesseau and Delfino rest their 35kg loads amid endless moraine, en route to the Chitina River.

Article Details

Author	Dougald MacDonald
Publication	AAJ
Volume	63
Issue	95
Page	100
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions