



AAC Publications

Four First Descents

British Columbia, Interior Ranges

The 2021 ski season was really memorable, and I was fortunate to be able to turn my focus to big lines near home. Normally I would have committed to backcountry lodge guiding and ski film projects that take me to faraway locations, but last season I stayed local, and both conditions and partners lined up perfectly for a few select projects in my backyard.

Mt. Grady/Mt. Burnham, Gold Card Couloir I had first tried the Gold Card Couloir with Andrew McNab years back, skiing in on two occasions to look at the line. Located in the Monashee Mountains in a couloir that splits Mt. Burnham (2,869m) and Mt. Grady (2,860m) on the north side, its intimidating exposure and 200m hanging face above serac ice make your stomach drop at first glance. Although the line was daunting, there was the lure of putting tracks in such a wild place.

On January 23, 2021, Brette Harrington, Andrew, and I set out on snowmobiles for the 30km ride in. From the sleds, it was another two hours of skinning to reach the base of the line. Accessing the upper snow required three ice and mixed pitches (two WI3 and one M4 A0). We reached the top of the couloir just before 3 p.m. and found the only sun we'd felt all day, but the urgency of fleeting light helped for a quick transition.

The snow on the upper face skied well, with minimal sluff, just soft enough to enjoy the exposed turns. We skied to 20m above the ice and made a short rappel to an anchor we'd established on the way up. Two more rappels (60m and 40m) got us through the serac ice and into the lower couloir.

The snow here was firm and chalky. We linked turns to a traverse and one more 15m rappel through rambling ice. At 5 p.m., almost in the dark, we skied off the fan and onto the frozen lake below. By headlamp, we skied back to the sleds for the long, cold ride back to the vehicles. While bootpacking on the ascent, McNab had pulled out his phone to snap a photo, and we all noticed as a thin, shiny object sailed down the line—it was his Visa card. Hence the name: Gold Card Couloir (800m, 50–55°).

Mt. Thor, South Face With an arctic air mass embedded over British Columbia, it was time to take advantage of a big south-facing ski line. On February 10, Andrew McNab and I left the road 50km south of Revelstoke near the Shelter Bay ferry on Upper Arrow Lake. We bundled up with overboots, heated socks, and full down outfits for a terribly cold 24km snowmobile ride to reach the south face of Mt. Thor (2,939m) in the Monashee Mountains.

Starting at 1,200m, we skinned up the east-facing basin for the first 1,300m of vertical gain to the east shoulder of Thor. We then descended 200m to the north side to gain the north couloir, which would lead us to the top of our line. Dropping north with such cold temperatures made me nervous, but we moved quickly to the base of the couloir and found generally friendly boot-packing conditions. At the top we welcomed the calm and sunny conditions. Looking down the south face, the snow looked absolutely perfect: cold, dry powder on a huge face.

Testing the snow in the first few turns, we were ecstatic to encounter boot-top blower snow with minimal sluffing. Leapfrogging pitches, we took turns watching each other disappear behind the powder clouds of sunlit snow from each turn.

Arriving at a small step of rock and waterfall ice, we glanced around at options for anchors to rappel, then opted for some downclimbing with skis and some short mandatory air instead. Below was another 900m of sunlit cold-smoke skiing. After 1,500m of skiing up to 50°, we descended into the cold valley bottom and transitioned to skins for the long, flat walk back to the snowmobiles.

Mt. Nelson, East Face Both Ian McIntosh and I grew up in Invermere, a small town at the headwaters of the Columbia River, nestled between the Rockies and Purcell ranges. The iconic peak of Mt. Nelson rises to 3,313m in the Purcells, and its east face can be seen from most places in town. I grew up looking at this peak from my living room window, and around the age of 11 or 12, I started wondering if it could be skied. At that age, I didn't know anything about ski touring or first descents. It was just pure imagination, but it planted a seed. However, this is an intimidating line and a location with a tricky snowpack, and I procrastinated on any attempt.

On February 23, Ian and I arrived in Invermere. Driving into the valley and seeing Mt. Nelson usually brings joy and a nostalgic feeling, but this time I felt nervous butterflies. We wanted to get eyes on the east face, so Ian and I headed up Panorama Mountain Resort with my dad and filmmaker Josh Lavigne. As we descended the resort piste, we scoped the face from different angles. The line looked good from a distance—and by good I mean incredibly intimidating—but at least it had snow. Later that afternoon we met at the Invermere airport to take a fixed-wing flight over a few objectives. From the air, Ian snapped photos of the approach up Nelson's south face and the grand east face while I hurled into the barf bag.

We spent the next week skiing around the area, familiarizing ourselves with the snowpack. A weather window presented itself and we mobilized a film crew. Two days before, I set a skin track from the Toby Creek Road to the alpine basin below the south face of Nelson.

We started skinning at 1:45 a.m. on March 4. From the trucks, it was just over 2,000m of vertical gain to the summit. At the base of the south face, we skinned up to the constriction of the rocks and transitioned to climbing. The dark night sky was lightening with orange and beautiful blues. The top quarter of the south face had little to no snow, so we continued scrambling up rock steps, mindful of rockfall. Finally breaking onto the ridge, we walked up toward the beautiful summit cross, reaching the top at 8:45 a.m.

Speed was crucial, as the east face had first light. With anxious parents and community watching from Panorama and ski patrol listening to our communications, we dropped in on a short rappel at 9 a.m. The snow on the face was very shallow and faceted (sugary), making clipping a rock a very hazardous possibility. We found the best snow in the main trough and skied one at a time, leapfrogging pitches. The snow stayed dry and cold, but just barely. We traversed skier's right over an exposed cliff band and regrouped. Due to the sugary snow, protruding rocks, and exposed terrain, we built an anchor using a pin, wire, and one screw in questionable ice, then rappelled 30m over the rocks to the final fan. Ian skied the fan while I coiled the ropes.

There was a sense of weight being lifted as we linked big turns exiting the face. Our line had been 750m of terrain up to 55°. A childhood dream realized with a good friend. Immediately after, the buzz of the descent had hit the community. We now get to look up from town with so much pride.

Bagheera Mountain, North Face Mark Hartley, a talented splitboarder and local legend, picked me up at 3:30 a.m. on April 24. We met Andrew McNab at Bostock parking and left his truck there for us to use on our way out. The three of us continued to the Rogers Pass center and geared up for the day.

We knew the south face of Bagheera (2,720m), our ascent route, would be locked up with a melt-freeze crust and an early start would help us get a head start. We hustled up Connaught (a winter access point) and transitioned at Balu Pass. The sun was just starting to hit the highest peaks as we skied down and west toward Cougar Creek. We made another transition to skin up the valley until directly below the south face of Bagheera. With the firm crust and almost 1,000m of elevation gain,

we transitioned to boot-packing with crampons. Rolling clouds kept the aspect cool as we marched to the top of our line.

McNab and I belayed Hartley out to cut away some of the cornice and build a rappel anchor. Slinging a block to skier's right of the entrance allowed a 15m rappel. The top of the line consisted of a steep and skinny 300m-long couloir. Where the couloir widened, we would traverse skier's right over a big, exposed cliff and look for the exit couloir.

From the top, it was hard to tell if it would go, and our photos of the line were incomplete. But we had all the gear we needed to navigate the unknown. Once all in, we pulled and coiled the rope, clicked into our skis and snowboard, and started to descend one at a time. It was 55° at the top and narrowed to a ski length wide. We made our way down and into the wider part of the couloir, where the snow was soft and dry, making the skiing more comforting in such a wild and steep place.

The traverse out right had a little west-facing tilt to it, firming up the snow and requiring us to use our ice axes on descent as we made our way down to a snow ledge. Taking off our skis, we did a 5m downclimb before transitioning into downhill mode, making some tight turns through the exit couloir before we were out of the business.

We skied down to Ursus Creek, snacking and filling up our water bottles as we transitioned to begin making our way out. After a total of 16km and 2,500m of elevation, the ski boots came off with pleasure. [Editor's Note: In 2010, Mark Hartley and Greg Hill descended a different line on the north side of Bagheera, looker's left of the 2021 line.]

— **Christina Lustenberger, Canada**

Images



A drone image of the Gold Card Couloir, between Mt. Grady (left) and Mt. Burnham (right).



Brette Harrington climbing serac ice on an initial attempt on the Gold Card Couloir in the Monashee Mountains. The team got spooked off shortly after this, returning two days later to finish the route and make the ski descent.



Christina Lustenberger giving all her attention to the first exposed first turns while dropping into Gold Card Couloir's upper face.



Christina Lustenberger rappelling through serac ice to link together sections on the first descent of the Gold Card Couloir in the Monashee Mountains.



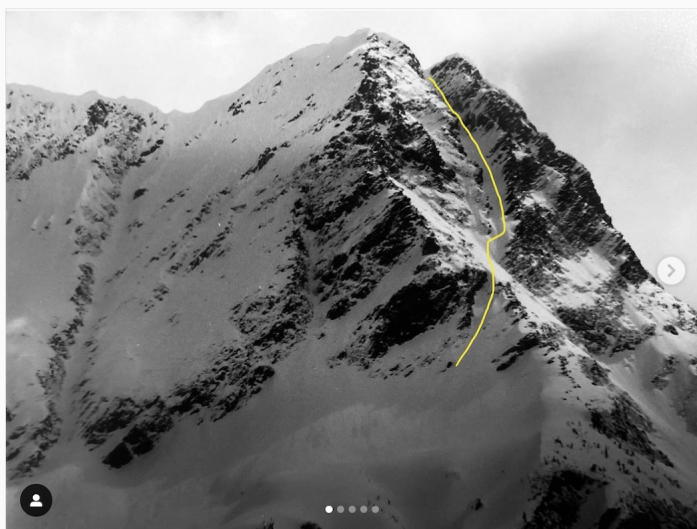
A cold high-pressure system in February delivered blower snow on the huge south face of Mt. Thor in the Monashee Mountains. Christina Lustenberger enjoying the first few turns on the face.



Christina Lustenberger linking turns on the sun-shadow line during the first descent of the south face of Mt. Thor. The Gold Card Couloir can be seen in the distance.



Growing up in nearby Invermere, Christina Lustenberger and Ian McIntosh aspired to someday put ski tracks down Mt. Nelson's beautiful east face. This photo was taken about a week before the first descent.



The line skied in 2021 by Mark Hartley, Christina Lustenberger, and Andrew McNab on the north side of Bagheera Mountain. In 2010, Hartley and Greg Hill snowboarded and skied into and down the obvious couloir on the far left side of the face.

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