



AAC Publications

The Moonwalk Traverse

The First South to North Traverse of the Fitz Roy Massif, Solo

I arrived in El Chaltén at the beginning of January 2020 with my climbing partner Nicolas Favresse.

We had a great season, climbing two new routes and freeing a third (AAJ 2020). Nico returned to Europe around mid-March. My plan was to stay until the end of March, but by then the COVID-19 pandemic had hit. Travel was complicated, flights had been canceled, and Argentina was in lockdown. I spent the austral winter in Argentina. At some point, I could have found a way home, but things in Europe seemed bad, and I was in one of my favorite places on the planet. After the initial confinement period, El Chaltén had zero cases, and things became more relaxed. I felt like I was locked in a giant playground. I spent the fall, winter, and spring taking long hikes, bouldering, sport climbing, ski touring, ice climbing, training, and playing music—there wasn't a dull moment.

Inspired by the approach and philosophy of my friend Sílvia Vidal—who has climbed big walls solo, sometimes without contact for over 30 days—I had dreamed of doing a solo ascent for years. But when you are spoiled with the best climbing partners imaginable, it is not easy to find the opportunity to go off on your own! During the long winter nights in my camper van, I imagined trying the Fitz Traverse, Tommy Caldwell and Alex Honnold's traverse of Fitz Roy and its satellite peaks (AAJ 2014). The route is incredibly aesthetic, but the idea was absurd, too big, totally unrealistic. Nevertheless, it never hurts to dream. I leafed through the guidebook, taking notes, making photocopies, and seeing if I could put all the pieces of the puzzle together. Whereas Tommy and Alex climbed from north to south, I imagined doing the traverse in reverse, mostly because it was something new. One day, I started believing it was actually possible, and that was enough.

Roped solo climbing is laborious and time intensive. Realistically, I planned on 10 days. My only prerequisite was a six-day weather window, which is very rare. Regardless, I started to prepare by training, visualizing, and arranging gear and food. A six-day window appeared over my 40th birthday, February 7, 2021. I was bubbling with excitement. I had not yet told anyone my plans for fear they would think I had lost my mind.

"At least tell us which direction you are going so we know where to look if you get into any trouble," my friend Juan Collado pleaded. I told him I would start on Aguja De l'S and get as far as I could. That is also what I told Rolando Garibotti when I asked him for some last-minute advice on the weather. Convinced he would try to talk me out of it, I was surprised when a smile appeared on his face. "That's a great idea!" Rolo said, immediately pulling out his own gear to replace some of my worn-out stuff. He insisted I take his brand new, top-of-the-line rope.

"That old sport climbing rope you have is no good! For a project like this, the right rope is essential," he said. I felt like he was giving me the keys to his Ferrari. I later learned that both Juan and Rolo thought the summit of Fitz Roy was my ultimate objective. It had not occurred to them that I was going to try a full traverse of the massif.

I approached from the southeast, via Laguna Sucia, sleeping at the cave near the edge of the glacier. On February 5, the east face of the Aguja de l'S lit up with the golden glow of morning light as I started climbing the Cara Este route. I felt at home. Every move felt precise and efficient, the summation of years spent big-wall free climbing. I reminded myself, This is a marathon, not a sprint! Don't rush. Keep a rhythm. Stay in the present. Enjoy every moment.

My gear—with ten days of food, a small tent, sleeping bag, and tin whistle—was too heavy to carry while climbing, so I carried both a light backpack and a small haul bag, which I would haul with a thin tag line on technical pitches. On ledges and sections with easy scrambling, I stuffed everything into my pack. My strategy was very inefficient. I often had to repack my bags depending on the terrain. On the other hand, I had not prioritized efficiency or achievement, just experience.

While I was hauling on Aguja St. Exupery, a few loose rocks slid off a ledge. When I pulled up my main lead rope, I had three core shots. I felt like I had just crashed Rolo's new Ferrari! I was nearly convinced it was over, but I still wanted to see how far I would get. The sight of the core shots pierced my heart like a needle, so I covered them with climbing tape. *Out of sight, out of mind*, I thought. The tape would get stuck in cracks, carabiners, and the Grigri. On rappels, when possible, I unweighted the rope to move the damaged sections through my device. I spent my first night on the north shoulder of St. Exupery, maybe a couple of rappels from the ridge leading to Aguja Rafael Juárez.

On day two, the long ridge traverse between Aguja St. Exupery and Aguja Rafael Juárez demanded a good nose for route finding. With a sea of clouds below, small waves danced between the summits. The breeze was icy cold. Crossing to the east face, I noticed major difficulties, so I turned back to the west face. I spotted a red cam lying on the ground and instantly knew: My harness gear loop had broken (probably from a diet of too many offwidths). I backtracked for 100m, just in case, and found more cams lying around. At least there was now less weight to carry. After reaching the summit of Aguja Rafael Juárez, I descended the Piola-Anker to reach the base of the south face of Aguja Poincenot. I then climbed the Fonrouge-Rosasco (700m, 6c) to a bivy near the junction with the Whillans-Cochrane Route.

On day three, I continued to the summit of Aguja Poincenot and rappelled north via Invisible Line. From the col, I tackled Aguja Kakito, climbing a few new pitches to reach the summit from the east. When I arrived at Brecha de los Italianos, below the southeast side of Cerro Fitz Roy, it was still early afternoon, but I was worried about the strong winds predicted for that night. At least that was the last forecast that I had seen before leaving El Chaltén; I did not carry an inReach, phone, or any way of getting updates. I wanted to avoid being benighted on Fitz Roy with no decent bivouac. There was still a long way to go, but it was important not to burn out. Doubting my plan, I saw two friends rappelling the Franco-Argentine—due to a waterfall on the route, they explained. I relaxed the rest of the afternoon in my tent, protecting myself from the sun, and glad for my luck.

On the morning of day four, the Franco-Argentine linkup was dried out and protected from the wind. The climbing flowed, and I focused on keeping a rhythm. The topo describes the last 200m as a "50° slope, not difficult." Expecting an easy walk to the summit, I was surprised by sections of hard ice. My approach shoes, aluminum crampons, single ice axe, and one ice screw did not feel like the appropriate equipment. The slightest misstep would have been fatal. Once on the summit of Fitz Roy, I spent an hour there, enjoying the view, playing my trusty tin whistle, and eating some trail mix. It was still early, and I had plenty of time to descend the big north face. Though I live in Belgium, my nationality is Irish, so when the tune "An Poc Ar Buile," came to my mind, I started dancing and singing aloud about the mad, ferocious goat who symbolizes the indomitable spirit of the Irish.

It was windy, which made the rappels down the Casarotto Route dangerous. After a few rappels, I found myself 100m above the Goretta Pillar, just above a big waterfall. I had hoped to reach the top of the pillar and bivy there, but I wanted to avoid a wet rope at all costs, as wet nylon would wear out even faster. I waited on a small ledge, hoping for the wind to ease. I started cleaning the ledge, more to stay warm than with the thought of a potential bivouac. However, once all the ice and rocks were cleared, the ledge looked about the size of my tent, and it was protected from the wind! For the second day in a row, I stopped early and spent the evening admiring the magical sunset. The shadow of the Fitz Roy Massif appeared on the plains and slowly dissolved into a pyramid of strange lights.

On the fifth morning, the wind had died, the waterfall had stopped, and I could continue the descent to the Col del Bloque Empotrado without incident. Once again, things had fallen into place. It was still

early as I climbed Aguja Val Biois and then did the traverse to Aguja Mermoz. The whole ridge up to Mermoz was longer and more complex than I expected. Every time I climbed a small peak, I found several more separating me from Mermoz. But this moment was it. There was no longing. I stayed present, moved, and relished it. I arrived on the summit of Mermoz as the light faded and pitched my tent for my fifth and final night on the traverse.

In the morning, the 10th, I made a few rappels down the upper part of the Pillar Rojo, then two rappels straight down to the big ledge system on the Argentina route on the east face. I then climbed the Bresba-Dominguez-Lüthi route to the south summit of Aguja Guillaumet. Around noon, as if in a dream, I strolled onto Aguja Guillaumet, the last summit of the Fitz Roy Massif. I burst out my tin whistle and celebrated with an extra handful of trail mix. However, the wind grew stronger, and I reminded myself the importance of keeping focus until the end. After seeing rockfall on the Amy-Vidailhet on the lower east face, the face that is protected from the wind, I decided it was safer to take my chances with the wind and rappel the Brenner-Moschioni route on the north ridge.

The rope, which in less than a week had received the equivalent of a lifetime of climbing, looked like a rag. By my last rappel, the six days of intense effort and concentration had added up. The ground was near, but the weight of my backpack was crushing. There were now many patches of tape on the rope. Suddenly, the sheath finally cut loose, and I slid down quickly, exposing more than a meter of core! Miraculously, the rope I damaged on day one had survived to the end. I continued quickly to firm ground at Paso Guillaumet. From here on, it was only walking.

A few hours later, I arrived at Piedra Blanca, a green meadow with a large, white boulder, a small, howling torrent, and a beautiful view down the valley. Big, dark clouds rolled through quickly. I had visualized the final descent to Piedra del Fraile so many times. *But why go down?* I thought. The afternoon was young, and I still had plenty of time to reach the village of El Chaltén. I did not feel ready to face the world below. Rolo and Juan, the only people I had dared tell my plan, probably were worried. They could wait until tomorrow, I thought.

I planted my tent under the granite boulder, protected from the gnar. Freed from my clothing, I dipped into the small glacial stream to feel the cold and life passing over my skin. Then, I walked around naked and picked wild berries while the wind served as a towel. I spent the rest of the afternoon lying beneath the boulder, admiring the view, and absorbing the experience I had just lived.

Summary: The Moonwalk Traverse (+4,000m, 6c 50°), climbed over six days from February 5–10, 2021, is the first south to north traverse of the entire Fitz Roy Massif. Climbing solo, Seán Villanueva O'Driscoll self-belayed and hauled on all but the easier pitches and climbed everything free except for rappels. Most of the traverse was new to Seán. He had previously: soloed the first two peaks, Aguja de l'S and Aguja St. Exupery, in December 2020; climbed the upper section (Whillans-Cochrane) of Aguja Poincenot on his and Nico Favresse's free ascent of Historia Interminable in February 2020; attempted the Franco-Argentine linkup in 2006, climbing most of it. The first complete traverse of the massif, the Fitz Traverse (+4,000m, 5.11d C1 65°), was climbed north to south over five days in 2014 by Tommy Caldwell and Alex Honnold. The ridgeline is approximately 5km long.

About the Author: Born and raised in Belgium to an Irish mother and Spanish father, Seán Villanueva O'Driscoll still resides in Belgium but says, "Home is wherever I put down my duffel bag, really. Right now, it is El Chaltén, but maybe not when this AAJ comes out."

The Cutting Edge Podcast (Ep. 38) interview about the Moonwalk Traverse:

The Cutting Edge · Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll: The Moonwalk Traverse

Images



Villanueva O'Driscoll atop Aguja Rafael Juárez.



Villanueva O'Driscoll atop Aguja Guillaumet, the final summit of his traverse.



Villanueva O'Driscoll's trashed and core-shot rope after the last rappel. He had borrowed the rope (brand new) from Rolando Garibotti. He writes, "While I was hauling on Aguja St. Exupery, a few loose rocks slid off a ledge. When I pulled up my main lead rope, I had three core shots. I felt like I had just crashed Rolo's new Ferrari!"



Villanueva O'Driscoll with the shadow of Cerro Fitz Roy projected below.



The Moonwalk Traverse went from left to right (south to north) over the Fitz Roy massif, crossing nine major summits in about five kilometers.

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