



The Alpine Trilogy by Bike: A New Approach to a Legendary Set of Climbs

Europe, The Alps

It was January 2020, and I was looking for a climbing project for the summer—something really different, a challenge that would test my limits, but also something with less environmental impact than an expedition involving many planes. After some research, an idea began to emerge: the Alpine Trilogy, three legendary 8b+ (5.14a) multipitch routes in the Swiss, Austrian, and German Alps, opened by three legendary climbers, all in 1994. The three routes—Silbergeier in the Rätikon Group of the Swiss Alps (Beat Kammerlander), Des Kaisers Neue Kleider in the Kaiser Mountains of Austria (Stefan Glowacz), and End of Silence in Bavaria's Northern Salzburg Alps (Thomas Huber)—are similar in difficulty and length, but each has its own character and style.

Doing any one of these routes reflects a great performance in the world of high-level multi-pitch climbing, but doing all three is a challenge that only a handful of climbers have managed to achieve—and they had never been done in one summer. Ambitious certainly, but undoubtedly possible! After the pandemic canceled all of my planned trips for the year, and after realizing the three routes were relatively close to each other, I wondered: Would it be possible to do them without fossil fuels? Could I find all the ingredients for a real expedition without taking three planes and two buses to some far-flung destination? Cycling seemed to be the way.

In July, three weeks before the ideal start date for the project, everything seemed ready. Most COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted in Europe. Photographer Damien LARGERON had signed on, and I'd found a dog sitter for Kroux, my canine partner. However, I still had a little problem to solve: No partners were lining up. Who would be crazy enough to embark on such a project?

I worried that I would have to postpone the trip, but one morning my phone rang and I heard the soft voice of my famous Belgian compatriot Nicolas Favresse. His exploratory trip to the big walls of Norway had just been aborted due to the pandemic, and he was looking for a Plan B. Without further ado, I suggested he get on his bike and join me in three weeks. He immediately and enthusiastically agreed, but then there was silence on the phone. I could almost hear him thinking, hesitating.

"I'm in, but I have a condition," he said. I expected the worst: time limits, electric assistance, a sweep vehicle. "We have to take the dogs with us," he explained. Shit, I found someone crazier than me!

On August 2, our train to the base of the Rätikon, our first objective, entered the station in France. I took stock of the team: Bintje, a fiery young dog of an undetermined breed. Kroux, cat lover and border collie-golden retriever mix. Damien and his photo equipment. Nico with his guitar and me in my best pink tights. In 45 seconds, we had to load ourselves and all the gear to sustain a month of multi-pitch routes in the mountains onto a train whose doors are too narrow to pass a cart and whose conductor is not fond of bicycles or pets. Somehow our nomadic caravan all got on board. We were underway.

Silbergeier is probably the most famous of the Trilogy and was the perfect route to test our fitness. Nico had climbed the route almost 10 years earlier, and I had given it a try without completing it. We'd quickly know whether this quest could become reality or would stay a dream.

After hours of climbing and sweating on incredible gray limestone, we reached the crux, a technical and bouldery pitch on small crimps. Try after try, Nico and I unlocked the sequences together. One of us found a foothold, the other imagined tricky beta for the hands. A few hours and falls later, we both clipped the anchor after a fierce fight! It was just in time, as melting snow from the top of the wall was flowing dangerously close to the key holds. We each had freed all the pitches, both of us leading the pitches graded 8a and harder.

Ten days later, after a quick bonus send of Headless Children (260m, 8b), also in the Rätikon, we have made our way to the Wilder Kaiser and are resting on an uncomfortable ledge for yet another try at the final crux of Des Kaisers Neue Kleider. "Don't fall asleep, you have to wake Nico in 30 minutes for his try!" I tell myself. "Concentrate, look at the stars, do not fall asleep, do not fall asleeeee...."

I'm awakened by Nico readjusting his position on the ledge. The silent, dark night of the Wilder Kaiser is punctuated by Damien's snoring. "Are you ready to attack?" I whisper to Nico. He responds by turning on our single dim headlamp. His eyes are tired but wide open, and I can see unwavering determination.

After 18 hours of climbing and nearly 20 tries to redpoint the route's four pitches of 8a or harder, Nico sets off for a final attempt on this last pitch, rated 8b+ (5.14a). The first section, a steep and terribly technical dihedral, is executed to perfection. Two more moves and he will be on the jug before the final, easier section. He begins to tremble and then forcefully grabs the jug with a cry. Only a few more easier moves—the victory is not far!

Earlier in the night, however, we both had fallen at these final moves before the anchor. In that moment, I forget my fatigue, my hunger, my thirst. In the light of the headlamp, fighting with slippery footholds, Nico climbs slowly and cautiously. In a few moves, he is trembling and breathing hard. I shout encouragement, giving back the support he has offered me throughout the day. He arrives at the final move, grabs the final jug, and clips the anchor, and our cries of joy break the calm silence of the night. Despite our doubts, despite the morning rain, wet pitches, and numerous falls, we have completed Des Kaisers Neue Kleider on our first (long) day on the route, again both freeing all the pitches, and each leading the ones 8a and harder.

We had been climbing, pedaling, and walking for two weeks by then. I wanted a real adventure, and the ingredients were all there: flat tires, high mountain passes under the sun and in the snow, multiple thunderstorms, soaked, dried, resoaked, paradisiacal moments and urban bivouacs, rockfall, big falls, dips in lakes and rivers each more bucolic than the last. Calf pain replaced pain in the fingertips and vice versa.

The sweet sound of barking dogs followed in our footsteps as we biked, camped, and climbed through the Alps. Bintje and Kroux seemed to enjoy their new way of life each day. Running alongside our bikes or riding in the carts, sleeping outside next to their owners—what else does a dog need?

We were ahead of schedule and optimistic. Aside from the skin on our fingers, we felt particularly fit. Our buttocks had become accustomed to our saddles and no longer cried out in pain each time we got on the bikes. We relished in slowly discovering these landscapes while carrying only the bare essentials (with the exception of a plastic flamingo and a guitar). It also seemed the pedal strokes boosted our climbing volume, our stamina, and even our resistance. Sprinkled with a few hangboard sessions, this seemed to be a recipe for success.

On August 20, after another 50km of pedaling, getting lost for more than three hours in the bushes, and a series of particularly slippery footholds in run-out terrain, we topped out The End of Silence in the Berchtesgaden massif. Our skin was in tatters, the Trilogy complete.

What a joy to combine a high-performance goal with a close-to-home adventure. What a joy to climb and travel while minimizing our impact, right in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. Perhaps these kinds of adventures are the future.

Summary of Activity: Sébastien Berthe and Nico Favresse became the first climbers to complete the Alpine Trilogy in a single summer season. They redpointed each route ground-up and in a day (Favresse had redpointed Silbergeier 10 years prior). From August 2–28, 2020, the two biked a total of 650km between the climbs. With time and energy to spare after completing the trilogy, Berthe and Favresse pedaled to the Eiger and made a one-day, team-free repeat of Odyssee (1,400m, 8a+).

Nico Favresse was interviewed about this tour for episode 32 of the Cutting Edge podcast:

The Cutting Edge · Nico Favresse and the Alpine Trilogy
CARO NORTH AND INES PAPERT: SWISS BIKE AND CLIMB

In August 2020, Caro North (Switzerland) and Ines Papert (Germany) undertook a bike and climb journey from east to west across Switzerland, pulling trailers behind their mountain bikes and climbing classic multi-pitch routes of the Swiss Alps.

Departing from Feldkirch, Austria, on August 10, the two spent a month traversing the country, pedaling about 600km and climbing Intifada (220m, 7a+) in the Rätikon, Peruvian Dancing Dust (7a+) on the Teufelstalschlucht above Andermatt, Excalibur (350m, 6b) in the Wendenstöcke, Deep Blue Sea (320m, 7b+) on the north face of the Eiger, and a route on the south face of Gastlosen. They finished the trip on the French border with an alpine traverse of les Aiguilles Dorées in the Mont Blanc massif.

— Andy Anderson

Images



Nico Favresse, Sébastien Berthe, and photographer Damien Largeron (right to left) during the Alpine Trilogy summer tour.



Nico Favresse leading on Des Kaisers Neue Kleider in Austria's Wilder Kaiser.



Sébastien Berthe and Nicolas Favresse towed the gear for a nearly four-week trip, plus their dogs, Kroux and Bintje, for about 650 kilometers.



Sébastien Berthe on Des Kaisers Neue Kleider in Austria. Berthe and Favresse each redpointed all of the harder pitches during their one-day ascents of the three routes of the Alpine Trilogy.

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