



AAC Publications

The 10X Project

Exploring the Intersection of Skiing and Mountaineering in the Alps

THE 4TH OF MAY, 6 o'clock in the morning. The halo of my headlamp guides me through the mixed pine and mélèzes forest on the slopes of Le Pouzenc in the south of France. I'm feeling fine, the air is cold, and I'm thinking about my project for today: a wild, steep, and magnetic face that I first saw in a picture a friend took a few years ago. The goal is to try to make the first ski descent.

I had already parked below Le Pouzenc twice this winter to have a look at the face through binoculars, but the conditions were not good. At the moment, I still have many doubts. Will there be enough snow? And what will it look like? Or will there be too much new snow? Yesterday I saw a lot of fresh snow in the Massif des Ecrins, farther north, and I'm worried about the avalanche hazard. But Le Pouzenc is a lot lower than the Ecrins and this line faces southwest, and today it is cold enough for stability. I take some deep breaths to smell the spring forest's perfume. As usual, my doubts fade, leaving only one thought: I'm in the mountains I love, and no matter what happens, at least I will spend a wonderful day in the wilderness.

AUTUMN

Autumn 2020, at home in Cercier, about halfway between Lake Geneva and Lake Annecy at the foot of the Alps. We're in our second shutdown for the COVID pandemic. For one month, we are stuck in our homes, unable to travel beyond a 10-kilometer perimeter. But soon there will be a bit more flexibility, and, as often, my mind has been turning over the possibilities for the coming winter.

I'm always researching faces that might not have seen a previous ski descent—studying published reports, calling local skiers who know the history of their mountains—and I already had a few new lines in mind. One morning, I woke up with an idea for a grand adventure not far from home: I would try to open ten new lines of steep skiing throughout the Western Alps. Some very good French skiers had recently made similar achievements: Hervé Degonon had done more than 30 first descents a few seasons earlier (2016–17), but all of them were in the same range, the Massif des Ecrins. Nicolas Jean had a huge season in the spring of 2018, also mostly in the Ecrins.

I wanted to try something a little different: I would attempt new lines in many different ranges in Italy, Switzerland, and France. I also had a few self-imposed rules. I would climb and ski from summits and not just from shoulders or ridges; each line had to be at least 500 meters high; and I would not use any mechanical assistance on the mountain: neither cable cars nor snow machines nor helicopters. All the slopes would be reached by skiing and mountaineering.

The goal with all these requirements was to create a real adventure, which would demand a lot of research and preparation. Most of the obvious, logical lines in the Alps have been skied. Potential new lines may be very beautiful, but they aren't as obvious and you have to have more mountaineering knowledge. The weather, the avalanche risk, the date, the orientation of the slopes, the winds—all would be crucial to success. Over 80 percent of the time on this project would be spent looking at maps, at weather forecasts, at avalanche data—and, obviously, training hard.

JANUARY

The project started on January 5, 2021, with a new line in the Aravis Range in Haute-Savoie, only about an hour's drive from my home. Le Jardin Secret was on the east face of the 2,362-meter summit of Pointes de la Blonnière. This is a 650-meter slope with a lot of difficult and quite hazardous traverses. I made the climb and descent with my friend Vivian Bruchez, after observing the slope a few days before.

Vivian also joined me for the tenth and final descent of the project, nearly five months later, on the southwest face of Ta schhorn (4,491 meters), not far from Zermatt in the Pennine Alps of Switzerland. I called this descent "X," like the number 10 and like the unknown in a mathematical equation. It was a 950-meter descent, very technical, that began on the east face and ended on the southwest face, passing through gullies and over very steep hanging slopes. Leaving our tent at around 3,200 meters, we climbed the entire face before descending, with difficulties around grade 4 ice. Fortunately, we found a little traverse that let us avoid any abseils during the descent; we had just a few meters of downclimbing.

Very different from each other, these first and last new lines say a lot about the whole project.

Le Jardin Secret was a last-minute idea, and the snow conditions were just good enough to try it. We skied in cold, faceted snow, often touching rocks but avoiding hidden avalanche hazards. We did two shorts abseils from trees, and during the descent we had to climb twice for a bit to reach the slopes we wanted to ski.

The descent on the Ta schhorn was an idea I'd had for at least two years, brought to me by Rodolphe Popier, a very experienced skier and chronicler of first ascents and descents in the Alps and elsewhere. (Popier is a correspondent for the Club Alpin Français, the Himalayan Database, and the AAJ.) I first went to Switzerland to try this line in April, but there was not yet enough snow. So I had to wait until the end of May to ski it, again with Vivian, dealing with old snow and spring conditions.

In both of these cases, and throughout the "10X Project," my major goal was to absolutely avoid avalanche risks, even if this meant I had to deal with poor conditions for skiing, because on such slopes, if anything goes wrong, there is high potential for a fatal fall. As a result, these descents had little to do with the idealized vision seen in films of free-riders ripping down powder snow in beautiful landscapes, with a support team and a rescue helicopter standing by. They had a lot more to do with alpinism. That doesn't mean these descents were better or worse; they were simply different.

Alone or with my friends, I had the chance to not only open new skiing lines but also four entirely new climbing routes:

- Le Jardin Secret (650m, D III M3 75°) on the east face of the 2,362-meter summit of Pointes de la Blonnière, Aravis Range, France, with Vivian Bruchez
- L'Eperon des Saltimbanques (1,200m, TD- V- 70° and one step of M4/5) on the north face of Le Chaperon (2,750m), Ecrins Massif, France, with Xavier Cailhol
- Il Segreto di Mai ra (1,100m, AD II M2 70°) on the east face of Rocca Bianca di Acceglio (2,950m), Cottian Alps, Italy, solo
- La Traversée des Anges (600m, D+ III M3 80°), west face of Le Pouzenc (2,898m), Embrunais, France, solo

My partners and I also completed three climbs, from 1,100 to 1,600 meters high, that had never been climbed all the way from bottom to top (only portions of these routes had been climbed or skied before). Almost all of the climbs were done unroped; I just needed a rope for about 10 meters on the east face of the Combin de la Tsessette—thanks Vivian!

Out of nearly 10,000 vertical meters skied, we made only 200 meters of abseils. Six of the ten descents had no rappels. The steepest slope we skied was measured at 57° (on the Ta schhorn). The

longest distance we covered in a day was 40 kilometers round-trip (to reach La Testa Tra le Stelle, Val Vény, without using snow machines). These numbers aren't offered to impress—they are just to illustrate our rules of the game.

As a mountain guide, under French law, I was less restricted than many people by the COVID lockdowns, but I did break a curfew once to start my day at 4 a.m. instead of 6 a.m. The border with Italy also was closed for a time, limiting my possibilities. In April, France had another shutdown, and though sports professionals like me were allowed to move around the country, I decided not to abuse this special treatment, and for most of the month I stayed near home. (I went to Switzerland once to try the Ta schhorn, but it wasn't in good condition.) My thinking was always, "OK, Paul, you might be allowed to move, but other people, including the ones who watch you on social media, aren't so free. If I were them, I wouldn't be happy to see somebody enjoying the mountains while being stuck at home." In early May, the restrictions eased again, and I ventured out for the final three routes of the project.

SPRING

Since completing the 10X Project, I'm been asking myself a lot of questions. Was it alpinism? Was it skiing? If it was not free riding and not exactly what the elders called "extreme skiing," what was it? Are there past achievements that can enlighten me? For example, we can look at Pierre Tardivel, Sylvain Saudan, Dominique Neuenschwander, Daniel Chauchefoin, and so many others and ask: Were my friends and I (and some other people, too) playing the same game?

On the one hand, yes, it is the same game: searching for new lines, exploring the unknowns of a face. But on the other hand, with all the climbing we had to do, with the variable snow and weather conditions we had to manage, without a big team or any safety assistance, it does seem as if this project was something different. Not better, not worse, just different. Moreover, the five-month span of the project added its own challenges. It wasn't like an expedition to K2 where you spend two months thinking about nothing but your climb. There was the client who wanted to climb Mont Blanc, the lawn that needed to be mowed; there was helping your child study her lessons or playing basketball with your son. Sometimes it was impossible to take advantage of good conditions.

In fact, these pressures prompted a different way of thinking about the mountains. Even though I had a list of objectives at the beginning of the project, it was the mountains that convinced me where to go. It was like, "Hey, I have a day free next week, let's look at the options." I'd check the weather forecast in France, Italy, and Switzerland, look at the avalanche bulletins, check social media to see what people had done recently, and only then start looking at lines that might be safe to ski and would meet my objectives. I felt like a prospector for gold.

In this way, the 10X Project was simply a way of evolving and learning in the mountains. Steep skiing is one of the best paths for this evolution because I believe there is no way to find steeper slopes than those that have already been skied. Therefore, in my opinion, it isn't possible or fruitful to compete, to argue about being a "better" steep skier than anyone else. To me, the only games that are still meaningful are about creativity and imagination, not about competition or difficulty. In fact, none of the lines we skied had the maximum grade for steep skiing (5.5/ E4), nor were any of them particularly dangerous, at least with the conditions I found (or patiently waited to find). The way I thought about this project was more about exploration than difficulty.

I became a mountain guide not because I grew up in the mountains, nor with parents who were great alpinists. My education came in the cow pastures, with the smell of flowers and the sap from the pine trees—first walking gently through the forest, then climbing a little bit, then running and skiing. In fact, I would say I am not an alpinist at all—more a mountaineer. When I discovered the world of alpinism almost 40 years ago, I read a lot about heroism and conquest, and my first impressions of "alpinism" were of fear, as if the climbers were going to war, risking their lives (and sometimes losing them) because of their desire to conquer a summit. In my way of thinking, the mountaineer's primary goal is

simply to be in the mountains.

I'm convinced the times of going to the mountains for personal glory have passed. We have to find other goals; we have to tell other stories than those about heroism, courage, and facing death. The 10X Project was a real commitment, but by that I don't mean a committing day or a committing style of skiing. This project was a way to illuminate what seems most important to seek up there—curiosity, imagination, respect, balance with nature, patience, renunciation—and what you can bring back home.

MAY

May 4, 11 a.m. I pause to remove my skis and look back at the face on Le Pouzenc that I've just descended. As expected, it was very technical. The ascent took a long time. The lower rocky outcrop was really tricky, with an amazing traverse under an overhanging limestone band, an icefall, and a 30-meter mixed climb. After that, I had to cross the whole face from right to left, through many gullies, always looking for the best way to come back down. The crux of the descent was around 100 meters below the summit, an icy and very exposed traverse before a 15-meter dry-skiing section. As it was a traverse, abseiling wasn't possible.

Now, at the bottom, I'm feeling satisfied. Not with a feeling of glory ("Wow, I'm the first to do this!"), but more like, "Hey, that was really a wonderful journey." I strap my skis onto my pack and gently make my way back down through the pines, completely alone, deeply breathing the joy of wilderness.

About the Author: Born in 1975, Paul Bonhomme is a Dutch native living in Cercier, France. Married and with four children, he works as a mountain guide. Bonhomme and his skiing partners produced compelling videos of the descents described in this article. A few of these are shared below.

THE 10X DESCENTS

Jan. 5 Le Jardin Secret (650m, 5.4 E4), east face of Pointes de la Blonnière (2,362m), Aravis Range, France

Jan. 19 L'Éperon des Saltimbanques (1,200m, 5.4 E4), north face of Le Chaperon (2,750m), Ecrins Massif, France

Jan. 26 Il Segreto di Mai ra (1,100m, 5.3 E3), east face of Rocca Bianca di Acceglio (2,950m), Alpi Cozie (Cottian Alps), Italy

Feb. 21 Les Larmes d'Ulysse (500m, 5.2 E3), Mont Pélago (2,768m), Alpes- Maritimes (Maritimes Alps), France

Mar. 6 La Cathédrale (1,600m, 5.3 E4), east face of Rochers du Rochail (2,853m), Ecrins Massif, France

Mar. 10 La Testa Tra le Stelle (1,100m, 5.3 E3), southeast face of Te te Carrée (3,732m), Monte Bianco (Mont Blanc) Massif, Italy

Apr. 1 Les Piliers de Bagne (1,200m, 5.4 E4), east face of Combin de la Tsessette (4,141m), Grand Combin Massif, Pennine Alps, Switzerland

May 4 La Traversée des Anges (600m, 5.4 E4), west face of Le Pouzenc (2,898m), Embrunais, France

May 9 Merci Mamans (900m, 5.4 E4), southwest face of Bietschhorn (3,934m), Berner Oberland, Switzerland

May 28 X (950m, 5.4 E4), southwest face of Ta schhorn (4,491m), Pennine Alps, Switzerland

A Note About Ski Grades: The descents listed here are graded for difficulty and exposure using the Toponeige system (a.k.a. Volo scale, named for skier Volodia Shahshahani, who developed it), which is in wide use in the Alps. The first grade covers skiing difficulty and ranges from 1 to 5, with the 5th grade currently subdivided into five levels, from 5.1 to 5.5. The second grade ranges from E1 to E4 and describes the exposure or fall hazard. A fall on E3 or E4 terrain is considered likely or certain to result in fatal injuries.

Editor's Note: The descent on the east face of the Pointes de la Blonnière was called by two different names in the print edition of the 2022 AAJ. The correct name is Le Jardin Secret. We regret the error.

Le Jardin Secret, east face of the Pointes de la Blonnière, France:

West face of Le Pouzenc, France:

Southwest face of Täschhorn, Switzerland:

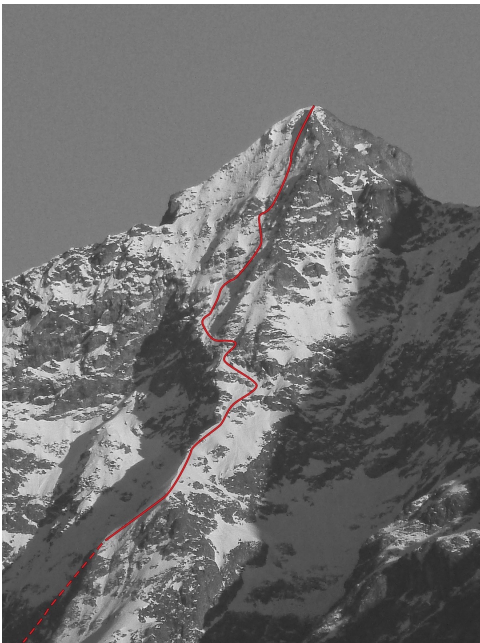
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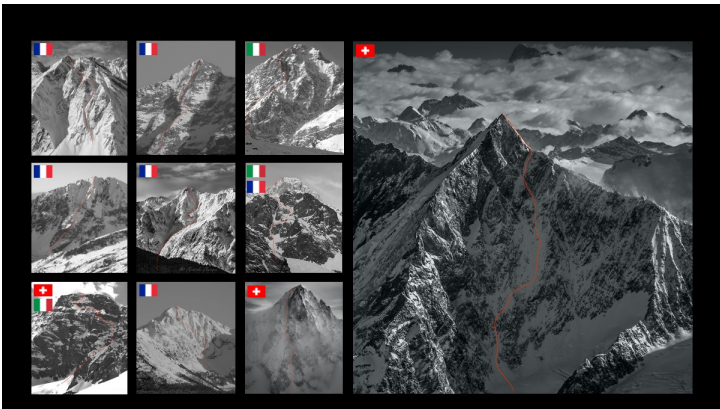
Merci Mamans (900m, 5.4 E4), southwest face of Bietschhorn (3,934m), Berner Oberland, Switzerland.



Skiing on Le Jardin Secret, east face of Pointes de la Blonnière (2,362m), Aravis Range, France.



L'Éperon des Saltimbanques (1,200m, 5.4 E4), north face of Le Chaperon (2,750m), Écrins Massif, France.



All ten of the 10X Project's peaks. The Täschhorn is on the right.



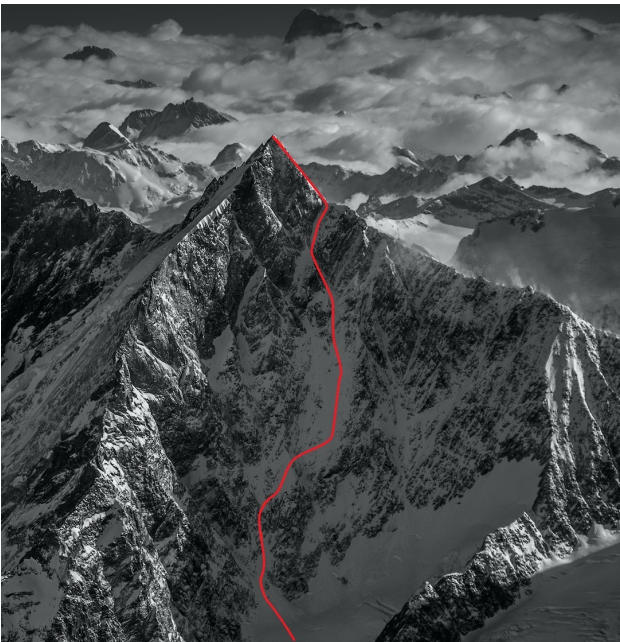
During the 10X Project, 10,000 vertical meters were skied and only 200 meters rappelled.



Skiing “Les Larmes d’Ulysse” on Mont Pelago in the Maritimes Alps of France.



La Traversée des Anges (600m, 5.4 E4), west face of Le Pouzenc (2,898m), Embrunais, France.



X (950m, 5.4 E4), southwest face of Täschhorn (4,491m), Pennine Alps, Switzerland.

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