



AAC Publications

Renaissance: A New Route up the Eiger Nordwand in Traditional Style

Switzerland, Bernese Alps

I'd been looking for something like this all these years, and it was right on my doorstep. I looked at it almost every day without seeing it—until August 2023.

A START WITH GLITCHES

Peter and I are sitting on the train from Thun, discussing the most important details of our climb, such as whether we've really brought enough mayonnaise and whether we need forks as well as spoons, when the announcement sounds: "Next stop, Lauterbrunnen." Oh no—we're on the wrong train!

Several hours later, back on track, we find ourselves at the Stollenloch. This renowned window onto the north face of the Eiger, accessible from the Jungfrau Railway, conveniently spares us from having to navigate the precarious, gently sloping initial 400 meters of the nordwand. We organize our bags—a total of 90 kilograms of material. I realize I've forgotten my helmet—not atypical for us. Real professionals!

A WALL STEEPED IN HISTORY

The north face of the Eiger is not only a huge chunk of limestone, standing 1,800 meters tall, but also an excellent marketing object for alpinists. The first ascent, in 1938, by the Austro-German team Anderl Heckmair, Heinrich Harrer, Fritz Kasparek, and Ludwig Vo rg, perfectly fit with the propaganda of the Nazi regime and led to huge media hype. With a slew of deaths before and after the 1938 climb, the nordwand—sometimes called the "Mordwand" (or "murder wall")—is one of the most famous alpine faces in the world. Nowadays, even a charming bolted route of eight pitches on the far west side of the north face still sells well.

What the dazzled readers of these publications usually don't know: The rock on the Eiger is mostly excellent and has plenty of holds. What's more, thanks to global warming, the temperature here often is perfect for summer climbing. Consequently, the modern sport routes on the face have nothing in common with the high-risk first ascent of 1938. Those climbers started their ascent without bolts, with little information, and with the certainty that they could not turn back from high on the icy wall.

THE IDEA

I think it's a shame that there are more bolts on the Eiger every year. A new line seemingly must be more difficult, more direct, or done faster—or at least with a high density of bolts so the route has as many repeat ascents as possible.

My dislike of how things are evolving on the Eiger (and on other mountains) is linked to my personal approach to the mountains: As a free spirit, I like to try projects off the beaten track. I am a trad climber and alpinist in the land of bolts and cable cars. My motivation has always been to experience real adventure—before starting to climb, I was into caving and other forms of remote exploration. The less information, the more interesting. And the less equipment left on a mountain, the more authentic the experience.

For a long time, I had been pursuing the idea of climbing the north face by a combination of existing routes without using any bolts—to find the most logical and appealing line for me personally. As I studied the route lines and topos, I realized there was still a 100-meter-wide swath of virgin rock to the right of the Ghilini-Piola Direttissima (1,400m, 6b A4; first climbed in 1983 and freed in 2013 at 7c). This part of the face, right of the nordwand's center, offers the Eiger's steepest features, such as the Rote Fluh, an overhanging wall 300 meters high. Above the Rote Fluh, a 400-meter pillar rises steeply and defiantly into the sky.

Due to its compact and crackless appearance, this proposed line didn't seem ideal for traditional climbing, but it motivated me nonetheless to try a first ascent instead of just combining existing routes.

TEAMWORK AND STRATEGY

When a one-week window of good weather opened up in August, it was easy to convince Peter von Känel to join the attempt. Peter and I share the same passion for adventure. Together, we've opened a couple of summer and winter routes on forgotten mountains. With Tradu ndition, an eight-pitch 8a (5.13b) we established in 2021 on the Du ndenhorn in the Bernese Alps, we opened Switzerland's hardest pure-trad multi-pitch route.

We also complement each other well: Peter is mentally strong and fearless, while I'm a bit more hesitant but have greater physical reserves. Peter usually climbs the wildest pitches, and I take the hardest. We also share a sense of humor. We don't take each other too seriously, and the most heartfelt comments often come at the most stressful moments. This is always very funny and has a relaxing effect.

For the Eiger, in addition to our usual high-fat meals, we packed lots of pitons and Peckers, a portaledge, 200 meters of static rope, a set of nuts, and a double rack of Totem cams. We used the static rope to fix the pitches above the bivouacs, climbing in capsule style. At the bottom of our bags, we even packed a drill and some bolts for the worst case. But we never had to use them.

WE TAKE OFF

After a few phone calls, we find a solution to my helmet dilemma: Another Jungfrau railcar stops at the Stollenloch, and a mountain guide hands us a helmet. I must admit, it's not all bad having a train station inside the mountain. We finally start climbing. The first part of our route is pure Type 2 fun: hauling on slabs and traversing scree bands. But, as Peter says, "Keep smiling—we're on vacation here!"

At the end of the day, we are only six pitches higher but cautiously optimistic: We have found more protection than expected. A spacious bivouac site rounds out our first day.

THE ROTE FLUH

On the morning of the second day, we climb the steep right-hand section of the Rote Fluh, the first overhanging stronghold of our line. The initial pitches require the full range of protection techniques, which soon become routine: cam placements, nuts, short pitons, and lots and lots of Peckers—some good, some bad. Using double ropes helps us incorporate laterally offset placements into the protection chain. Our years of experience trad climbing on limestone are coming in handy. To save time and energy, the second climber often ascends the rope to clean the pitches.

In the afternoon, we stand at the foot of the large ledges that separate the overhanging lower wall from the upper headwall. We have passed the entry test! We traverse back and forth on brittle ledges and look for a bivouac. We finally decide on a suitable site and dig a platform in the scree until it gets

dark. Peter cooks us a feast: tortellini with gravy and plenty of butter. We're both firm believers in a high-fat diet, and we eat until we're full.

DECISION DAY

Sleeping is my greatest strength. Every morning, Peter must forcefully wake me up; this morning, as usual, he runs out of patience at 8 o'clock. We are both nervous because today we'll be trying the huge overhanging pillar. This is clearly the hardest part of our route. We look somewhat enviously at the neighboring Piola route, which leads through logical cracks—we'll be on the compact overhangs to the right of it. Peter climbs three pitches confidently and efficiently. Now it's my turn.

I try different directions from the belay but can't find a way. My final option is to climb across a compact slab. I get farther and farther from the small Pecker I've hammered in, until I'm eight meters out. Close to the panic threshold, I place a good hook. I let the adrenaline subside and find two shallow Pecker placements. My psyche is exhausted by the time I reach easier terrain with a rappel traverse. This will turn out to be one of three short passages on which we use aid techniques; we are fortunate that these sections offer decent aid placements in the form of hooks and small pockets for Peckers, letting us pass without any falls.

As I recover at the belay, I slowly come to appreciate the amazing quality of this rock. The gray limestone has perfect friction and beautiful gouttes d'eau, with shallow slots for cam placements. I'm seeing that I just need to keep climbing and the rock will offer its gifts. Gradually the fear subsides. We continue for the rest of the day, highly motivated and with great joy. As the evening sun reaches the north face, we rappel to our first bivouac site, the static line fixed to a ledge right at the top of the overhanging pillar. We are euphoric: Our chances of success are excellent. Peter unpacks a flask of delicious grappa, and we celebrate the successful third day in style.

THE TRAD GAME

For Peter and me, trad is the top league of climbing, combining risk assessment with protection of varying quality in unknown terrain: *Can I fall safely? Can I climb this passage without falling?* We must analyze the situation hundreds of times a day and find the answers to these questions. Then we must climb as the analysis suggests: either aggressively on the attack or defensively with maximum safety—or something in between.

Most of the time, our route doesn't follow cracks but instead compact walls. Thus, the mental workload is immense. It would be difficult to apply a commitment grade of R or X, since most of the protection is cams in limestone, which can be judged as "rather good" or "rather bad," but rarely "bombproof." I seldom feel the relief of thinking, "Now I can fall without any doubt." Route-finding is also more complex when trad climbing. To reach good placements for belay anchors, traverses and rappels are sometimes necessary. This enriches the range of movements and skills required. The actual climbing is only one aspect of the trad game; the intellectual work is just as important.

AN ALMOST PERFECT ENDING

The fourth and fifth days spoil us with wonderful climbing on the best rock—pockets, runnels, and nice, sharp holds. To increase the tension a little, Peter takes the liberty of throwing a helmet and a bunch of Peckers down the wall, but fortunately this doesn't change the outcome. The only flaw we encounter is that we must switch to the neighboring Piola route for three pitches because brittle overhangs block our planned direct exit.

When we reach the west flank of the Eiger on the fifth day, we sit atop the wall and enjoy the moment. We both have tears in our eyes—the climb of a lifetime! We feel connected and deeply fulfilled. To savor these beautiful moments even longer, to maintain the best possible style, and to use up the last

of the butter, we bivouac once more and summit the Eiger on the sixth day of our climb.

WHAT REMAINS

I have traveled by plane many times on expeditions in search of great adventures. I found the adventure, but increasingly I find it a contradiction to use expensive, motorized travel to measure myself against nature. With our Renaissance route on the Eiger, we want to inspire a rethink and show that there are high-quality adventures on our doorstep.

However, it is also important that we take care of our rocks and of nature. To ensure that future generations can find the same kinds of adventures, we should reduce the use of equipment to access the mountains. When we climb with renunciation, the adventure increases: Without a plane, car, or bolts, you don't have to travel far to experience the wilderness.

EPILOGUE

During our ascent, we observed some rockfall in the central part of the wall. A week later, we learned that a huge flake had fallen from the Ghilini-Piola route, smashing into the wall below. Even though our route was probably not affected by this event, it did make me think about the risks in summer mountaineering these days. Though this rockfall was a clear warning signal, I still believe that steep, compact limestone walls pose fewer risks than classic mountain tours in glaciated terrain.

SUMMARY: First ascent of Renaissance (1,220m, 30 pitches of climbing), graded 7c (7a obl.), on the north face of the Eiger in the Bernese Alps, Switzerland, by Silvan Schupbach and Peter von Känel, August 19–24. The route starts from the Stollenloch and ascends the right side of the Rote Fluh, then climbs to the right of the Czech Pillar between the Ghilini-Piola Direttissima (1983) and the Gelber Engel (1988); the new route shares three pitches with the Ghilini-Piola before finishing to the left.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Silvan Schupbach lives in Thun, Switzerland, with his family and has done expeditions to Nepal, Pakistan, Greenland, and Patagonia. Originally a biotechnology engineer, he currently works for the Swiss Alpine Club and as a mountain guide.

Images



Peter von Känel starting the first step pitch on day one of the climb. A pocket provided a cam placement in just the right spot.

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