

Lessons Learned From a Misadventure

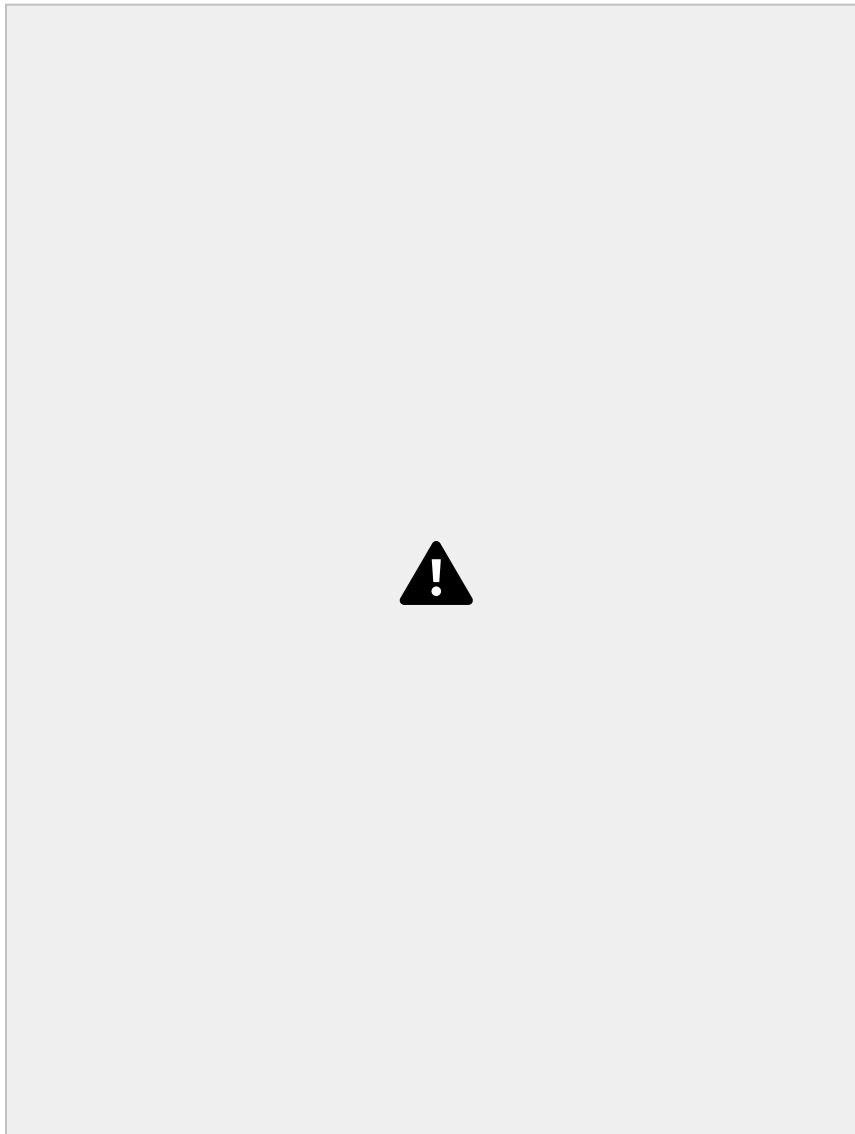


Introduction

Sometimes things don't go the way you've planned and although it's never nice, sometimes these experiences are what define and shape us. At the very least it's where we learn the important lessons.

After a great expedition to attempt to ski the 30 highest peaks in the Pyrenees last year in 30 days, I was very keen to do something big and exciting in the Pyrenees again this winter (2019/2020). I had read about Kilian Jornet running across the Pyrenees, and had for a long time been fascinated with the idea of a ski crossing of the range, from coast to coast. With

this in mind, I set about planning. By November I had a good idea of what I needed to do to make it happen - it wasn't going to be easy, but I had a plan. I'd need logistics, fitness, support and conditions all to come off like a dream. Although most of these did actually happen, the last didn't, and in dramatic fashion. By the start of the year I had amazing support from TORQ nutrition, Expedition Foods, Natural Balance Foods and the Austrian Alpine Club. Despite being away travelling in South America (which made logistics horrific to organise) I was fitter than ever, training at altitude every day. The logistics was the biggest challenge (or so I thought), but I had a detailed plan of how I would arrange food drops and transport when back. The last bit of luck I needed was with good conditions, and an absence of any additional factors, this is where things fell down a little.



The Trip

I arrived back from South America at the beginning of February with the aim of setting off late February - probably a bit too close in retrospect. The short timescale meant that I was straight into dropping off food packs (3 days of tasty mountain meals, gels, bars and gas) at snowed-in huts and bivvy sites along the route. From mid January I had been reading reports from the Pyrenees that it was an unusually low snow year. Since we had arrived in the Pyrenees in early February, it had only got worse, and it was the worst snow year I had ever seen in the region. Although this was not ideal at all for nice dreamy powder skiing, it wasn't the worst thing, as I planned to stay very high up (where at least there was still snow). Then the weather forecast started to come in for March, and things took a turn for the frustrating. After two months of no snow, most of March was predicted to be very heavy weather. Snow, rain, wind, fluctuating temperatures - it was making up for those two missing months. My initial start date had to be postponed to avoid a storm, then postponed again to try to outsmart the weather.

Finally, on March the 3rd, I set off to the coast with my bike, aiming to meet my girlfriend that evening to swap my bike for skis at a high mountain pass. I reached the coast just as the heavens opened. Wet and cold in the first minute of a month long trip is never how you want to start, but adversity makes us great, right? The rain started to combine with a strong wind coming down from the mountains towards the sea - the opposite direction to the one I was trying to cycle in. After 100 slow kilometres, I reached the edge of the mountains and began the 1000m climb up to the mountain pass, where I would swap my bike for skis. As I climbed higher, I saw the rain turn to snow very low down, which was good news for the next day. At 6pm I reached the mountain pass - 1500m high, windy, cold, and over a foot deep in fresh snow - , feeling very very tired. Surprised my girlfriend was not there with the skis (and the nice warm van), I checked my phone, and found a text letting me know the van hadn't been able to deal with the snow. Cold, tired, and with a small amount of dread, I cycled down the other side of the col, and at the snow line I saw our warm van. I was far too cold and tired to get back up the col in the dark so I retreated to the van. Checking the weather that evening furthered the concerns that had been building for weeks - only bad

weather ahead. My plan was to just try and see what happened: really I had no other choice.

The next day I set off hiking back up to the snow line, which was retreating faster than I could hike. After a long hike, then a long ski (which I was so grateful for), I arrived at my first hut. I got ready for a nice warm evening, but found my lighter had broken. Note to self: always bring more fire. I thanked the lucky stars that my mountain meals could be cold-hydrated, and tucked down to not the cosiest night, but one made all the better by an incredible salmon-pink sunset.



The next day I woke up renewed, and set off skinning happily, despite a rucksack that resembled a travelling salesman's (all my kit was packed into a 30L avalanche bag). It was a beautiful day skiing: blue skies, frozen lakes, nice ascents and great fun descents. Skiing with 12kg and on racing skis and boots was like learning to ski all over again, but by the afternoon I felt I had it ticked. The only concern was that it was very warm, and some slopes were starting to show signs of instability very early in the day.



After the last high climb of the day, I had a stunning 4km winding descent down a valley to my next hut. I managed to find some signal, only to discover that the avalanche risk the next day was high, with more bad weather the next afternoon, creating worse conditions the following days. I also read reports of increasing concerns over coronavirus in France, and talk of strong restrictions being put in place. All of this was pretty depressing: I was out here alone, in bad avalanche conditions, with a bad weather forecast, with awful snow levels. I went to sleep that night with my head still spinning over the options.

The next day I set off, aiming to get to the Andoran border and re-assess. A long climb led up to a high ridge that was slowly traversed with skis on my back. The snow was already in bad condition - very wet and unstable -, making moving along the ridge exhausting and unnerving. Somewhere along the ridge, during a boxing match with a rock spire, my avalanche bag ripped. I could come up with a solution of sorts, but it meant the bag would be about as useful as a straitjacket in the case of an avalanche. Not so good given the conditions. The weather was also building, with some small snow showers coming down, despite it being quite warm. Finally, after a long battle with the ridge, I skied down a long



valley that led to the border with Andorra. On checking my phone, I was not surprised that the forecast was worse, not better. The avalanche bag had been the nail in the coffin, and by the time I got this news there was no other option but to crushingly call the attempt off, and start a slow solemn hitchhike home (which actually turned out to be a barrel of laughs). The next day I woke up to find out that my avalanche bag probably hadn't been my biggest issue - I, like so many, had misjudged the seriousness of Coronavirus, Andorra had shut its borders, France had placed severe restrictions including banning of skiing and mountaineering. It simply wasn't meant to

be.

I would like to thank all the support I received, both from my sponsors: TORQ, Expedition Foods, Natural Balance Foods and the Austrian Alpine Club, and from friends and family. As always it is much appreciated.

Lessons Learned.

At the end of the day, the factors that shut this trip down were well out of my control - awful conditions, and a global pandemic that has affected the entire world. But there were a lot of aspects of my approach that I could learn from.

Things are always harder and take longer than you think:

I am awful for assuming everything is easier or takes less time than it does - perpetual optimism. The last minute prep and logistics were so stressful, as they turned out to be much harder than I had thought, and this could easily have been reduced.



Learn when to call it a day:

There is a fine line between valiant determination and stubborn struggle, and it's very hard to know where to call it. Everyone loves the tale of the team who pushed through adversity to triumph - I mean, that's half of why we do this stuff - but it's also important to acknowledge when you're just pushing against a wall, so you can alter your objectives. I was told by many people before the trip that the conditions were awful, the weather would produce bad avalanche

conditions, and I refused to see coronavirus having an impact. I probably would have been better off putting my energy elsewhere, and saving this epic for another time.

Doing it alone is really really hard:

This was a solo expedition, but quickly in the planning I realised I needed help for aspects of it. In the end I wish I had used more support - solo expeditions are fun, but there is nothing as good as sharing crazy adventures with the people around you.

Coronavirus Fitness

A few days after I got back from the trip, France went into complete lockdown. It was quite hard after the trip ending to be suddenly so restricted, but this was the case for everyone. During lockdown, it's been great to see the creativity of people, particularly when it comes to keeping fit. Following in the footsteps of others, I've climbed famous mountains... on the stairs, ice climbed through the garage and run a marathon around the village. It's also a great time to take a step back, think about what you want from the future and about how to get there. Sports-wise it's been great to consolidate strengths and work on weaknesses, with lots of indoor strength training. I have been building up a solid routine which hopefully will enable me to adventure to a higher level and injury free in the longer run. Although it's been a challenge, the restrictions have shown us how adaptable we are and that, if nothing else, is a good lesson to learn.

The next steps

I have had much time (too much) to plan adventures for the coming year, but with so many unknowns it's hard to put much detail into them. I am planning to finish off last year's trip by summiting the 30 highest peaks of the Pyrenees. I am signed up to enter the Golden

Trail World Series, which I am so excited about. I am also hoping to plan a few long distance running adventures and some really exciting Alpine link-up adventures. I plan to make up for the lack of skiing this year by some epic ski-oriented adventures next winter, but it remains to be seen what form they will take!

