

# What we strive for - The never ending goal of Pyrenees 30

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## Summer 2018

Whilst out playing in the hills of the UK, two friends and I conceived of the idea to try to ski the highest peaks of the Pyrenees, all in one season, or even all in one month. Convinced of the brilliance of the idea, we set about planning, with energy and excitement. I had spent lots of time in the Pyrenees ski mountaineering (my family live there) and knew the area well. We all trained hard, were experienced, we had amazing support and sponsorship, and by late summer the outlook was positive.

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## March 2019

We arrived, and the very next day our quest began. We had given ourselves 30 days to climb 30 peaks. Very ambitious, but we thought just about possible (later I better understood the exact magnitude, and slight absurdity, of this ambition). Our first peak went just as hoped for, but that night, with comic bad luck, we all got violently ill from a water bug. And I mean violently - over the next 4 days, we couldn't get out of bed or eat. By the time a week had passed, I had lost 8 kilos, and it was clear our original plan was out. Sadly, due to the illness, one of the team members had to fly home. The loss of our main objective was a bitter pill to swallow, and we were scrambling around trying to find something "meaningful" to do. What that means is anyone's guess, but I decided to try to ski as many 3000m peaks as I could in the remaining 16 days of the trip. Although somewhat contrived, this led to 16 amazing days' skiing, climbing 16 peaks and ending up happy with sore legs. The bitterness of the initial failure was mitigated, or at least delayed.

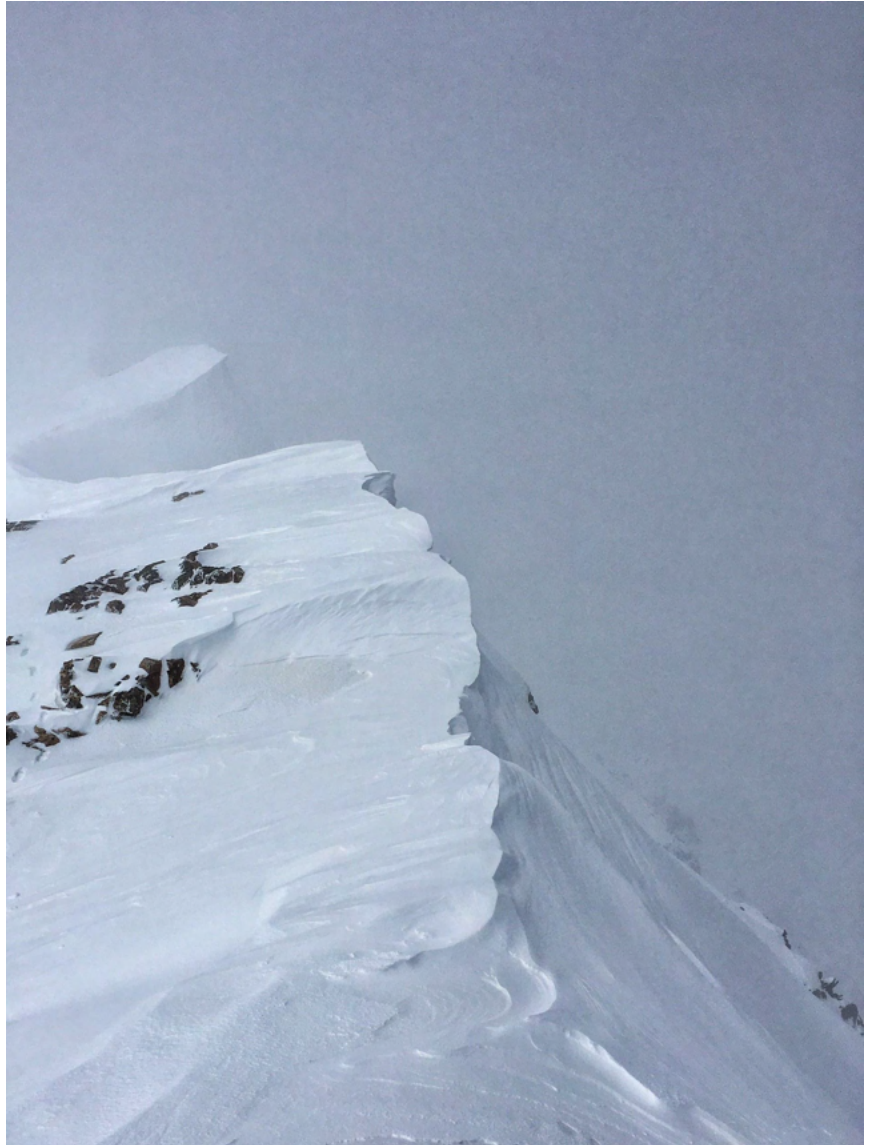




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## April 2020

Having been thwarted on another Pyrenees-based expedition in February (this time an attempt to cross the range solo on skis) by awful snow conditions and coronavirus lockdown, I suddenly had a lot of time to analyse the last trips and think about what I wanted to do. It was pretty frustrating that I had failed on two trips. Despite the circumstances being unavoidable, it felt a personal failure. I became aware that I had fallen on the wrong side of the balance between goal driven and fun driven. It's a fine balance. At the end of the day, I love skiing and being in the mountains, and interesting projects and objectives are a scaffold to allow that to happen - it shouldn't be the other way around. I decided to use my remaining time in the Pyrenees to complete the Pyrenees 30 project, but this time with no time limit, or forced pressure, but just to play as hard as I could, choosing awesome routes and interesting styles as a priority.



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## May - June 2020

The first day on skis after lockdown was like being let out of a cage. The snow conditions were good for the time of year (finally), and the energy built up in lockdown was like a boost of nitro. I skinned up long slopes, carried my skis along deep snowy ridges, up icy faces, and smashed down the descents. The fun was back with vengeance. The very unpredictable weather (snow one day, blazing sun the next) added a layer of challenge and excitement. For each peak, I looked at the different routes and styles that I could try - be it a long ridge traverse, a face climb, fast and light, linking with other peaks - and I chose whatever felt would be the best way to experience the mountain. It was ultimate freedom. I came back beaming after days spent wading in whiteout along long technical ridges, super tired after big days linking peaks, or bouncing off the walls after a powder descent, but every time happy.



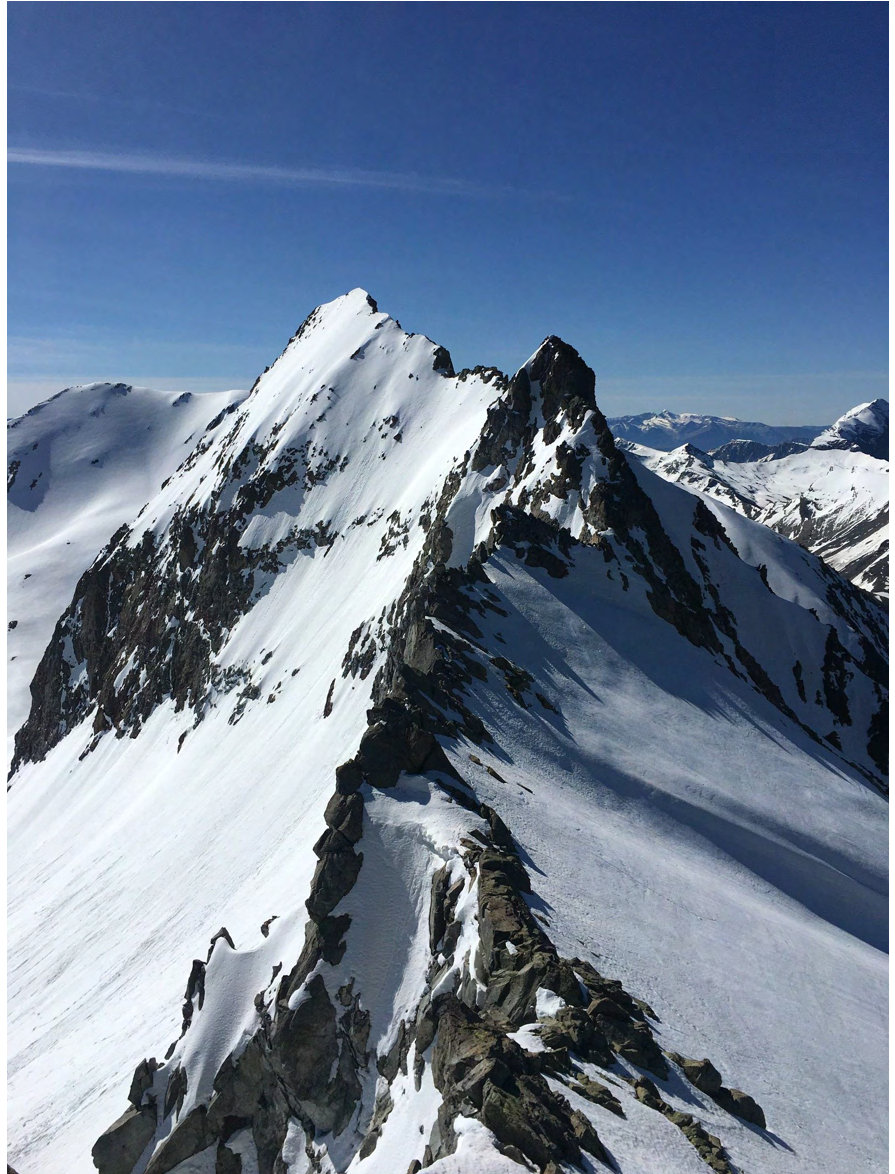
Slowly, spring (with the odd winter spell) swapped for summer, and I swapped skis for climbing/running shoes. Although initially reluctant, it turned out just as much raw fun was



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possible moving over all sorts of terrain, and the ability to take in many peaks in a day. The fun continued, supplied with a huge volume of food along the way.

A year after it had started, I finally felt like I had the balance of Pyrenees 30 nailed. Its focus had changed lots during the course. It started out as a single objective, with too little focus on enjoying it. That objective was forced to change, but the slant on goal focus didn't. In the second year the goal or objective (to ski/climb the remaining 30) was still there, but not the driving force. The goal gave me a great excuse to visit new areas, push myself physically as hard as I could, and tackle new peaks. The driving force was to have as much fun as possible, reminding myself how much fun it is being in the mountains. Despite there being big ups and downs during the project, the biggest win was a better understanding of what balance works for me.



The varied terrain, environment and weather tested and developed my skills and knowledge in the mountains. Some days I would have to climb grade III rock in ski boots or trail shoes, some days I would be glissading down long snow slopes in running shoes. I ended up having to climb the steep long North Face of Mont Perdu on bullet hard ice, only to have a snow storm increase the challenge half way up. Long days (>10 hours) on technical rock terrain left me so mentally tired I'd trip over my own feet once down on safe ground. I got caught out with the ever

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changing weather a couple of times and after sitting in the car for hours with the heater full blast learned to read it and plan better. One day whilst tired and downclimbing a scramble I missed the usual route and ended up on almost vertical loose rocky terrain, but with some calm cursing I managed to safely descend, and learnt a lesson. Being alone in the mountains most days, often on serious terrain, had an intensity that was both tiring and rewarding, but something I never took lightly. I saw rockfalls, avalanches, lightning and a landslide but fortunately always from a distance. I was lucky to meet lots of interesting people on my days out, often who shared advice about great routes, but who always shared their happiness to be out in the mountains.

Exploring the Pyrenees properly and taking the time and energy to do so properly was also hugely rewarding. Areas that I'd never heard of are now the ones I'll be going back to. I spent numerous days scrambling along amazing ridge lines, being the only human around, meeting only birds and sassy marmots. I spent lots of time (in between routes) running through the iconic lower pastures of the Pyrenees, being bullied by cows and enjoying the calm environment.

In late June, with just a few of the peaks left to do, I packed my running gear and left for a four day continuous effort to run/scramble long link ups between some of the remaining peaks, and to see what my legs had left in them. With the weather on my side, I enjoyed long days finishing them off, ridge after ridge, peak after peak. Finally finishing on Pic Central del Inferno around midday, it seemed fitting that I met my first thunderstorm of the project, telling me to go home and eat my body weight and relax.

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