







After working for more than 20 years to gain permission to ski in Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta national park, Ptor Spriceniaks is all smiles in December 2018.  Steve Ogle




# GO YOUR OWN WAY



BY MATT COTÉ

In the tumultuous and deadly world of ski mountaineering, Piotr Spriceniaks, who gained notoriety for his 1995 first descent of the north face of Mt. Robson, the Canadian Rockies' tallest summit, has followed an unconventional path to vitality. After more than 30 years on the sport's cutting edge, the 51-year-old skier known for his antiestablishment worldviews and self-styled descents is still bagging prize lines around the globe in obscure locales. And his style and opinions are still evolving.





Spriceniaks slides into his 50s above La Grave, France's Tabuchet Glacier on a version of his signature ski, the German-made Pogo Wolverine, which measures a commanding 191 cm long and 135 mm underfoot. ☞ **Cedric Bernadini**



## FRANCE'S DAUPHINÉ ALPS

glistened in distant waves, laced in ice, illuminated by a ball of fire that threatened to tear the snow from them. On a warm January day after a fresh storm in La Grave, I followed Ptor Spriceniaks to the mouth of a massive bowl that fed into the Vallon de la Selle. The routine run for him factored bigger than any slope I'd ever skied, dropping 4,000 continuous feet into a long, snaking valley and through a firing range of 12,000-foot peaks, flanked by chossy, brown walls in a steepening hour glass. Falling would be bad. An avalanche would be worse.

SPRICENIAKS'S LONG-TIME LA GRAVE SKI partner, Joe Vallone, entered first, carving tight turns honed over a decade spent in the Alps. A few hundred feet in, Vallone paused on an outcropped island of rock and called for the rest of us to post up with him. I joined second to last, gazing back up at a stoic Spriceniaks, who'd quizzically watched four of us ski first. Then, with arms opened wide, he tilted into the run like a falling tree. As the powder caught him, he leaned into giant arcs that took him most of the way to the valley bottom in one ecstatic swoop. I could *feel* his Cheshire grin.

I'd only ever heard of Spriceniaks, but this experience cemented his lore to me as one of the great living legends of ski mountaineering. He's pioneered lines around the world, most notably his first descent of 12,972-foot Mt. Robson, the serac-topped north face that he skied with Troy Jungen in 1995. Many of those lines are seldom repeated or not at all.

The cosmic Canadian both famous (and infamous) for his antiestablishment worldviews—and for dirtbagging across the globe in his youth—is 51 now, but he looks like he's still in his 30s. These days, when he's not skiing, he placidly attends to chores in his hand-built home on the agrarian hillside above La Grave, with his two young sons and half-Belgian/half-Austrian wife. He still dresses in jeans and ragtag hoodies, still sports a wild mane of wiry, black, shoulder-length hair, and still bags prize lines every season. His has been a long, strange journey, and it continues to defy the odds.

BORN IN ONTARIO TO LATVIAN immigrants who survived WWII, Spriceniaks inherited a European passport and a global perspective. In 1998, at age 21, he dropped out of the engineering program at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, only one year shy of graduating. He'd suffered a bruised ego by not landing a spot on the provincial ski team, and then had a major paradigm shift when peyote came through campus, beginning a lifelong love affair with psychedelics.

"I was set on the regular course to get a degree, a job, a hot wife and a nice car and live in a nice place in Toronto," he remembers. "Then traveling and experiencing Chile directly post-Pinochet, and starting to connect the dots—what they tell you on the news; it's the winners that are writing history—then I questioned everything."

Ditching the establishment, he took a four-day train ride to Whistler, B.C., then went on to shun the trappings of modern society for two decades, couch surfing across the world. He worked as little as possible and shadowed skiers like Eric Pehota and Hans Gap and mountain guides like Otto Klimmer. Soon after, Spriceniaks put his problem-solving mind on a mission to figure out how to get up and down the world's most daunting mountains and, in doing so, built a mythic résumé.

In British Columbia, that included skiing the north face of Mt. Loki (8,383 ft.), the west face of Monarch Mountain (11,663 ft.) and the north face of Mt. Vancouver (15,787 ft.); in France, he skied the south face of Pic



Central of Les Aiguilles d'Arves (11,529 ft.); on the border of Switzerland and Italy, the southwest face direct of Lyskamm Oriental (14,852 ft.); and in between he traveled to obscure descents as far as Peru's Cordillera Blanca and the Pakistani Himalaya, including Nanga Parbat (26,660 ft.), the world's ninth-tallest summit.

"That was when I started learning all this stuff I didn't know before," he recounts. "That's when Troy [Jungen] and I made up our pseudo-degrees. We were doing our bachelors in ski bumming for the first four years, and then we chose different masters. I did my two-year masters in ski barbarism. Then, for both of us, our PhDs were in ski shamanism.... Ski shamanism is actually a form of enlightenment and helping people heal. It's accessing the bliss state and propagating that and teaching other people how to access it."

UNDERNEATH THE ROW OF MOUNTAINS at the bottom of La Selle on that first day skiing together, we had a slow-moving slog out before us. As the steep faces began to weep snowballs, I told Spriceniaks I wasn't comfortable. He looked at me, grinned and said, "Not really anywhere else we could be," confronting me with the fact that we'd already committed and just had to move forward.

"Part of the process for me has always been to overcome fears," he tells me years later, sipping tea at his home in La Grave, where he permanently settled in July 2007. "Some people say fear is healthy, but that's just basic. It's just physical awareness. It's like how cats know when it's too high to jump. They're not afraid; they're just not going to jump because it's too high."

Spriceniaks's confidence has an occult quality, and people have long sought him out for it. In the late '90s, followers begged him to privately heli-guide them in B.C.'s Coast Mountains before there was even a formal industry there. He obliged, and it launched an ongoing career of "renegade guiding" he still imbibes in today—eschewing a formal



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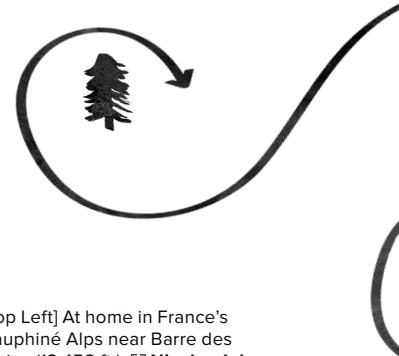


guiding certificate, which he calls “a license to kill.” In the early 2000s, he was invited to design the avalanche-control and safety program at Gulmarg Ski Resort in Kashmir, India, and for the last eight seasons has been a lead guide in Kyrgyzstan for 40 Tribes Backcountry—all gigs that have come on the merits of his track record.

“Ptor’s approach to guiding is largely spiritual—more based on his interactions and connections with mountains all over the world,” explains Ryan Koupal, founder and director of 40 Tribes. “There was obviously a learning curve at the beginning, but he took what the mountains in [Kyrgyzstan] had communicated to him and was able to deliver exceptional skiing experiences for clients that weren’t inhibited by the technicalities of traditional guiding. He once said to me, ‘I’ve always thought effectiveness is the measure of truth.’ And effective is what we’ve always been with Ptor out front.”

A FEW YEARS AND SEVERAL VISITS TO La Grave after that first ski with Spriceniaks, I once again found myself taking in his presence, this time with half a dozen of his friends hunched over a fire in his small yard, burning some meager construction scraps. His silhouette was animated, arms gesturing strongly as he espoused the dire need to overcome the Babylon system. The setting revealed all his complexity: a warm and generous spirit braided with a desperation to let his voice out as rawly as he can.

“Antigravity is a reality. I think probably teleportation is, too. That’s all been hidden away by the military,” he posited. The broad-shouldered mystic is an avid follower of conspiracy theorist David Icke and is a self-proclaimed “avant-garde” environmentalist. Spriceniaks has long believed in the power of yoga, Taoist sexual chi kung, growing his own food and protecting the natural environment. But he *does not* believe in climate change. He insists



[Top Left] At home in France’s Dauphiné Alps near Barre des Écrins (13,458 ft.). ☑ **Nicolas Joly**  
[Above] On a 2011 expedition with Sweetgrass Productions to Peru’s Cordillera Huayhuash, Spriceniaks admires an objective that’s never been completely skied, the east face of Yerupajá (21,768 ft.), Peru’s second tallest summit. ☑ **Koky Castaneda**



[Left] Spriceniaks cuts his teeth on Monarch Mountain (11,663 ft.) in British Columbia's southern Coast Mountains, high above the expansive Monarch Icefields. ☑ **Carl Skoog**

[Below] Toked and stoked on a 2004 expedition through Manali, India's Jugatsukh Valley. ☑ **Greg Von Doersten**

[Right] Finding balance on the south face of the Aiguilles d'Arves (11,529 ft.) in France's Dauphiné Alps. ☑ **Colin Samuels**





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“insane military madmen” are using it as a “psyche out” to weaponize weather under the guise of geo-engineering solutions. He’s dismayed at how climate change has become a marketing bandwagon for pro skiers who fail to see the bigger threat to the entire ecosystem. And it’s this kind of vociferousness that’s kept him locked in the fringes, never quite securing the adulation of his peers, many of whom, for all their famed lucidness, died during their skiing careers.

But just as Spriceniaks’s politics have become louder with time, so too has his skiing, forever motivated by dreams—which he says synchronize different dimensions and reveal paths to him. One of them has now twice led him to Colombia. In December 2018, along with Steve Ogle and Chad Sayers, Spriceniaks became the first ever to slide in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, a towering national park that took 20 years to get permission to ski. With their 13-day expedition, the group tagged the first descent of the diamond-shaped Pico Simons, taller than 18,000 feet.

“My first impression of Ptor was [of] his larger-than-life stature,” recalls Ogle, a Nelson, B.C.-based photographer and

biologist. “But in a Gentle Giant kind of way. He’s tall and imposing but always smiling, with a huge mop of hair.... I expected him to be cavalier, given his reputation for extreme. But I quickly learned he thinks through all his moves, planning according to experience. For example, he doesn’t eat street food. His safety regime was based on first-hand experience.... I also quickly learned that hiking around heavy-duty terrain with someone like Ptor should be treated like a dinner with the in-laws: just focus on and enjoy the bounty, and stay away from political dialogue. Because Uncle Ptor won’t budge.”

The enduring irony, though, is that for all his unchangeable beliefs, he and his mountain practice have actually changed dramatically—and it’s why he’s survived.

“FOR SURE, HE’S HAD A LOT OF GOOD LUCK,” says Jon Walsh, an acclaimed Canadian alpinist who learned the skiing part of his mountaineering from Spriceniaks, one of his oldest friends who’s six years his senior. “He’s gotten away with a lot of shit that might have been a bit of a gamble. We’ve been critical of him in the past, a bunch of us, but he does have a really good



mountain sense. He always goes with his gut instinct.”

This instinct eventually led Spriceniaks to transcend what he calls his “addiction to skiing,” to start taking days off and feeding his passion for skiing with the “rest of life’s awesome stuff.”

“Everything he does is training for the next thing,” Walsh explains. “He’ll look at gardening as training somehow. He’ll work hard at it.”

It’s an attitude I find surprising, but it sticks somewhere to the side of my brain the way skiable snow does to a steep glacier. The idea that overall happiness is the greatest life preserver is as holistic a concept as I can imagine. Living by this ethos, Spriceniaks’s objectives are no longer terribly dangerous ski lines; they’re just very far out there. It’s the entirety of these things that now sustains him.

“For a while, it was necessary to go bigger,” he explains after serving dinner to his two boys, Willy-Khan (seven) and Carlos (nine)—miniature versions of their father who sit next to cats Spriceniaks has named after *Star Wars* characters. “But then at a certain point, well, Terrence McKenna has a great quote, ‘When you get the message, hang up.’ You don’t need to keep doing drugs forever to have gotten what you needed out of them. For me, I don’t really know when exactly that point was, but I realized I didn’t need to keep pushing it to transcend like I had been doing through the process of challenging myself skiing.”

One clear turning point, though, came in 2014, when shooting for the film *Dream Line*. Spriceniaks and Greg Hill were skiing in Pakistan with filmmaker Bjarne Salén when Hill got dragged away in a massive avalanche. Hill broke his leg badly and had to spend the night outside before enduring a slow rescue and a painful journey home to Canada for surgery. It took him almost a year to recover, while Spriceniaks continued up the objective only days later.

“It affected me so much because Greg is a family man, too,” he admits. “That was just a reality check. Like, ‘Holy shit, that was close.’ Then I was up on the mountain, and Bjarne asked, ‘Do you miss your family?’ And, yeah, that made me weep. I realized we had already made our decision to ski from there [shy of the summit]. I think the best way to honor my family is to keep surviving and ski like a father.”

But, under dim, warm light that glows orange against the wood beams Spriceniaks laid in his kitchen by hand, his rosy cheeked wife, Karin, tells me she believes he’s always been calculated and is just adding up different variables now.

“Of course his decisions in the mountains will always change and evolve because of previous experiences,” she says. “But his decisions are not based on having kids or not. His decisions have more changed in the sense that now Ptor tries hard, and succeeds, to find the right balance between selfishness and selflessness.... To me, Ptor is still the same Ptor, just funnier and very good at his new job being an amazing partner and papa. It’s also good he leaves once in a while so he comes back stoked.”

Whatever the equation, whatever the politics, perhaps in the end what Spriceniaks really demonstrates is that vitality comes less from trying to solve life’s big mysteries than from just being open to them—along with every possible experience. ■



[Above] Spriceniaks, Jason Schutz, Hans Saari, Kristoffer Erickson, Rob DesLauriers and John Gribler (left to right) gear up for the fifth descent of Artesonraju (19,767 ft.), an iconic, pyramid-shaped peak in Peru’s Cordillera Blanca in 1998. [Kristoffer Erickson] [Below] With his wife, Karin, Spriceniaks finds his place in Ventelon, France. [Ville Niiranen] [Right] Spriceniaks goes his own way in Chamonix, France. [Gabe Rogel]

