

British Alpine Ski Traverse 1972

Peter Cliff

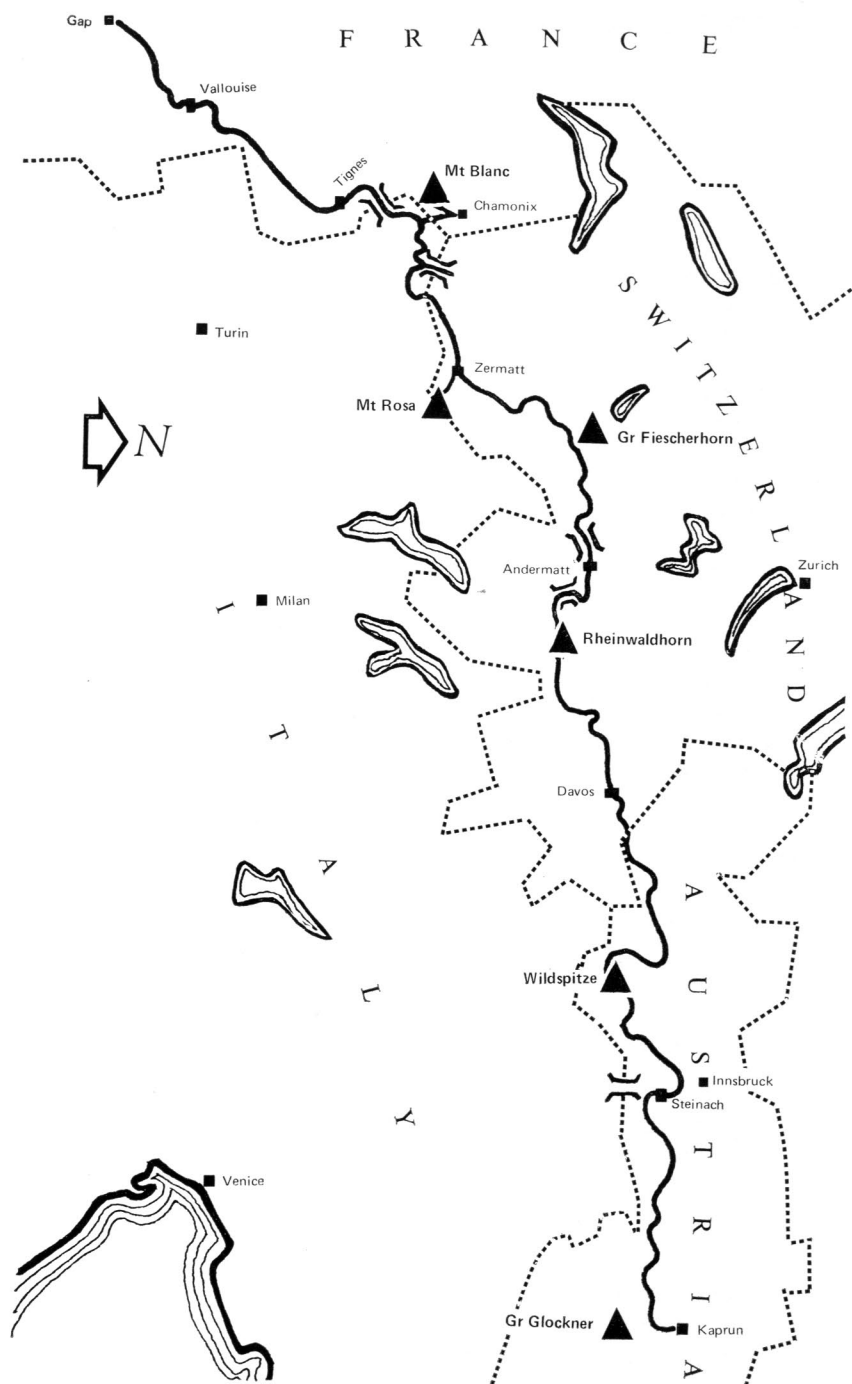
In 1956 the Italian guide Walter Bonatti traversed the Alps with three others on skis from the Julian Alps to the French Riviera. This was followed in 1965 by Denis Bertholet and an international party of guides who started near Innsbruck and finished at Grenoble. In 1970 Robert Kittl with three other Austrians completed a very fast crossing in 40 days. The challenge for us was twofold: we were to be the first British party, and whereas the others had been predominantly professional guides we were all amateurs. The route we took was from Kaprun, s of Salzburg, to Gap, which is between Nice and Grenoble. The straight line distance was 400 miles (by comparison the straight line distance for the normal Haute Route between Argentière and Zermatt is 40 miles), and we ascended at least 120,000 ft excluding uphill transport. It took 49 days including halts.

The party was: Alan Blackshaw (leader), Michael de Pret Roose (deputy leader and route Klosters to Zermatt), Fl-Lt Dan Drew RAF (food), Peter Judson (equipment), Dr Hamish Nicol (medical), Lt-Col John Peacock REME (route Chamonix to Gap), Dick Sykes (finance) and myself (route Zermatt to Chamonix). On the first section to the Brenner pass we had with us Walter Mann, who had been very much involved with the planning of the whole Austrian section. Support in the field was provided by Brig Gerry Finch and Major David Gore in a Range Rover. The other people who were closely involved were the members of the BBC TV team who filmed a good part of the Traverse. They were Chris Ralling (Producer), Stuart Kington, Mick Burke, Bev Clarke, Dougal Haston, John Hoare, Chris Sadler, Dave Smith and Robert Warburton.

Central Austria, 9-16 March

The Austrians gave us a very enthusiastic farewell from Kaprun, complete with brass band and a speech from the mayor. They had arranged for us to travel to Mooserboden by the hydro company's private lift system: this was fascinating as it included lifts, trains and jeeps, all in tunnels inside the mountain.

But after this it became more difficult; in fact the start of the Traverse was probably the most difficult stage of all. Three factors contributed to this: first, the route lay through the Gross Venediger group, which is a very impressive and remote area, especially at that time of year. Very few people go ski-touring there; consequently it was difficult to get local advice, as very few of the local guides knew the ski-routes or anything about winter conditions. The second factor was the lack of snow: we were running out at 2200 m on occasions and having to walk. This meant we got fit very quickly, but it also meant that



Map 1 British Alpine Ski Traverse 1972

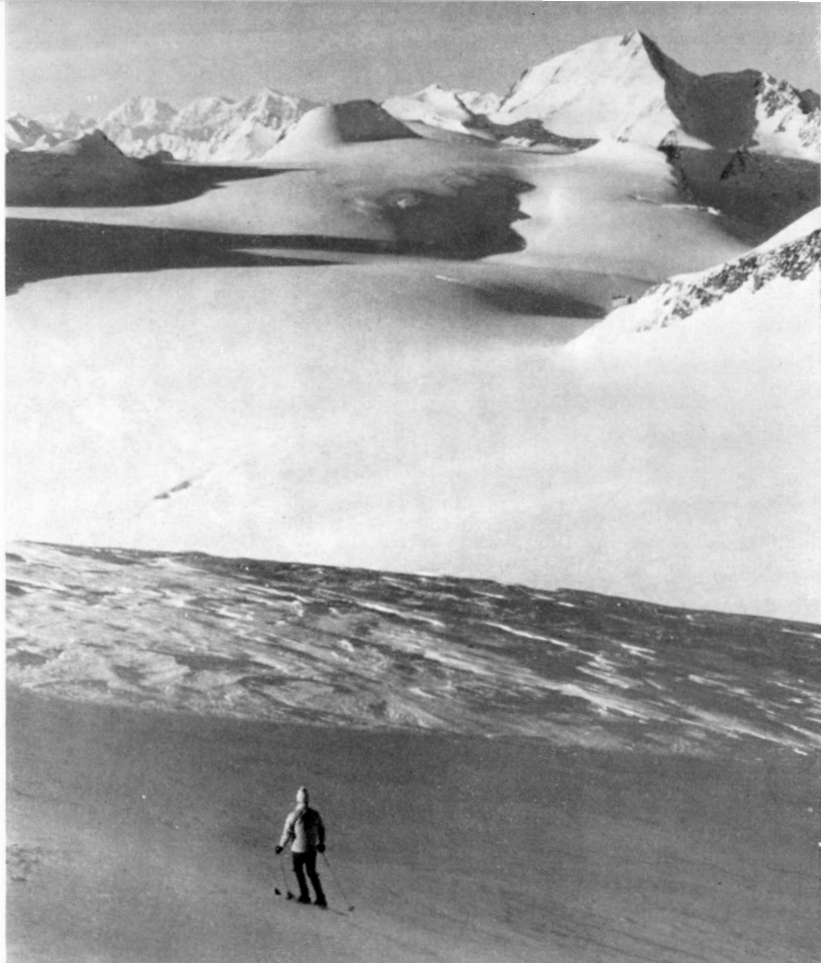


6 *Below the Hildesheimer hut* This and next two photos: A. Blackshaw

the glaciers were in very bad condition with huge open crevasses which would normally have been covered. The third factor was the weather which was predominantly bad: winds of force 8-9, and on two days visibility was 10-20 yd.

The importance of accurate navigation in these conditions cannot be overstressed. We used maps, compasses, altimeters and flags. Altimeters are invaluable, and we used the flags for measuring distances in white-outs as well as a safety precaution in case of retreat. At first we moved in two groups of four, but eventually changed to three, two, three. Alan Blackshaw and Michael de Pret Roose took it in turns to lead the front group, while the rest of us alternated between them.

Perhaps the most important day of the whole Traverse was the day we left the Matreier Tauernhaus, 13 March. The weather was bad, the forecast was worse. The route led up to the remote Untersulzbachtal; from there 6 miles



7 *Looking across to the Weisskugel*

across a wide area of glacier at just under 3000 m, picking up a rock on the other side of the glacier at 2500 m, and then a traverse to the unguarded and remote Kürsinger hut. It was tempting to stay in the comfort of the Matreier Tauernhaus, but we in fact pressed on instead, and in so doing adopted at an early stage of the Traverse the philosophy of going out and having a look at it, of pushing on wherever possible. In order to move at speed you must go out in bad weather so as to be in the right place to take advantage of any breaks. The factors needing consideration are many, in particular the strength of the party, escape routes, weather. The final decision is with the leader, and I think it is a fine reflection on Alan's leadership that we completed the Traverse ten days ahead of schedule without serious mishap.

From the Kürsinger hut we went to the Krimmler Tauernhaus: then a $5\frac{1}{2}$ -hour climb up the Zillerplatten Scharte to Mayrhofen, Hintertux, and a fine descent from the Wildlahner Scharte to Schmirn near the Brenner Pass.



8 Looking south-west over the Euslarjoch

Western Austria, 17–25 March

The predominant winds in this area had been southerlies, so there was a lot of windslab on the N-facing slopes. Because of this we unfortunately had to go by road from Schmirn to Ranalt, and from there up to the Dresdner hut. Thereafter we kept to our planned route through the Stubai, Ötztal, Samnaun and Silvretta; staying at Sölden, the Braunschweiger hut, Vernagt Haus, Serfaus, Alp Trida Ski Lodge, Heidelberger hut, Wiesbadener hut and finally Davos on the 25th. We climbed the Schaufelspitze (3333 m), Wildspitze (3774 m), Fluchtkogel (3500 m), Dreiländerspitze (3197 m) and Piz Buin (3312 m).

On the day we left Serfaus we came fairly close to an involuntary night out. It was going to be a long day anyway with five cols to cross. But a late start and quite appalling snow conditions (again slab on N-facing slopes and knee-deep wet snow on S-facing, which later turned to breakable crust) made for a late arrival at the Alp Trida Ski Lodge. The warmth of the reception that Milo and his guests gave us was unforgettable.

On the whole the weather was very good on this stage; we had settled down into a good rhythm, and we were moving quite fast. For example, this is what we did on Friday 24 March: Heidelberger hut to Zahnjoch (681 m climbed, 4 km distance, 2 hours); descent from Zahnjoch to Jamtal hut in 1 hour; Jamtal hut to Ober Ochsencharte (812 m climbed, 5 km distance, 2 hours). Here we met the BBC, who filmed us on the Dreiländerspitze; and then we skied down to the Wiesbadener hut. The next day we climbed Piz Buin, had a fabulous descent to Klosters and then on to Davos.

Eastern and Central Switzerland, 26 March–7 April

Davos highlighted an entirely different aspect of the Traverse. We had no sooner arrived than we went to a party given by the BBC. This was followed by an excellent dinner given by the Tourist Office. Before going to bed I washed my clothes out ready for the next section. It was difficult to get up at 4am to continue the Traverse. We went by Range Rover for a couple of miles to Frauenkirch, then walked up some meadows, carrying our skis as there was no snow, crossed the Maienfelder Furka, and then skied down to Arosa, unfortunately arriving near the sewage outlet. After lunch we took the Hörnli lift and skied over to Parpan.

There then followed a very interesting section over the Rheinwaldhorn, with a night in the rather remote unguarded Zapport hut. We were avoiding unguarded huts as much as possible, because early in the year they tend to be damp and cold. This in fact was a comfortable hut; but I would not like to have to find it in bad conditions as the approach to it is very obscure. The descent from the Rheinwaldhorn took us to Olivone, a charming Italian speaking village; I think all of us would have liked to have stayed there a day or two, but instead we had to push on to Andermatt.

This was nearly two days away, the first day being a $9\frac{1}{2}$ -hour climb over the Lukmanier Pass to the unguarded Cadlimo hut. It was very hot and desolate, and most of us found this a very hard day. The next day, 31 March, we arrived rather tired in Andermatt for two days' rest. This was time to sharpen the edges of our skis, fill in the holes in the soles, stitch skins, wash clothes and write letters. We had done these first nineteen days without a rest: this would have been quite impossible without the support of Gerry Finch and David Gore in the Range Rover. We had covered about half the E to W distance but had the bigger mountain ranges ahead, with the prospect of our first 4000-m peak a few days ahead in the Bernese Oberland.

We left Realp, near Andermatt, on 3 April, crossed the Furka Pass, passed through the deserted summer station of Gletsch, crossed the Grimsel Pass and arrived at the Oberaar glacier restaurant, where we had made special arrangements with the hydro company to spend the night. Although this was locked up for the winter, they very kindly allowed us to use the beds in the kitchen. When we arrived there were only two beds, but we nevertheless spent a good night on the floor. On the next day we moved through to the Finsteraarhorn hut in rapidly deteriorating weather. We were hut-bound the next day; the day after we tried the Gross Fiescherhorn, but had to give up about two-thirds of the way up because of the weather. We made the best of the afternoon by moving on to the Concordia hut. The next day the weather

9 *Alan Blackshaw on the Grenz glacier* Photo: P. Cliff



was still very bad and we stopped at the Hollandia hut for a couple of hours to give it a chance to clear before descending the Löttschental, the top of which is crevassed. At the hut we were told the sad news that two days before a party of five had bivouacked within 50 yd of the hut, unable to find it: four of them had died. Our decision to wait paid off, as the weather cleared and we had a fabulous powder descent to Blatten. From there we went by road to Zermatt.

Zermatt to Chamonix, 7-17 April

Having missed one of the Oberland peaks, we were particularly anxious to climb Monte Rosa. We in fact had to wait two days for the weather to settle, but then had one of the best days of the Traverse; in fact it was the most enjoyable day I have had on skis. Because of the wind we did the Signalkuppe (4556 m) rather than the Dufourspitze. Despite falling snow at first, the 7½-hour climb went well, breaking our own trail in powder the whole way: and the descent down the Grenz glacier in powder was unforgettable. We then did two days' filming for the BBC.

We left Zermatt on 13 April for the Schönbiel hut. The eating, drinking and discotheques of Zermatt had been fun, but maybe during that hot afternoon some of us regretted an over indulgence. The route thenceforward was over the three cols of Valpelline, Mont Brulé and l'Evêque to the Chanrion hut. Following the normal Haute Route we would have spent our third night in the Valsorey hut, but the weather had turned bad again; it was snowing at 2am and we waited with little improvement until 5am, when we left. Alan navigated perfectly in nil visibility to Pt 2735.7 above the Mont Durand glacier, and it was here we decided it was too bad to consider the Plateau du Couloir but to branch off and take our escape route over the Fenêtre de Durand and down into Italy to Ollomont. From there we went by car through the Grand St Bernard tunnel to Bourg St Pierre.

The next day (16 April) we went up to the Grand St Bernard monastery in a blizzard and spent a most enjoyable night. On the advice of the Prior of the monastery, who is a mountain guide, we took a most interesting route from there over the three cols of St Rhémy, Pt 2816 and Malatra. Few English skiers have been this way, and I can strongly recommend it as an alternative to the normal Haute Route. It brought us down to Entrèves, and from there we went through the tunnel to Chamonix.

Chamonix to Gap, 18-26 April

Mt Blanc was in a bad state—a metre of new snow and winter conditions; nobody had yet done it this year. So we decided to complete the Traverse to Gap and then return for Mt Blanc.

By using the lifts at Courmayeur we were able to reach La Thuile that morning, after a good descent from the Testa d'Arp; then during the afternoon we skied



10 *Party moving off from Grands Mulets* Photo: A. Blackshaw

over the Col du Petit St Bernard from the Chaz Dura lift to reach La Rosière, above Bourg St Maurice.

Next day we arrived at Lac de Tignes after ascending a remote valley to the Col du Palet. Subsequently we spent nights at the Refuge de la Leisse, Modane, the Refuge de la Vallée Étroite, Névache and Vallouise, before reaching the end of the snow at Les Clots, near Gap on 26 April. The highlights of the section were the ascent of Mt Thabor (3178 m), the traverse from the Col de Méa to the Col de Fréjus, above Villeneuve, in a blizzard, and the Pas de la Cavale on the last day. The Pas de la Cavale is a high pass seldom crossed on skis in this direction, E to W, on account of its reputation for difficulty and steepness. We left Vallouise at 3am and 7½ hours of trail-breaking brought us in perfect weather to the col. Alan carefully picked a way down the steep W side, made more difficult by a thin covering of wind slab. After that it was clear to Les Clots where the support party met us.

Mont Blanc

The next morning (27 April) we left Gap at 4am and drove back to Chamonix; we went straight up to the Grands Mulets hut. We spent the next day at the hut, uncertain of the weather. At midnight, with a forecast of prolonged bad weather coming in, we decided this would probably be our last chance. Five o'clock saw the front party at the Vallot bivouac hut. There was quite a high wind, bad visibility and it was very cold. Alan pressed on with Michael de Pret Roose and me, confident of being able to retreat if it got worse. The others, including the BBC, decided to turn back from the Vallot hut, Mick Burke and Dougal Haston generously staying at the Vallot to cover us. Conditions were still bad when the three of us reached the top, but we were rewarded by a partial clearing on the way off, giving some extraordinary light effects.

Conclusions

What stood out throughout the Traverse were the contrasts. We had everything: big resorts, little villages; smart hotels, unguarded huts; the freedom of uncrevassed glaciers, the restriction of rutted wood paths; desperately hot days, bitterly cold ones; every conceivable snow condition; different languages and people. Above all it was really enjoyable.

Throughout we had great help and encouragement from a very wide range of individuals and organisations, including especially: the national and local tourist authorities of Austria, Switzerland and France; the téléphérique companies; our equipment suppliers; the civilian and Service ski and mountaineering clubs; British Leyland with their indispensable Range Rover; the *Guardian*; the BBC; Ski Plan; the Imperial Tobacco Group Ltd; the British Educational Ski Association Ltd; and our patron, Lord Hunt, President of the National Ski Federation of Great Britain. We are very grateful to all of them.