Above and Below the Snow-line

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Turkish Ski Traverses II: Kackar Chariot

(*Plates 71, 72*)

In any military mountaineering Pantheon, the Athenian general Xenophon must take pride of place. Not only did his 401 BC expedition to Persia pre-date Hannibal's to Rome by 182 years, but in crossing the Taurus outward bound and then both the Kurdish and Pontic Alps inward en route to the Black Sea he scored a treble. Although it was to this corner of the ancient world that Jason sailed with his Argonauts in 1263 BC to search for the Golden Fleece and open up the Black Sea to Greek commerce, for most 20th-century European travellers, Pontus was as remote as Xanadu and its hinterland *terra incognita*. For me, it was Robin Fedden's 1963 account of these mysterious Pontic Alps that stirred schoolboy memories of Xenophon and sowed the seed of curiosity.

Xenophon's Pontic Alps are now the Kackar Dag, the highest range in NE Turkey. These Little Caucasus, culminating in Kackar Peak (3932m), rise some 100km south-west of their grander namesakes and cover 3600 square kilometres of what was ancient Lazistan. Winds off the Black Sea dump over 100 inches of rain and snow on the mountain wall raised high above the narrow coastal plain to create a botanical mosaic. The littoral's tea plantations and hazelnut groves rapidly revert to forests of chestnut, walnut, alder, hornbeam, oak and spruce – oversized variants of our European familiars. Here, lianas and other parasites trail downwards into a matted undergrowth of blackberry, bay laurel, holly, cotoneaster, privet, ivy, xilax, clematis and fern. Intermingling with the forest and creating impenetrable thickets of its own is the *Rhododendron ponticum*. On Scotland's west coast this exotic grows like a weed: here, in its native habitat, it covers whole mountainsides in livid pink. Above the deciduous tree-line, pine forests compete with swashes of yellow azalea giving way to meadows bejewelled with alpine flowers swept by wave-tossed tracts of the white blossomed *Rhododendron caucasicum*. Up and beyond is the climbers' world of scree and snow, glaciers and granite peaks.

Kackar's modern climbing history dates from three turn of the century visits by the ubiquitous Anglo-German Willi Rickmer Rickmers, a pioneer mountaineer explorer of the Caucasus and Pamirs, twice reinstated to the AC after two world wars, an RGS gold medallist and inaugural honorary member of the Alpine Ski Club. During the 1930s, Austrian and German climbers – Turkey's former wartime allies – mopped up most of the exploratory mountaineering in Turkey. After the Second World War, the first Briton to visit Kackar was the redoubtable traveller Denis Hills whose 1959 and 1963 journeys are elegantly described in *My Travels in Turkey* (Allen & Unwin 1964). Robin Fedden and Basil Goodfellow made first British ascents of

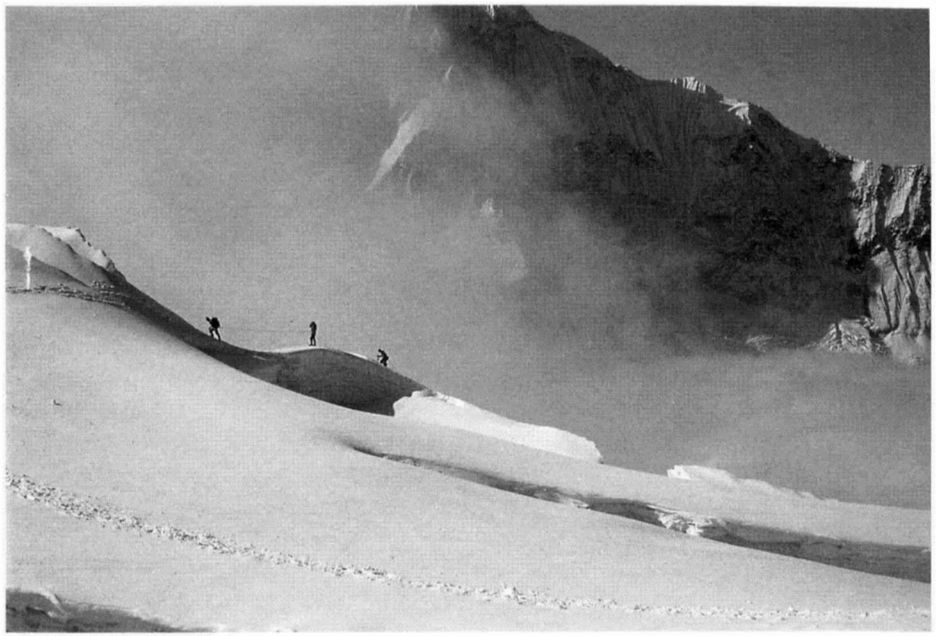
Kackar (3932m) and other peaks in 1963. Sidney Nowill was active in 1976, 1977 and 1980.

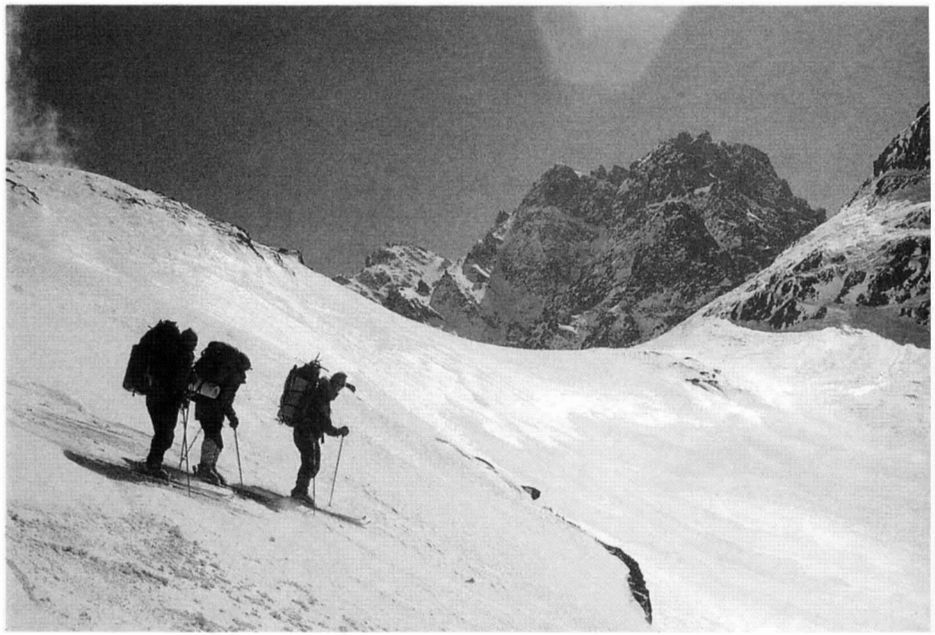
It took me 21 years to fulfil the earlier vow to climb in Kackar. In June 1987 my wife and I, with Robert and Susan Sykes, flew to Trabzon, hired a taxi and headed east along the coast. Swinging inland through effulgent green forests emblazoned with rhododendron, we reached Ayder (1250m) after six bumpy hours. From this local resort, famous for its hot springs but with disturbing plans for tourist development, we backpacked south into the hills. We were neither kidnapped, robbed nor molested but climbing was frustrated by the insidious Black Sea mist, lack of a decent map, and compasses which the granitic rock swung unpredictably. The weather too was dreadful – alternate bouts of snow, hail and thunderstorm. But when visible, the country was magnificent and as the snows retreated, alpine meadows became floral tapestries. Then on one fine day, 7 June, all frustration was forgotten when Sykes and I climbed Nanetleme Tepesi (3405m) from the head of the Kaymakcur valley. From this belvedere, the whole range unfolded from the lazy mass of Karchal Dag marking Russia to the east to the unmistakable rock pyramid of Verchenik in the west. This vision spawned the 1991 Kackar ski traverse.

Turkey is, above all, a diverse country. While both the Bolkar and Ala Dag are ranges of Central Asia, Kackar Dag, 650km further east, is alpine in character with the comforting feel of Europe. It is not simply that the Lazes, butts for Turkish wit yet renowned as mariners and pastry-cooks, are an industrious Caucasian remnant. Their migrations from the lower valleys to the summer yailas, with the women dressed like peacocks and the men outlandish in bearskins driving their black bulls before them, have a high drama wholly lacking in Heidi's Swiss cows. But in scale, land forms and architecture, the Kackar seem disconcertingly familiar. The elegant humpbacked pack bridges are unique but the stone-foundationed wooden chalets, eyrie-like on hillsides linked to valleys by primitive *téléfériques*, could be Swiss. Above all, the people are hospitable and friendly.

The 1991 Kackar traverse team comprised David and Anna Williams, David Seddon and Stephen Baker. Like Xenophon, we would enter from the south and exit at Trabzon. I could find no record of a complete Kackar ski traverse but three months before our departure, Ronald Naar, the Flying Dutchman Seven Summiter, wrote to say that he was about to visit the range with a Turkish guide. Naar in the field! We had first met on Mount Olympus in 1985 and our paths had been crossing ever since. His entry to the lists added a *frisson* but when we compared itineraries it looked as if Ronald's, from Yaylalar to Pokut, was more an extended crossing than an east/west traverse.

Of more concern was the Gulf War. Our flights were only confirmed after consulting the Turkish Oracle Sidney Nowill. And it was the memory of the Nowills' hospitality on our first night in Turkey at their flat overlooking the Bosphorus, serenaded by honking foghorns, that sustained us through a lost day in Ankara. From England, it took a three-day journey into winter suspended above the illimitable snow-bound plateau of Eastern Turkey to reach Erzurum and from there, by bus, our roadhead Yusufeli.





Above

73. Large crevasses on Island Peak. Baruntse's fluted ice in the background. (*Malcolm Rutherford*) (p170)

Facing page, above

71. Kackar Dag: Avucor valley. (*J G R Harding*) (p154)

Facing page, below

72. Refuge at Bulut Dag. (*J G R Harding*) (p154)

As we disembarked, self-conscious with ski and incongruous in garish anoraks on an unseasonably balmy evening, Ozkan attached himself to us. As folk do in Turkey, he had seen us coming. Now, as we wandered with him through the dusty main street in search of taxis for tomorrow, our self-appointed Treking Mauntainer Guy (as his card pronounced) soliloquised about the mountain life. 'There are no bears in Kackar' – Ozkan was doing his best to reassure us – 'and no wolves either – but the butterflies are very beautiful.' Ozkan confided that he guided trekkers during his three month summer season to Kackar, Ararat and the Caucasus. But in winter, he avoided the mountains as 'dangerous with too much snow'.

Ozkan was wrong about bears and wolves, but then he only wanted to please. Over the next fortnight scarcely a day passed without a sighting of bear or wolf spoor. But he was dead right about the snow which proved unpredictable, collapsible to a depth of 4ft and seriously avalanche prone. Monumental, solidified heaps of the stuff filling gullies and valley bottoms were constant reminders of mortality. In the Taurus we had scarcely seen an avalanche. In the Kackar their brooding presence was a feature of everyday life.

On 22 March 1991, blue skies heralded a perfect start to our venture. A 32km competitive slalom between our two taxis on bare treads whisked us up the spectacular Altiparmark valley to the hamlet of Barhal (Altiparmak) at 1200m. From this roadhead, we shouldered sacks. The traverse was to be in three phases: Barhal to Ayder, Ayder to Chat and Chat to Chemlihemshin. This allowed 12 days to take in the four massifs of Altiparmark, Bulut, Kackar and Verchenik. 2392 years before, Xenophon had crossed the Pontic Alps in 10 days.

Eight hours on and 1300m higher, we made our first camp just short of the Kara Gol lake. So far so good but by next morning, barely three hours out, a Black Sea blizzard sent us snow-holing in the lea of a monolithic rock below the black cliffs of Didvake and left us sopping wet. Was this the pattern of things to come? Ski touring blind on sketch maps is bad for the nerves. More of the same next morning set the scene for a 900m thrills and spills descent through the cloud down the Percha valley to Binektashi yaila. At the end of that run we crossed our first bear tracks. But could these monstrous 12" imprints of claws, like splayed crampons, belong to a mere brown bear? More importantly, if confronted, should we stand our ground, go to ground or simply grovel?

A descending traverse across the hillside through forest, cloud and mist brought us gently down to the Kisla valley. Here, the south-facing slopes were wooded with birch and oak as the north were with pine. Passing clusters of deep-eaved, deserted chalets, silent in the snow, we climbed on up beyond the tree-line, to camp early on a rock knoll jutting out above the valley. Snug and secure on this belvedere marked by a solitary pine, our tents were cushioned by a mattress of *Rhododendron caucasicum* while, all around, the sides of the Upper Kisla were seared and scarred by fresh avalanche slides. Plumb 50m below our camp, the gaping gulch of the Ombolat Deresi was buried in 15m of solidified snow blocks.

This ugly passage was best left for an early start and with the dawn came clear skies. Due west the sun had already picked out in luminous pink a snow tooth set between the double col of Kirmizi Gedici (3110m) marking our first watershed. Frozen snow swiftly sped our ski over and past enormous avalanche cones into the maw of the upper Kisla valley which narrowed to a head wall topped by the Kirmizi col. Before us, away in the north-west, invisible beyond serried ridges that peeked out from a cauldron of cumulus cloud, lay the Black Sea. Could this be the mountain Xenophon called 'Thekes' from which his 10,000 first saw the Euxine? Imagination might have caught an echo of '*Thalassa, Thalassa*' ('the Sea, the Sea'), but to make this crossing, a Peltast must paraglide or ski like a Williams.

Steeply below, down an icy gully, the undulating snowfields of the upper Avucor valley sparkled reassuringly. On reaching this promised land, by crampon or ski to taste, the pressure lifted. With the sun warming our backs and the snow holding firm, we slalomed downwards past the castellated flanks of Bulut Dag ('the Cloudy One') in snaking turns which desecrated the virgin snow. Racing through, amongst and over the rooftops of chalets snow engulfed to their eaves, this dizzying plunge only stopped at the lip of a waterfall in the bed of the ever-narrowing valley.

The 14km descent from the Kirmizi Gedici to Ayder demolished 1800m of vertical height. But my nostalgic memories of a bustling summer spa soon faded as we trudged down its one street now slushy, grey and deserted. We had banked on reprovisioning at Ayder but the village had been abandoned. Not a shop was open and both electricity and water (save for a single street tap) were cut off. But miraculously, the proprietor of our old haunt the Hilton Oteli was still in situ. This establishment would have nonplussed the chain's founder and its fleas make gnats of their Pyrenean cousins. But its owner gave us olives, cheese, scrambled eggs, bread, butter and rice in his warm kitchen with what remained of the local population. We ate to bust, correctly anticipating some lean days ahead. A more serious preoccupation was David Seddon's knee, injured in descent. This was definitely not a case of 'doctor heal thyself'. The prospect of losing a key player to a quack deputy with only one-third of the traverse completed cast a dark shadow at the close of that otherwise magnificent day.

Next morning, the formal handover of the Kodachrome film canister containing the expedition's pills, potions and placebos confirmed that David was heading for the coast and home. Pensively, the rest of us set off southwards up the Kale Duzu valley into the heart of the range. Bear and wolf spoor preceded us through a pine forest which, at the Asagi Caymakcur yaila, gave way to open snowfields. Here, in June 1987, we had walked through alpine meadows studded with giant yellow peonies and blue gentians. Four years on but three months earlier, the sun seemed warmer as we mounted unstable snow slopes strung out in file and preoccupied with the threat of avalanche. That unsettling 1520m ascent took 9½ hours. Secure beside Kara Deniz Golu (2750m) a snow-covered lake at the foot of the spired Nanetleme Tepesi, I realised belatedly that this had been our summer campsite four years ago.

On 27 March, a 4.30am start took us from shadow to the sunlit Caymakcur col (3210m) marking the Kackar's N/S watershed. We gazed at this new southern horizon before mounting our ski chariots and launching off down the deep-delved Dupeduz valley. Heaving for breath after a lung-blowing descent on perfect snow on a spur just above the Buyuk Chay at Olgunlar, I spotted a tiny figure framed in the valley's narrow shoulders. It was far below but moved purposefully upwards with a skier's gliding stride.

Preoccupied with the loss of Doctor David, we had forgotten Ronald Naar. Coincidence can be taken too far but was this not the day when our paths might again cross? Like raptors we swooped downwards for our preordained tryst past startled shepherdesses raking dung and, at precisely 8am, were a laughing, handshaking and happy snapping group with Ronald, Bas, Henk and Jamal their Turkish guide. They had set out from Yaylalar only the day before. Half an hour on brought another surprise when three local shepherds on primitive skis swept by in straw hats smelling high as badgers. In the heat of the day it took 5½ hours up the airless corridor of the Buyuk Chay to reach the Dilber Duzu (2930m) set in a cirque surrounded by granite peaks. Here we camped opposite the pillared black buttresses of the Devil's Rocks, vaulting 1400m from the valley floor to the summit of Kackar itself. 50m away, the Dutch built a moat and bailey round their tent with food enough for a siege. Next day, 28 March, we all climbed Kackar peak (3932m) in 4½ hours via the frozen Deniz Golu with skins to the summit ridge. Mist obscured the view but we celebrated that evening on the heroic tin of honey humped up by the lion-hearted Jamal, ski-less and goggle-less on the mountain, now eyeless with snow blindness.

Dutch hospitality had significantly extended our range but Good Friday brought the first bad weather in five days and a parting of ways. We were heading west while Ronald and Co were northbound though initially would follow our tracks across the key passage to the Kavron Gap (3270m). A 450m climb via the backwall of Deniz Golu landed us on the first of five cols that link the radiating ridges of Kackar's southern flank. In falling snow and poor visibility the route was uncertain. But on that high trapeze crossing, an avalanche-scoured face, an overcast sky was better than any amount of sun. David was again man of the match – sometimes a mere speck on a baleful wall but always steering a bold, unerring line. We reached the Kavron Gap 4 hours and 20 minutes after leaving camp; dropped 700m into the upper Polovit valley; almost sank without trace through the snow when the sun came out and finally slipped west across yet another ridge down leg-breaking crust to Karam yaila in the upper Kormik valley.

We were now off the sketch map. To reach the Verchenik massif, should we strike due west over the mountains or follow down the Kormik valley via Elévit to Chat? With food and time running out we opted for the 1350m descent to Chat past monstrous avalanche slides through snow so vile that even Williams was spotted doing a sly kick turn. When the snow gave out, we walked through snowdrops, gentians, primulas and clouds of butterflies. Chat itself, set prettily in a confluence of deep valleys, was virtually deserted save for the Oteli Canick's rapacious proprietor Rasim and his monster dog Arslan

'the Lion', Turkey's answer to the Tosa. Health warning: both prey on itinerants. After stuffing ourselves with Rasim's hyperpriced boiled eggs, bread and honey, we decided to carry on to Ortakoy yaila, 800m higher up the Firtina gorge, by way of avalanche debris suspended above a boiling torrent. Kackar's yellow azalea honey, hived in barrels 30m high up in the trees to frustrate the bears, has poisoned over-indulgers from the days of Xenophon and Pompey. We had glutted ourselves on Rasim's, but with no ill effects.

Our last three days in Kackar were a fairy-tale. The saga will oft be retold of how we met Barki Kasholi, the winter guardian of Ortakoy, emerging from the gloom of a Black Sea snowsouper at the close of that endless 12-hour day. How he frustrated his two dogs of their infidel dinner, took us to the bosom of his family to share hearth and home and how, on that stormy night, we slept not in leaky tents in mud and slush but under embroidered sheets scented with lavender in a pine walled dortoir two storeys above Barki's extended family of 150 sheep, 10 cattle and 2 dogs.

On Easter Day 31 March we breakfasted off eggs with golden yolks and bread smothered with orange and raisin jam while the Barkis' daughters suckled their twin pet lambs from a milk-bottle. David gave young Ali a skiing lesson and I gave Barki my Swiss penknife before we skinned on up the Firtina valley towards a pyramidic snow peak emerging through the morning mist. But even as we sighted the fantastic granite spire of Verchenik (3711m), we knew it would remain inviolate. We camped at its feet but our time was up and although, next day, before descending 1900m to Chat, David climbed the pyramid peak Ovit Tepesi (3260m) (the rest of us nearly), the Queen of Kackar remains a vision. That evening in Rasim's rude *hamam*, having emptied a jug of paraffin over my head as water, I remembered All Fools Day.

Marching out of Kackar down the Firtina valley, it struck me that Xenophon might as well have followed this valley down to the coast as any other. His route is still disputed but, though my insight was probably a mere fantasy, in completing the Kackar ski traverse in 12 days it was Xenophon's spirit which had moved us, as ours had been buoyed by the hospitality of others. If you have luck with the weather and rise with the dawn to the four-note reveille of the Caspian Snow Partridge so as to catch the good snow, Kackar will provide unforgettable ski mountaineering.

Summary: *Kackar Dag, Turkey.* First ski traverse from Barhal to Chemlihemshin 22 March–2 April 1991. Party: David Williams, Anna Williams, Stephen Baker and John Harding with David Seddon in part. **22.3.91** Yusufeli to Kara Gol camp. **23.3.91** Kara Gol to Didvake Col. **24.3.91** Didvake Col to Ombolat Deresi. **25.3.91** Ombolot Deresi to Ayder. **26.3.91** Ayder to Kara Deniz Golu (via Caymakcur Deresi). **27.3.91** Kara Deniz Golu to Dibler Duzu via Dupeduz Deresi/Olgunlar and Buyuk Chay. **28.3.91** *Ascend Kackar Dag (3932m).* **29.3.91** Dilber Duzu to Karam Yaylasi (Kormik valley). **30.3.91** Karam Yaylasi camp to Ortakoy via Chat. **31.3.91** Ortakoy to Ovit Yaila. **1.4.91** Ovit Yaila to Chat (*Ascend Ovit Tepesi 3260m DRBW*). **2.4.91** Chat to Trabzon via Chemlihemshin and Firtina valley.