
DAVID HAMILTON

A Ski Traverse of the Alps



Skiing the Col de Valpelline with the Matterhorn as a backdrop in 2016, the second portion of David Hamilton's ski traverse of the Alps. *(David Hamilton)*

This is an account of a 2,113km winter journey from Menton on the French Mediterranean coast to Vienna. Well over 90% of the route was completed on skis and the short sections below the snow line were completed on foot. No mechanised transport was used at any point. The trip comprised 102 stages and took 129 days to complete over four winters from 2015 to 2018. On 27 days no forward progress was possible, mostly due to poor weather or dangerous snow conditions. Logging the trip by GPS gave a total ascent of 115,060m. Without doubt this was the most physically and mentally draining mountain project I have ever undertaken, as well as being the most rewarding. My aim here is to share the lessons learnt from the planning and execution of this journey.

I consider myself a fairly experienced mountaineer and have been a professional expedition leader for over 30 years. I have led 20 expeditions to 8,000m peaks and climbed Everest 10 times. I have also led 12 expeditions to 7,000m peaks, and climbed each of the Seven Summits at least three times. I have worked as a guide in Antarctica for 15 seasons, climbing Mt Vinson 23 times. I have led ski-mountaineering expeditions in more than a

dozen countries and made ski ascents of Muztag Ata, Denali, Damavand, Elbrus, and Ararat. I have decades of experience of multi-day ski tours in the Alps, almost all in the early season using winter rooms. All of this was essential in developing the necessary skills and preparing me for this project.

There is a significant history of parties making long ski traverses in the Alps. The 1956 journey of Walter Bonatti is commonly thought of as the first, and Alan Blackshaw led the first British group in 1972. Most of the early journeys used different start and end points and it was common to use vehicles to link adjoining mountain areas. In recent decades there have been traverses from east to west and from west to east, either in a single season or over multiple seasons. There is an attraction to completing this trip in a single winter but this was not an option for me as each year I work in Antarctica until the end of January and then in Nepal from the end of March. Instead my aim was to make the trip as 'pure' as possible, starting at the sea and finding a continuous route to Vienna by ski and foot that did not require any vehicle links.

The ski route from the Mediterranean coast to Chamonix is a great stand-alone project. It is probably one of the most interesting and varied four-week ski tours in the Alps. When Venetia Wingfield and I left Menton on 9 February 2015 the aim was 'just' to ski to Chamonix. Little did I realise that this would be the start of a project that would occupy the next four winter seasons. After the two-day hike from the coast to Col de Turini (43.4km, 3,470m climbed, three cols crossed), the only low-lying section that must be covered on foot is crossing the Maurienne valley from Val Fréjus ski station to Aussois. The entire route stays close to the France-Italy border passing through the Mercantour, Queyras, Vanoise and Gran Paradiso National Parks.

Accommodation is mostly in CAF refuges and small village hotels. Ironically the biggest problem was finding accommodation in large ski resorts where booking rooms for a single night can be difficult. Depending on the opening dates of the CAF refuges there may be as few as five nights in winter rooms (Merveillies, Nice, Vens, Rabuons, Mario Bezzi) although this could rise to seven if Dent Parachée and Col de la Vanoise are not yet open. The optimal route is fairly obvious with five sections starting from Menton, Isola 2000, Col de Larche, Montgenèvre, and Val d'Isère. Our average day length was seven to nine hours and we seldom saw other skiers or tracks once away from the ski resorts. This meant that we broke trail for most of the way. The most technical section was between Isola 2000 and Col de Larche. We were probably the first skiers of the season to cross the glaciers of the Vanoise from the Dent Parachée refuge to the Col de la Vanoise refuge. The longest stage was a 14-hour day from Bonne to La Thuile. Overall the 2015 leg of 26 stages covered 486km with 29,207m of ascent in 32 days.

In retrospect the Swiss leg of the journey, accomplished between 16 February and 17 March 2016, was less enjoyable than the French leg. This is probably due to the high proportion of bad weather days that made much of the travel and navigation difficult and stressful. Steve Kentish joined me for



Cross purposes. From top left clockwise: on the Rheinwaldhorn (3402m) in 2016; the Wilder Pfaff (3456m) in Austria in 2017; the Grosses Bärneck (2071m) in 2018; and the Hohe Veitsch (1981m), also in 2018. (David Hamilton)

the full 31 days, with John Kentish joining for days one to eight and Harvey Lyons for days nine to 31. Our start from Chamonix was delayed by a week due to bad weather and dangerous snow conditions. When we were able to start we were forced to take a low level route to Verbier via Col de le Forclaz and Orsières before continuing to Zermatt. Here John left the team and was replaced by Harvey. His introduction to the project was a 14-hour day, mostly in poor weather, crossing the Adler pass to the Britanniahütte. In the early morning the Zermatt avalanche cannons strafed us as we ascended the 'closed' pistes. Late in the day we navigated the gaping crevasses of the Adler glacier in the failing light, and spent several hours in total darkness searching for the closed hut. Harvey remarked that he had previously been on several ski tours that required starting in the dark, and also some that had required finishing in the dark, but never one that had done both on the same day.

The day from Saas Grund to Simplon pass was excellent, but we were then stuck for several days by poor weather. This dogged us for the next section on to Airolo and my memories of this eight-day stretch are mostly

of long stressful days with difficult navigation in poor snow, punctuated by poorly equipped Italian huts. The weather improved for the five-day section on to Splügen, and we enjoyed good snow conditions and the excellent facilities of three SAC huts. This section ended with a traverse of the 3,402m Rheinwaldhorn and a descent through a Swiss army firing range (not shown on the map).

The fourth section of the Swiss journey had to be recalculated when we found that a key hotel was closed. The new route required long days linking villages and small ski resorts where the accommodation was comfortable if expensive. Time constraints led to the trip terminating at Bergun on 17 March. By then the snow was fast disappearing and onward progress would have been difficult. We had spent 18 nights in hotels and 12 nights in huts. The Mont-Fort hut was being used as cheap accommodation for Verbier skiers so should probably be reclassified as a hotel. Two huts (Castiglione and Margaroli) had wardens who were preparing for the season ahead but no other guests were present. The nine unstaffed huts were mostly excellent with cooking facilities and heating. Had we not lost a week at the start of the trip we would have completed the crossing of Switzerland, and reached the border with Austria. The 2016 leg of 25 stages covered 518km with 30,621m of ascent in 31 days.

Andy Helm joined Steve and myself for the first six days of the 2017 crossing of western and central Austria. We started from Bergun on 8 February and had an excellent trip to Klosters and on through the Silvretta. The weather was generally fine. The huts had not yet opened for the season and we saw very few other skiers. We completed the final seven Swiss stages and entered Austria at Ramosch north of the Reschenpass on 14 February. This was the first time that I had skied in Austria. Ahead of us the Ötztal, Stubai, Zillertal, Hohe Tauern and Niedere Tauern ranges promised classic ski-touring terrain.

As with the French and Swiss legs we rarely saw other skiers except when we passed close to ski resorts. The mountain scenery was spectacular and most of the days were acceptable in terms of risk and effort. Many days were six to 10 hours long, but six were between 10 and 12 and a half. Half a dozen times we found ourselves in seriously unpleasant situations due to avalanche and snow stability issues, or steep technical terrain. Fortunately we survived all of these without mishap. Looking back we had been too trusting of the ski routes shown on the OEV maps. These are not nearly as reliable as their French or Swiss counterparts. Ramosch to Sölden would have been an excellent five-day section but for the difficult descent of Glockturmjoch and lack of accommodation that night. We endured our only bivouac of the entire journey in the Kaurnertal ski station after an 11h 40m day.

There seemed to be an obvious three or four-day route from Sölden to Steinach traversing the Stubai mountains. Only later did we learn that all ski tours in this area use the north-south valleys and few people attempt a west-east crossing. On the third day out of Sölden, after traversing the summit of the Wilderpfaff (3456m), we completed the difficult ascent of

Approaching the Olpererhütte in the Zillertal in 2017. (David Hamilton)

the Freigerscharte pass in the dark and diverted to the Nürnberger hut arriving after 11h 15m of effort. The following day we covered 37.7km in 12h 15m to reach Steinach. The five-day section to Kasern held no exceptional technical difficulty and we reached the Berliner hut in three days. However storm conditions forced us to retreat to Mayrhofen for supplies and this added three days to the journey. After a heavy snowfall we waited a day in Kasern before continuing the three-day section to Matreier Tauernhaus. We should have waited longer and as a consequence of our haste endured a very fraught trip to the Warensdorfer hut in extreme avalanche conditions.

We waited out a three-day period of poor weather at Matreier before managing five consecutive eight-hour days passing north of the Grossglockner and Heiligenblut to Bockstein. The final descent from Baumbachspitze to Sportgastein being the worst example encountered of a totally un-skiable cliff shown as a ski route on the OEV map. Again we were delayed for three days by bad weather, fortunately in a comfortable hotel. While it rained in the valley we were unaware that winter had ended and there was a massive thaw happening at altitude.

For our final seven days into Schladming we faced a very different snowpack made up of morning ice and afternoon slush. After the unpleasant climb to the Hannoverhaus we resorted to very early starts in an attempt to avoid the afternoon wet snow slides pouring from the hillsides. We pushed the route onwards with five reasonable length days plus a 12h 20m day to Albertbiwak (after a long fight with a drained hydro lake), and a 10h 20m day into Obertauern. When we reached Schladming on 28 March the only snow to be seen was of the artificial variety on pistes leading into the town.



We spent 22 nights in hotels, and 19 nights in 15 different DAV and OEV huts. All were winter rooms except the Hannoverhaus, where the warden initially suggested that we should not come, and then was reluctant to let us leave. The 2017 leg of 35 stages (seven in Switzerland plus 28 in Austria) took 49 days with 14 days lost to poor weather or dangerous snow conditions. We covered 746km with 39,800m of ascent.

Steve and I reconvened in Schladming on 19 February 2018 to complete the fourth and final leg of the journey to Vienna. Despite the lower altitudes

this was to be a year with plenty of snow and very cold temperatures, but mostly dull and overcast weather. The trip divided naturally into three distinct sections. The first exited the Niedere Tauern and traveled through a predominantly forested landscape to the mining town of Eisenerz. This was a six-day journey with overnight stops in Donnersbachwald, Gulling, Rottenman, Johnsbach, and Radmer. These are similar days, each with some road walking, a mixture of forest trails and footpaths, and some good ski terrain.

The second section was more mountainous, traversing five high limestone massifs, each with multiple summits: Hochschwab (2277m), Veitchalpe (1981m), Schneevalpe (1903m), Raxalpe (2007m), and Schneeberg (2076m). This would be considered a substantial tour anywhere in the Alps. Four out of the six travel days took nine hours or longer. We encountered quite a bit of poor weather including strong winds and temperatures below -25°C. We had two very cold overnight stops at the Sonnshienhütte and Schneevalpenhaus.

The third section left the high mountains behind and traversed the undulating hills of the 'Vienna woods' gradually losing height until reaching the city limits. In four days we covered 95km and climbed 2,722m. On the final day we skied through woods to the Kammersteinerhütte (582m) and climbed the historic Josefwarte tower for our first view of the city below. A short ski descent led to vineyards on the edge of Vienna where we packed the skis and walked the final 15km to St Stephen's Cathedral in the city centre. We had travelled for 17 days (with a single rest day) covering 363km with 15,430m of ascent. We spent 15 nights in guesthouses and hotels, one night in a hut winter room, and a one-night bivouac in a tractor shed.

The Alpine mountains in winter can be a savage and dangerous place. It is easy to be fooled by 'accurate' maps showing red lines linking 'obvious' passes but in poor weather even map, compass and GPS are no guarantee of safe passage. Micro features a few metres high can easily cause a broken leg and the consequences of a night in the open without full camping equipment can be dire. Our pack weights (when not carrying skis) were around 12-18kg, depending how much food and fuel was carried. The extra weight of bivouac kit would have made the packs unacceptably heavy. Our climbing kit was restricted to 25m of 6mm static cord, one snow stake, one ice screw and a few karabiners. The key challenge of long distance ski touring is how to keep the pack weight reasonable without abandoning any 'essential' kit.

It takes considerable commitment to push on day after day into unknown terrain with no local knowledge and an awareness there are unlikely to be any other skiers or visible ski tracks. The only way to make this situation manageable is with detailed advanced planning. It may seem boring to spend hundreds of hours studying maps and programming routes into a GPS, but on a long tour through unfamiliar terrain this is essential to avoid navigational errors with potentially serious consequences. The main way of reducing risk is to have an in-depth understanding of the primary route

and available accommodation plus all the possible alternate routes. Despite all my planning we were frequently the victims of inadequate maps, poor cartography and vague or wrongly marked ski routes.

The length of each stage was dictated by the available accommodation, but pacing is important too. It is possible to have a few long days of 10 to 14 hours if necessary, however it is important not to string too many of these together consecutively. It is good to have a few short stages of four to five to aid recovery, and this removes the need to have complete rest days. When the weather is good it is essential to make forward progress, and we never took a rest day unless this was forced by weather conditions, illness, injury or exhaustion.

These journeys were all completed between mid February and mid March. Some may regard this as early for Alpine ski touring but I have come to appreciate the advantages of the early season. The daylight hours are less and huts generally unstaffed, but neither of these are significant disadvantages. It is possible to have long days without having to make outrageously early starts to avoid the mid afternoon heat. Snow cover usually extends down to valley floors. This enables low altitude link sections to be skied, often on Nordic tracks, and reduces the need to walk. Lower temperatures also mean that slopes stay safer into the late afternoon and this can be important if forced to climb a south-facing slope at the end of a 10-hour day.

There is no getting away from the fact that making a long point-to-point ski trip has significantly greater hazards than other forms of ski touring. We travelled in weather conditions and crossed snow slopes that most sensible people would avoid. Had we not done so, we would not have completed the journey. We were not foolhardy but we set the threshold of acceptable risk much higher than most ski mountaineers would be comfortable with. Every day carried the risk of a serious skiing fall, an avalanche, a fall over a cliff, benightment or other mishap. This made each day stressful and this stress was cumulative, building day by day over the length of the trip. Despite more than 30 years experience of guiding and managing stress in mountain environments this surprised me. However this observation does not detract from the fact that this four-year project has been the most challenging and rewarding that I have been part of, and I would like to thank my companions named above for sharing it with me.

• A detailed day-by-day description of the trip can be seen at <https://highadventure.org.uk/introduction.html>.