
MARTIN MORAN

Alps 4000: A Non-Stop Traverse

(Plates 21–26)

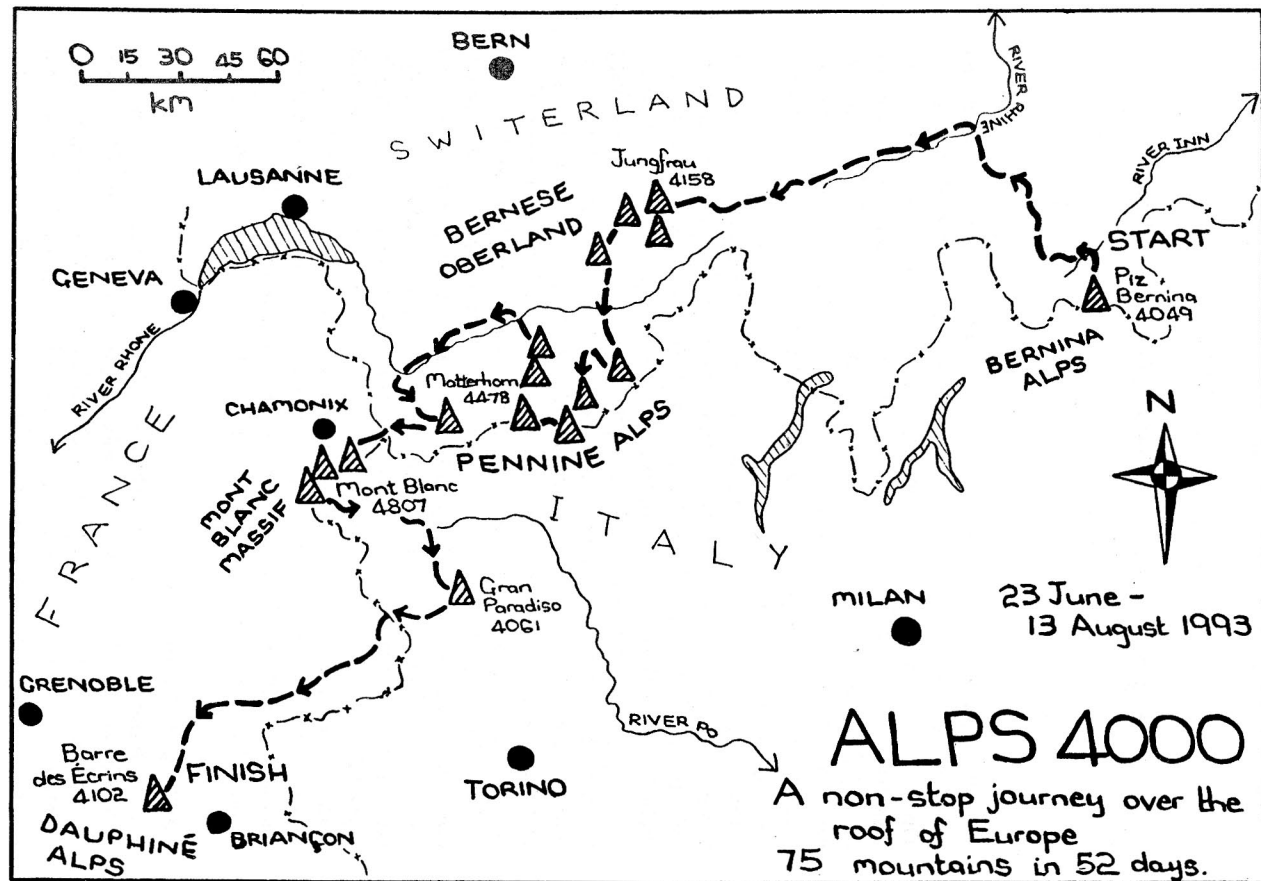
In this technological age it requires imagination to create an adventure: nowhere more so than on the well-trodden mountains of Western Europe. The linking of several ridges, faces or groups of summits in a single expedition has proved one of the most popular ideas for renewing the challenge of Alpinism, especially among the best French and Swiss climbers. Unfortunately, many remarkable *enchainements* have been emasculated as adventures by over-enthusiastic media attention, much of it encouraged by the participants themselves.

One of the less publicised yet most impressive feats in this genre was the traverse of all the summits of the Zermatt skyline over 20 days in February 1986 by the Swiss pair André Georges and Erhard Loretan. Their route included some thirty 4000 metre summits, and clearly revealed the potential for a grander traverse of all the Alpine 4000 metre peaks in a non-stop journey. But prior to 1993 the only non-stop attempt on the 4000ers was made by two British climbers, and was inspired by marathon fell-running feats, such as Lakeland's Bob Graham Round, as much as by the feats of the ace Alpinists of the day. In 1988 Paul Mackrill and John Rowlands set out to do the 4000ers in the most adventurous manner possible – on foot throughout and without high-level support teams. Beginning in early May they were beaten off the mountains several times by the snowy unsettled weather typical of the Alpine spring, and when conditions did become good in July and August they lacked the support to stay high and keep moving. Mackrill battled on for 120 days until 20 September, when he finished all fifty Swiss 4000ers with the ascent of the Grand Combin. For sheer determination it was an admirable performance, but changes in tactics were clearly needed if the 4000ers were to be traversed in their entirety in a single summer.

Forging a partnership

Any such traverse clearly demanded an intimate and efficient partnership between two equally committed climbers. Simon Jenkins and I had been aware of the 4000ers challenge throughout the late 1980s, but instead had thrown our energies into the shorter but technically harder project of a non-stop unsupported traverse of the Mer de Glace skyline from the Drus to the Charmoz.

The experience was bitter. Twice each, in 1988 and 1989, we set out from Montenvers and traversed the Drus. In each year we had installed food caches at four of the cols on the skyline. Our best effort got us as far as the



Aiguille de l'Eboulement after five days, where we had to abandon the venture owing to a worsening respiratory infection which was affecting us both. On each attempt we encountered mixed climbing more sustained than we could have imagined, rock that was shattered beyond belief and snow conditions which varied from perfect névé to abominable slush. Our lack of foreknowledge of the remote sections round the Talèfre and Leschaux basins counted heavily against us.

We emerged from these failures happy to let the prize of the Chamonix skyline fall to someone else but immeasurably strengthened as a partnership and much the wiser about Alpine climbing conditions. Meanwhile, we were individually amassing a sizeable tally of 4000ers in our work as guides, so that our route knowledge approached the level required for a rapid traverse without eliminating the novelty of the enterprise.

Tactical choices

Making the final commitment to the 4000ers implied the loss of a third of our annual earnings as guides and the personal expenditure of some £10,000 to equip and support the venture. The economic climate was not ideal for any form of financial sponsorship, even though we pledged our expedition to raise funds for Blythswood Relief Aid, a Highland charity working in Eastern Europe.

The tactical decisions were easier to make. First we had to define our list of peaks. It is annoying that none of the published lists – Blodig, Collomb, *High* magazine or Goedeke – had seemed to use an objective criterion to define separate tops. All of them appeared deficient in some areas and over-detailed in others, particularly in respect of the Monte Rosa massif where insignificant bumps abound. Simon and I decided that we would climb every top with a 35m height separation from its nearest highest neighbour. This gave a total of some 75 summits, although we would have to climb more than that in order to establish the height separation of several marginal candidates for inclusion. Our 35m rule may be seen as arbitrary, but it did ensure the inclusion of every important top in the itinerary.

Secondly, we arranged high-level support teams to keep us going during the major sections of the Bernese Oberland, Zermatt skyline and the Mont Blanc massif, as well as having our wives providing valley back-up and maintaining essential communication by radio transceiver.

We elected to begin the traverse on the Piz Bernina on 22 June and hoped to hit the expected July anticyclone during the Zermatt traverse. We constructed a base schedule of 48 days from the Bernina to the Barre des Ecrins without allowance for weather delays. Thus a time of 55 days or less seemed realistic. In constructing this schedule we had looked carefully at the routes linking the main massifs and quickly realised that the use of bicycles would save us a fortnight of hard footslogging, as well as providing a welcome change of exercise. We also planned to use skis in the Oberland.



21. Alps 4000: Simon Jenkins and Martin Moran basking in contentment back at the Schreckhorn hut after the 16-hour traverse of the Lauteraargrat. (Ian Dring) (p7)

Early successes

After six months of detailed planning we presented ourselves in the lovely Morteratsch valley on 21 June. Vague or erroneous weather forecasts were to plague our progress throughout the next seven weeks and our start on the Piz Bernina was no exception. We climbed the normal route via the Bellavista Terraces and S ridge in a blizzard which demanded navigational accuracy equal to anything we had ever applied in the Scottish winter.

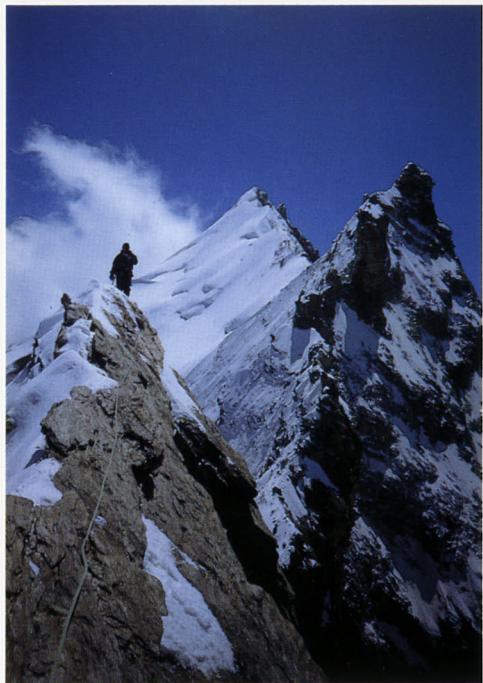
There followed a two-day interlude of cycling when we saw some of Switzerland's most enchanting scenery in the Engadine and upper Rhine valleys but also experienced the crucifying effort of linking big passes. Doing the Oberalp, Furka and Grimsel passes in a day matched any physical effort we made on the mountains. Our bikes were Dawes hybrid models, light enough for road touring but amply geared for gradients up to 1 in 4.

Now fitter and a little acclimatised after our protracted ascent of the Bernina, we embarked on the Oberland, the most extensive of the 4000er massifs and the least known to us. Our entry via the Unteraar glacier had a Himalayan atmosphere. Vast untouched cirques split off in all directions and the Finsteraarhorn towered behind in impregnable splendour. In such austere surroundings, the Aar bivouac hut was perhaps the cosiest and certainly the best maintained shelter we used all summer. The Finster itself gave us an arduous ascent. Truly it is the monarch of the massif, and we struggled in gale force winds on the long climb from the Agassizjoch.

The next day we were pitted against the renowned Schreckhorn–Lauteraarhorn traverse, or the Lauteraargrat as it is better known. However, the snow conditions in the Schreckfirn were excellent and the crucial linking ridge sufficiently clear of snow that we climbed it without crampons. There are two significant tops on the Lauteraargrat, Pts 4011 and 4015, which are ignored in all the lists. Their inclusion in a 4000ers odyssey guarantees some of the finest space-walking in the Alps.

After this excitement our escape from the Obers Ischmeer basin over the Fiescherhorn on a warm foggy day was pure toil, with a significant objective threat first from serried ice cliffs and then from rapidly thawing snow. As we skied off the Fiescherhorn our edges cut a continuous wet slough that accumulated into an avalanche of disturbing scale. Near exhaustion at the Mönchsloch hut was solved by the arrival of our support team with a mountain of food. I devoured six fried eggs in as many minutes, each with a thick slice of bread, followed by a family-sized tin of peaches; I was still ready for another meal three hours later.

The Aletschhorn was a fitting final obstacle in the Oberland – a big lonely peak with a wonderful view of our forthcoming challenges in the Pennines. We ploughed up a crusted Hasler Rib and then skied the Mittelaletsch glacier on rutted névé which left no illusions as to the consequences of a slip. Our skis were 130cm Kästle Firn Extrems with Silvretta 404 bindings. They could be easily carried up a route like the Hasler Rib, and what they sacrificed in speed and style was amply compensated for by their ease of turning when wearing ordinary climbing boots. Indeed they even managed to flatter my limited and long-redundant skiing skills!

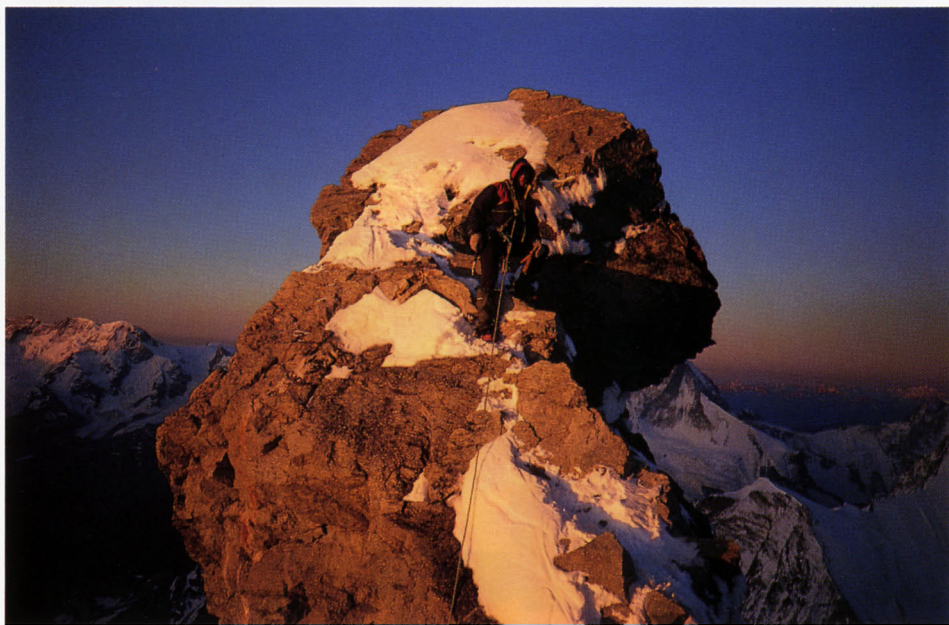


Left

22. Spacewalking on the N ridge of the Weisshorn. (*Martin Moran*)

Below

23. Traversing the Kanzel on the Zinalrothorn. (*Martin Moran*)
(p7)



The weather collapses

So far we had lost only one day to our ambitious schedule and now looked forward to the arrival of the big summer anticyclone. We thought it had arrived during three days of glorious weather in Saas, and our confidence tempted us to an open bivouac on the Lenzjoch at 4050m. The short but difficult link of the Domgrat would have taken us to a support team at the Mischabeljoch hut, but that night a blizzard struck. In the morning we struggled to the top of the Dom in a whiteout but further progress was impossible. It was to be three days before we bridged the 1km gap to its Siamese twin, the Täschhorn. Our detour took us back to the valley floor 3000m below, then up to the Mischabeljoch via Täschalp and the Weingarten glacier. Snow had fallen thickly down to 2400m and the Täschhorn's usually benign SE ridge proved to be a corniced monster of Andean proportions!

The Allalin-Rimpfisch-Strahlhorn linkage was scheduled as an easy day's romp, but the weather showed no mercy and we ended up taking three. Our spirits reached a nadir as we ploughed up the Strahlhorn at 5pm in a whiteout of driving sleet. Only a magnificent support operation by fell-runners Martin Stone and Mike Walford and our cameraman Martin Welch kept us going over Monte Rosa. Traversing Liskamm on a fine Sunday morning, we thought that at last we had broken the noose of bad weather, but four hours later we were nearly struck by lightning at the start of the Breithorn traverse and were forced to retreat to the Val d'Ayas hut.

The Zermatt giants

We arrived at Schwarzsee, beneath a snow-plastered Matterhorn, fully six days off the pace. 'They're definitely not joking this time,' enthused Martin Stone. 'The Zermatt guides are promising five days of brilliant weather!'

In the event it turned out to be a cool and moist anticyclone with a cloud inversion at 4200m. The Matterhorn was magnificent and totally deserted, the WNW face of the Dent d'Hérens a wonderful four-hour romp from a camp by the Schönbiel hut, and the Dent Blanche's S ridge a spectacle of ethereal winter beauty. However, our five days of grace ended abruptly just where we dreaded: the Schalijoch. We were marooned for a day without food at the bivouac hut. The storm cleared away overnight but after fresh snow we couldn't contemplate the complexities of the Schaligrat. Knowing that we had to get to the Weisshorn that very day or else face a demoralising retreat to the valley, we risked uncharted snow couloirs on the mountain's E face. In fact the climbing was fast and simple. This piece of intuitive route-finding saved us crucial hours which were immediately employed in getting down the N ridge. Snow was banked at ridiculous angles on the Grand Gendarme and its onward arête. Thank goodness there are a few easy 4000ers like the dear old Bishorn. We actually laid out full length on its summit in relief after so vertiginous a descent.

So far our knees had survived the summer without complaint, but the 2500m descent to Zinal extracted the first twinges of pain. Yet with the Zermatt ring now closed, our spirits soared and for the first time we dared to think of the finish. Surely Mont Blanc would treat us kindly.



24. The Aiguilles du Diable. (*Angus Andrew*) (p7)



25. The final steps: Simon nearing the summit of the Barre des Ecrins, 13 August 1993. (*Martin Moran*) (p7)

Home ground

We compressed 130km of cycling and the Grand Combin into two days and left Switzerland five days behind schedule. Arrival on our home ground of the Mont Blanc massif coincided with a swing to the baking hot weather more typical of recent summers, and we took our helmets along for the first time. A night traverse of the Col d'Argentière and the Col des Cristaux brought us face to face with our old adversaries Les Droites and the Aiguille Verte. We knew all too much about the difficulties of the linking ridge between the two, so we did a moonlit meander up and down the normal route on Les Droites and then crossed the glacier and climbed the couloir leading to Col Armand Charlet from whence the tops of the Verte were easily accessible.

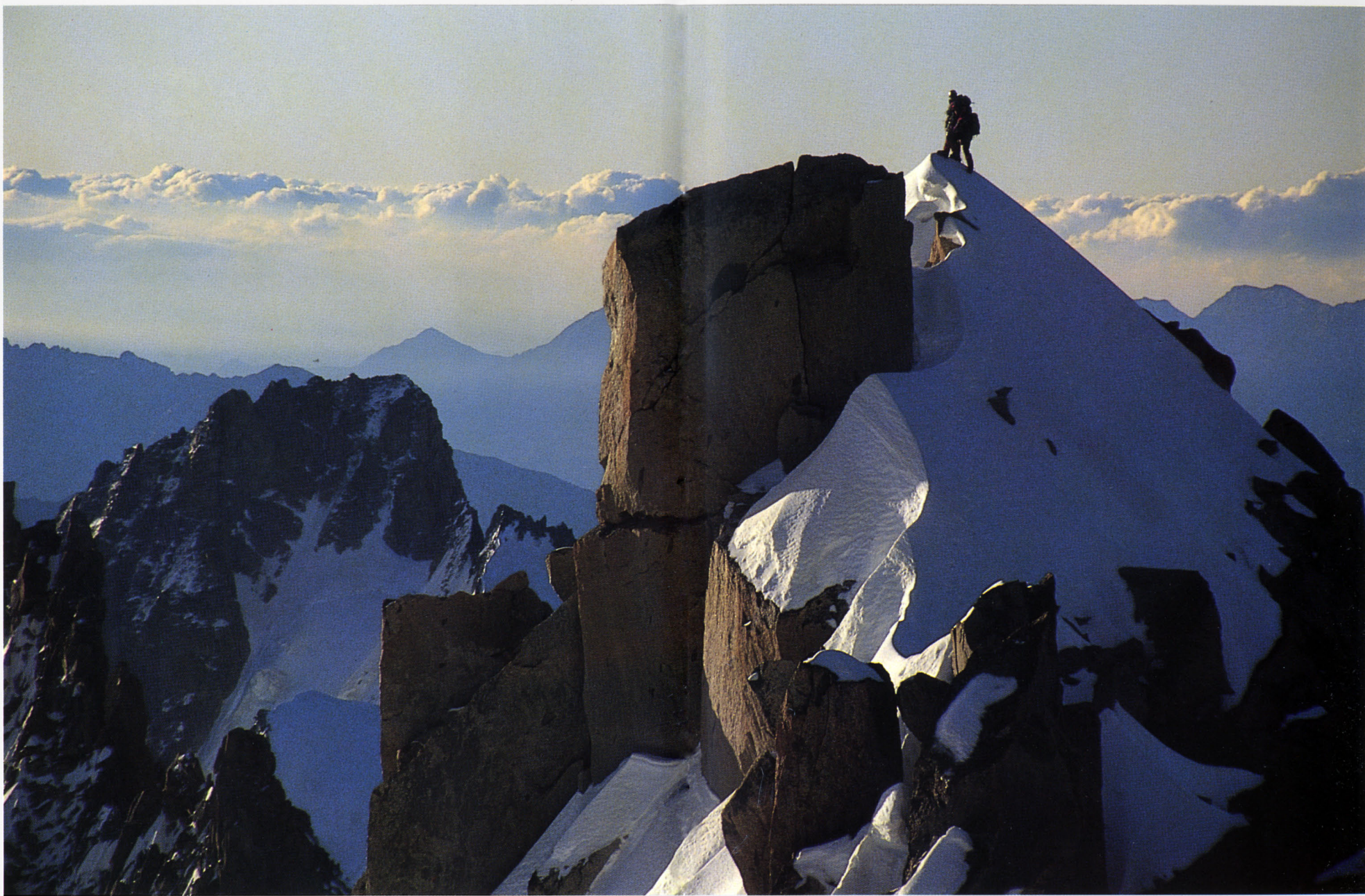
The next dawn saw us toiling out of the Leschaux basin and up under Les Périades towards the Col des Grandes Jorasses bivouac hut. Sometime during our climb the summit sérac on the south side of the mountain collapsed and engulfed eight climbers. The sight of the rescue operation, plus threatening weather, made the W ridge of the Jorasses the most nerve-racking route so far. Did Winthrop Young, Jones and Knubel really do those hand traverses under the Pointe Marguerite? We returned to the hut close on midnight and celebrated with a mouthwatering spaghetti.

The pitches needed in order to climb onto the Calotte de Rochefort impressed us equally the next morning. By the time we had traversed the two Rochefort summits and reached the Dent du Géant thunder was rumbling over Mont Blanc and flurries of hail were falling. Gripped by panic, we swung wildly up the fixed ropes past hordes of retreating Italian climbers, touched the Madonna and fled to the Col du Géant where a support camp awaited.

33 hours on the go

The stage was set for the Mont Blanc finale but the weather kept us guessing for two days. Finally a furious thunderstorm broke just as the friendly voice of the Chamonix weatherman was promising a 36-hour window of fine conditions over a crackling line from the Torino hut. After some devious route planning we reckoned we could just squeeze the mountain's 12 tops into the window, provided we climbed non-stop through the following night. The moment the wind dropped, at 10am on 6 August, we set out for the Diables ridge. For carefree aerial acrobatics the route had no comparison – a total contrast to the austerities of the Jorasses W ridge.

By 7pm we were resting in a support tent on the Col Maudit and, in between mouthfuls of soup and cheese, witnessed the best sunset of the trip. Mont Maudit was taken slowly out of respect for our digestion, but by midnight we were briskly traversing the Corridor and the Grand Plateau bound for the Aiguille de Bionnassay. True to form, the Bionnassay's summit ridge was a razor edge. Why on earth had I suggested leaving our rope back at the Dôme du Goûter? Fortified by strong coffee at the Vallot hut we joined the march of the 200 to the top of Mont Blanc. No greater contrast could be found to the warm conviviality of the crowded summit than a



26. Martin Moran and Simon Jenkins on the top of the Aiguille du Jardin.
(Martin Welch) (p7)

descent of the Brouillard ridge. By midday we were sitting on a crow's nest of solid rock high above the Col Emile Rey contemplating the guidebook's advice that 'it is essential to be well above the col by dawn' and watching stones and snow slides funnelling into the recommended couloir. With storms due that evening, we couldn't sit tight and await a frost, so we embarked on a speculative series of abseils down steep granite walls on the Miage side of the ridge in order to gain the col. Most of the old slings we had been stowing in our sacks over the weeks were now gratefully utilised.

Stumbling like a pair of zombies we crossed Mont Brouillard and the Punta Baretti and, after 33 hours on the move, gained the sanctuary of the Eccles hut. There we so amazed a French guide and his client with our route description that they promptly gave us all their spare food and departed for the Monzino, so leaving us to a blissful sleep!

Only the Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey now separated us from virtually certain success on our journey, provided that we didn't get knocked off our bikes by an Italian juggernaut. The storm held off just long enough to allow us across the Frêne plateau to its summit and back next morning. Then, in a little under 2hrs 30min, we joyously plunged down the side of the Brouillard glacier to the Val Veni and the arms of our wives.

Holding out to the end

The final five days were more relaxing mentally but still arduous. The Aosta autostrada was safely negotiated, we just beat a storm to the top of the Gran Paradiso, and then did a marvellous hike over the Colle del Nivolet and Colle del Carro into the Vanoise. A day like this striding through glorious unfrequented surroundings counted among the highlights of the journey.

Following the wheels of the *Tour de France* up the 1800m ascent from the Arc valley to the Col du Galibier was another great thrill. A tremendous view of La Meije and the Barre des Ecrins burst forth as we reached the top. It was a moment of happiness to equal that on arrival on any of our 75 summits. The Barre itself proved to be an anticlimax. We were now too tired and jaded to really appreciate the finish. From a bivouac in the boulders of the Col d'Arsine we had a 1300m climb over the Pic de Neige Cordier just to get to the start of the Barre. The *voie normale* was thronged with large voluble guided parties, piles of excrement lined the track and clouds hid the views. Happily, the crowds all stopped at the forepeak, the Dôme du Neige, and a sudden breakthrough of sunlight on the summit ridge reminded us of the unfettered glories of the mountains which we had savoured over the past 52 days.

For Simon and myself the journey rekindled the fire of true Alpinism as perhaps it was practised in the days of Winthrop Young, Knubel and their contemporaries. By following their steps in all weathers and conditions we largely escaped the crowds and discarded the regimentation and commercialism which has crept into modern Alpine mountaineering. If nought else, our 4000ers traverse has proved that real adventure in the Alps is still there for the taking.

The 75 peaks climbed: 23 June - 13 August 1993

All heights in metres

Major Mountains

1 Mont Blanc	4807	26 Dent d'Hérens	4171
2 Dufourspitze	4634	27 Breithorn	4164
3 Nordend	4609	28 Jungfrau	4158
4 Signalkuppe	4556	29 Bishorn	4153
5 Dom	4545	30 Aiguille Verte	4122
6 Liskamm	4527	31 Aig Blanche de Peuterey	4112
7 Weisshorn	4505	32 Barre des Ecrins	4101
8 Täschhorn	4490	33 Mönch	4099
9 Matterhorn	4478	34 Pollux	4092
10 Mont Maudit	4465	35 Schreckhorn	4078
11 Dent Blanche	4356	36 Obergabelhorn	4063
12 Nadelhorn	4327	37 Gran Paradiso	4061
13 Grand Combin	4314	38 Aiguille de Bionnassay	4052
14 Lenzspitze	4294	39 Gross Fiescherhorn	4049
15 Finsteraarhorn	4273	40 Piz Bernina	4049
16 Mont Blanc du Tacul	4248	41 Gross Grünhorn	4044
17 Castor	4228	42 Lauteraarhorn	4042
18 Zinalrothorn	4221	43 Durrenhorn	4035
19 Hohberghorn	4219	44 Allalinhorn	4027
20 Piramide Vincent	4215	45 Weissmies	4023
21 Grandes Jorasses	4208	46 Dôme de Rochefort	4015
22 Alphubel	4206	47 Dent du Géant	4013
23 Rimpfischhorn	4199	48 Lagginhorn	4010
24 Aletschhorn	4195	49 Aiguille de Rochefort	4001
25 Strahlhorn	4190	50 Les Droites	4000

Subsidiary tops

Defined as those summits having a height separation of 35m or over from higher adjoining summits, and an essential part of the 4000ers challenge.

51 Zumsteinspitze	4563	63 Gd Combin de la Tsessette	4141
52 Liskamm W summit	4479	64 Breithorn W Twin	4139
53 Pic Luigi Amedeo	4469	65 L'Isolée, MB du Tacul	4114
54 Parrotspitze	4436	66 Pte Carmen, MB du Tacul	4109
55 Ludwigshöhe	4341	67 Breithorn E Twin	4106
56 Weisshorn N ridge		68 Grande Rocheuse	4102
gendarme	4331	69 Pte Chaubert, MB du Tacul	4074
57 Corno Nero	4321	70 Mont Brouillard	4069
58 Dôme du Goûter	4304	71 Pte Marguerite, Gd Jorasses	4065
59 Il Naso, Liskamm	4273	72 Aiguille du Jardin	4035
60 Pt Whympfer, Gd Jorasses	4184	73 Hinter Fiescherhorn	4025
61 Gd Combin de Valsorey	4184	74 Dôme de Neige des Ecrins	4015
62 Breithorn C summit	4159	75 Punta Baretta	4013

Other notable tops climbed, with estimated height difference in metres:

Pt 4011, Lauteraarhorn	4011	25	
Pt 4015, Lauteraarhorn	4015	30	
Wengener Jungfrau	4089	25	
Stecknadelhorn	4241	25	
Pte Hélène, Gd Jorasses	4045	25	
Pte Mediane, MB du Tacul	4097	25	Checked with rappel rope
Aig Blanche SE top	4107	30	

NOTES

- 1 Top 53, Pic Luigi Amedeo, 4469m: the height was marginal and needs checking.
- 2 Top 57, Corno Nero, 4321m: the height differential was measured as exactly 35m with altimeter.
- 3 Top 67, Breithorn E Twin, 4106m: the height differential was measured as 40m.
- 4 Top 71, Pointe Marguerite, Grandes Jorasses, 4065m: the height differential is at least 45m.
- 5 The N ridge gendarme Rimpfischhorn, 4108m, was the only notable top not climbed; its height separation is c30m.
- 6 Other tops often included in the lists, such as Balmenhorn, Pta Giordani, Mt Blanc de Courmayeur and Il Roc, have a height differential of only 20m or less and were not considered. Their inclusion would qualify dozens of other minor bumps as 4000ers and make an objective listing impossible.
- 7 Some existing lists of the 4000ers, giving height differentials, were found to have several errors. An accurate survey of many of the smaller tops remains to be done.