
Turkish Ski Traverses:

I. Taurus Express

J G R HARDING

(*Plates 38-40*)

Some countries spell adventure. One such is Turkey which cast its spell on me 36 years ago when, on an undergraduate expedition, we drove to and from the Elburz Mountains across the length and breadth of that country. Turkey bridges Europe and Asia but it is not the Bosphorus that delineates East and West. Western Turkey, the classical Ionia – site of Troy, Pergamum, Ephesus and Halicarnassus – with its Mediterranean seaboard of inlets and promontories, its fertile vales and wooded mountains, is historically, physically and climatically part of Europe. Thus was it known as Asia Minor.

But once you breast the Bolu Pass on the high road to Ankara and breathe in the thin air of the Anatolian Plateau, you have arrived in Asia Major. Eastwards, the steppe unfolds – illimitable, immobile and impassive. The monotony of this stark landscape is relieved only intermittently – here a swath of cultivation, there a remnant of primeval forest. But here too are marvels to behold – a salt lake suspended mirage-like above the heat haze, the solitary snows of a volcano floating cloud-like in the sky. In summer, dawn's delicate shades are quickly leached. During the heat of the day a high-riding sun burnishes the earth. Colour returns lingeringly at dusk with the balm of cool air as evening's shadows etch the darkening contours of a distant range. Autumn's cloudscapes billow above the duns and browns of stolid soils turning grey with the onset of winter. And now, an icy wind blows out of Asia and snow settles its monochrome mantle over the Plateau.

Containing this plateau promontory of Anatolia are Turkey's two great ranges which delineate its southern and northern boundaries and, by their classical names, Taurus and Pontus, retain a link with its classical past. The limestone tiers of the Taurus emerge from the Mediterranean like a castle wall, 2000m high, curved in a 400km arc from the Gulf of Anatalya to Iskandrun before veering north-east to become the Anti-Taurus. To the ancient Greeks, the Taurus not only marked the southern and eastern limits of the known world but were touched with divinity. Representing the zodiacal sign of the bull, this range was Jupiter himself – the white bull who bore Princess Europa from Phoenicia across the Tyrrhean Sea to Crete thence to found the continent that bears her name. Mythological memory is stirred each wintry day as the eastern dawn, uplifted by the sky's chariot, travels westward across the Taurus's snowy back.

Long before they were known as the Taurus, these mountains formed the natural boundary between the plains peoples of Mesopotamia and the

highlanders of the Plateau. As today, the lower slopes were thicketed with Mediterranean maquis merging into a dense forest of oak, cedar, oriental beech, alpine pine and fir before eventually giving way to juniper, scrub and bare rock at 2000m. Sun-scorched in summer, snow-bound in winter, with a southern scarp scarred with limestone gorges and barred by cliffs, in bygone days the Taurus was virtually impassable save through the Cilician Gates, a gateway for invaders from Hittite times to the 19th century.

Anatolia's northern containing range divides the Plateau from the Black Sea in a 600km arc running from Samsun to the Russian border. Rising 650km north of the Taurus, the Turks call these mountains Anadolu Daglari. But modern nomenclature is as recent as their discovery by western mountaineers. In classical times they were known as the Pontic Alps, taking their name from the Black Sea which spawns the rain that clothes them in an exotic temperate forest. Their cosmographical provenance is older than that of the Taurus.

The Pontic Alps have a special niche in the history of mountain exploration on account of a feat which pre-dates the incursions of Pompey's legions by three centuries and Hannibal's crossing of the Alps by 182 years. In 401 BC the Athenian general Xenophon marched across Asia Minor through the Cilician Gates into Mesopotamia with 10,000 Greek mercenaries to overthrow the King of Persia. The attempt was aborted at the Battle of Cunaxa near the site of modern Baghdad but for the Greeks, Xenophon's *anabasis* lifted the veil on a seemingly impenetrable continent and paved the way for Alexander's world conquest some 64 years later. The retreat of Xenophon's 10,000 across Mesopotamia and Armenia to the Black Sea is one of history's great survival sagas of which the ten-day crossing of the Pontic Alps from Gymnias to Trapezus in winter was the climax.

For long untravelled and still little frequented, the Taurus and Pontus have special attractions for those with a bent for unusual country. Although they lie beyond the fringe of modern European consciousness, their classical nomenclature – the Bull and the Sea – strikes a subliminal chord. My previous visits had mainly been in summer and the concept of traversing both on ski took time to gestate. On top of the usual time constraints are such little local difficulties as the unavailability of accurate maps on a scale of less than 1:500,000 and the non-existence of huts or rescue facilities. And beyond the Mediterranean seaboard, Turkish travel has an uncomfortable unfamiliarity. Unswervingly, Ramadhan coincides with one's visits. Basic communication with rudimentary Turkish may seem relatively easy but, beyond that, language is a barrier. Yet these very factors determine the shape and flavour of Turkish tours and the prerequisite of self-sufficiency begets flexibility and independence.

In 1990 the objective was the Taurus. Where exactly this range begins and ends is a conundrum but its culmination is unquestionably the limestone massifs of the Bolkar and Ala Dag. On paper, the Taurus traverse appeared to fit neatly into two phases. First, a seven-day crossing of the Bolkar Dag from the railhead of Eregli to Horoz. Secondly, a seven-day crossing of the Ala Dag from Camardi to Karsanti. Pozanti, just north of the Cilician Gates, provided a conveniently placed intermediate stop for resupply.

The Ala Dag I knew from winter and summer visits in 1961 and 1986 but the



38. Taurus mountains: en route for Curtepe Basin, Ala Dag.
(J G R Harding) (p109)



39. Bolkar Dag. *(J G R Harding)* (p109)

Bolkar Dag was terra incognita. Few travellers, ancient or modern, appeared to have chronicled its mysteries. Of climbing or skiing we could find only one account and this by the late Michel Parmentier tragically killed in the Himalaya in 1988. Yet Parmentier's description of the mid-May trip from Camardi westward was short on detail and seemed barely to have touched the Bolkar Dag. Without route descriptions, photographs or proper maps we were lucky to get an aerial preview of the range on the flight in from Istanbul to Adana on 4 April 1990. Illuminated by the early morning sun, the Bolkar took the form of an uplifting plateau, V shaped and open to the south-west. From its steep southern scarp a tangle of gorges fell away in a forested wilderness to the shores of the Mediterranean. To the north-west, at the apex of the V, a knot of shapely peaks formed a backdrop to what was to become our theatre of adventure.

At Adana, the core party – David and Anna Williams, David Seddon and Simon Kirk and I – was met by the advance party poet pipemaster Ronnie Wathen. We boarded the 'Taurus Express' on £1.50 first-class tickets for Eregli 200km away, and spent the better part of the day climbing 1467m up and through a series of Taurean tunnels and tightrope traverses reliving the Kaiser's dream of a Berlin to Baghdad railway. When the train emerged breathless at Posanti, crisis loomed. With no station-master in situ how to cache the 10 kilo Ala Dag food bag? The situation was saved in typically Turkish fashion by the unsolicited intervention of a philanthropic bystander, White Iron Mehmet, who unhesitatingly volunteered to act as its guardian. As the train swung westward across the Plateau, a towering snow bank filled the southern horizon. This was the Bolkar Dag, whose crest marked the line of our traverse.

The key to the traverse was to attain the 3000m-high plateau so clearly seen from the air. But, unacclimatised and over-laden, we must first find a way up and over the northern scarp and outflank the bulk of Aydos Dag (3430m) which barred the way south. Kayasaray (Kalameindos), a 1½-hour drive from Eregli, was a lucky start point. From our jeephead, a distinctive snow gully beckoned upwards we knew not where. 1700m and nine hours later we were barely 100m off the summit of Aydos itself but, with time running out and the weather turning, that was a summit too far for a first day. An exhilarating 700m ski descent through gently falling snow brought down its curtain and took us to our first campsite.

That first night of 5 April might also have been our last in the Bolkar. At Eregli the day before, 2½ hours had been spent scouring the town for paraffin, once, but no longer, Turkey's staple fuel. The stoves had roared away at 1000m on Turkish petrol but 2750m brought them to sputtering sulphurated stops and it took three hours of coaxing and wheedling to produce a meal and water for the morrow. The stoves never worked to capacity but this early hiccup bred an uneasy familiarity.

Having successfully reached the Bolkar's 3000m-high plateau the way now seemed clear to follow a NE line across a 20km blank on the map. We langlaufed for most of the second day, hugging the inner flank of the northern containing ridge. To the south, beyond a 10km-wide undulating snow plain glinting and glaring under a skin-searing sun, massive banks of cumulus billowed up from the Mediterranean. On the third day out, after an easy pass,

we traversed steeply to a belvedere overlooking trench-shaped gorges that tumbled away to the south. A tricky descent and torrid ascent led to a crucial pass, the Kara Gedic, which tenuously links Anatolia to the coastlands. Thence, a dreamlike ski descent through a narrow defile of pink and grey limestone cliffs flashed with black stripes took us to the Black Lake in the shadow of Erkaya's (3308m) striated NW face.

This was the halfway mark and now, at least, we were on a sketch map. The crux passage to the Yalaklar basin lay ahead. It meant crossing three separate ridges involving 1000m of ascent and descent over a distance of 13km by a route which, in summer, the *Lonely Planet Guide* had described as 'virtually impossible'. The alternative was to descend north to Maden village at the foot of the mountains but thereby losing 1700m of height, two days of time and the essence of the venture.

Next morning we struck camp at 6.45 to reach Tahtakaya's (3372m) south col in three hours. From here, the drab dun steppes of Anatolia lay at our feet 2000m below. Away to the NE, 70km distant, the peaks of Ala Dag sparkled in the morning sun. On perfect snow, we swooped like choughs into an amphitheatre ringed with icecliffs, then deeper still into a chasm bounded to the east by a pinnacled ridge which might have led anywhere. At a seeming impasse, an improbable passage snaked round the very roots of the ridge, then up again into a broad cwm from which, by a long rising traverse, we reached the very lip of the Yalaklar basin. And now for a shock. The bottom of this massive scoop, the most dramatic feature of the Bolkar, was plainly visible 400m below. But it was lined on all sides, save to the north, with baleful bluffs and corniced snow-slopes. For what seemed an interminable time, we looked hither and thither for a route down. Yet even as the afternoon clouds enveloped us, the imperturbable Williams led off yet again – spiralling down a steep gully through a rock defile with wet snow coming away in wedges. By 2.15pm we were all struggling to erect tents in thickening snow flurries, wet but triumphant at having cracked the key passage of the Bolkar traverse.

The ascent of Medetziz (3585m), culmination of the Bolkar, whose 600m N face closed the southern wall of the Yalaklar like a breaking wave, was shelved after a false start and avalanche risk posed by accumulations of powder snow. But our second string, Kopuktas Keppi (3324m), gave panoramic views and a *Wedeln* descent on perfect snow. That same afternoon we pushed on to our last Bolkar camp at Gocuklu, beyond a line of unsullied limestone cliffs buttressing a string of unnamed peaks, and next day (10 April) skirted Kiziltepe to a col at 2900m for another grandstand view of the Ala Dag. A 500m snow couloir led down to the tree-line and thence to a path carpeted with blue gentians and campanulas down which we danced through the juniper-scented air into a forest of pines and cedar trees. Dropping to the valley bottom, a patchwork of reds, ochres and browns took shape as the fields, vineyards and orchards of Horoz tilled by women and children. Later that same afternoon at the Toros Oteli Pozanti we and our food cache were reunited, with only one sprained ankle in debit. The six-day Bolkar traverse, from 5 to 10 April, had covered some 80km at an average of $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours a day. A leap in the dark had had a happy landing. The mysterious high plateau with its shapely peaks, dramatic gorges and north-facing cirques had provided ideal ski mountaineering.

40. Right Ala Dag: Gurtepe Col.
(J G R Harding) (p109)

41. Below Parade of ski troops at the
Mountain Warfare Training Centre
at the Cedars of Lebanon during
World War II. (A D M Cox) (p191)



Next day we boarded the Camardi Express – this time a bus – for the Ala Dag. Although both Bolkar and Ala Dag are limestone and only separated by 30km, the Ala Dag's rock architecture is grander, its peaks higher and its valleys deeper than those of the Bolkar. For over 60 years climbers have been drawn to the ridges, walls and spires of these Turkish Dolomites. The construction of the massive new Demirkazek Mountain Centre and the 1988 publication of an English language guidebook *Aladaglar* (Redhouse, Istanbul) are doleful harbingers of what has already arrived. But day-tours to the Yedigoler basin apart, ski mountaineering is still in its infancy. Certainly our projected 60km west-east ski traverse from Camardi to Karsanti via the Emli and Siyirma gorges and Kokorot valley promised to be another first.

Although the Camardi municipality's minibus to the gates of Emli gorge saves half a day's walk, this new road desecrates one of the grandest of the Ala Dag's valleys and bears out Sir Edward Peck's 1945 prophesy that this could become a tourist centre. On Good Friday, from our first camp at Aksampinari, 'The Evening Spring', the four-note call of the Caspian Snow Partridge, heralded a glorious day to attempt Alaca (3588m) once known as Ludut Dag. Sliding past the limestone monolith of Parmakkaya, 'The Finger Rock' glowing like a red candle, we skinned up to the Avci Yeli col and thence, on foot, to Alaca's summit by its E ridge – PD in the conditions – to finish a splendid day with a 1100m ski descent.

And now for the Ala Dag's key passage. At the extreme NE end of the Siyirma gorge, high in the Gurtepe basin, I knew of a remote col said to lead to the Kokorot valley. Four years before, John Blacker and I had been frustrated by bad weather and avalanche risk in finding this elusive passage. By mid-afternoon on 14 April in poor visibility, we had climbed 1200m through intermittent snow flurries to the base of a rock buttress at 3240m. Two hours of excavation produced a snow platform for two tents and an exhausting foot recce confirmed a 3300m col almost directly above our Eagle's Nest at the top of a steep slope with no firm base. But this perch was precarious and by 7pm the weight of snow coming down an inconvenient gully threatened to bury us. Only after another two hours of digging by torchlight did we excavate a snow-hole big enough to accommodate the Williams' tent.

It continued to snow heavily and blow lustily throughout the night but all was calm by Easter Day's dawn when Kaldi Dag (3723m), Queen of the Ala Dag, and Alaca emerged effulgent from the valley mists like pink phoenixes bathed in sunlight. The treacherous 80m that separated camp from col required respectful re-excavation with shovels through waist-deep snow over a suspenseful hour. From the safety of Gurtepe col a wondrous new panorama opened up – arrays of unknown peaks festooned with a fantastic confectionery of rime, snow and ice. The mysterious Kokorot valley was now beneath us, hemmed in to the east by the bulging buttresses of Vay Vay Dag, but after descending its headwall on spongy snow with clouds racing up the valley I suddenly felt very tired. We made an early camp in an afternoon whiteout and, when it cleared that evening, found ourselves perched on a great snow prow overlooking the valley end which was itself overlooked by the red slabs of Vay Vay Dag's (3565m) S face.

On the following day, 16 April, we climbed due N to the top of the Tayare

ravine to another high col from where David Williams nonchalantly soloed Vay Vay's NW face while Anna, Simon and I bagged a subsidiary 3510m peak to the NW. The last day in the Ala Dag began with an exhilarating 1000m ski descent to the Aciman Yaila and finished with a depressing nine-hour slog through the forest. A fortuitous Forestry Department lift saved an extra day's march to Karsanti where, in the best traditions of Turkish hospitality, the foresters gave us free beds that night. By 9 next morning we were back in Adana where the adventure had begun 16 days before.

Luck had been with us in the Taurus. Any injury would have been serious and progress in bad weather without proper maps problematic. The storms that blighted Ronald Naar's 1988 Ala Dag ski tour and our own May 1986 visit never materialised. Throughout, the weather followed a predictable pattern – cold nights, often with snow, followed by fine mornings with snow and cloud coming in by mid-afternoon. The Bolkar Dag gave exceptional skiing on excellent snow and the Emli-Kokorot traverse a classic *grand raid*.

Summary: Taurus Ski Traverse, Turkey 5–17 April 1990

First W to E ski traverse of Bolkar Dag and Ala Dag (via Gurtepe col). Party: D R B Williams, Anna Williams, S R R Kirk, D J Seddon, R J Wathen and J G R Harding.

Bolkar Dag (5–10 April) [4.4 Adana to Eregli], 5.4 Eregli/Kayasary roadhead to Aydos Dag camp, 6.4 Aydos Dag camp to Plateau camp, 7.4 Plateau camp to Karagol camp (via Kara Gedik), 8.4 Karagol to Yalaklar (via Tahtakaya col), 9.4 Yalaklar to Gockuklu (ascent of Kopuktas 3324m), 10.4 Gockuklu to Horoz/Pozanti.

Ala Dag (12–17 April) 12.4 Camardi to Aksampinari camp (Emli gorge), 13.4 climbed Alaca Dag (3588m) E ridge (DRBW, AW & JGRH), 14.4 Aksampinari to 'Eagles Nest' (Gurtepe cirque), 15.4 'Eagles Nest' to Vay Vay camp Kokorot valley (via Gurtepe col, 3310m), 16.4 Ascent of Vay Vay Dag (3563m) NW face (DRBW solo), ascent of 'Anna Tepesi' (3500m) (JGRH, AW, SRK), 17.4 Vay Vay camp to Karsanti, [18.4 Karsanti to Adana].