

The Tatra Mountains

Marek Brniak

It is an unforgettable moment when one travels S from Krakow when suddenly there appears in the distance, veiled by a mist or topped by clouds, the most beautiful range in Poland. Granite summits and pinnacles, high passes and lush valleys, beautiful lakes and swift flowing streams, charming ravines, and crenelated ridges above deep corries; that is the landscape of the Tatra Mountains.

Now let us have a look at a map of Europe. Between the 45° and 50° parallels the mighty arc of the Carpathians fastens together like a clasp the mountain ranges of Central and S Europe. In the W part of the Carpathian chain, on the S frontier of Poland, the map darkens with the colour of high elevations. Here are the Tatra, the highest range between the Alps and Caucasus. Their granite peaks rise up steeply above deep valleys and post-glacial cirques reaching a height of over 2600 m. The sharp Tatra summits are remarkable for their varied relief and distinctive rock scenery. As they are a formation relatively young in the geological scale, the natural processes of weathering, erosion and denudation are still very vigorous. Generally speaking, they are more inaccessible than most mountains of the same elevation. Because their accumulation surface is too small they have no glaciers, though they reach up to the zone of eternal snows usually found in the mountains of the same latitude. The magnificent soaring lines of the Tatra are all the more clearly outlined.

Compared with other ranges the Tatra are relatively small, covering an area of some 750 sq km. From W to E they stretch for about 60 km as the crow flies, and their width, from N to S does not exceed 19 km. On this small patch of land, granite and limestone ranges are piled up in a close-knit circle. Their formations bear several hundred different geographical and local names. The whole chain is divided into 3 groups: the W, the High and the Belanske Tatra (Tatry Zachodnie, Tatry Wysokie i Tatry Bielskie). The High Tatra form the central group of sharp granite peaks. All the highest summits can be found here, 10 of them rising above a height of 2600 m, the Gerlachovsky stit being the king of them all. In Poland the highest peak is Rysy (2499 m). The landscape of the W Tatra is much gentler; built mostly of limestone in the N and granite in the S they reach a height of 2250 m (Bystra) and stretch from the Hucianska Pass (910 m) in the W, to Liliowe Pass (1952 m) in the E including almost half the entire area of the whole chain. In the W the Liliowe Pass joins the W Tatra to the High Tatra, which in turn is connected in the E to the Belanske Tatra by way of Kopske sedlo (1749 m). The Belanske Tatra, built of dolomite and sedimentary rocks, terminate the whole group in the E with the summit of Havran (2154 m) as their culmination.

It took several thousand years for the vegetation of N and E slopes of the Tatra to reach its present pattern. The lower forest belt comes up to, on the average, an altitude of 1000 to 1250 m. Here spruce prevails with an admixture of fir, sycamore, beech, maple, ash, yew and larch. The upper forest belt, at an altitude of 1250 to 1550 m, is almost entirely made up of spruce with an admixture of rowan trees. In the higher parts of this belt grow the Carpathian birch and stone pine. Here also stretch mountain meadows or alps, occasionally



45 On the E face of Mnich. This and next photo: Marek Brniak

used for grazing sheep and small herds of cattle. The dwarf mountain pine belt above the timber line reaches to an average altitude of 1800 m. The mountain pine (*Pinus mughus*) is not a tree but a shrub, and grows on the slopes and in hollows in large thick patches. In the granite parts of the Tatra the mountain meadows rise to a height of about 2300 m and in the limestone parts to 2150 m. On the crags and peaks higher up the only vegetation consists of alpine lichens, weak grasses and here and there some typically alpine flowers.

The fauna of the Tatra is no less attractive. The forests are inhabited by lynxes, wild boars, stags, roe-deer, various species of rodent and an occasional bear. Animals such as the chamois, the marmot and some varieties of vole form an alpine group. Among the birds inhabiting the high rocks the majestic golden eagle and the plain-looking wall creeper must be mentioned.

The exceptional value of this small area resulted in the National Park designated by both Poland and neighbouring Czechoslovakia, which enjoys a two-thirds share of the Tatra. This does not detract, however, from the Polish part with regard to its immense attractiveness to visitors and its magnificent scenery. The importance of this area as an international tourist and mountaineering centre and its value as a health and holiday resort do not depend upon its size.

Here where the tradition of mountaineering goes back to the 16th Century, there are over 3000 routes in the guide-books. In Polish the detailed route descriptions occupy 17 volumes for the High Tatra alone. New routes and developments are published regularly in the columns of 'Taternik', which also covers members' activities and news of climbing abroad. Talking with many of those British climbers who have been to the Tatra I have found that the greatest single barrier to getting a Tatra trip organized is the absence of a climbing guide-book in English, or even French or German. Fortunately I can assure the reader that in the Polish huts you will nearly always find someone eager to practice their English and translate routes from the guide-books for you.

For a long time I have been complaining that it is a pity that the Tatra does not see many British climbers, but the number of visitors from Great Britain has been increasing recently. This is partly thanks to the combined effects of inflation and devaluation which makes the overall cost to a British climber of a fortnight's holiday less in the Tatra than it is in the Alps or the Dolomites. Now some of the harder Tatra courses have had their first British ascents (for example, see 'Alpine Climbing', 1975).

The W limestone region is still wild and not very popular among the local climbers despite offering fantastic possibilities for new lines, many of them extremely hard. The Polish High Tatra with its 2 main centres for mountaineering is very crowded at the height of the season. The main climbing centre is the cirque of Morskie Oko ('Eye of the Sea', a lake) containing most of the hard routes in the range. The vicinity of Hala Gasienicowa is the second important climbing area in the Polish Tatra with most of the routes shorter and easier. Apart from the 2 above mentioned centres nearly every big valley of the Tatra has a lot of good climbing to offer. All the valleys and most of the faces are very easy of approach and can be reached within a couple of hours on the average. Descents off the summits and many passes are much more complicated and may be very dangerous and time consuming. The standard

of climbing is now exceedingly high. On the 800 m granite faces in the High Tatra, solo ascents of some of the harder routes have already been made and many of the artificial routes have been climbed free.

Winter climbing in the Tatra has been popular for nearly 80 years and now much climbing of a very high standard is done. At that season the mountains provide superb sport demanding great fitness and stamina as many of the harder and longer courses require bivouacs. The traverse of the whole Tatra range (about 30 miles long with some sections of VI and many of V) is certainly one of the best winter expeditions anywhere, creating a fantastic introduction to a hard Himalayan climb. When first accomplished, it involved as many as 13 bivouacs in a region of very heavy snowfalls and severe blizzards.

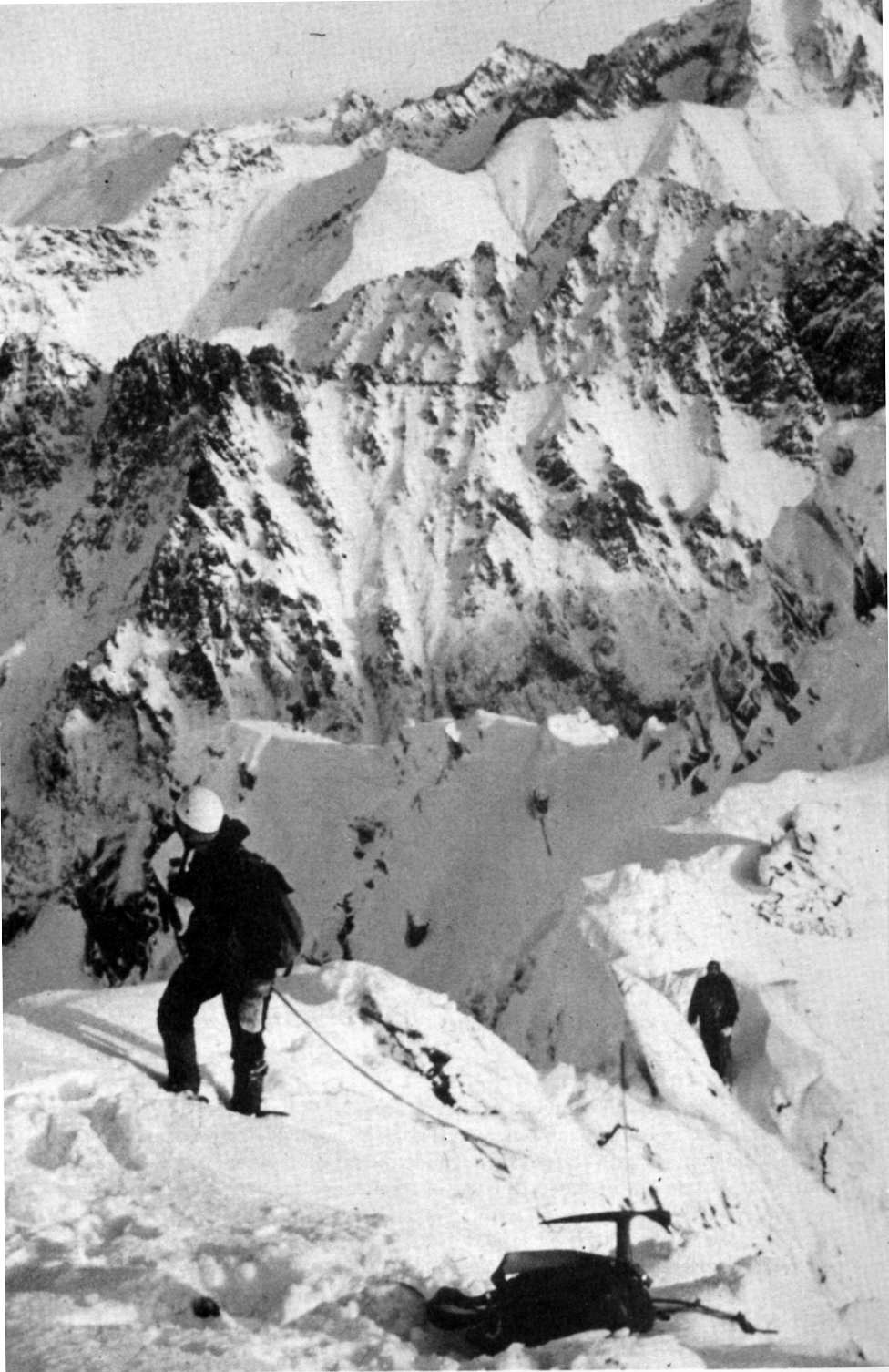
Apart from winter climbing the Tatra is also good for ambitious ski touring. But normal ski boots and crampons are not always adequate as the ridges and faces are long and hard with steep rock, sugary snow and almost no Alpine or Scottish type ice. As for downhill skiing, the pistes are excellent but the lift systems are hopelessly inadequate.

There is now a comprehensive system of huts, where visitors will find good facilities. In each main valley there is a hut or a larger refuge, all very easy of access and very convenient as jumping off bases for both climbers and walkers. Unfortunately, camping is prohibited in the Tatra; in the Polish part there is only one camp-site, situated close to Morskie Oko, run by the Polish Alpine Club and meant for climbers only. The Czech huts are out-of-bounds for practical purposes. The state frontier between Poland and Czechoslovakia lies along the crest of the main ridge of the Tatra for much of its length from Wolowiec to Rysy. This part of the frontier is effectively guarded on the valley floors and low passes but there are only token patrols on the higher stretches and none at all on the difficult rocky sections. However, while it is perfectly easy for a climber to cross the frontier (by accident or design) unannounced, passports with valid visas are necessary for a stay at any of the huts. Though there is not normally any difficulty in obtaining Polish and Czech visas, it is both difficult and expensive for a westerner to obtain the multiple visas necessary for frequent crossings and recrossings of the frontier in the course of one holiday.

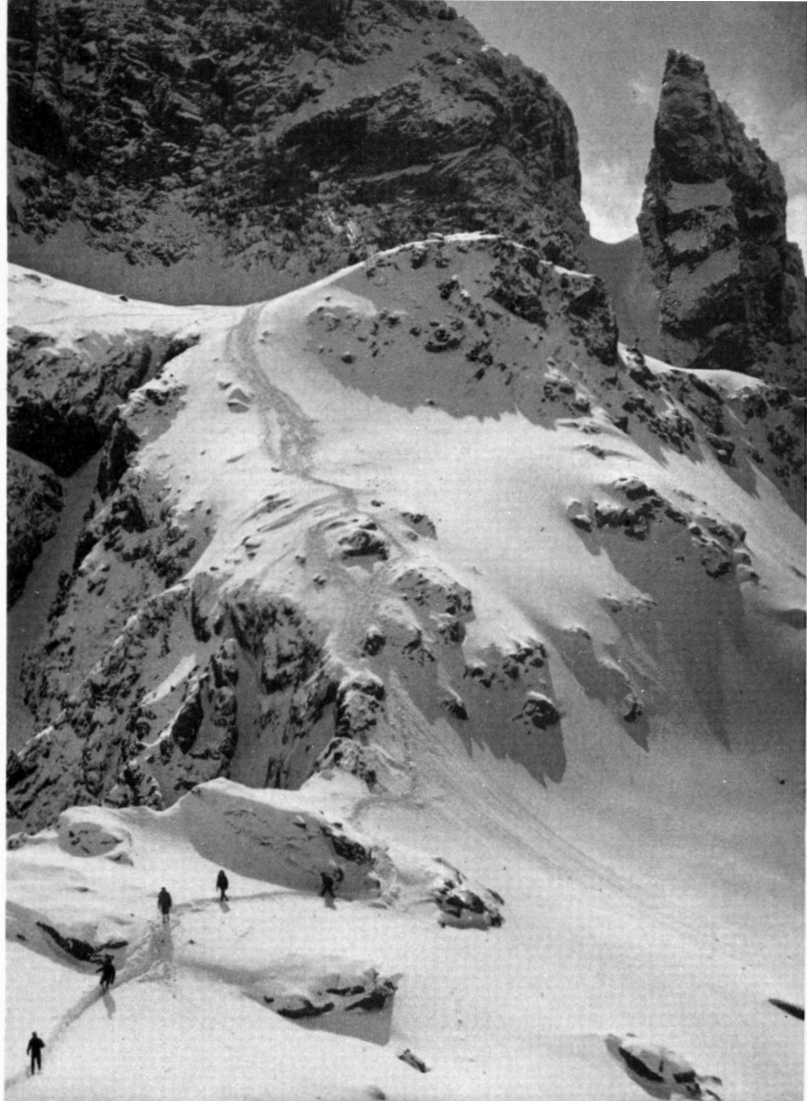
Experienced cavers will find some marvellous descents in the extensive cave systems of the calcareous W Tatra. The caves are deep and difficult with a very high concentration of technical difficulties. They include the famous Snieżna (the Snow Cave), a system which is over 4 miles long and 650 m deep, making it one of the 10 deepest caves in the world.

For the less adventurous the area offers some superb walking tours. A very good, dense network of mountain tracks covers the region, providing access to many summits, passes and nearly all the valleys. The tracks are marked clearly with coloured marks painted occasionally on rocks, boulders, trees etc. At the beginning of each track there are small boards carrying necessary directions. On some steeper or more exposed sections of the tracks some metal holds or sometimes handrails have been put up to make them safer and easier. Walkers are expected to keep to these tracks; only climbers may leave them to reach the foot of their climbs.

In case of accident there is an excellent Mountain Emergency Service. The rescue teams are full-time professionals paid by the State and their services



46 Winter climbing in the Tatras I



47 Winter climbing in the Tatras II. Photo: Lucjan Sadus

are free of charge to all climbers, cavers, walkers and skiers alike. They have the best and most up-to-date equipment available, including helicopters and 24 hour radio contact with refuges throughout the range. A rescue leader at each hut deals with minor incidents, but major rescues are done by the alarm teams who operate all the year round with a party always on standby.

The Tatra weather has well earned its bad reputation. Summers are renowned for being wet, cold and even snowy, and longer periods of broken weather happen quite often, paralysing climbing activities. The Tatra granite, such wonderful rock when dry, becomes as slippery as ice when soaked and is nearly impossible to climb, so Poles do not bother to go out in such conditions. But on the other hand long periods of wonderful dry weather are not

rare specially at the end of the summer, early autumn and spring. Winters are far better.

Climbing holidays in the Tatra as well as any trip to Poland can be arranged with surprisingly little fuss through the Anglo-Polish agency—Fregata Travel Ltd., 100 Dean Street, London W1. They would be very glad to help small groups of climbers. At present they are preparing to publish a very concise introductory climbing guide-book to the Polish Tatra in English. The author himself—who may be contacted through the Editor—will be glad to be of assistance to any British climbers willing to come to his country.

One of the geriatric eccentrics¹

Walter Kirstein

Last year bad weather and some postoperative troubles prevented me from climbing in summer. When winter came, I felt recovered and well enough to keep an appointment with the Westmacotts in Alta (Utah, USA) to try the famous powder snow-slopes in that area. With blizzards raging in December, Michael said, it was even colder than on Everest. I did not quite believe that, but all 3 of us found snow and skiing fabulous. I had another skiing week with my daughter and her family in the Sierra Nevada in California. Though my 10-year-old grandson is by now faster than I am, he had not to wait too long for me. This encouraged me to book my usual skiing jaunt with the Combined Services in the Engadine. I have known this area for nearly half a century and therefore they still trust me to take a few of the slower parties around. When March came, I had to cancel the first week on account of a nasty lumbago attack, but I can recommend skiing as the best cure for it. I was feeling fine after only one good day of downhill skiing.

The AC Meet in Langdale gave me an opportunity to climb again, first a short climb with A. B. Hargreaves and Ivan Waller on a rather misty day. On the following day, a brilliant Sunday, Ivan led the Plaque route on Bowfell Buttress. He found the route changed by a rock fall; the debris was still covering part of the route. In June Jim Cameron took me up 'Little Chamonix' at Shepherd's Crag in Borrowdale. I now felt fairly sure that I should still be able to get up a few rocks in the Alps.

I am writing this at the end of July, sweltering in London's heatwave, which makes one forget how late summer started this year. As late as April the Engadine had been cut off by avalanches from the world for nearly a week with all 3 cols, Maloja, Bernina and Julier closed and even the Chur-Engadine railway not running. With so much snow on the high mountains and with rainy weather in May and June in the Alps the outlook for early Alpine climbs was not good at all. I knew that my guide, Paul Nigg in Pontresina, would not be available after 12 July and decided therefore to go to the Engadine in spite of the weather reports. I arrived on 4 July in Zürich—much to my surprise in sun-

¹ See AJ 79 274.