

HARDER THAN YOU THINK

THE BIANCO RIDGE

IN WINTER

THE CHALLENGE WAS DONE
IN WINTER. REAL WINTER, NOT THE METEOROLOGICAL WINTER.
TO HAVE ONE OF THE MOST AWE-INSPIRING ROUTES IN THE ALPS ALL TO
YOURSELF IS SOMETHING THAT MANY DREAM OF BUT ONLY FEW MANAGE
TO EXPERIENCE. AND YET THE STRATEGY FOR THE BIANCO RIDGE WOULD
BE SO STRAIGHTFORWARD: GO WHEN NOBODY ELSE IS THERE. AND THAT'S
EXACTLY WHAT TONI MOSSHAMMER AND DAVID KREINER DID.



IT DOESN'T MATTER WHETHER YOU LOVE THEM OR HATE THEM: IF SUPERLATIVES MANAGE TO DELIVER WHAT THEY PROMISE, THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO APART FROM STAND THERE AND STARE IN AWE.

CRUX OF THE SUPERLATIVE

THE BIANCO RIDGE

CORNICES are a standard feature of ridge walks in the high Alps. On the Bianco Ridge it is no different. In contrast to many other far less popular ridges, the Bianco maintains its physical shape from snow and ice alone. And in the imagination its appearance takes shape using every superlative you can think of. Just like the cornices, they get more spectacular as you go along.

"The most aesthetic route in the Alps!" "A sculpture of snow and rock!" "A magic picture book line!" "A ridge made by the hand of God!" "A must for every tour book!" "Stairway to heaven in white!" "The most spectacular mountain marathon!"

Superlatives are part of the way people judge things. That superlatives don't stop at mountains, but have been intrinsically linked to them ever since romantic alpine literature came into existence, is also nothing new. After all, there is hardly a better way of portraying the grandeur of nature than with a lofty peak standing out against gigantic cloud formations, or the absorbing darkness of an overhanging north face that evokes fear and respect from the first moment you set eyes on it.

The Bianco Ridge has made regular appearances in the gallery of picturesque routes since time immemorial. High above the valley floor, appearing to float in the heavens, illuminated by a golden-pink alpine glow, elegantly curving its way towards the summit of Piz Bernina: it has been created to be admired and then climbed. **In other words: whoever sets eyes on the Bianco Ridge wants to get up there and do it.**

Beauty isn't everything.

The attraction of the Bianco Ridge has one serious disadvantage, however. A disadvantage that everybody knows who has set off in perfect conditions during the summer vacation to treat themselves to this alpine dream classic. That is because it is only in exceptional cases that you can enjoy the Bianco Ridge in solitude.

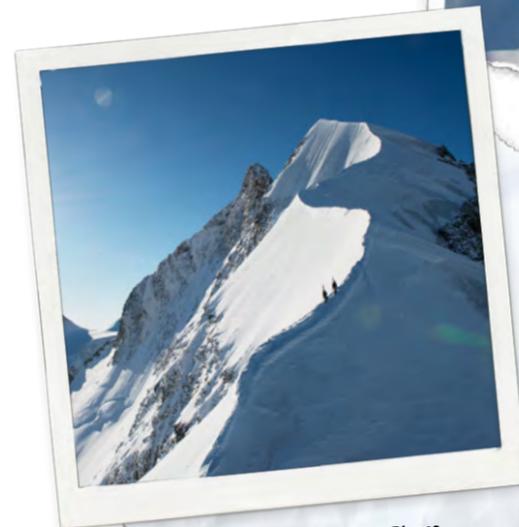
It is far more likely that your enjoyment of this alpine highlight will be tarnished by the following conditions: sardine-style accommodation in the Tschierva hut, the starting point of the tour. Followed by a confusion of light beams from innumerable headlamps when you set off at 2:30 in the morning. Then footsteps in front of you, behind you, to your left and to your right, on the scree slope ascent.

A little later, ice cascades caused by climbers above. As the day goes on the crescendo of rotor noise arrives as the rescue helicopters move in. And finally the impossibility of getting your camera out to snap the indescribable panorama from the summit because it is usually too crowded to even move.

The art of waiting.

Toni Moßhammer and David Kreiner are actually really affable people, although being part of a mass exodus does not really meet their expectations as far as a memorable alpine adventure is concerned. When they pay their respects to the Bianco Ridge then it is going to involve a strategy that includes simply waiting. Wait until winter has set in, wait until the days are shorter and the conditions more fierce. Wait until wind, weather and low temperatures leave the area people-free.

Wait until the Bianco Ridge pleasure trip has transformed into a real alpine challenge.



"The challenge was doing the Bianco Ridge in winter. Real winter, not the meteorological one." Toni

BIANCO RIDGE

BERNINA RANGE, GRAUBÜNDEN, SWITZERLAND

IS: PERHAPS THE FINEST SNOW-CRESTED RIDGE IN THE ALPS **FIRST ASCENT BY:** PAUL GÜSSFELD, HANS GRASS AND JOHANN GROSS IN 1878

LEADS TO: PIZ BERNINA, 4,049M

STARTING POINT: TSCHIERVA HUT, 2,573M

DIFFICULTY: ROCK III, ICE 45-50

AVERAGE TIME TAKEN: 9-12 HOURS (IN SUMMER)

AUTHORISED NICKNAME: "STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN"



POLE POSITION HAS ITS PRICE

THE BIANCO RIDGE



TONI MOSSHAMMER

HOME TOWN: FIEBERBRUNN/TYROL/AUSTRIA
SPENDS HIS TIME: WORKING AS A QUALIFIED MOUNTAIN AND SKI GUIDE, AND AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE WITH HIS CHARMING GIRLFRIEND
UNAUTHORISED NICKNAME: HANDSOME ANTON
HAS: THE ABILITY TO ALWAYS BE IN A GOOD MOOD
CAN DO WELL: EVERYTHING TO DO WITH MOUNTAINS

DAVID KREINER

HOME TOWN: KITZBÜHEL/TYROL/AUSTRIA
SPENDS HIS TIME: WINNING NORDIC COMBINATION GOLD MEDALS, E.G. AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN VANCOUVER 2012 (TEAM EVENT), AT THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS IN OSLO 2011 (TEAM EVENT), AT THE WORLD CUP IN CHAUX-NEUVE 2011 (INDIVIDUAL EVENT)
AUTHORISED NICKNAME: DAVE
HAS: AS MUCH POWER IN HIS LEGS AS TWO FREIGHT TRAINS AT FULL TILT
CAN DO WELL: STAY AWAKE



January 2013: it is freezing cold and the days are as short as they can be. Daylight shuts shop from four o'clock in the afternoon, plunging the stage in darkness.

Toni Moßhammer and David Kreiner have just arrived in Pontresina after a long drive from Tyrol in Austria. There is no time to lose because they both want to catch a glimpse of the ridge before it becomes pitch-black. What the conditions look like up there at the moment none of the people they contacted in advance were able to say. For one simple reason: nobody has been up there recently. And why not? Because you only do the Bianco Ridge during the season. Certainly not in winter. Interim status report: the strategy seems to be working.

In order to obtain an overview of the situation they first need to reach the Tschierva hut at 2,573m. But this is more than just a stone's throw away. Toni and David put on their skis, shoulder their backpacks and set off up the mountain. To have an Olympic champion and world champion in Nordic combined putting the tracks down in front of you is an advantage, especially when you are in a hurry. So David sets the pace, and instead of the standard three hours it only takes half as long – thanks to their extremely athletic progress – until they reach the completely snowed-under Tschierva hut. No light, no footprints, no smoke: the hut was shuttered up for winter months ago and it looks like nobody has been here since. The last entry in the hut logbook is from October last year.

It is no longer possible to check out the ski touring conditions tonight because the Bianco Ridge has transformed into the Nero Ridge as night falls and it slumbers in silence under the starry sky. The only information to be obtained within the scope of their headlamps is from the mercury in the thermometer outside: a reassuring -20°C. It is clear there is only one thing to do: get inside, and quickly.

Swiss mountain huts have their pros and cons. The prices are one of the cons. For a litre of hot water (without a teabag, obviously) you will often be asked to hand over € 6.00. On the positive side, as a kind of reimbursement for the exorbitant summer prices, some hut keepers equip the winter quarters with an oven and plenty of wood, as is the case in the Tschierva hut. An offer that Toni and David, sweating and frost-covered from the ascent, find impossible to decline. Within the hour the winter room has transformed into a 70°C sauna: "We sat there in our underpants and watched the glue drip off our ski skins," says Toni.

TWO EARLY BIRDS – one cold start. When the alarm goes off the next day, on January 8th, it is still pitch-black outside. The backpacks are ready and their skis are skinned up in the corner. A quick breakfast, a few sips of lukewarm tea, and they are off. It is important they do not waste a moment: every hour of light is invaluable in deep winter. Just before six o'clock, Toni and David set off by the light of their headlamps in temperatures of minus 20 degrees.

The first stage across the Tschierva glacier immediately reveals its stubbornness. A stubbornness that hardly exists in summer because at this point you have an easily crossable scree slope in front of you that you can march across relatively quickly before reaching the glacier field. But not in January, when all the paths are covered by several metres of snow. On top of that it has snowed quite recently, turning the supposedly "easy" start into a bit of an ordeal. Again and again Toni and David break through the icy crust, sinking up to their waists in bottomless snow: "First it was David, who had taken over cutting the trail at full pelt, who sunk in up to the waist. And then I followed and thanks to the 20 kg extra weight strapped round my ribs, sank into the same track, just even deeper."

Getting off to a difficult start is not for everybody and has often led to retreat. For Toni and David this is neither a surprise nor unwelcome. This is precisely the challenge they were looking for here in the middle of winter: "For us the challenge was doing the Bianco Ridge in winter. Real winter, not the meteorological one. No holds barred."

Their batteries are fully charged and their thighs have fully recovered following yesterday's sauna. The two-man team ploughs on until they reach steep ice and have to secure their skis to their backpacks. The 45 to 50° steep ice slope is in sound condition and they manage to run up quickly. Two and a half hours into the tour Toni and David reach Fuorcla Prievlusa (3,430m), the saddle at the beginning of the first section of rock. In summer, this grade-three climb would not present them with much of a problem. All the gnarly bits have been ironed smooth with steel cables and ladders. A situation that Toni and David are not able to take advantage of on this occasion. Loose snow is lying everywhere, not offering a safe foothold, and has to be painstakingly swept away first. As a result, climbing and setting protection is a slow process that in these conditions turn out to be very time-consuming. Plus it is freezing cold. Toni: "This section went on forever and we lost a lot of time covering these few metres."

"If your pins don't get tired, then the grey matter upstairs stays awake longer too."
 Toni

WALK THE LINE

ANCO RIDGE

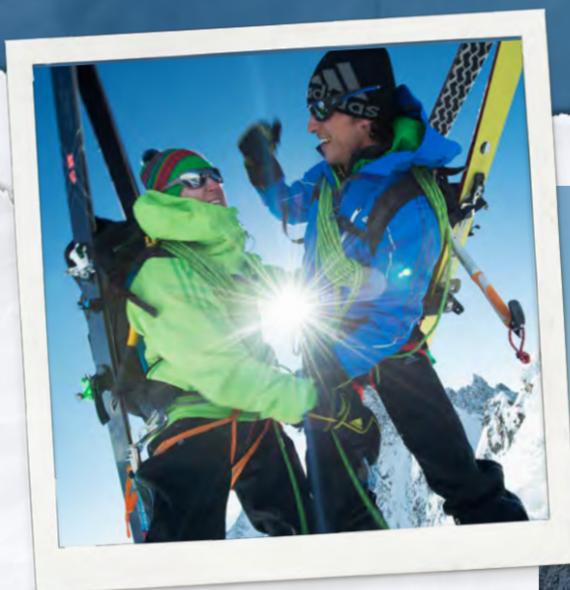
FIRST CUTTING A TRAIL in deep snow and then tiresome climbing up rock covered in snow – so far operation “Bianco Ridge in winter” has delivered everything Toni and David could hope for in terms of challenge. Testing yourself against the challenges of winter climbing is all very well, but a winter classic like the Bianco Ridge can also catch you out with one or two picture book moments, even in winter. Toni and David are on top form, but at the moment they still don't know what the conditions on the ridge are like. It is not until they reach the “Shark Tooth”, a prominent rock pinnacle at the end of this section, that they set eyes for the first time on the heart of the tour: the ridge itself. And, the curtain rises, the picture book moment appears.

It does not matter whether you love them or hate them: if superlatives manage to deliver what they promise, there is nothing you can do apart from stand there and stare in awe. Toni and David do just that as the Bianco Ridge stretches in front of them in all its glory. Still, a real mountaineer does not stand around with his jaw hanging open, he gets started. “Walk the line” commands the instinct. However: “Now and again we just had to stand there and let our jubilation sink in. It is difficult to believe that a place which is overrun with people on a fine day can also be so mystical and lonely.”

“Now and again we just had to stand there and let our jubilation sink in. It was so incredibly beautiful up there. But we didn't need more than 45 minutes for the ridge.” Toni

After a euphoric 45 minutes, the ridge – which offers a mix of smooth ice, hip-deep powder and perfect foothold-safe snow – is behind them and they reach Piz Bianco (3,995m), a kind of intermediate peak on route to Piz Bernina (4,049m).

But there is still a ridge to come: Toni and David yet again have to tackle a technical section and this time it is the crux of the whole route. On this second section of rock it is also difficult to fit protection and tough to climb. Thrash about, search for hold, thrash about again. Toni takes the lead and is first to reach Piz Bernina. David is right behind him and at 1:30 pm they are both standing exhausted but satisfied under a perfectly blue sky on the summit of Piz Bernina.





"It doesn't matter whether you love them or hate them: if superlatives manage to deliver what they promise, there is nothing you can do apart from stand there and stare in awe."



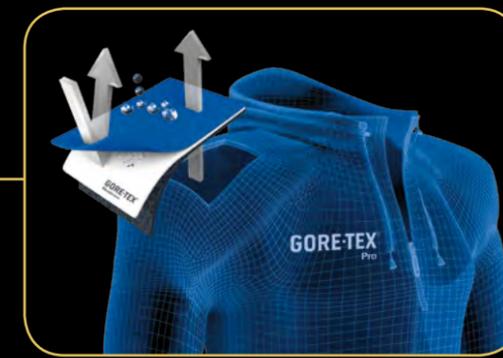
AN AMAZING MOMENT for them both, all the more memorable for David perhaps because the Bianco Ridge is his first major combined tour above 4,000m in winter. There wasn't a moment, though, where he revealed his lack of experience, something for which Toni expressed his greatest respect: "David is not just extremely fit, he is something even more important on this kind of outing: totally motivated. There was only once when I showed him which way to go next and he took off."

Doing overrun alpine classics in winter so that you have your peace and quiet: a concept with a future? There are only exceptional cases when you can enjoy an alpine beauty like the Bianco Ridge alone and deepest winter is certainly one of them. "But you must not forget," warns the mountain guide in Toni, "a tour in winter is a completely different undertaking that has virtually nothing to do with the summer version of the same thing."

You need to view the grades of difficulty in the topo with caution. A scree slope can easily transform into a bottomless snowfield that is difficult to cross. Likewise, a comfortably crossable snow-crested ridge can become smooth ice on a treacherous knife's edge. As the difficulty of the conditions increases, so do the requirements on fitness and physical strength. Not everybody has an untiring ski track maker as a climbing partner, not everybody who climbs a mountain has the experience of a mountain guide.

Conclusion: an icy cold winter's day, a dream ridge, a summit and a team that quickly managed to ascend and descend without incident. It could not be better. And it looks as though the Bianco Ridge will not be the last team expedition undertaken by these two.

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