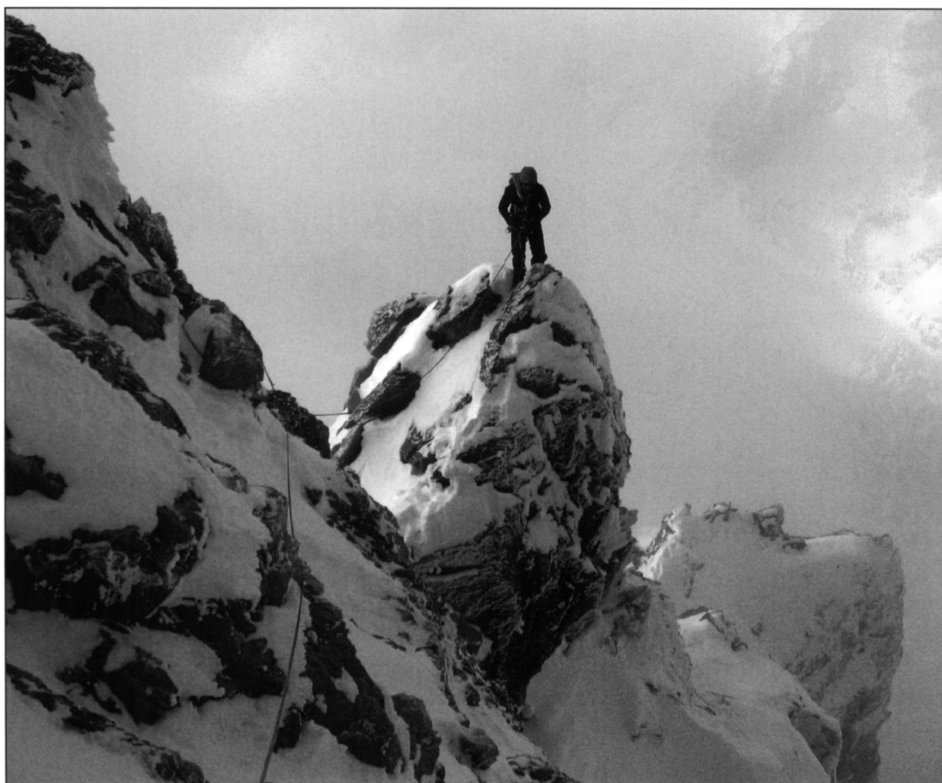


# 82 X 4,000

*All of the Alps' highest peaks in a single winter season.*

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MIHA VALIC



Tomaz Jakofcic climbing the Schreckhorn in the Bernese Oberland of Switzerland. Miha Valic and Jakofcic linked the Lauteraarhorn and Schreckhorn for one of Valic's more difficult days in the Alps. *Miha Valic*

Situated in the very center of Western civilization, the Alps are criss-crossed by roads, tunnels, lifts, ski trails, and passes. Despite all that, these mountains remain one of the rare places in Europe where we can still escape from our fast-paced everyday lives, appreciate the sun rising, and enjoy the silence and solitude—all the things we sorely miss in the urban jungle.

Besides being the refuge of the modern man, the Alps also are the most climbed mountains in the world, thus giving their name even to the activity itself: Alpine climbing. Good road connections, mountain huts, and excellent rescue services mean climbers can focus exclusively on

what they enjoy most: climbing. All the logistical issues we have to deal with on other continents do not exist here. In the Alps, the climbing is always close.

This level of popularity also means that new challenges are hard to find. There are of course still demanding virgin ascents and repetitions of difficult ones, and lately there has been a boom of multiday enchainments. Other adventures include traversing the Alps on skis, climbing all the major faces in one season, and speed records on individual routes. Another such idea is to climb all Alpine peaks over 4,000 meters in a limited period of time.

In the summer of 1993, English climbers Martin Moran

and Simon Jenkins climbed 75 4,000-meter summits of their choice in 52 days. A year later the international mountaineering organization UIAA created an “official” list of the major peaks that surpass the 4,000-meter level. It includes 82 peaks and is based on the importance, individuality, altitude difference from neighboring peaks, and, to a point, the popularity of the individual summit. Eleven years later, in 2004, two French climbers, Patrick Berhault and Philippe Magnin, decided to try to climb all 82 peaks in 82 days. They began their project in the spring, but the tragic death of Patrick Berhault stopped their endeavor after 65 successfully climbed peaks. In the spring of 2006, Italian climbers Franz Nicolini and Michele Compagnoni tried their luck, but had to give up the marathon after 25 summits because of bad weather.

I had been thinking of a similar climbing challenge for a while. After researching different possibilities, I decided to try my luck in winter, a step forward from the other attempts, and from Moran and Jenkins’ success in summer. I would try to make my project as simple as possible, with no support team. While thinking about all this, an autumn expedition I had planned to join in the Indian Himalaya was cancelled, and suddenly I was free to pursue my project that winter.

Several things had to be considered before I could embark. The most important was the schedule and the route: which peaks should be linked together, which were the fastest climbing routes, which summits could be climbed even in bad weather, avalanche risk, or right after snowfall—these were just some of the questions I had to answer. I was not familiar with most of the peaks, so climbing guidebooks became my best friends.

Another important consideration was money. Three months of living in France, Switzerland, and Italy meant a big financial burden. To cut down on costs, I bought a second-hand van and used it as my home. Only occasionally did I splurge on a hotel room to dry out and enjoy the full luxury of a bathroom. With some notable exceptions I did not manage to get any big



Blaz Stres (left) and Miha Valic on the summit of Mont Blanc in mid-March, on the 81st day of Valic's campaign. On this day, Valic and Stres bagged five 4,000-meter peaks via the Brouillard Ridge.  
*Miha Valic*

sponsors for my project. I was surprised by the complete indifference of the majority of Slovenian companies that produce and sell climbing gear. In the end, the project could be carried out only with a great deal of help from acquaintances, my local alpine club, individual sponsors, and a large personal investment.

Finding a single climbing partner with enough experience and climbing skills, not to mention three months and lots of money to spare, was a lost cause from the start. I decided to carry

out the project alone, despite the fact that having a companion would have made many things a lot easier. But I would not always be climbing alone—several friends offered their company, and together we laid out a schedule. Without their support in time and money, this project would have been doomed from the start.

All the little things to be sorted out meant that sometimes I could barely find the time for training. But a project of such scale of course requires extensive mountaineering experience, which I had been gathering since childhood. My first guides in the Alpine world were my parents and my scout group; later I began learning about climbing in the Alpine school, followed by 11 years as qualified Alpine climber, and lately as an internationally licensed mountain guide.

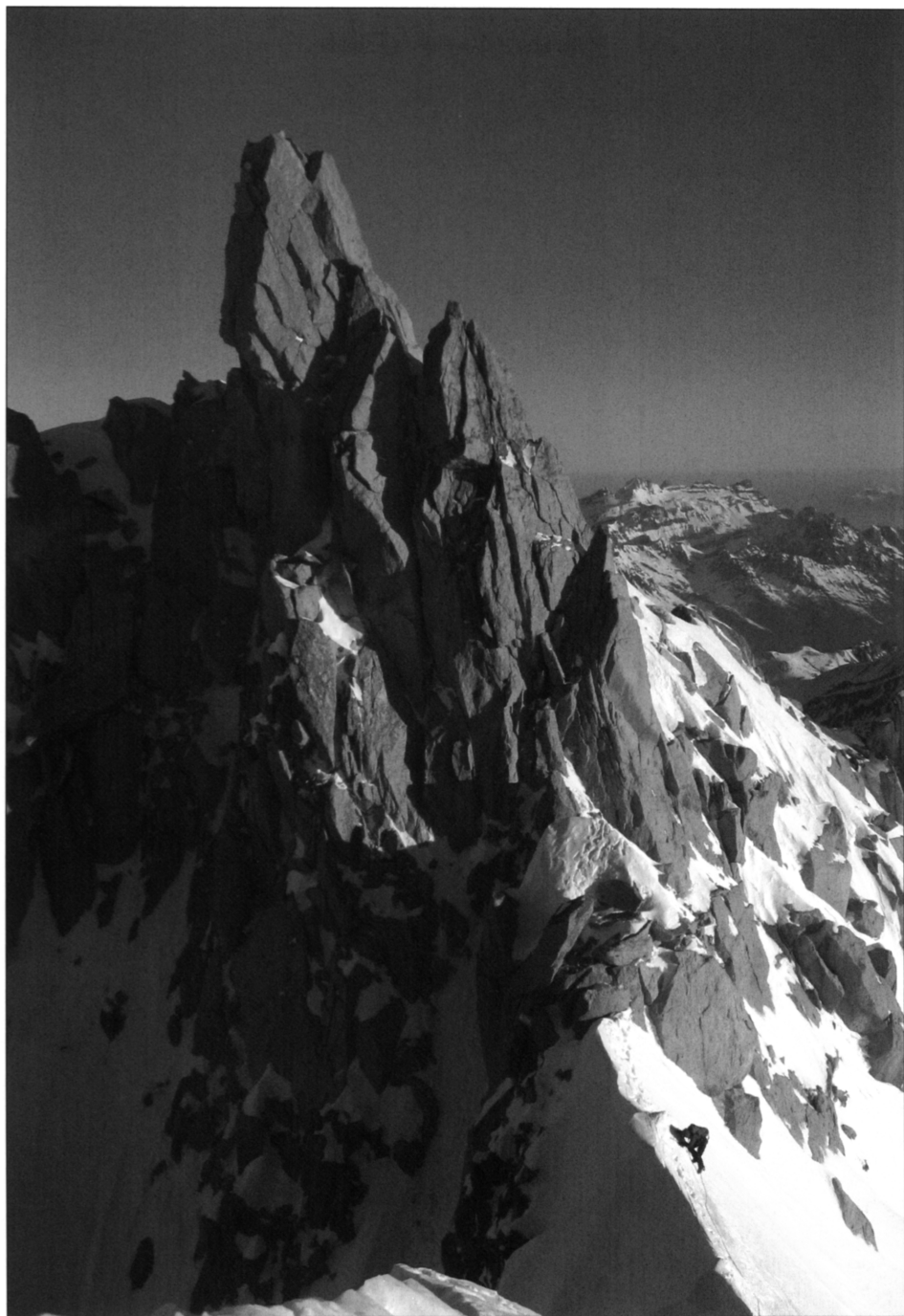
Right after Christmas the weather forecast looked promising and the conditions favorable, so Rok Blagus and I headed toward Courmayeur. The Aosta Valley route is always long and boring, and it seems to go on forever when you are driving on a three-lane motorway with a 20-year-old van that won't go faster than 100 kph, while you're trying to catch the last lift to Helbronner.

As my first tour I chose what looked to be the most technically demanding ascent, the traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable to the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul. Thus, on the 27th of December I was standing on the top of the first peak on my list, Corne du Diable. With plastic boots on our feet and heavy bivouac gear on our back, we progressed slowly. The climbing was not easy either (grade five), and the descents quite exposed. The sun set behind Mont Blanc before four p.m., and we were forced to bivouac on a snow ledge just under the summit of Pointe Médiane (our third peak over 4,000 meters that day) until eight the following morning. It was difficult to crawl out of the sleeping bag again and get back to the rock after such a long night. After two more aiguilles and a traverse of the snowed-up ridge, we were on the top of Mont Blanc du Tacul. We made a quick descent and managed to catch the last cable car from the Aiguille du Midi to Chamonix.

With our first climb over, the project was under way, and it set a routine that went on for the next three months. After every ascent and descent, I sat down to write a short description for my website, checked and cleaned my gear, checked the weather forecast I was receiving daily from Gregor Sluga, and decided on a plan for the next couple of days. I tried to eat and sleep as



With little money to spare for more than three months in the Alps, Valic and his companions slept in a second-hand van. *Miha Valic*



Blaz Grapar near the top of the Aiguille du Jardin, a satellite of the Aiguille Verte, Mont Blanc Massif, France.  
*Miha Valic*





Valic on the summit of Les Droites on April 7, the final day of his quest. *Blaz Grapar*

much as possible to get enough strength for the exhausting days in the mountains. Despite the warmest winter in recent years, freezing cold swept through the valleys at times. The temperatures hit record lows at the end of January, when even the village of Chamonix was shivering at 14 degrees (C) below freezing. On that day everything in my unheated van froze: water, milk, cans, pasta sauce, and even the dishwashing liquid.

The days in the mountains felt incredibly similar. Early-morning rising, melting the snow for breakfast and drinking water, a walk in the dark, the sunrise, then hiking or climbing for a whole day, followed by an evening routine of yet more snow melting, cooking dinner, drinking lots of liquids, and sleeping. Day in, day out. More important than the difficulty of the routes were the conditions, as even the easiest of the ascents suddenly became very demanding after heavy snow, or in fog or wind. In summer the standard routes to the more popular peaks over 4,000 meters are full of people, but in winter everything is different. All the mountain huts are unattended, the routes are more difficult because of the snow, the day is short, and the cold, strong winds and lack of human presence give these summits a feeling of being somewhere in the great mountain ranges of other continents.

In all, I did around 55 to 60 days of climbing. On non-climbing days, when the weather or conditions were too bad, I just waited, checking the weather forecast every 10 minutes and window shopping. Those were very long days.

None of the individual climbs I did could be listed as top Alpine ascents, although some of the ridge traverses were definitely challenging winter routes. Among those were especially the Aiguilles du Diable traverse, the Rochefort–Grandes Jorasses ridge traverse, the traverse of the Mischabel Group, the Schreckhorn–Lauteraarhorn ridge traverse, and the Brouillard Ridge of

Mont Blanc. But perhaps the most demanding, although nothing exceptional in a technical sense, was my ascent of the eastern ridge of the Weisshorn. Despite a favorable forecast, the weather suddenly changed for the worse, with snow falling all day. The snow gave way under my feet, and the rocks were covered with virgin powder. I had to cover 3,100 meters of altitude from my starting point. Upon my descent into the valley, I was completely wasted.

Ultimately, the most challenging part of the project was persevering with it until the end, finishing all 82 peaks, covering 60 kilometers of vertical distance, and holding on for 102 days. This was difficult in several ways: logistically, motivationally, physically, and, above all, mentally.

The weather was good at the beginning of winter, with great conditions, and I could follow my plan precisely. I managed to climb 46 peaks in the first 41 days, but then long spells of bad weather began. Despite doing my best to take advantage of any day with at least acceptable weather conditions, sometimes even stubbornly pushing up the hill in weather that usually would have kept me safely at home, I could only make it to the top of seven mountains between mid-February and mid-March. Luckily, the weather turned for the better at the end of winter, and I climbed 20 summits in nine days, thus at least partially catching up. By March 18, the planned deadline of my project, I had ticked 74 Alpine peaks in 82 days. I wasn't going to make it during the calendar winter, but I decided to finish my endeavor and climbed the remaining eight peaks by April 7, in a total of 102 days.

This project never would have been possible without great help from 15 friends climbing by my side (in order of participation): Rok Blagus, Alenka Klemencic (three times), Blaz Grapar (two times; also my webmaster), Luka Kronegger, Boris Lorencic, Gasper Rak, Tina DiBatista, Miha Lamprecht, Matevz Kramer, Tadej Debevec, Vesna Niksic, Miha Macek, Blaz Stres, Klemen Gricar, and Tomaz Jakofcic.

I tried to summit all 82 peaks in 82 days, and I did not succeed, but instead did the last few peaks in calendar spring. Doing a continuous traverse in winter, when all the huts are closed, would of course be a step forward. But there are many other mountain ranges in the world, still waiting for traverses, where you can experience a complete lack of civilization. For me, these other ranges are waiting!

#### SUMMARY:

AREA: European Alps

ASCENTS: Miha Valic climbed all 82 of the "official" 4,000-meter peaks in the Alps, alone or with various partners, in 102 days, from December 27, 2006, through April 7, 2007.

Portions of this story previously appeared in the Spanish magazine *Desnivel*.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Born in 1978, Miha Valic lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and works for the Slovenian Police Force's sports unit, and sometimes as a UIAGM mountain guide. In the last decade he has frequently joined international expeditions, establishing new routes in Bolivia, Nepal, and Pakistan. When he's not working or climbing, Valic dedicates much of his time to training his golden retriever, Uka, as a search and rescue dog.*