



Tatra Ridge: Team Speed Record

Poland, High Tatras

Between July 21 and 25, Polish alpinists Artur Paszczak and Adam Pieprzycki made what is likely the fastest crossing of the complete Tatra Ridge by a roped pair. The two took 106 hours 38 minutes to travel from Zdziarska to Hucianska Pass, across the main ridges of the Bielskie Tatra, the High Tatra, and the Western Tatra—about 100km with 22,000m of elevation gain.

The pair used as a benchmark the so-called Kurczab Variation, defined by Janusz Kurczab and Marek Woloszynski in their 1991 book *The Most Beautiful Peaks of the Tatra*. The Kurczab Variation is the most widely accepted crossing of the entire main ridge, at least by Polish climbers, and involves difficulties up to UIAA V-. The Bielskie is easy and grassy but with large ups and downs; the High Tatra has technical, exposed, and often loose ridges; and the Western Tatra is again easy but extending for over 50km.

The pair had made two previous attempts, the first in 2014 when Paszczak fell due to loose rock on the first day and suffered spinal injuries, and the second in 2015 when the pair gave up in very hot weather on the second day, due to slow pace and blisters. After these unsupported attempts, the two opted to have a team establish their bivouacs in advance, so they could carry lighter loads. But they had no caches of gear, food, or water between their bivies, other than two liters of water left during earlier attempts.

Paszczak and Pieprzycki were slow on the Bielskie, taking five and a half hours, due to muddy conditions after days of rain. The High Tatra took 76 hours and involved three bivouacs, while the Western Tatra took 25 hours 8 minutes and required another bivouac. After the first day, the sky then cleared, and for the next two days they pushed on for 17 or 18 hours per day to reach their rendezvous points with the support team. (These teams were led by Paszczak's wife, Alicja, also a notable mountaineer.) A storm moved in at noon on the fourth day, and after waiting it out at a cable car station they continued through miserable conditions to arrive at their fourth bivouac 30 minutes after midnight. On the last day the weather remained stormy, but they enjoyed a window of sunshine to move along the crest.

Both Paszczak and Pieprzycki consider this the hardest outing of their careers, and despite considerable trail ultra-running experience, they found it touched their limits. However, their time comes nowhere near the two outstanding solo records set in 1975. In that year Krzysztof Zurek completed the integral crossing in just 70 hours, with rappel ropes and food deposits in place on the ridge and a support team for the bivouacs. Wladyslaw Cywinski (who died, aged 74, in 2013 while climbing on the northwest face of Tepej in the Tatra) also soloed the traverse, in three and a half days, also with rappel ropes and food/water caches on the ridge. Zurek repeated the traverse in the winter of 1978 with two other climbers, taking 10 days.

The first team to achieve a complete traverse of the entire Tatra was Zbigniew Hegerle, Zbigniew Krysa, Jerzy Piotrowski, Ryszard Wiktor Schramm, and Jan Staszal over 11 days in 1955. The feat is rarely repeated—the last time before 2016 may have been as long ago as 1990. [Editor's note: This report covers only Polish traverses of the range, from the Polish side of the frontier. Slovak climbers also have made significant Tatra traverses.]

The main section of the High Tatra was first crossed in 1946 by Adam Gorka and Kazimierz Paszucha, the first winter crossing by Matras and Mlezák in 1953, and the fastest time to date by Vladimír Plulík, in 27 hours, during 1999. In 2015, Andrzej Marcisz, a great mountaineer from the golden era of Polish climbing, completed a super version of the High Tatra traverse, reaching all named topographical points, in four and a half days, with support teams for the bivouacs. He too said it was one of his hardest mountain experiences.

– Lindsay Griffin, with information from Artur Paszczak, Poland

Images



Adam Pieprzycki approaching Martin's Chimney (UIAA IV) on Great Mieguszowiecki (2,438m) during the Tatra traverse.



Artur Paszczak (left) and Adam Pieprzycki at the end of their odyssey along the Tatra Mountains, showing their elapsed time of 106 hours.



Typical High Tatra terrain. Adam Pieprzycki climbing the Rumanove Pinnacles (UIAA III) during the Tatra traverse.

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