


WHEELS TO THE TOP OF A CONTINENT

by Jaap Lampe



Two climbers from Holland decided to do something different for their 1984 vacation. They planned to go by mountain bike to the top of a real mountain, Mont Blanc, the highest in Europe at 15,772 feet altitude.

Glorious sunshine caressed the startlingly white peaks that dominate the Alps in this corner of France, close to the borders of Italy and Switzerland. We have already been on the 'road' for five hours, setting out by moonlight on this culmination of a strenuous, but memorable vacation. It is 7.00 a.m. when we meet the first alpinists that day, more than 14,000 feet above sea level. They stare in amazement and point, exclaiming with astonishment, "Ein Fahr-rad! Un velo! A bicycle! Impossible!" But, yes, we were climbing with a mountain bike up Europe's highest peak. After their initial shock, the climbers sent us on our way with encouragement in several languages. "Great stunt," they said. "What a good gag." One could not wish for better publicity for the outstanding possibilities of this hybrid machine.

Two days before, we had reached this same spot on the mountain, close to the Vallot emergency hut when the weather closed in around us. A thick fog cloaked the forbidding crags. Visibility was less

than two meters. Close to the cabin we met a group of four Germans and three Frenchmen. They had lost their way in worsening conditions and for two solid hours we tried to help them find the right way down. It proved hopeless and we all headed for the hut. We had to hurry because the snow threatened to leave no trace of our tracks, and even though the fog made it difficult to orient ourselves we arrived safely.

There is a telephone at Vallot and we were able to contact the rescue-service in Chamonix. They forecast bright periods for the following day, but advised us to spend the night at the hut. Because of the fog, it was impossible to send out a helicopter. Another problem was that we had hardly any food left and nothing at all to drink! We spent hours melting some snow, with the aid of an empty sardine can and a candle. It was so cold, even inside, that we had to drink it straight away, before it turned into ice again. The temperature outside was about 15 degrees centigrade below zero. A heavy storm broke out during the night, and blew through the cracks; the night was long and very cold.

Fortunately, it was brighter in the morn-

ing, and we were able to descend to our base-camp in the valley of Chamonix, where we arrived late at night, exhausted and very hungry.

After a good night's sleep we woke to find fair weather: a clear blue sky. We had only four days left to reach our goal: on our mountain bikes to the top. The weather-forecast was good so it was now or never!

That Wednesday, September 12, we set off at 10 a.m. According to plan, the first stretch would lead us past Les Houches at 1100 m altitude, and past the Bellevue Hotel to the terminal of the Mont Blanc Tramway, at 2400 m. During our previous scouting, we found that, with some effort, it could all be done by bike.

It took most of the first day to climb 1400 m, as we made a lot of photo- and video-stops on the way. We decided not to go any further, but to leave our bikes behind and walk back to our base-camp.

After spending the night there, we set off again, early in the morning, with heavy rucksacks full of climbing-gear and provisions for three days. We proceeded at a much lower speed. In the afternoon, we reached the place where we had left our bikes the day before.



After some cycling, we arrived at the base of the enormous rock-face which leads, via the Tête Rousse hut, to the Goûter hut, at 3861 m. We dismantled one bike, tied the parts to the frame of our rucksacks and left the other bike behind. One bike each would be far too much to carry.

We hoped to be able to start cycling again when we got to the Goûter hut, from where there are snowfields right to the top. The climbing was very rough, compounded by our extra heavy load, the thick, loose snow and thin air, and it was late afternoon when we finally reached the hut, at 3161 m.

Next morning we set off at 2 a.m., leaving as much stuff behind as possible. The full moon gave us plenty of light, and the solid snow a good grip. To reach the Goûter hut we first had to climb 700

meters through a steep rocky gully, and after two hours of climbing we put the bike together again. Cycling through the snow proved to be very hard indeed. We slowly plugged away, taking it in turns and stopping every 50 meters. It was 6.30 a.m. when we stopped for a rest, and a bite to eat, as the sun rose.

After meeting those climbers, the route was steeper and narrower. We were forced to dismantle the bike again and carry the parts on our back. We were just below the top now, close to where we turned back a few days before.

Erik walks faster all the time — I can't keep up with him. The blood is pounding against my temples, and every 25 steps I have to stand still and pant. It is almost too much — and this is just 4700 meters! How do they manage Mount Everest, I wonder. I keep counting my steps. The passage is now extremely narrow, and I look down hundreds of meters at both sides. Erik has disappeared behind a slope. I had hoped for the top to be right there, but yet another slope looms up. I

stagger a little. Will I dare to bike down later on?

Suddenly, Erik turns up again. "We are there," he shouts, "we made it!" We are standing on top of Mont Blanc — with a bicycle! A few moments later I am actually cycling along the top of the mountain, quite effortlessly, since the snow is frozen solid. We take lots of pictures, and also enable the other alpinists to make a unique shot. It is cold, 10 degrees centigrade below zero, with a sharp wind. After one hour we quit, to set out on our journey back, picking our way carefully.

The first stretch is too narrow and too dangerous to cycle; besides, there are still lots of other alpinists climbing up. Cautiously, I walk down beside the bike. When the path gets wider and less steep, I try cycling again. With one foot at either side of the bike, and jamming on the brake, I slide down as if on a ski-run. The tires have a remarkably good grip on the ice, which makes the braking easy and the descent smooth.

Back at the Goûter hut, we dismantled the bike once again, and in the presence of a great many fascinated alpinists, we began to walk down the steep rock-gully. It was late afternoon, and we decided to spend another night in the Tête Rousse hut.

During the night, there was a heavy fall of snow! We had done our climbing just in time; one day later, and we would have been forced to return to Holland with nothing to show for our pains. With some difficulty we descended through the fresh snow, to the tramway terminal, where we left our other bike. From there it was a spectacularly speedy descent to our little base-camp. We had conquered Mont Blanc by bicycle. ■