

Alps Training Plan

*Training Plan for Alps Tour, Rhone-Alpes
September, 2023*

OVERVIEW & PURPOSE

The “plan” that’s proposed below is in fact a framework and a set of guidelines for you to adopt and adapt as appropriate. Our goal is to give you the means to think carefully about the process and take responsibility for your own preparation for the Alps.

HOWEVER, this is not an all inclusive training guide and we can’t possibly explain here all the nuances and individual variations inherent in the training process. We therefore strongly encourage you to use this document as an aide in **what** might be important, but to do your own research into **how** to apply it.

The best training plan for you is one that has been designed with your unique strengths, limiters, objectives, context and constraints in mind, and is constantly adapted for you when things change (as they inevitably do). So, please take that to heart and don’t stress about sticking directly to a plan. We are looking for a 90% success rate on training days. This **isn’t** a race after all, it’s an opportunity to experience some of the most iconic climbs the region has to offer, plus some hidden gems and to have the best time doing so. **That’s the purpose.**

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO DO WELL ON THIS TRIP?

To answer this, we need to take a look at the overall demands of the trip. We’ll have major climbs every day plus long, technical descents, both require your focus. The weather is a

major consideration and can turn a tough day into a terrible day if you're unprepared or lack the right clothes. Extremes of heat can be as challenging for some, as heavy rain, sleet or even snow and the resulting risk of hypothermia can be for others. Even if it doesn't rain, you can expect to experience temperatures varying from ~0°C to 30°C throughout the day and expect to change and alter your clothing throughout the day, multiple times for this reason.

Assuming you intend to ride as well as you can, the Alps make the following demands of you:

PHYSIOLOGICAL

- A good power-to-weight ratio for the climbs
- Excellent aerobic endurance (2-6 hour total daily cycling; multiple long climbs)
- Good short-term muscular endurance (short, hard efforts to get up the steeper sections)
- The ability to recover fairly quickly between efforts

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- Able to maintain focus and motivation on long climbs
- Able to concentrate and stay lucid when fatigued
- The mental ability to descend and corner at speeds above 30 mph
- Able to stay positive and deal with inevitable tiredness, setbacks and negative thoughts

TECHNICAL DEMANDS

- Excellent climbing skills, on long climbs and varied gradients
- Excellent descending and cornering skills

- Bunch riding skills
- The ability to eat and drink while climbing and while riding in a peloton
- The ability to change clothing or at least adjust for temperature while riding

TACTICAL DEMANDS

- The ability to identify and stick to the optimum pace on long climbs
- The ability to identify when to push harder and when to conserve energy

I know this sounds like a lot, possibly even overwhelming, but you can do it!

Before working on your personal training plan, take the time to analyze your current abilities against this list to identify your strengths and limiters.

To obtain your best performance you should not only continue to develop your strengths, but also to work on your weaknesses (we all have them), at least to the point where they no longer handicap you.

KEY TRAINING PLAN PRINCIPLES FOR A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCE

The key principles behind a strong training plan for the Alps are:

- **Your commitment to make the Alps trip a priority.** This should go without saying, but if you want to ride well in the Alps, you must commit to a serious effort of preparation. Our plan assumes you will train for 5-7 hours per week on average
- **Be consistent.** This is the single most important success factor. Of course your

training load will vary from one week to the next but these variations should be deliberate in order to create overload and then recovery. If you are unable to train normally for a period you should keep this to a minimum and find ways to compensate (e.g. leg & core strength workouts, walking, jogging, swimming...)

- **Build a strong aerobic base**, so you can ride moderately hard for several hours without having to ease off. To do this, we recommend you train predominantly at low intensity, below LT1(Lactate Threshold - Level 1), the point at which the lactate concentration in your blood starts to increase above the baseline. This is quite likely to be much lower than the current level at which you train. It's important to understand that training at this low intensity provides the endurance adaptations you need without adding unnecessary fatigue. Ideally, you should determine LT1 via a lactate test. Failing this, you can estimate it by paying very careful attention to your breathing while starting at a very low intensity and increasing slowly. Your LT1 will be the point where you first feel the need to start breathing more deeply. For the majority of people, LT1 will be in the range = 60-65% of FTP or 60-65% of HR max.
- **Develop your fat-burning capacity**, to conserve your glycogen stocks during the long climbs and thus your ability to climb hard for longer. Progress towards this by limiting your intake of refined sugar and high glycaemic-index carbs, both on and off the bike. Do one long low-intensity ride per week partially or fully fasted,
- **From April onwards, do as much climbing as possible**, mostly at low intensity. If you attack every climb in your training at race pace (let alone as hard as you

can), you will build fatigue, not fitness. As you get closer to the trip you should do some sustained climbing (slow hill repeats), especially towards the end of your rides, when you're fatigued. This is a psychological part of the training process to push through when it doesn't feel possible, but in reality, your body is capable of much more than you give it credit for.

- **Build short-term muscular endurance**, to close gaps, stay with the group and power up short, steep sections that we encounter on each climb. This is extremely important.
- **Increase the load progressively, then recover**, to allow your body to adapt and get stronger. Remember, hard training actually breaks you down and makes you weaker! You only get stronger when your body has the time to recover, adapt and rebuild. There should be a big difference between your hardest and your easiest training weeks.
- **Monitor your readiness to take on a high load.** The best way to do this is with HRV (Heart Rate Variability), which provides insights to the state of your parasympathetic nervous system and therefore the stress you are under. Research has shown that training when you are stressed (low HRV) provides little or no benefit and may even be harmful. We recommend monitoring your RHR (Resting Heart Rate) and HRV every morning as soon as you wake up. If RHR is significantly higher than normal and/or HRV significantly lower, train easily or not at all. For more on this, [HRV](#).
- **Include exercises to develop technical skills**, and not only physiological

capacity, because this trip is not only about physical performance. These exercises might include practicing cornering, riding in a group, taking clothes on and off while riding, eating while on the bike, etc.

Our framework begins on January 1st. This gives you eight months to prepare for the trip.

A key assumption is that you will continue to ride regularly on the roads throughout the entire year. If this is not possible, you will have to compensate by doing long rides on the indoor trainer and ideally by joining us for our monthly North Georgia mountains training rides throughout the year (February to August) leading up to the trip. This is a necessary and invaluable part of your training plan.

YOUR TRAINING PLAN: STRUCTURE

The training plan is made up of three phases: **Preparation**, **Pre-Trip** and **Trip**. Each phase is then broken down into 4-week meso-cycles including 3 load weeks and 1 recovery week, with a target training load for each week. If you are over 50, consider adopting a 3-week cycle of 2 load weeks and 1 recovery week.

It's important to understand that such a structure is essentially arbitrary and takes no account of the total stress you will be under (life stress + training stress) on any particular day. Current best practice is to monitor readiness to train, using a combination of daily HRV (Heart Rate Variability) measurements with perceptions of fatigue and muscle soreness, and to adjust the plan accordingly. If you feel very tired, have sore muscles and your HRV is below the normal range, it would be better either to take a very easy day or not to train at all until you have recovered.

Remember that hard training breaks you down: you only get stronger during recovery!

In terms of intensity distribution, we recommend that the Preparation phase be **Polarized** (80% low / 20% high intensity, or even 90% low / 10% high) and the Pre-Competition phase be **Pyramidal** (70% low / 20% medium / 10% high).

PREPARATION PHASE

This covers the period from January through May. The key objectives here are to accustom your body to training 6-8 hours per week, to build a strong aerobic base, and to use a limited number of HIT interval sessions to develop short-term muscular endurance.

The training intensity distribution during this phase should be, **Polarized**, meaning 80%-90% of your training should be at low intensity and only 10%-20% at high intensity. You should completely avoid training in the middle (tempo or sweet-spot), because at this time of year it creates too much fatigue for too little benefit. In practice this means that only one ride per week should include a significant amount of high intensity work.

ON THE BIKE, JANUARY TO MAY

1. **Aerobic endurance:** progressing to 4h rides at low intensity (less than 60-65% of your HRmax or FTP; if in doubt, err on the cautious side. The rides should FEEL slow). Aerobic endurance is by far the most important quality you need to build and you should spend ~80%-90% of your training on this.
2. **Short-term muscular endurance:** multiple 4'-8' efforts, initially in Zone3 then increasing progressively to Zone5; and/or 1'-2' efforts initially in Zone4 increasing progressively to

Zone6. High short-term muscular endurance is essential for getting up the steeper sections we encounter. Do some of these efforts at low cadence. No more than one per week, and none during the recovery weeks.

3. **Technical limiters:** e.g. bunch riding, descending, cornering, etc. Take every opportunity on your long rides to practice technical skills. If you are not a confident descender, consider joining us in the mountains to work on your descending and gain pointers from those more experienced in descending.

OFF THE BIKE, JANUARY TO MAY

You may not be used to off-the-bike training. Nevertheless, it can have a significant impact on your performance. To ride faster, you need to push harder on the pedals, which means you need not only stronger leg muscles but also greater core strength to stabilize and channel the extra force. The best way to strengthen your muscles is off the bike, using appropriate exercises and good technique.

1. **Strength and conditioning:** one or two sessions per week, ideally guided by a Strength and Conditioning coach with experience in cycling. If you are new to this, err on the side of caution to limit the risk of injury.
2. **Flexibility and stretching:** two to three 20' sessions per week. Pilates or Yoga can be extremely beneficial. Learning correct technique is vital so choose a practitioner who knows cycling and only takes small groups (or better yet, one on one teaching).
3. **Complement** occasionally with other sports: running, swimming, etc. If cycling is your only sport you risk building up imbalances and soft tissue problems over time.

PRE-TRIP PHASE

The key objectives during the Pre-Trip phase are to increase the training load to up to 10 hours per week or more, to reinforce your aerobic base, to improve your climbing at an increased pace and to improve your general trip readiness.

The training intensity distribution should now switch to **Pyramidal**. You should still train for 70% of the time at low intensity but you should now introduce medium intensity training (tempo and sweet-spot) for 20% of the time, while maintaining 10% at high intensity. Your training thus becomes more trip-specific as you get closer to September. In practice it means adding tempo or sweet-spot sessions to one or two rides per week while maintaining one ride per week focused on high intensity work.

ON THE BIKE, JUNE TO AUGUST

1. **Aerobic endurance:** continuing long low-intensity rides, progressing to a 4-6 hour ride by mid-July, with as much climbing as possible. Either do these long rides alone or with an understanding training partner willing to stick to the low intensity. Keep it low! Seriously.
2. **Threshold:** multiple 10'-30' efforts, first in Zone 3, then in Zone 4 to develop your ability to climb short, steep grades we encounter. No need to structure too much: just make all the climbs in Zone 3 or Zone 4 on a 2-4 hour ride. Try to push a bit harder on the final climb of the ride. No more than two per week, less if overly fatigued.
3. **Group ride:** twice per month in June and July, hit a fast group ride in order to sharpen your reflexes and re-accustom yourself to faster paced rides for an added fitness boost. Just make sure it's a group ride that's within your limits and allows you to complete the ride with the group. Finishing strong is the goal. Push yourself but limit your time on the front of the ride.

4. **Recovery:** short rides, 45-75 minutes, strictly in Zone 1. Make the recovery EASY. If the hardest training has pushed you close to your limit, then recovery must be easier than normal, otherwise you will overtrain and lose the benefit. Remember: Easy!
5. **Test different nutritional and equipment choices** so that on the trip you know exactly what works – and what doesn't work. Practice changing clothing and adapting to different temperatures while riding.

OFF THE BIKE, JUNE TO AUGUST

1. **Strength and conditioning:** one or two sessions per week, ideally guided by a Strength & Conditioning coach with experience in cycling. The goal during this period is to maintain the strength of your leg and core muscles. Cycling does not do this adequately.
2. **Flexibility and stretching:** as in the previous phase it is vital to maintain these sessions to keep your body flexible. Do two to three 20' sessions per week.
3. **Other activities:** optional, as desired. We recommend an occasional swim or perhaps a 1-2 hour walk.

GENERAL, JUNE TO AUGUST

1. **Maximize your sleep.** This is essential for recovery and adaptation. You should aim at a minimum of 8 hours per night, and try to wake up naturally (without an alarm-clock). Banish all screens from the bedroom.
2. **Ensure high quality nutrition.** This is even more important than usual, due to the high training load. This is not the place for extensive advice on nutrition, but the key principles are

to avoid industrial food and supplements (except under medical advice) and eat the widest possible variety of fresh, top-quality natural foods.

3. **Minimum travel, minimum stress:** the more you can avoid adding to the stress on your body, the better off you will be. This is certainly easier said than done but it is possible to learn psychological coping strategies to reduce the impact of the most stressful events that life can throw at you.

TAPER

This covers the final one or two weeks before the trip. The key objective is to eliminate fatigue without losing fitness. The goal is to arrive in Alpe d'Huez the fittest you have ever been, but also super-fresh and thus able to conquer all the climbs for the week. The longer the trip, the longer the taper: if you would normally taper 7 days prior to a typical challenging weekend trip, you want to taper 10-14 days for the Alps trip. Save those legs!!!

ON THE BIKE, LAST 1-2 WEEKS

Progressively reduce your training volume by at least 50%. For example, if you have been riding 10 hours per week, you might bring it down to 7 hours in the second-to-last week and no more than 5 hours in the final week. If in doubt, do less. It's too late to make any difference to your fitness and it's far more important to eliminate the accumulated fatigue. Save those legs!!!

OFF THE BIKE, LAST 1-2 WEEKS

The need for sleep, good quality nutrition and minimum stress are even more acute during the taper. The advice is the same as for the Pre-Trip Phase. The better you can plan to sleep well, eat well and avoid stress, the better off you will be...Save those legs!!!