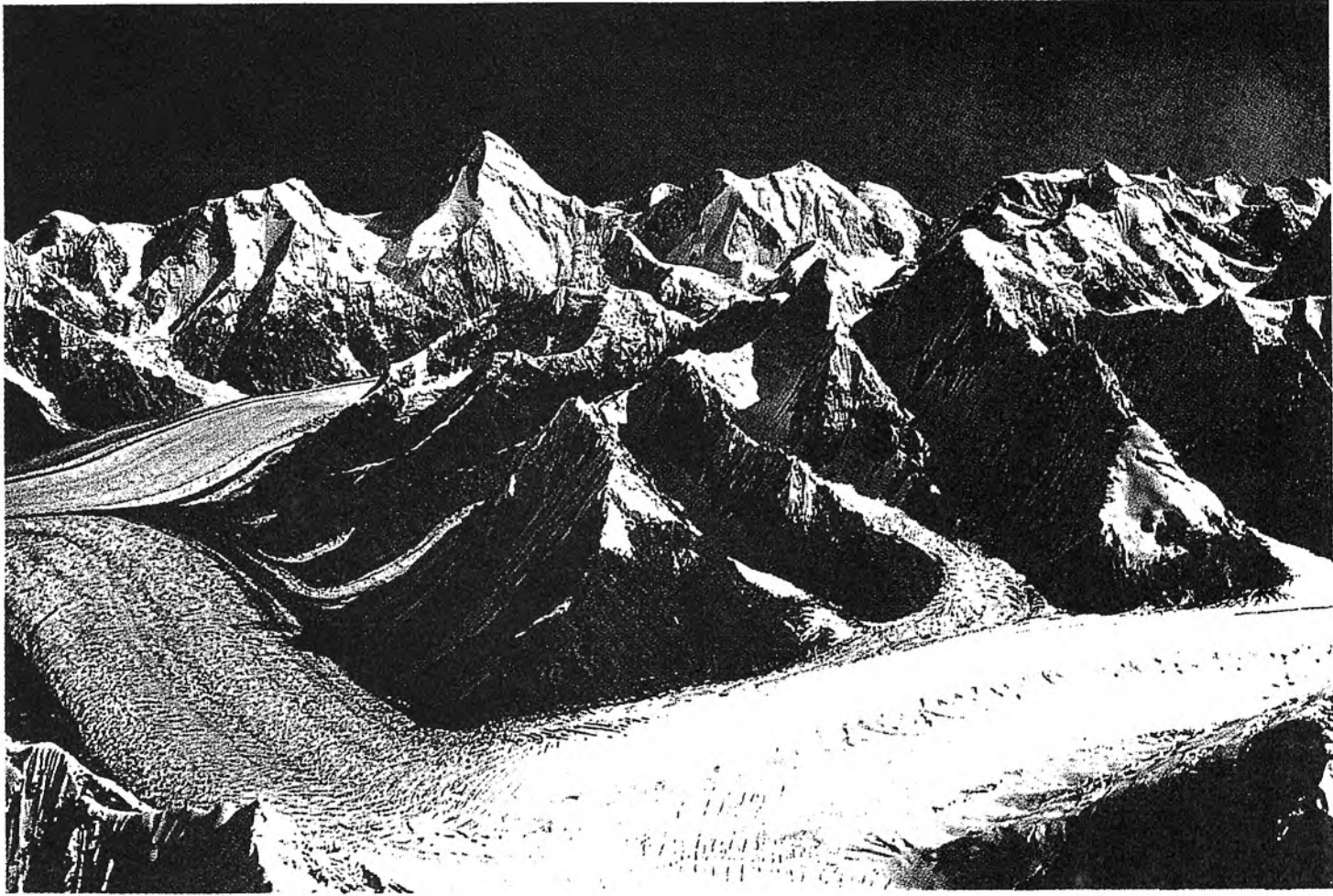


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BRITISH TIEN SHAN EXPEDITION 1993

Expedition Report



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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1992 , four British mountaineers teamed up with a party from Minsk for an expedition to the Pamirs . This was in response to an invitation in an Alpine club circular. The 1993 trip was a follow up to this.

The expedition was a multi-national venture, nine climbers from Belarus, five from Britain and two from Switzerland. The British party were organised by Tony Park and Dave Wilkinson , the others being Stewart Muir , Paul Nunn and Bob Toogood . Bill Church had also hoped to go , but had to withdraw at the last minute due to a back injury . These five flew from London to Alma Ata , changing planes (and airports) in Moscow . They were met in Alma Ata by Tolya Gvozdev from Minsk who organised all travel,accommodation,food,etc. from then on . For this , they paid him \$900 each . This was more than enough to cover the cost , and the profit Tolya made went to subsidise the costs of the trip for himself and his friends from Minsk . This seems quite reasonable , and is the usual practice in this part of the world .

GEOGRAPHICAL & POLITICAL

The Tien Shan mountains are well north of the Karakoram , on the borders of the Sinkiang province of China with Kirgizia and Kazakhstan , two of the central Asian states of the former Soviet Union . The range extends for several hundred miles , but the highest peaks are concentrated in a compact central area around the South Inylichek glacier . Here are the two seven thousand metre peaks , Pobeda and Khan Tengri , and a host of five and six thousanders .

A feature of mountaineering in the Tien Shan , and elsewhere in the former USSR , is the fixation they seem to have with the biggest mountains . A peak-bagging philosophy dominates , to the almost complete exclusion of activity on lower mountains . Information about what has been done on the lower peaks is hard to come by due to the few English-speaking parties who have visited the region (until recent years) , to the obvious language difficulty , and to this disregard for the worth of the lesser peaks . Local enquiries are met with a blank incomprehension , which is not due solely to secretive protection .

The concentration on ordinary routes on the biggest peaks seems to infect most foreign visitors . These routes become unpleasantly crowded , but if you venture off these beaten trails , you are likely to be completely alone . Most of the smaller peaks seem to have been climbed once or twice , but there are plenty of untouched ridges and faces .

To visit the former USSR , a visa is needed . This requires an invitation from someone over there . The visa specifies which places may be visited , and instructs you to register with the local police . This is a relic of the old system and is largely ignored . We certainly visited many places not authorised by our visas , and did not report to a single police station . But this is all in a state of flux , and may change from one year and one country to another .

The South Inylichek glacier is actually in Kirgizia , but there are two organised base camp sites on opposite sides of the glacier . The camp on the north bank is run by the Kirgizian mountaineering centre , the other one by the Kazakhis . The latter seems rather anomalous in these days of independence between the former Soviet states , but is , perhaps reluctantly tolerated at present for historical and political reasons . Both camps offer full board accomodation , but allow independent self-catering parties to camp nearby . We camped independently , near the Kirgizian site .

During the summer of 1993 , the Kirgizian authorities were trying to introduce a peak-fee system , charging \$100 per head for Pobeda , \$70 for Khan Tengri , and less for lower peaks . This was not enforced very rigidly , and we made all manner of unpaid attempts (mostly unsuccessful) which were not queried . We do not know whether the Kazakhis attempt similar charges , nor how this is likely to develop in future years .

OBJECTIVES

Our main aims were ascents of new routes on the lower peaks in the area . Our main source of information was Roger Payne , who had visited the area in 1991 , when he made the first British ascents of the two big peaks . He was very generous about possible objectives on lower hills .



THE JOURNEY

The Aeroflot flight from London to Alma Ata went without incident, except for the rather expensive taxi journey between airports in Moscow, which cost us \$50. This is monstrously over the top in local currency, but the taxi-drivers' union seem to have a total grip on the matter.

Tolya met us at the Airport in Alma Ata, and a few hours later, the various national sections of the expedition were all united, and on a bus bound for the mountains. We were driven west from Alma Ata, across the border into Kirgizia, to arrive the following morning in the town of Karakol (formerly known as Przhevalsk). Helicopters can be taken to base camp from here, but it is cheaper, and normal, to first take a further 5 hour road journey to the road's end at Maydadir. However, a helicopter hired by another party was about to leave Karakol, so that afternoon, the dollar-paying foreigners had the luxury of a flight to Maydadir, the workers from Minsk enduring a lorry ride with the luggage to meet up in the small hours. Next day, the whole party were helicoptered in to the base camp by the Inylichek glacier, arriving at just over 4,000 metres altitude only 72 hours after our departure from Heathrow.

IN THE MOUNTAINS

The first two days at base camp were spent settling in, taking short acclimatising walks on the glacier, and trying to decide what to do next. The weather in the Tien Shan is notoriously bad, and this year was no exception. It had already settled in to a total lack of pattern, snowing with little warning whenever it felt so inclined, but with some good half days, and just occasionally, a good whole day. The Belaruskis, true to tradition, were only interested in the big mountains, and immediately started ferrying supplies up to Pobeda. The five Brits decided to climb a small hill for acclimatisation, and carried tents across the main glacier to the foot of an attractive but easy looking 4,900 m peak, "Abaya". A pre-dawn start was rewarded with a reasonably good day's weather, and the mountain was climbed by easy slopes of scree and snow on its east face. A rope was only needed for the final summit cornice, which we ascended up and down, one at a time, belayed from below. We then descended, and returned to base camp that evening. The route appeared to have been climbed just prior to our ascent, as we were following tracks all the way to the final cornice, where they had probably been obliterated by wind-blown snow. The route is recommended for an acclimatisation ascent.

After this, we decided on a walk up the main glacier, to see what we could see. We decided on the west face and north-west ridge of pik Otkritii (5664m). Information that this mountain was unclimbed conflicted with a dotted line from the north on one of our photo-copied sketch maps, but it did not appear to have been done from the west. From the advanced base camp used for Khan Tengri, we started very early in the morning, and had an exhausting approach in unfrozen snow on the glacier. We climbed snow slopes of 45 degrees on the left side of the face to join a spur which slanted left to a junction with the north-west ridge. We reached the spur, at about 5,000 metres, but the weather, which had been perfect when we set off, had then steadily worsened, and now started to snow. A brew of tea was now taken, but the snow continued to fall, and visibility to worsen. Reluctantly, we decided to retreat, and this decision was vindicated after five days of continuous snowfall, mostly suffered at base camp, enlivened with such pastimes as reading in bed, building snowmen, and imbibing of much vodka.

Eventually, the snow did stop, but bad news came from Khan Tengri. Various parties had been stranded by the weather in the snow caves at 5,800 metres. This is 50 metres below the col at the foot of the west ridge, the ordinary route. But one party, two Poles and two Ukrainians, camped in a tent next to the snow holes. The heavy build-up of fresh snow had avalanched in the night from the 50 metre slope, burying the tent and killing all four occupants. In spite of this, Paul and Bob decided to have a look at Khan Tengri, whose ordinary route did have the advantage of many other parties to break the trail. Dave, Tony, and Stewart went up the glacier again to attempt pik Pogrobetskii, 6,527 m and apparently unclimbed. The fresh snow had been consolidated by two days of sun and a good frosty night, and we walked past pik Otkrytii without sinking in at all, except that every few minutes, the whole surface of the glacier all around us would suddenly drop down a few inches with a sharp

crack as the hard surface collapsed on the unconsolidated lower layer. This did not seem a good indication of conditions higher up. Passing Otkrytii, a steeper bit of glacier required crampons. One of Tony's foot fangs broke as he put it on, to his evident verbal displeasure. The plastic lever which secures the back of the crampon had snapped in two at the central pivot, and was totally unusable. He took the realistic view, and set off immediately for base camp to attempt a repair or loan. Meanwhile, Stewart and Dave, overburdened with tent and gear for a party of three, abandoned Pogrobetskii in favour of another attempt on Otkrytii. This was, in turn, abandoned, at a lower height than the previous attempt, when the slope showed the same tendency to slabby fracture that we had noticed on the glacier. Walking back to advanced base, we observed a number of slopes which showed signs of slab avalanche, and felt our retreat was justified.

Dave and Stewart then, rather reluctantly, decided to turn their attention to the Khan Tengri ordinary route, which seemed to be the only thing which was reasonably avalanche-free. The following day, to further their acclimatisation, they carried a small load of food and gas to the snow caves at 5800 m. On the way, they met Paul and Bob, who were similarly occupied. At the same time, the nine from Minsk were moving up to a small camp at 6400 m on the west ridge, bound for the summit the following day. These four Brits returned to base, where Tony, mechanical engineer that he is, had made a very impressive-looking repair to his crampon, and felt confident enough to go on Khan Tengri with it. Forming a scratch team with an itinerant Spaniard, he made a pre-dawn start up the side glacier leading to the west col. The lower part of this route keeps well right, away from an impressive ice cliff on pik Chapaev, which regularly discharges serac falls onto the glacier below. One such fall, in the dark, was too big and too close for their comfort, and sent them scurrying back.

After a couple of days' rest, Dave and Stewart returned for their attempt on Khan Tengri. The threatening seracs were in less hostile mood for them, and they reached the snow caves at 5,800 m without incident. With the benefit of a longer acclimatisation than the Minskis had had, they planned to travel light, and go to the top and back in a single day. This meant a long and arduous day with 1200 m of ascent and descent, but avoided the exposed camp at 6400 m, and meant better use could be made of a single good day, which seemed like the most that could be expected. Snow fell in the evening, but this stopped before dawn (for a change), and another early start led up the easy lower part of the ridge in the dark. The ridge is quite steep and rocky, with its fair share of loose stuff, but easier than it appears, rather reminiscent of the Hornli ridge on the Matterhorn. For financial reasons, the locals try to encourage guided parties and other teams of limited ability. So most of the route was fitted with fixed ropes. But this is a windy place, the ropes get badly frayed, and are not replaced often enough (for financial reasons). Some parties seem quite happy to prussic all the way up, blissfully unconcerned about the risk of a frayed rope snapping. There are surprisingly few accidents. We climbed the rock, with a clamp slid up the rope every few moves for protection only. The rope could be used more often on the descent - one could see from above if the rope was safe enough for abseiling.

The weather was clear, but cold and windy, and Stewart was suffering from numb fingers and toes. We disagreed with Roger Payne's advice that ordinary gaiters were adequate. Not desirous of a dose of frostbite, Stewart retreated from a height of about 6,500 m, leaving Dave, who was equipped with a good pair of yeti overgaitors, to continue to the top alone (along with a few other parties). He reached the top in clear cold conditions at about 2 pm, and got back to the snow caves at 8 pm. The day had been one of the clearest of the whole trip, but it still started snowing again at about 7.30.

Paul and Bob were with Stewart at the snow caves, they had come up for their attempt. But while ascending to the col, an appalling accident had taken place lower down. The big ice-cliff had released an enormous serac avalanche in mid-morning. They were high up the glacier and out of reach, but others below had been less fortunate. A party of four from the Bristol based company "Himalayan Kingdoms", two clients and two Russian guides, were buried under tons of ice and killed. They were on the normal path, well over on the "safe" side of the glacier, but the avalanche was so huge, that its momentum took it right across the glacier and up the other side. Paul and Bob had seen the avalanche from above, but were unaware that any parties had been caught in it, and in any case were too far ahead to be of any aid. The four descended together the following day, and saw the devastation. Several square kilometres of glacier were totally covered with huge blocks of ice. It was

fortunate that no others were on that part of the glacier at the time. Paul and Bob were so disheartened by this disaster, that they had lost their appetite for climbing, and did not retain it for the duration.

The British party made three further unsuccessful attempts on routes. Tony had managed to borrow a pair of crampons, and teamed up with the Swiss climber Christophe Berclaz. They made an enterprising attempt on the central spur of the south face of pik Gorki, directly behind base camp. They reached over half height before retreating in poor weather. Their line may or may not be the one climbed recently by a Russian party. This mountain, and its higher neighbour to the east, pik Chapaev, have a number of attractive mixed spurs on their south faces, overlooking the South Inylichek glacier. But the spurs and main ridges are heavily corniced, with flutings and mushroom formations reminiscent of the Peruvian Andes. There appear to be no easy descents, so several days of reasonable weather would be preferable.

The same pair went to the foot of a small steep mixed face, the north face of the north point of "Three Heads", but did not even start this, due to the weather. Dave and Stewart went up the main glacier again for another attempt on Pogrobetskii or Otkrytii, but poor snow and bad weather again foiled them.

While this was going on (or not going on), the Minskis were showing much greater fortitude (rashness?). Five of them succeeded on the ordinary route on pik Pobeda, a multi-day effort of sitting out bad weather in snow caves, and pushing on in slightly less bad. Theirs was the first ascent of Pobeda that year.

CONCLUSIONS

The Tien Shan is the most northerly range of mountains of its height in the world, and is consequently colder than the Himalayas or Karakoram. The weather is also the worst of any major mountain range. Even when it is clear, cold winds usually blow, so warm clothing is important. The unstable weather means that for multi-day ascents, one should be prepared to sit out bad weather en route. The Russians (and other former Soviets) are more prepared for this than most visiting westerners, but where does courage end and foolhardiness begin? Access to peaks further up the glacier was hampered by soft snow. This would be much eased by snow shoes (or even skis, if their air transport can be organised).

ACCOUNTS

Income	£	Expenditure	£
Grant from M.E.F.	600	Air fares London to Alma-Ata	2430
Grant from B.M.C.(Sports Council)	400	(5 @ £486)	
Grant from Foundation for Sport and the Arts	600	Costs, Alma-Ata & beyond	3055.60
Members' Contributions (5 @ £968.15)	4840.75	(5 @ \$900)	
	-----	Insurance with BMC (5 @ £139)	695
	6440.75	Visas (5 @ £5)	25
	-----	Excess Baggage	46.85
		Taxi fares in Moscow (2 @ \$50)	67.90
		Sundry expenses in Moscow	44.82
		Sundry expenses in UK	21.23
		Loss on re conversion of contingency fund \$ to £	54.35

			6440.75

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

GRANTS Our thanks to the Mount Everest Foundation, to the Foundation for Sport and the Arts, and to the British Mountaineering Council (money from the Sports Council) for the three grants mentioned above, which relieved the strain on members' personal bank balances.

GLACIER CREAM We would like to record our thanks to Mr David Wood and Mr Mike Wood, Chemists from Aberdeen, who very generously supplied us with glacier cream. This was used by our members, and more importantly by the climbers from Minsk. All mountaineers from former Soviet countries find effective sun-screen cream to be unobtainable in their own country, and they are seen in the mountains wearing various improvised protective masks looking like Ku Klux Klan or women in purdah, otherwise they suffer dreadful facial burning. Our Minsk friends greatly appreciated the cream supplied to them by the Wood brothers, and asked us to convey their thanks to David and Mike.

CENTRAL TIEN SHAN

