

**REPORT TO THE MEF  
ON THE  
ESC SKI-MOUNTAINEERING  
EXPEDITION  
TO THE  
AK-SHIIRAK RANGE,  
KYRGYZSTAN  
2003.**



# **REPORT TO THE MEF ON THE ESC SKI-MOUNTAINEERING EXPEDITION TO THE AK-SHIIRAK RANGE, KYRGYZSTAN, 2003**

**Members: Steve Wright, Mike Sharp, Joost van der Valk, Dave Wynne-Jones.**

## **1. History.**

The Kyrgyz Republic is an ex-CIS state in Central Asia. It is separated from China on the southwest by the Tien Shan Mountains, and the Ak-Shirak is one component of this complex range.

In 1997 Chris Watkins, a member, returned from 2 years working in Kyrgyzstan to first suggest an Eagle Ski Club visit to the Ak-Shirak range. Her research had led her to believe this area would be ideal for exploration on ski with the likelihood of first ascents on ski of peaks up to 5000m. For various reasons that suggestion was not taken up at the time, but in 2001 Steve Wright canvassed support for an expedition in 2003 and received sufficient interest to go ahead with planning.

Agencies contacted in Kyrgyzstan knew of the range but not of any winter visits on ski.

Close study of maps of the range developed the plan to traverse it from southwest to northeast via glacier systems linked by high passes. The Kara Su valley would access the southwestern system while descent of the Sary-Chet glacier would bring the team out on the road to the Kumtor gold mine.

Further research turned up information from John Turk regarding a visit to the Kara Su valley and the ascent of some 4000m peaks in July prior to a visit to the Pamir Alai. His team recommended visiting the area "earlier in the summer or late in the spring when there is more snow and colder temperatures."

In February of 2003 another ESC member on a heliskiing visit to Kyrgyzstan found considerable avalanche danger at that time and learnt from local contacts that May would probably be a better time for ski-touring. Accordingly the previously arranged dates in March for the expedition were pushed back to April 12<sup>th</sup> to May 2<sup>nd</sup>.

## **2. Access.**

Flights to Bishkek are available from BA direct, though with punitive excess baggage charges or from Aeroflot via Moscow with very much more reasonable excess baggage rates. Travelling with BA, we airfreighted baggage to Bishkek but found this more expensive than expected and administratively time-consuming. Aeroflot have very good group rates but only for 15 people or more.

The Kyrgyz infrastructure is collapsing with the disappearance of Soviet inward investment. Bus stations are gutted shells but the roads are still driveable though the surfaces are breaking up. We

drove in a 4WD vehicle from Bishkek via Balykchi to Barskoon on the southern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul, where we spent the night. From there a 6WD "vachtovka" took us over the Barskoon pass, but the Suek pass was closed by deep snow, so we were unable to reach the Kara Su valley by road. The road to the Kumtor gold mine was kept open and from it an alternative route on ski over the Ak-Bel pass was suggested. Though this would add several days to the route, we took it.

### **3. Summary of team activity in the range.**

From a camp just off the road we made double carries to 2 more camps reaching the head of the pass in 3 days. Weather was poor with some days a total reliance on GPS navigation in whiteout conditions. The rapid gain of altitude by road, from 1600 – 3500m took its toll on the team and 2 of us were developing chesty coughs. Bad water may also have contributed to bouts of sickness. Despite the Kumtor road this was a remote area and we encountered fresh snow leopard tracks on our way to the head of the pass.

It was hard going in the deep breakable crust with hoar crystals beneath and it seemed that several more days would be required to reach the site of our first planned base camp. From the Ak-Bel pass however there was the option to explore the western approaches to the Ak-Shirak range. We dug in at 3700m 41°45'N. 78°05'E.

The weather continued very unsettled, so though some days were lost, other short days were spent exploring the glacier approaches to the east of the pass and making ascents of peaks 4280m, 4200m & 4060m to the west of the pass.

We spent the one glorious day ascending the largest eastern glacier to a peak (spot height 4449m) at the head of the pass beyond. This afforded fine views east into the main body of the Ak-Shirak range. Another peak at 4700m was attempted but snow conditions on the corniced ridge proved too dangerous. Avalanche danger was a constant concern after all the snowfall. The ski back to base camp through a striking, wild landscape was quite spectacular.

A return to bad weather encouraged the idea of travelling rather than climbing. Steve, Mike and Joost decided to make a lightweight trip to the original planned first base camp at the confluence of 3 glaciers in the Kara Su valley. Over the Ak-Bel pass, they came out into a broad river valley, with a distant view of the road that would have brought us there two weeks earlier. They camped on grass by the frozen river, just next to an abandoned building, with enticing views of the mountains towards the Chinese border. Apparently this area was intensively grazed in Soviet times, but now it is wild and open, and the domain of wolves rather than sheep.

The river was solidly frozen, and it provided a highway up to the Kara Su glacier. After a short day, they camped at the base of the glacier, at the gateway into the heart of the range. The route was clear – the first part of the glacier would be hard work through the glacial debris, but the way up to Pik Kyrgyzia looked skiable.

Dave Wynne-Jones stayed alone at the camp on the Ak-Bel pass to make the first ski ascents of a 4560m peak due east of BC, climbing a scree strewn ridge that became increasingly rocky until buttresses gave way to a narrow snow ridge and summit plateau; a technically interesting descent.

The weather continuing fine he climbed another peak of 4600m. to the north of the previous one. A rock-studded spur led to a corniced ridge climbed via a narrow corridor between the cornice break-line on the right and bare ice plunging a way to the glacier below on the left. Harschiesen were invaluable, and he skied the descent with ice axe in one hand.

Having noted some interesting tracks on that ascent, the next day's good weather tempted him to explore the glacier between the 2 peaks, spotting a herd of blue sheep. It's worth emphasising the wildness of the area with eagles, lammergeyer, snow geese, and fresh snow leopard tracks spotted more than once.

When the travellers returned the reunited party broke camp and took 2 days to get back to the road over the thawing river flats below the pass.

#### 4. Comments.

- a) Weather in late April, early May showed improvement. It might be better to schedule another trip of this nature for May-June when 6WD access to the Kara Su river valley would be possible and glacier travel would avoid deteriorating snow conditions.
- b) From the summits of peaks east of the Ak-Bel pass and the upper reaches of the Kara Su valley it was clear that this is a highly suitable area for explorative ski-mountaineering. There are plenty of peaks and passes offering first ascents and the traverse of the range remains a worthy objective.
- c) Rock where it was encountered proved to be friable and unstable, but the north faces of mountains offered potential ice/mixed routes of some interest.
- d) We had excellent local support from Top Asia ([www.topasia.kg](http://www.topasia.kg)). Digital maps are available from East View Cartographic ( [www.cartographic.com](http://www.cartographic.com) - sheet K-44-73).

We gratefully acknowledge support from the Mount Everest Foundation and the Eagle Ski Club. The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.

DWJ

### **Notes on Maps and Photos.**

1. On the large scale map of the eastern Kyrgyz Republic, the squared area is approximately that which the expedition explored.
2. On the detailed map of the area:
  - a) the scale is 1:100,000.
  - b) The peak marked 4946.9m is Kyrgisia.
  - c) camps are marked 1-4.
  - d) camp 3 is just below the head of the Ak-Bel pass.
  - e) camp 4 was our planned first base camp.
  - f) routes are marked in green broken lines.
  - g) Peaks ascended are marked:
    - A – 4280m
    - B – 4200m.
    - C – 4060m.(no photo)
    - D – 4449m.
    - E – 4500m.
    - F – 4600m.

### **Appendices:**

The original itinerary and the final accounts are appended.













A

B







# Kyrgyzstan

Proposed Itinerary for April 2003

Version 7.0

## Objective

- A traverse of the Ak-Shiirak, with peaks up to almost 5000m
- Have a good time....

## Itinerary

Day	Activity	Sunday Comment
12th April 2003 Saturday	Fly from UK 13:45 from LHR Flight BA 6275	
Sunday	Drive along lake Issyk-Kul Stay in hotel.	
Monday	Borskoon gorge, Arabel plateau, Ak-Bel pass, transport by "vachtovka", as far as we can go... Make camp at roadhead	
Tuesday	Ferry loads to site at end of track	
Wednesday	Move to camp, carry to high camp	
Thursday	Move to high camp below Kyrgyzia (4200m)	
Friday	Ascend CNK Kyrgyzia 4946m, return to camp	
19th April 2003 Saturday	Ascend Peak 4816m	
Sunday	Go through the Letaveta Pass 4550m to the Petrov glacier.	
Monday	Climb peak 4916m (?)	
Tuesday	Climb peak xxxx	
Wednesday	Move to high camp on upper Petrov glacier	
Thursday	Explore peaks to east	



Friday	Climb peak at nearly 5000m
26th April 2003	Return to high camp on upper Petrov glacier
Saturday	
Monday	Go along Petrov glacier to below the Sary-Chet Pass
Tuesday	Go over Sary-Chet pass 4300m to the Sary-Chet glacier.
Wednesday	Descend to Kum-Tor Pick up by 4WD Transfer to lake Issyk-Kul Hotel accommodation.
Thursday	Transfer to Bishkek Leisurely day, hotel (early start for plane)
2nd May 2003	Flight to LHR on BA6726
Friday	05:45 from Bshkek Arrive in LHR at 11:25
Saturday	
Sunday	



<b>Income</b>	<b>££</b>	<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>££</b>	<b>\$\$</b>
MEF grant	£400.00	Air fares	£1,793.80	
Eagle Ski Club support	£250	Cargo charges	£297.81	\$108.00
		Agents fees (local transport, accommodation, fuel)	£244.00	\$1,577.00
		Expedition Food	£37.00	
		Administration (maps, reports etc)		\$160.00
	<b>£650.00</b>		<b>£2,372.61</b>	<b>£1,845.00</b>