

Anglo-New Zealand Zartosh 2009



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CONTENTS

Summary.....	3
Expedition Members	4
Itinerary	5
Area Description	6
Maps	6
Approach Route.....	8
Acclimatisation	8
First Attempt.....	9
The Climb	10
Return to Dushanbe.....	12
Formalities and Agent Details	14
Transport.....	14
Food and Equipment	14
Accounts	15
Expedition Research and Bibliography.....	15
Thanks and Acknowledgements.....	16
Further Information.....	16
Expedition Contact Address	16
Appendix 1 – Maps	17

SUMMARY

In August 2009 a team of four members travelled to a remote part of the Tajikistan Pamir to attempt the first ascent of Zartosh (6128m). Zartosh had been attempted four times by commercial expeditions run by EWP in the late 1990's by its spectacular north face or by the north west face and west ridge. Although unsuccessful on Zartosh, EWP recorded first ascents of many of the surrounding peaks.

The team consisted of Simon Woods and Adam Thomas, both from the UK, with Jock Jeffrey from New Zealand and Graham Rowbotham from Canada. They met up in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, at the end of July and made final preparations for the four day drive to the eastern Pamir. Other than an area permit for the remote east, and registration with the police, there was little officialdom and in terms of bureaucracy Tajikistan seems an easy place to climb remote, unclimbed mountains.

The road to Zartosh was spectacular, if uneventful, and whilst the road ran out somewhat short of base camp, this did not stop our intrepid driver from depositing us on some river outflow moraine at 3870m. From there the team transferred about 500m to a decent base camp site above a small stream.

From 10-16 August all four members established a camp on the glacier at 5100m with an intermediate moraine camp at 4500m. They also climbed Leopard's Tooth (5470m), first climbed and named by EWP in 1997.

Up to this point the weather had been glorious – wall-to-wall sunshine with warm days and cold, clear nights. Unfortunately this changed on the night of 16 August and it proceeded to snow, albeit lightly, every night for the next week. This did not change plans significantly because the snow did not accumulate too much, but it did become colder and the snow was deeper higher up.

Heading back up and taking the tents a little higher to the foot of the 800m north face, on 22 August Woods and Thomas attempted the north face, reaching a height of c.5650m. However, due to unconsolidated snow on technical terrain and the prospect of at least one bivouac in less than favourable conditions they retreated.

On the same day Rowbotham and Jeffrey headed up to a col at 5950m between Zartosh and White Pyramid Peak (6060m), again first climbed by an EWP expedition in 1998. After a lot of deep snow plodding and a small drop into a crevasse right on the col by Jeffrey, they made the summit.

At this point Woods and Jeffrey returned to base camp leaving Rowbotham and Thomas at the high camp. On 24 August The pair headed up to the col between Zartosh and White Pyramid Peak before turning their attention to the technical face leading to the west summit ridge of Zartosh. Taking over five hours to climb the 180m to the summit they arrived there just after 1pm to record the first ascent.

Having safely abseiled and down climbed by the ascent route the pair rejoined Woods and Jeffrey at base camp the following day having cleared the mountain of all trace of their being there. By 31 August the team was back in Dushanbe.

EXPEDITION MEMBERS



Adam Thomas from the UK is 37. In 1998 he explored the little known Tres Marias area in Bolivia (including numerous first ascents) and in 1999 made the second ascent of Kutshkulin Sar in Pakistan. In 2000, he made the first ascent of Uddin Zom (5995m), also in Pakistan. He co-led an expedition to Raksha Urai (6593m), in 2001, led an expedition to explore the Nyainqentangla East Range in Tibet and attempt Chukporisum (6359m) in 2003 and returned to Tibet in 2005 to attempt the first ascent of Menamcho (6258m).



At 52, software engineer Graham Rowbotham has the dubious privilege of being our oldest member. Graham emigrated from Britain to Vancouver 12 years ago and has climbed very widely all over the world, including ascents of Bhagirathi II in India and the first ascents of Sahan Sar and Khan Sar in Pakistan. Graham was also on Raksha Urai in 2001, climbed in Peru in 2002, was on Chukprisum with Thomas in 2003, made first ascents in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and climbed in Bolivia in 2007.



Jock Jeffrey is 46 and comes from Queenstown, New Zealand. He has a wealth of experience in New Zealand, including several ascents of Mount Cook and climbed in Bolivia in 1998 and Peru in 2002. In 1999 he made the second ascent of Kutshkulin Sar with Woods and Thomas and in 2000 was again with the pair during the successful climb of Uddin Zom. He also joined Rowbotham and Woods on Sahan Sar and Khan Sar in 2000.



Simon Woods from the UK is 40. He has led or been on seven Himalayan expeditions including Kutshkulin Sar with Jeffrey and Thomas in 1999, Uddin Zom with the same pair in 2000, Sahan Sar and Khan Sar with Rowbotham and Jeffrey in 2000 and was co-leader on Raksha Urai with Thomas and Rowbotham in 2001. He has also climbed several other peaks in Nepal and Bolivia.

Anglo-New Zealand Zartosh - 2009
Expedition Report

ITINERARY

28 July	Woods and Thomas arrive Dushanbe
30 July	Rowbotham and Jeffrey arrive Dushanbe
30 July – 3 August	Registration, shopping and hanging around, Dushanbe
4 – 7 August	Drive Dushanbe - Murghab
8 August	Arrive base camp
9 – 18 August	Acclimatisation and load carrying to glacier camp
19 – 25 August	Attempt Zartosh north face, climb White Pyramid Peak and 1 st ascent Zartosh
26 August	Base camp awaiting transport
27 – 31 August	Base camp to Dushanbe
1 – 6 September	Dushanbe, hanging around waiting for flights home
7 September	Rowbotham and Jeffery leave Dushanbe
8 September	Woods and Thomas leave Dushanbe
9 September	After days of flying and waiting in airports Jeffery finally makes it home!

AREA DESCRIPTION

The Golden Age of exploration in the Pamir was undoubtedly during the “Great Game” in the 19th and early 20th centuries. With the expansion of the Russian Empire southwards there was great concern in British India over Russian designs on India itself. This prompted both Russian and British (often using native Indians in disguise) to explore and map the strategic ridges, rivers and passes on the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountains.

It was not until the area had been completely annexed by Russia, and then Tajikistan became a Soviet Republic in the 1920s, that mountaineering became a serious option. Even then, and indeed, subsequently until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, activity was restricted to climbers from the Soviet Block or, rarely, invited guests.

The main thrust of mountaineering exploration was in the very highest mountains to the north on the border with Kyrgyzstan or those surrounding the Fedchenko Glacier. Some small scale expeditions by Soviets had explored some of the more remote areas and recorded significant ascents, but much of the Pamir up to 6500m remains unclimbed.

Zartosh lies in the Muzkol Range, just under 100km north east of Murghab, the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (a restricted area covering virtually the whole of eastern Tajikistan). Previous Soviet expeditions had climbed some mountains in the range, including the highest, Soviet Officer's Peak (6233m). However, until the mid-1990's there has been no expeditions to Zartosh or the immediate area.

In 1997 the Muzkol Range received a visit from EWP, an adventure travel and guiding company. They returned in 1998, 1999 and 2000 and made several ascents of the mountains surrounding Zartosh. They attempted Zartosh both by the north face in 1999 and also by the route from the col between Zartosh and White Pyramid Peak. More can be found on their website at <http://www.ewpnet.com/>.

MAPS

Maps of the area come from three sources. Firstly, for large scale route and area planning there is an excellent map produced by Marcus Hauser on a scale of 1:500000 which is available commercially. The second are the old Russian military maps, sections of which are now available for download from the internet. The relevant sheet for the Muzkol Range is J-43-51. Finally, there are sketch maps produced by the EWP teams that visited the area in the 1990s. (See Appendix 1 for more details.)

Perhaps the best source of maps and topographical detail available these days is Google Earth and Maps. Certainly, once we had pinpointed Zartosh as our objective we got remarkably detailed information on the surrounding topography from Google Earth, including a complete fly-by of the north face! It is worth, therefore, cross-referencing maps with Google Earth – you can almost climb the mountain from your own home!

Anglo-New Zealand Zartosh - 2009
Expedition Report



Panji River Gorge



Panji River Valley



Unknown Peak above Khorog



The "Happy Bus" Arrives at Base Camp



Base Camp



Between Base Camp and Moraine Camp

APPROACH ROUTE

The approach from Dushanbe took us over a pass to Kalai-a-Kum and then up the Panji River (Oxus) to Khorog. This took us along the border with Afghanistan, up the celebrated Pamir Highway. We then branched north up to the Pamir plateau, still following the Pamir Highway, to Murghab. From Murghab we transferred into a wonderful old Russian UAZ which looked like a VW Campervan on steroids. With a jacked up suspension and 4X4 this contraption took us all the way to base camp. The final stretch was up some fluvial moraine with no hint of a track. How the vehicle made it we will never know, but it meant that all we had to do was transfer our kit about 500m to a suitable spot for our tents.

Whilst it was a long drive (and, indeed, on the way out we took a longer detour to travel down the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan) it was a very civilised way to get to base camp and very quick – four days in total from Dushanbe to base camp (although we actually took an extra day in Khorog as Graham was sick). Considering how remote our base camp was it shows that the Pamir could be a very good objective for a shorter trip than ours.

ACCLIMATISATION

Having spent a day on 9 August establishing and organising base camp the fun and games started with the first load carry. As ever, this was a complete delight. We had camped further up the valley than the EWP expeditions had, which meant a shorter walk to the foot of Zartosh. We still had to get our gear up the moraines to the glacier and this meant a trudge from base camp to a moraine camp at 4500m. This took 5 hours of toil so we dumped our loads before heading back down to base camp. On 11 August Simon and Jock headed back up with another load, thinking that moraine camp would become an advanced base and we would all but abandon base camp. This did not happen, however, because it became clear that we could get from base camp to a higher glacier camp in one day once we were acclimatised.

On 12 August all four of us headed back up to moraine camp where we spent the night. The following day we took a load up to a glacier camp at 5110m. This was the same campsite used by the EWP groups when they attempted Zartosh. We went back to moraine camp that night before returning to glacier camp with all our gear the next day. Having time to make camp here, we explored a little and came upon the memorial to Ulf Carlsson who had died in a fall descending from high up on the north face of Zartosh in 1999. This acted as a grim reminder of the dangers of mountaineering for all of us and, in some ways played a big part in subsequent arrangements for the trip.

On 15 August, in wonderful weather, all four of us ascended Leopard's Tooth, an island peak in the middle of the glacier at 5470m. We followed in the footsteps of EWP by climbing the east flank and north ridge in 2 ½ hours. This was very straightforward, but gave us a taste of the rotten quality of the rock in the area. None of us had ever seen rock quite that friable before! We took a direct descent down the east face of Leopard's Tooth back to glacier camp.

The following day we returned to base camp for a rest, but as we descended the weather began to change. Up to this point we had experienced only sunshine and

blue skies every day. The only inconvenience was the wind, which, in time honoured fashion for the Pamir, blew up after midday and only abated at sunset. Above base camp we did not experience this, but base camp itself was miserable in the afternoons – a good incentive to be up high! However, on our return to base camp the weather changed for the worse. Each night saw a sprinkling of snow and whilst it was not too serious it was certainly inconvenient.

Due to the poor weather we decided to stay in base camp until 19 August, when we set out for the climb itself.

FIRST ATTEMPT

On 19 August we all set out for glacier camp. This meant a tough slog of 1240m from 3870m to 5110m past our previous moraine camp. We arrived to find that the north face of Zartosh had a good deal more snow on than before with some of the very steep run off lines looking quite well iced up. Whilst not on the menu for this trip some of these lines looked to be amazing and would test even the best.

After one night at glacier camp we headed up to camp at the foot of the north face at c.5300m. Despite being cold over night and the glacier being covered in snow there was still running water at this camp, helping hugely with fuel consumption. With both tents set up Adam and Simon went to have a look at the start of the north face while Graham and Jock reconnoitred the start of the route up to the col between Zartosh and White Pyramid Peak.

We had originally planned for all four of us to attempt the north face of Zartosh, but for various reasons Graham and Jock decided that they would, instead try a repeat of White Pyramid Peak, leaving Adam and Simon to concentrate on the face. The plan was to climb the following day, but after setting alarms for 3am, reasonably heavy snow fall kept us all in our beds!

This gave us a chance to rest and acclimatise for another day so we set the alarms again for 3am the next morning. This time the snow was much lighter so we headed off. Adam and Simon made very slow progress to the bergschrund due to deep, soft snow over steep, hard ice. It was never dangerous, but very precarious and really hard work as the snow was up to waist deep. They crossed the schrund and headed directly up the face, following the route taken in 1999 by the EWP expedition.

There was no let up from the conditions under foot and progress remained slow. As the face steepened, the climbing became even more precarious although good screw placements could be found deep beneath the snow. Adam climbed a particularly unconsolidated pitch on brittle ice under snow and, in places, bare rock covered in powder. The pitch steepened at the top, giving solid Scottish grade IV climbing, but on progressively better ice.

At this point the route climbed through a steep section onto a right slanting snow ramp. It was time to really commit, which, judging by the terrain and conditions would have meant at least one miserable night out, probably two, and steep, hard, unconsolidated climbing right to the summit. Being somewhat out of practice and with the memory of Ulf Carlsson lying below the pair decided that they were not up for it and descended.

Whilst the climbing looked superb, the challenge and commitment was a bit beyond them.

However, Graham and Jock were fairing better on White Pyramid Peak. They made steady progress up to the ridge leading to the col, getting high on the ridge as the sun came up. The going was particularly hard in deep snow and each step was a fight with the powder. To make matters more challenging, Jock was trying to regulate his type one diabetes and decide whether the feelings he was having were due to altitude or the effects of too much or too little sugar.

However, they persevered and eventually made it to the col in just under 5 hours. Just as they reached the col, Graham having walked confidently towards a patch of sunlight across perfectly safe looking snow, Jock managed to fall into a crevasse behind him. This was almost the last straw as the effort of extricating himself almost put Jock in a coma. Still, cussed and determined as he is and with Graham lying and telling him that it was only another 10 metres Jock soldiered on and they both reached the summit at 11.20am.

Graham and Jock got back to the tents well before Adam and Simon so had the pleasure of watching the latter abseiling off Abalokov Threads down the face.

At this point Simon decided that he did not want to try Zartosh again and he and Jock made the decision to return to base camp over the next two days. However, Adam was keen to try again, either by the north face or up to the col between Zartosh and White Pyramid Peak. Graham was not sure as he was justifiably tired from his ascent of White Pyramid Peak and the thought of breaking trail back up turned him off. However, the draw of the unclimbed Zartosh proved too much and he had got a very good view of the gully and face leading up to the west summit ridge of Zartosh and felt that there was a reasonable route.

Therefore, Adam and Graham went down with Jock and Simon to glacier camp where they picked up two more days food and returned to high camp with a view to climb Zartosh the following day.

THE CLIMB

On 24 August Graham and Adam set out from high camp at 5am on the long trudge through deep snow to the col between Zartosh and White Pyramid Peak. The initial slopes to the ridge were quite amenable and with Graham having been this way two days before, progress was rapid. A steep section of deep snow took them onto the ridge, still following footsteps from the previous ascent of White Pyramid Peak. The footsteps had been filled with spindrift, but were still visible and made a huge difference, much to Graham's delight.

After a steep haul up the final slopes to the col, the pair arrived there at 9am. The sun had hit the col, but the gully and open slopes leading to the summit ridge were still in the shade. The weather had finally sorted itself out though and the sky was once more an azure blue. Graham divested himself of his rucksack whilst Adam carried the essentials in his. Then Graham led off up the gully in deep powder and a temperature of -12°C. He reached the first rocks as the angle steepened to about 60° and placed an ice screw to protect the precarious climbing on loose snow covering hard ice.

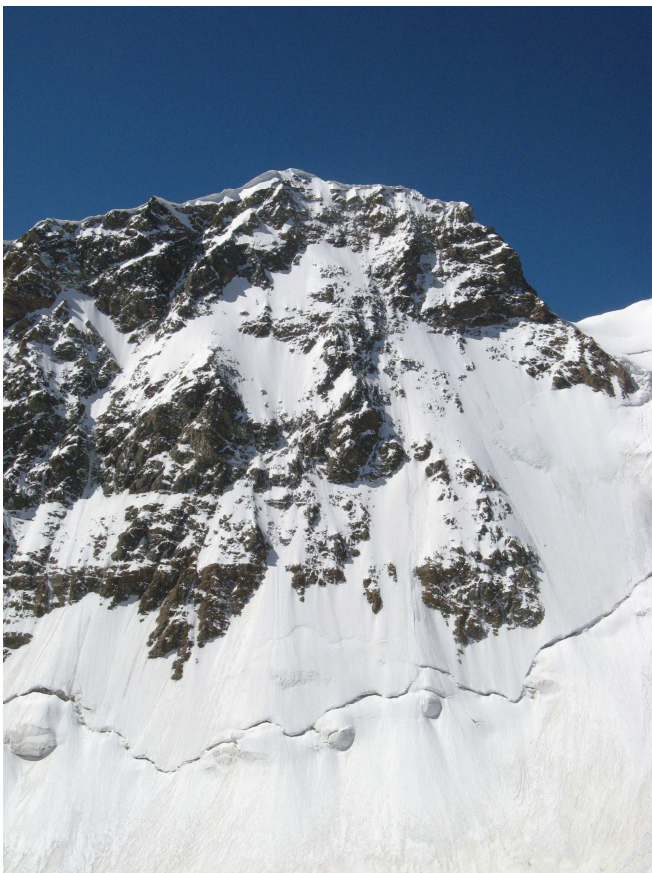
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Expedition Report



Above: North Face of Zartosh with White Pyramid Peak in Distance on Right and Leopard's Tooth on Extreme Right



Above: Graham on Summit of Leopard's Tooth



Below: North Face of Zartosh

Below: Memorial to Ulf Carlsson at Glacier Camp



Graham then led up a snow/ice gully to a rock step which was protected from below by a good nut. The rock step was technical and loose, but soon turned into easier angled snow which Graham followed to a good spike belay below a small rock wall.

Adam followed the pitch, before heading left up easy snow to the base of a very steep rock band barring the route to the summit ridge. This was the crux of the route because if there was no route through the rock band there was no way to the summit ridge.

Luckily there was a steep groove in the rock, protected by a sling. Adam pulled through this on poor placements and a few tricky moves further up the groove brought him to a good belay at a large boulder wedged in the groove. The angle then eased and a ramp line seemed to offer hope, albeit covered in very loose rock. Graham led up this and after a series of very precarious moves over the loose rock, arrived on the summit ridge. The fat lady began warming up.

The summit ridge was a perfect knife edge of snow, rising up with huge cornices over the north face and broken rock and snow to the south. Graham led off on a short rope with Adam close behind. After a series of small steps and steep, unconsolidated snow they reached the summit cornice at 1pm. They stayed on the summit itself only for photos as the cornice had a large crack in it and then managed 20 minutes on a rock just below the summit. The views were incredible, looking north and west to the Fedchenko hills and south to a sea of mainly unclimbed peaks. The potential for unexplored mountains looked enormous.

The decent was by the ascent route. Adam and Graham down climbed the summit ridge and the top pitch to the boulder belay. They then took four abseils on rock threads, spikes and Abalokov threads before they were able to down climb to the col. From there it was a straightforward descent to the tents.

The following day Adam and Graham packed up their camp and headed down, passing glacier camp and moraine camp and picking up gear all the way down. Jock and Simon had taken a good deal of kit before them which meant that the whole expedition managed to leave nothing behind at all, taking all their rubbish from base camp as well.

RETURN TO DUSHANBE

Whilst we had arranged for a pick up from base camp we had finished on the mountain earlier than we expected. Therefore we made use of the Thuraya satellite phone we had rented from the agent and called for the car a bit earlier. It arrived on 27 August and we headed back to Murghab that day.

With a bit of time to spare we returned via the Wakhan Corridor on the border with Afghanistan. The scenery was spectacular with views initially across the Pamir River into Afghanistan (passing a herd of wild Bactrian camels) and then across the Panji River when we reached the Corridor itself. The mountains of Afghanistan rose high and steep and we could see into Pakistan too. These mountains were explored and climbed extensively in the 1970s, but have seen precious little traffic since then. There must be huge scope for unclimbed lines. (For more information see Climb Mountain Info September 2009 www.climbmagazine.com). We followed the Panji River down to Khorog and then retraced our outward route to Dushanbe, arriving on 31 August.

Anglo-New Zealand Zartosh - 2009
Expedition Report



Above: Steep Ground on North Face –
Summit Cornice Above

Below: Looking Back Down
Summit Ridge



Above: Looking Across North Face with Eventual Route
Up Snow Tongue from Col on Right then Left Up Rocks
to Summit Cone

Below: Graham at 6000m Leading on Technical
Ground up Face Towards Summit Ridge



FORMALITIES AND AGENT DETAILS

We organised transport and registration for our trip with Hamsafar Travel in Dushanbe (www.hamsafartravel.com). Ruslan, the main man at Hamsafar was reliable once we got into the country, but was very difficult to pin down before we arrived. We ended up having to completely renegotiate our deal when we arrived. Dealing with Ruslan took up a lot of time before we departed so it was worth starting the planning early.

In terms of formalities getting a visa for Tajikistan depends on what country you live in. From the UK it was simply a matter of applying at the Embassy in London. For Graham and Jock (Canada and New Zealand) it was more complicated because they needed to get their visas on arrival at Dushanbe airport. For this to be possible you need a letter of invitation from inside the country which Hamsafar provided.

Once in the country you need a permit to travel to the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). From the UK you can get this at the Embassy with your visa, but for Graham and Jock this had to be done through Hamsafar in Dushanbe. We also needed to be registered with the police in Tajikistan because we intended to stay longer than 30 days. For shorter stays this is not necessary. Again, it was done through Hamsafar, but took three working days (excluding weekends) which delayed us a bit in Dushanbe.

There is also supposed to be a small peak registration fee for climbing in the Pamir, but we were never asked for this and never enquired too closely.

TRANSPORT

Simon and Adam made use of the newly started Air Baltic link from London Gatwick to Riga (Latvia) and then direct to Dushanbe. This was very straightforward, but being a bucket airline, Air Baltic were very strict about excess baggage and charged us 15 Euros per kilo for each leg of the journey.

Getting to Dushanbe from anywhere else is a bit of an epic. Graham came from Vancouver via Chicago and Istanbul and Jock flew pretty much everywhere to get there! He started in Queenstown in the South Island of New Zealand and arrived via Christchurch, Sydney, Bangkok, Dubai and Istanbul.

Transport in Tajikistan was arranged through Hamsafar Travel. We only needed one Landcruiser as we went pretty lightweight with no cook or camp guard. In Murghab we got our UAZ from META, an eco-tourism outfit set up by French NGO, Acted. META seems to rule the roost out east in terms of tourism logistics and they can be used direct from Dushanbe if preferred (meta@acted.org). They seemed pretty clued up although we had no direct dealings with them.

FOOD AND EQUIPMENT

We brought all of our equipment for the mountains from home and it seems that little or none is available in Tajikistan. We used petrol stoves throughout as gas is also unavailable. We used 95 octane petrol which burned really well and was very clean. We had no problems with the stoves at all, despite using them every day, including at base camp.

We brought Backcountry Cuisine dehydrated meals from New Zealand which, as ever were first rate. Backcountry very kindly gave us the food at cost price as a way of supporting the expedition, for which we are extremely grateful. Good, lightweight altitude food is not really available in Dushanbe, but everything else is. We bought lots of noodles, instant mashed potato, salami, cheese, chocolate etc, all of which was of western quality. Apart from dehydrated meals everything you could possibly need is available in Dushanbe.

ACCOUNTS

Income	£	Expenditure	£
MEF	1550	Flights/Excess baggage	5270
Flight/Insurance/Visas Thomas (Individual Contribution)	1000	Insurance	720
Flight/Insurance/Visas Woods (Individual Contribution)	1000	Agent fees (transport and sundries)	2240
Flight/Insurance/Visas Rowbotham (Individual Contribution)	1940	Food and other in-country costs	1860
Flight/Insurance/Visas Jeffrey (Individual Contribution)	1930	Visas and other bureaucracy	390
Individual Contribution x 4	765		
Total	10480	Total	10480

EXPEDITION RESEARCH AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

The starting premise for this expedition was that we wanted to go to Central Asia. Graham had previously been to Kyrgyzstan so Tajikistan seemed the obvious choice for somewhere new.

The research for Zartosh was done by Simon and Graham the latter coming across the EWP website. This seemed to indicate a wealth of mountains in the Muzkol Range that had been climbed and some that remained unclimbed. Zartosh appeared to be the jewel in the crown, which is why it was chosen. Graham contacted Andrew Wielochowski- from EWP who was most helpful in giving more information on the area. As ever with unclimbed mountains, finding them and information about them is often half the battle.

A study of the Himalayan Index from the Alpine Club and enquiries into the Russian Peak Classification Tables found no record of any attempt on Zartosh, let alone an ascent. Clearly EWP had tried the mountain, but from the lack of other evidence it seemed clear that Zartosh was unclimbed. Certainly, the lack of any evidence at the top of the mountain suggests that this was the case (Russian expeditions had a habit of leaving first ascent details at the summit in the Muzkol Range).

In terms of general information for travel, accommodation and general logistics in Tajikistan we used two books. First was the Lonely Planet Guide to Central Asia (2007) and the second was "Tajikistan and the High Pamirs: A Companion Guide" by Robert Middleton and Huw Thomas, published by Odyssey. The latter is very comprehensive and is a good read before or after travelling. However, it is heavy and therefore not a great choice to be travelling with, especially in light of the excess baggage problems noted earlier! Neither book has much detail about the Pamir area off the main highway.

THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The members of the expedition would especially like to thank the Mount Everest Foundation who, once again, lent their generous support to the tune of £1550. MEF support is invaluable for expeditions such as ours and is very much appreciated.

We would also like to thank Backcountry Cuisine who provided our supply of ready made dehydrated meals at cost price. Having tried many brands of such food, Backcountry always comes out on top. Why don't they distribute to Europe?!?

FURTHER INFORMATION

A downloadable version of this report, a number of photographs and details of many of our previous expeditions are available on our website at www.virginsummits.org. The webmaster is away at the time of publication of this report and the website may not be updated in the immediate future. Please check the site and if you experience any difficulties contact Adam at the details given at the end of this report.

The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that all or part of it may be copied for the purposes of private research.

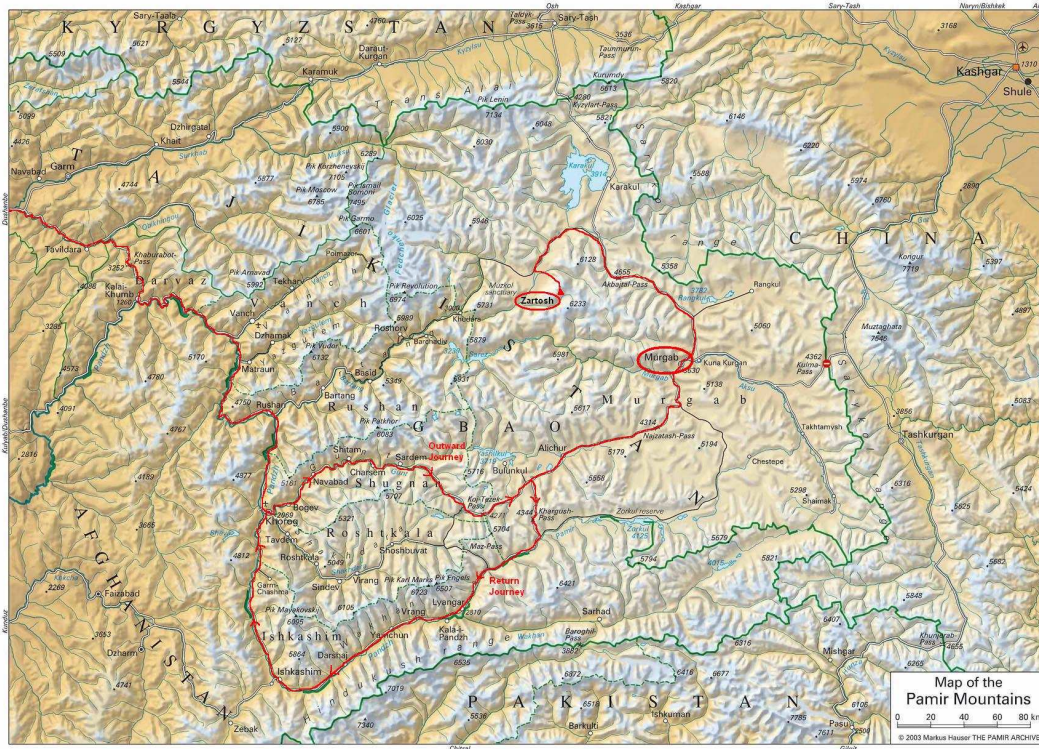
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Anglo-New Zealand Zartosh - 2009 Expedition Report

APPENDIX 1 – MAPS



Above: Marcus Hauser Map with Route

Below: EWP 1998 Sketch Map Extract

