



TAJIKISTAN EXPEDITION
2013
'THE SILK ROAD'

EXPEDITION REPORT
FOR
THE MOUNT EVEREST FOUNDATION



OVERVIEW

The aim of our expedition was to complete first-ascents of unclimbed peaks at around 5,000 metres in the mountain range surrounding the Rog / upper Zerafshan valley in central Tajikistan.

We sought:

- to complete first ascents of unclimbed peaks in the Rog valley, Tajikistan;
- to gather information on the area to allow others to identify potential objectives for future expeditions;
- to extend the mountaineering and expedition experience of all members;
- to inspire others to attempt similar expeditions;
- to drive from the UK to Tajikistan and back;
- to experience the culture of the area.

The area had seen only one previous expedition, in 2011, which made it a clean-slate for exploratory climbing activity. We aimed to take advantage of the unique mountainous geography; to climb strong lines and make challenging ridge traverses, targetting mixed and rock routes of predominantly moderate difficulty. In July and August 2013, following an overland journey of c.3,500 miles, we succeeded in our mountaineering objectives, summiting two new peaks and three points, ranging in height from 4,495 to 4,922 metres.



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1. PLANNING

1.1 TEAM

Our expedition team brought together individuals with a wide range of experiences and skills, all of which enabled the expedition to progress successfully.

Struan Chisholm – Expedition Leader / Driver – 21

A keen rock climber, Struan had on-sight soloed Monolith Slabs and led 'Flying Buttress Direct' (E1). He had spent a season in Chamonix roaming the Alps, climbing everything that caught his eye (up to D), and had also bagged some of North Africa's highest peaks. Struan had been winter mountaineering in the Sierra de Guardarrama and has Bushcraft / survival training. He had also walked the 350km Cape Wrath Trail and crossed Iceland on foot in 2012.

Calum Nicoll – Treasurer / Driver - 22

Calum had spent three seasons in the Alps, climbing many routes, including the 'Arete de Rabuin' (D), and the 'Frendo Spur' (D+). Calum had climbed Scottish winter routes up to grade V, and led an expedition through the High Atlas mountains in 2011. He planned and completed the first unsupported south-north crossing of Iceland (650km) on foot, along with other members of the team.

Theo Scott – Mechanic / Driver - 21

Theo had strong experience climbing in the Alps and had led several trips in the UK - to Snowdonia and in his local Lowland hills. In 2011, he undertook an 8,500-mile overland journey from the UK to Mongolia via Poland, Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on a 125cc motorbike. A mostly self-taught backyard mechanic with a sailing background, his mechanical skills were a great asset to the team on the drive to Tajikistan and back.

Leonhard Horstmeyer – Logistics / Driver - 24

Leo's main experience was as a skier and alpine climber. He had been mountaineering and ski mountaineering in Scotland, Switzerland, Germany, France, Norway and New Zealand for several years. He also enjoys white water kayaking, hiking and anything that takes him outdoors. Leo's enthusiasm and all-round fitness were a great match for the expedition objectives.

Max Jamilly – Translator / Driver - 21

Max had experience skiing for the Territorial Army and had led expeditions in Snowdonia, the Highlands, Tanzania and Malaysian Borneo. Max's proficiency in Russian was highly valuable to the team, as was his training as an emergency first responder.

Sam Newmark - UK Expedition Co-ordinator - 21

Sam had travelled to countries as diverse as Iceland, Morocco and China, and at the time of the expedition, had recently returned from leading an expedition to the Polish Tatra. Sam was unable to join the expedition team over summer 2013, so instead played a hugely important role in co-ordinating the expedition logistics and communications from the UK. Sam sent the team updates about the political, geographical and other developments in the varied regions the route passed through, and these were frequently used as planning tools.

In addition to this, all climbing members of the team were competent at general mountain skills including winter mountaineering, and were qualified in outdoor First Aid.



Struan, Max, Calum and Sam: winter training in the Cairngorms.

1.2 IDENTIFICATION

We identified an area of Tajikistan which would be a clean-slate for exploratory climbing activity, renowned for its vast scale and scenic beauty. There was potential for lots of mixed climbing as well as rock routes.

In the only known previous expedition to the area, in 2011, a Polish team approached the area from the north, and completed two first ascents, of which Pik Rog (5430m) was the highest. We contacted the expedition's leader, Leszek Darmochwal, and he provided us with a great deal of useful information about the area and its climate.

We were also in correspondence with several mountaineering guides and companies in Tajikistan, who told us that the area is largely unclimbed and they are not aware of any other expeditions to the region. Some among them drew our attention to the prevalence of large predators and certain poisonous species of viper in the mountains. We also noted that there were very few photos of the mountains from the south.

We intended for our base camp to be strategically positioned to allow us to access many peaks. We envisaged that in most cases it would be necessary to walk a day from base camp to the start of the climb and camp halfway, a main advantage being valuable reconnaissance opportunities. At the outset, we felt that a central base camp at lower altitude (approximately 2800m) would offer the best ease of access, and greatest flexibility. As many of the routes we hoped to attempt would be south-facing, we realised it may be necessary to start climbing extremely early to avoid sun exposure melting ice and causing rockfall. We intended to survey routes as much as possible the day before attempting them, i.e. on the walk in, to learn how they behave at various times of day and at different levels of sun intensity. We intended to evaluate the peaks on arrival and choose lines that were most appealing and in good condition.



Map of Tajikistan, showing the two mountain-access routes we took.

The southern red line leads from Dushanbe to Gharm, and north thereafter into the mountains to the encircled point (Base camp A, proposed). This access route was unsuccessful. The northern red line traces the Zerafshan valley to the east, and the encircled end of this line shows our final base camp location (Base camp B, actual).

1.3 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the expedition were:

- to complete first ascents of unclimbed peaks in the Rog valley, Tajikistan;
- to gather information on the area to allow others to identify potential objectives for future expeditions;
- to extend the mountaineering and expedition experience of all members;
- to inspire others to attempt similar expeditions;
- to drive from the UK to Tajikistan and back;
- To experience the culture of the area;
- To document plants / rocks for scientific purposes.

The ethos of the expedition was to aim to be minimalist: unsupported, and with minimal impact on the environment. We made every effort to be ethically and environmentally sound. By driving to Tajikistan, we were able to experience a diverse range of nations and cultures, but this choice was also motivated by the significant reduction in our carbon footprint by driving, rather than flying.



Our expedition vehicle in Georgia, September 2013.

1.4 TRAINING

Training was an integral part of our expedition planning, and was carried out as a team as well as individually. The fitness of all members was built upon through climbing, running and cycling in addition to several hikes in the mountains. A communal log of activity was kept to add a competitive aspect to individual fitness training.

We developed our winter mountaineering skills over the course of two mini-expeditions: to the Cairngorms in February in the midst of severe weather warnings; and to the French Alps in June (following one of the largest summer snow-falls in recent years). In the Cairngorms we climbed on fresh ice slopes in Glen Einich, and from a base in Chamonix we climbed around the Argentiere refuge. We honed our skills with winter climbing tools – practicing crevasse rescue, the use of ice screws and the creation of Abalakovs for abseiling. We also practiced first aid and conducted mock disasters in realistic settings, with real expedition medical equipment.



Picture taken during training expedition in the French Alps, June 2013.

2. JOURNEY

2.1 VEHICLE

We bought a 1995 Mitsubishi Shogun for the expedition, and spent a month testing it and enhancing its capabilities for the long journey ahead. This involved fitting a roofrack and sourcing a trailer; building a trailer lid; replacing springs, the battery and various internal connections; and putting the vehicle through its MOT. Serious ignition issues became evident as the car would only sometimes start, but as there was no ready solution to this, we developed our skills in push-starting so that this became standard practice on the journey.

2.2 ROUTE

The expedition took place over July, August and September 2013. Our schedule was flexible and allows for unexpected delays, for example at border crossings. The final route back to the UK differed substantially from that planned, due to Russian visa requirements changing while we were in Tajikistan (meaning that we had to travel back without entering Russia).



Full route map (figure of eight).

We kept a summarised log of days' events, which can be found in Appendix A. While the core report focuses on the mountaineering element of the expedition, this appendix gives extensive detail about every stage of the expedition, including the drive from the UK to Tajikistan and back.

2.3 LOGISTICS

Our logistics were delineated in terms of time by our visa dates; and in terms of finance by our expedition budget. Our numerous visa commence / expiry dates meant that we often had tight deadlines to meet in transit. We managed this by planning routes according to our timeframe, as well as driving continuously for long periods of time. Each team member would drive for 2 hours at a time, with a supporting partner navigating for 2 hours. This allowed almost continuous driving through countries where a deadline was pressing, and also allowed ample time for rest.

Our logistics were also managed financially, with the aim of minimising cost to the expedition, allowing contingency in case anything unforeseeable occurred. We minimised the driving distance between points wherever possible, to economise fuel, and re-fuelled strategically in lower-cost zones (such as Luxembourg on the return leg). We ate frugally while in high-cost economies including much of Europe, while stock-piling food in low-cost countries.

The challenging logistics of packing our vehicle were key to everyday comfort and good progress on the expedition. We had a full car, trailer and roof rack, and everything had to be packed and unpacked tidily and efficiently - for ease of access to food and car tools, and also to avoid damage to any items.

3. LOCATION

3.1 TAJIKISTAN

The Republic of Tajikistan is a land-locked country in the heart of Central Asia, surrounded by various countries which are arguably better-known, including China and Afghanistan. 93% of Tajikistan's surface area is covered by mountains, and the country is very elevated on average, with more than 50% of the landmass at 3,000m or higher. Our target area can be referred to in broader geographical terms as sitting within the Alay mountain range, in the north of the country. Tajikistan is a Muslim country but its culture has clear Russian influences, due to the country's time under Soviet rule. The spoken language is Tajik, and the official language is Russian.

3.2 MOUNTAIN ACCESS

The road quality in Tajikistan varied greatly, but with a 4x4 vehicle, access to the mountains was manageable. Many of the major roads, such as that connecting Dushanbe and Aini / Zerafshan, were of a very high quality but were also very exposed to enormous cliffs without separating barriers. Tunnels such as the Anzob Tunnel ('The Tunnel of Death', a 4km-long potholed, damp, unlit, terrifying excuse for a road) were unavoidable challenges reflecting the inconsistent quality of major infrastructure projects in Tajikistan. The further from population centres we travelled, the less developed the roads, and the final 100km or so towards the mountains were travelled on rough dirt tracks. The weight in our vehicle and the somewhat precarious set-up, including loaded trailer and roof rack, sometimes caused difficulty on the worst of the dirt tracks.

On a less tangible note, there were significant cultural contrasts between Dushanbe / other towns in Tajikistan, and the more remote farming communities which we visited on our way to the mountains. Many individuals in Dushanbe were referred to by fellow Tajiks as 'New Tajiks' – modern and eager to embrace typically western styles, norms and values. In the remote villages at the foothills of the mountains, people were conservative but friendly and incredibly hospitable. Among some, there was a general sentiment of nostalgia for bygone days under Soviet rule. We were frequently invited in to 'feast' with the men of these communities, and we trusted them with looking after our vehicle while we hiked into the mountains. The welcoming people made access to the mountains all the more easy.



Access to the mountains via dirt track, July 2013.

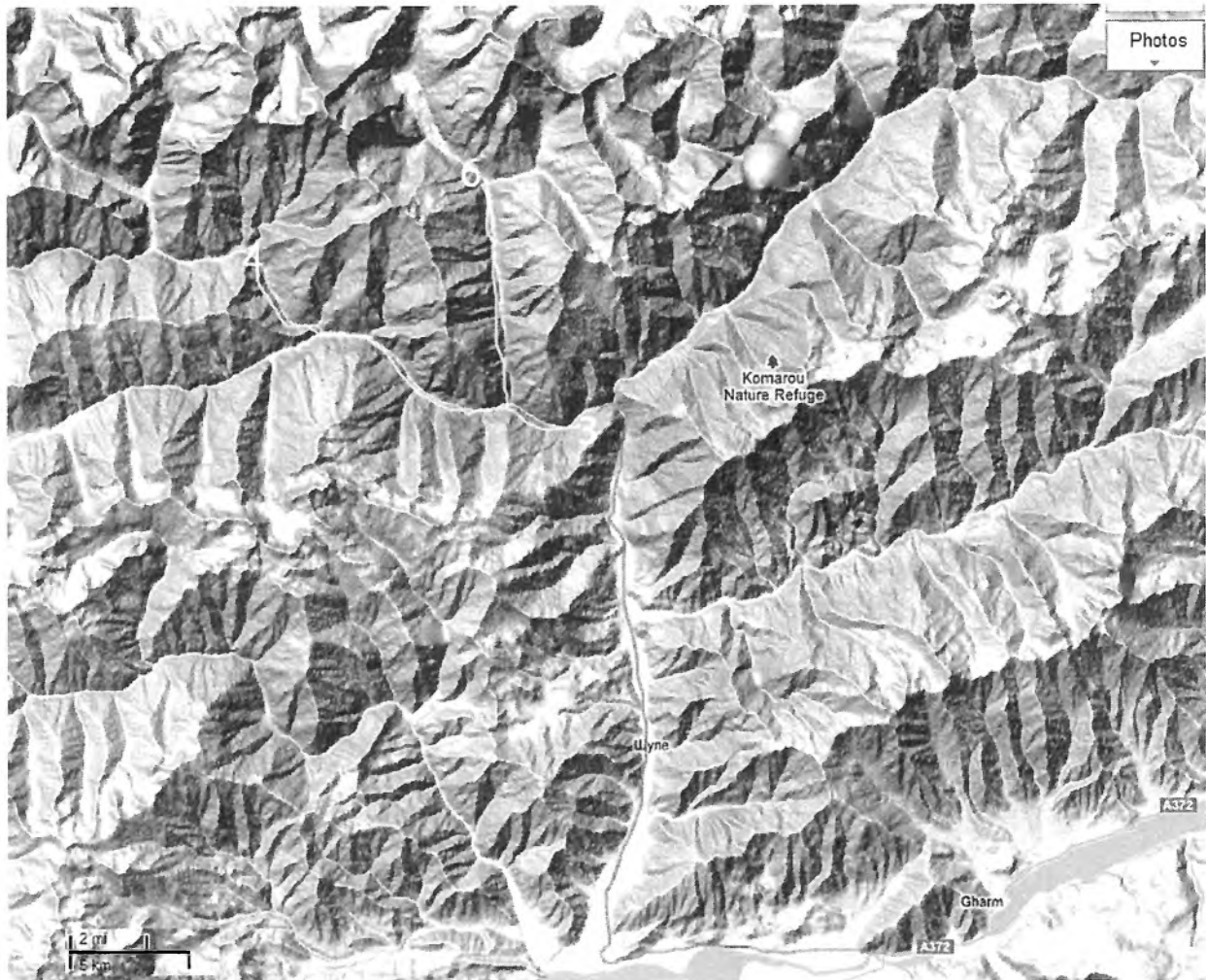
3.3 BASE CAMP A (PROPOSED)

The base camp we initially proposed lay in the lower reaches of a major glacier, north-west of a fork in the Kamorou valley, to the north-west of Gharm. We were unable to reach this base camp due to a number of set-backs which will be discussed.

While still in Dushanbe preparing for this first entry into the mountains, the serious political turmoil of the region in the recent past (2010) was brought to our attention by an ex-pat contact. We had been aware of an insurgent rebellion which took place in the Rasht valley close to Gharm, but had not realised how close this was to our target area. Events and politics in Tajikistan are poorly-documented by western media, and the best information was to be found in current academic journals. We were assured by local sources that government control had increased greatly since 2010; that there had been peace since; but we drove up the valley with caution nevertheless. At one point we saw two young boys on mules and carrying fishing rods, but we mistook these for rifles and hid.

The first setback was that in our planning of the route using Soviet maps and Google maps / 3D view, the road appeared to run all the way up the valley until a fork in the river (and possibly beyond it). However, when we drove north up this valley, we reached roughly two thirds of the way before the road gave way: on the west side of the river forest and landslides blocked the way, and then on the east side of the river large boulders from an apparently recent landslide blocked the way. We parked the car and proceeded to walk the additional distance with full packs, but the second barrier was that the bridge we intended to cross had been washed away. We had to divert and cross a different bridge further upstream (NE), which added more distance to the route. The river here was a raging torrent of water, and the path we followed above it was narrow, overgrown and exposed. We hiked for some five hours but covered very little distance due to the terrain. That afternoon, we decided that the maps had misled us, and that carrying additional loads on this access route would be too dangerous. We retreated towards the car, but upon stopping to rest, Struan's rucksack toppled from its resting place and fell down the slope into the river below. It was swept away in the spate, holding Struan's passport, visas, money, sleeping bag and all other possessions. A communal tent and (heartbreakingly) several kilos of salami were also lost. This dealt the expedition a devastating blow, as the team now had to travel back to the capital city with Struan (the passport-less political alien), dodging police checkpoints, in the hope of somehow re-equipping.

The result of the unfortunate 'bag incident' was that we returned to Dushanbe for emergency diplomatic support - for one long and stressful week - before diverting the expedition to an alternative target area, in a very similar mountain location (surrounding Pik Rog) but accessed from an entirely different direction.



Map of the road approach from Gharm.

Point 1 - The bridge crossing at Gharm.

Point 2 – Junction where we turned north into the 'Wyne' / Komarou valley.

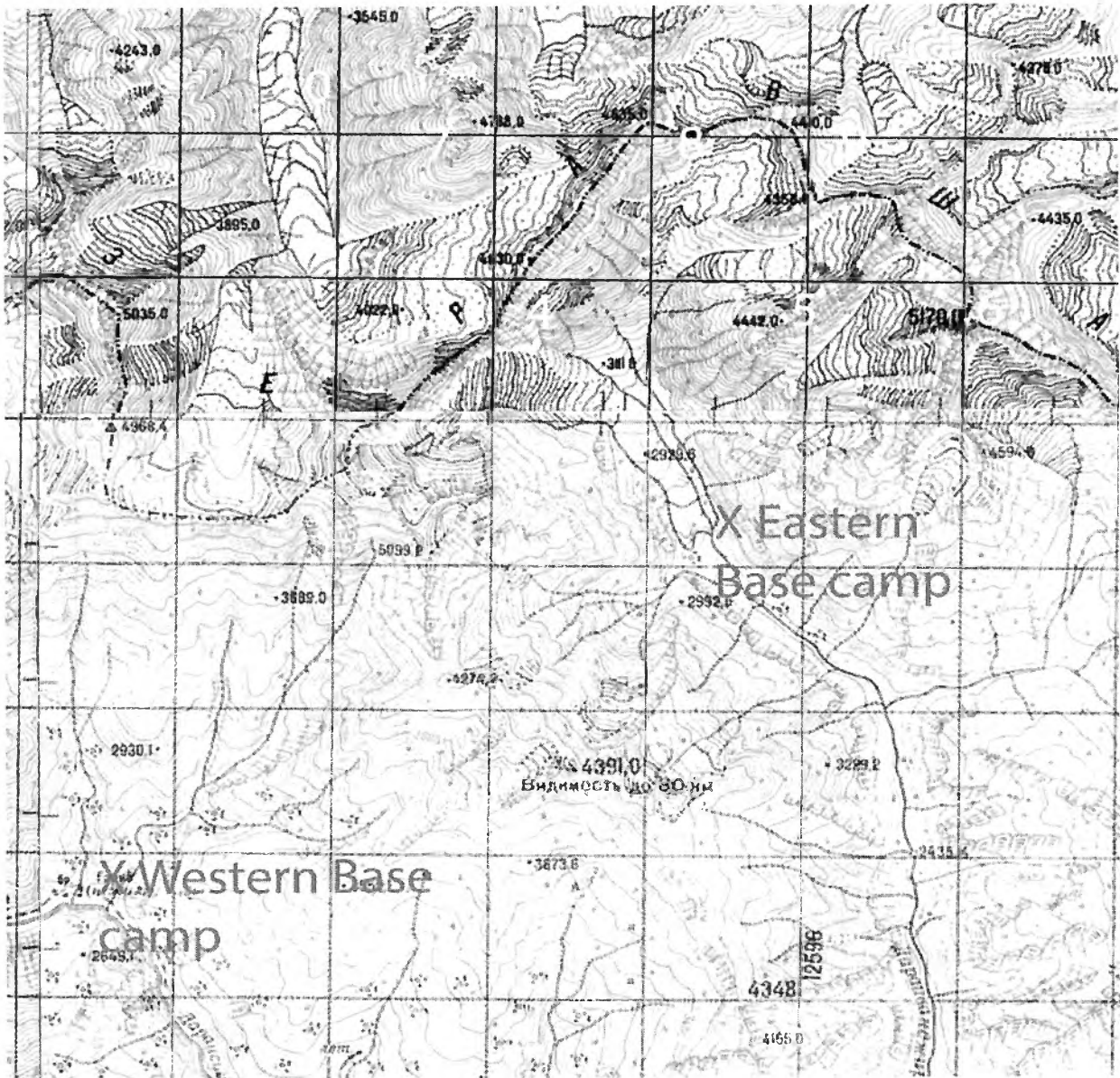
Point 3 - As far as the road apparently went up the valley, according to maps and Google maps.

Also the location of a bridge. In reality, we found the road to be blocked by landslides on either side of the valley, considerably to the south of Point 3.

Point 4 - Potential base camp for the eastern objectives.

Point 5 – Pik Rog (5430m).

Point 6 - Potential base camp for the western objectives.



Map of proposed objectives.

Peaks 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 - all unclimbed.

Peak 3 - Pik Rog (5430m).

Peak 2 – may have been climbed.

Point 10 - Rog Valley.



Reversing the vehicle after the road gave way to forest en route to 'Base camp A'. The other side of the valley was equally impenetrable due to landslides.

3.4 BASE CAMP B (ACTUAL)

After re-assessing our mountaineering objectives, we drove to the north of the country, to the Zerafshan valley. A contact who was studying in Dushanbe suggested this would be a good target area for mixed climbing, with the possibility of first-ascents in an area close to that originally proposed.

Our starting point was the remote village of Paldarok, c.100km east into the Zerafshan valley, accessed by following the Zerafshan River for a 15-hour drive along dirt track and crossing the river to the south. We organised our supplies in the village, and gathered vague information from locals about the topography of the mountains to the south. We were able to communicate in Russian, although the language was only spoken by some elders in the community, and even their Russian was not perfect. Tajik was the primary language, and no English was spoken by the locals. The

resident farmers were intrigued by our tools and objectives, but showed little interest in the mountains above and around them. They suggested that our ice axes “must be for finding gold” and also, regarding our proposed route, that “15 years ago people used to take cattle over the pass (...) but not since then”. We were greeted as the first 'tourists' / 'westerners' to the valley that year, and we were told that no mountaineers had been to the area in several years (the most recent may have been the Polish team earlier mentioned).

Experiencing Tajik hospitality in Paldarok, prior to ascending to base camp. July 2013.



The heat in the lower valley was extreme and even at this relatively low altitude, hydration had to be maintained carefully. All water drunk was purified. We walked due south from the village, on an exposed and elevated path above a gorge, on an increasing gradient for c.9km. We followed the lie of the valley (crossing challenging boulder / scree fields) to the south-east thereafter, and established an initial cache of supplies at c.3500m. As has been mentioned, at the outset we thought that a central base camp at a lower altitude (approximately 2800m) would offer the best ease of access, and greatest flexibility. However, the mountains we sought to target were not easily accessible from this height. Instead, we spent 3 days acclimatising up to this level, before

ascending very steeply over a boulder field and waterfall, and establishing a final base camp at c.4000m. Reaching this altitude was not difficult, but required 5 days of acclimatisation and several trips up carrying full loads of provisions.

The base camp consisted of our two tents, positioned next to a small glacial stream (which would flow through the day and cease due to freezing through the night), in the midst of a rocky plain beneath glaciers and corries. The site benefitted from a good outlook all around; in particular to the peaks we hoped to target. We constructed camp amenities including a fridge lined with ice, and latrines some distance away. Conditions at base camp were contrasting and testing – intense heat during the day, coupled with giant flies which irritated us constantly; followed by freezing cold as soon as the sun set.



Map of Base camp B, with Paldorok village labelled.

BC – Base camp

- 1 – Mount Christopher Ward (Peak 4,922m)
- 2 - Mullach Siseal Scott (Peak 4,492m)
- 3 - White Point (Point, 4,543m)
- 4 - Theonhard (Point, 4,787m) accessed via Hotel Ledore (Route)
- 5 - Planet of the Apes (Point, 4880m)



Base camp B (actual), with two of the most prominent glaciers behind / behind left. August 2013.

4. MOUNTAINS

We climbed in pairs and groups of three, for reasons of practicality, safety and back-up support at base camp. All our ascents were planned by pinpointing peaks visually and by map, and researching suitable routes by exploring at lower levels and using binoculars to look upwards / at a distance. Like the temperature at base camp, the climbing conditions were contrasting. The rock was of a remarkably poor quality – brittle like slate, piled high and deep so that walking was very difficult on steep slopes. The snow, however, was generally firm névé which was well-suited to climbing. Long walks to commence climbs were not necessary, due to the elevated and convenient location of our base camp. We were able to start climbs within 2 hours' walk of camp, and our longest climb was just under 20 hours (round trip).

We made ascents of two peaks and three points, ranging in height from 4,492m to a maximum height of 4,922m, and difficulties to TD (ice to 85%). We enchainned point 4,880m and peak 4,922m, and climbed the others in single-day pushes. The rock quality was exceptionally poor, and while one rock / shale peak was climbed, other attempts were made but only other snow peaks offered success. Ice was generally strong and took good abalakovs for descent. All of our climbs were completed within a period of 10 days.

Weather conditions were excellent, with a week of consistently good weather during our time at base camp. There were a couple of nights of heavy rain and wind, but these were rare throughout our journey (driving and mountaineering). For the most part, conditions were incredibly favourable. Summits of peaks were sometimes partially clouded (which forced us to turn back from one attempt at peak 4,922m), but most of the time the clouds were benign. Temperatures were amenable, with sufficient frost at 4000m to freeze the terrain fully until at least four hours after sunrise, fairly comparable to Alpine summer.

We found no records of these peaks and points having been reached by mountaineers in the past, and for all but one (*Mullach Siseal Scott*) access would have been inhibited by glaciers which required technical climbing tools. Names given below are for our own reference and enjoyment and for that of readers.

4.1 MOUNT CHRISTOPHER WARD (PEAK, 4922m)

Accessed via the main glacier. We walked east over the rocky glacial debris plain surrounding base camp, then south-east in a roped ascent of the glacier (smooth, with very few crevasses) on a gradually increasing gradient, to a plateau. Ice screws were placed at regular 30m intervals, and we climbed as a trio. Freezing, windy conditions were met upon reaching the upper plateau, but the intensity of the sun forced us to make fast progress in light of the softening snow. A bowl-shaped hollow in the snow was skirted and ascended, reaching a jutting rocky outcrop at c.4880m. From here there was a sharp descent of c.100m over rocks and scree, then a further steep (85%) staged ice slope which had to be climbed up to the summit at 4922m. The ice climb required regularly-spaced ice screws, and three abalakov abseils were used in descent. The route was exposed and intimidating, and only minutes were spent at the summit due to the increasing heat from the sun. The avalanche risk was minimal on the firm ice we ascended, but there was evidence of recent avalanche on the east-facing slopes.

4.2 MULLACH SISEAL SCOTT (PEAK, 4492m)

North-east from base camp over incredibly loose scree slopes of varying degrees of steepness. A challenging scramble along a ridge before a final steep 100m ascent to the summit. No man-made structures such as cairns were noted on the route or summit. There was excellent visibility in all directions, and this summit was also used as a survey opportunity for planning other ascents to the south of base camp.

4.3 THEONHARD (PEAK, 4787m) via HOTEL LEODORE (ROUE)

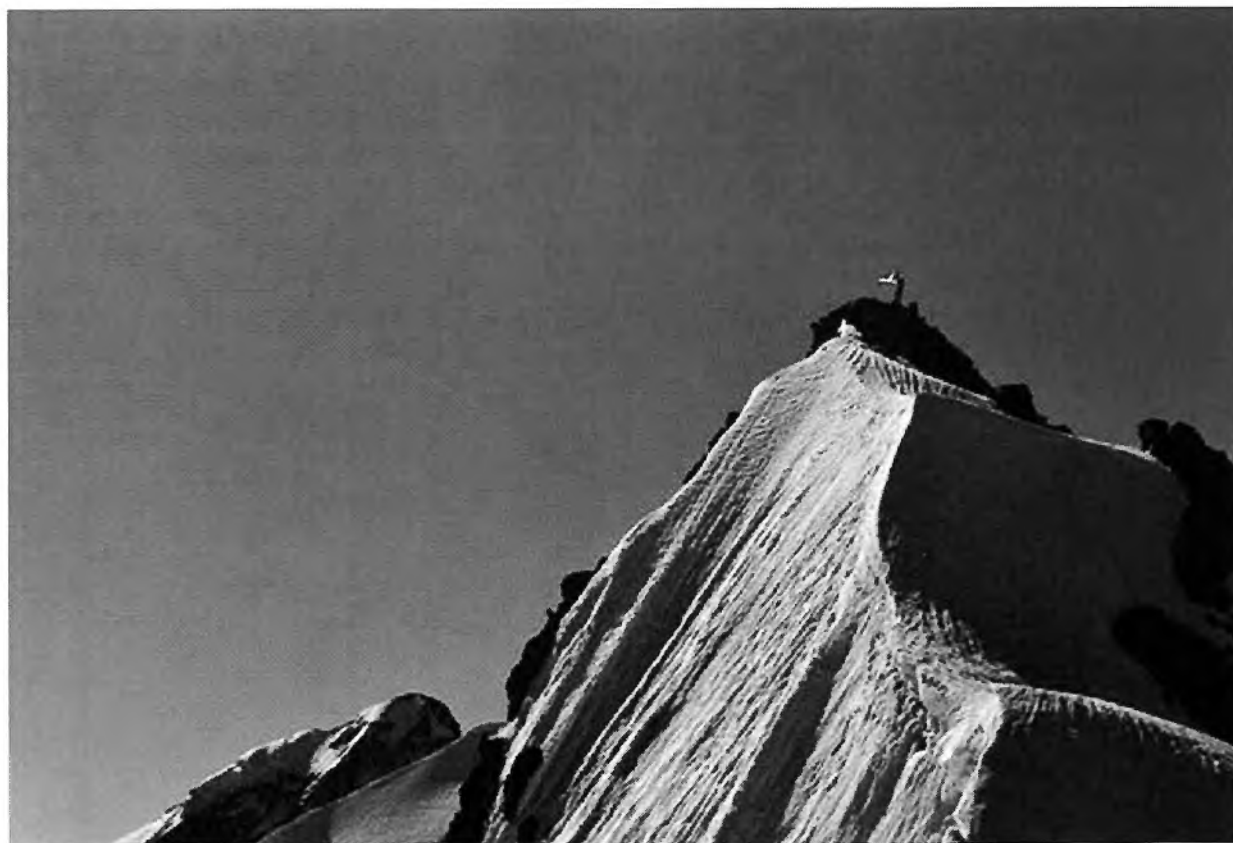
Peak accessed via glacier route, the same as for Mount Christopher Ward, but deviation to the east (left) at the ice plateau was followed by a scramble over exposed rock to the summit. Ropes were employed in all sections of this ascent. On the day in question, we sought to descend to the plateau and pursue further peaks (such as 4,922m) but cloud descended rapidly and a retreat to base camp was necessitated.

4.4 WHITE POINT (POINT, 4543m)

Prominent snow-capped point accessed via rock / scree route then by glacier to the south of base camp. The glacier and snow-cover extended much further than is shown in the map above. The rocky gulley used to access this point was very strenuous terrain due to the loose scree and subsequent inability to trust any hand-holds. Some of the snow on the glacial section was of a distinctly poorer quality to that of the eastern glacier / slope, but this may have been due in part to a later start and longer exposure to the sun.

4.5 PLANET OF THE APES (POINT, 4880m)

This point was reached en route to Mount Christopher Ward (4922m). It was a jutting, rocky outcrop on a ridge, with a significant descent beyond it, which led directly to the ice climbs previously mentioned. There were obvious cornices on the east side of this point which we were careful to avoid.



View from Planet of the Apes to the summit of Mount Christopher Ward. Saltire flying at the summit. August 2013.



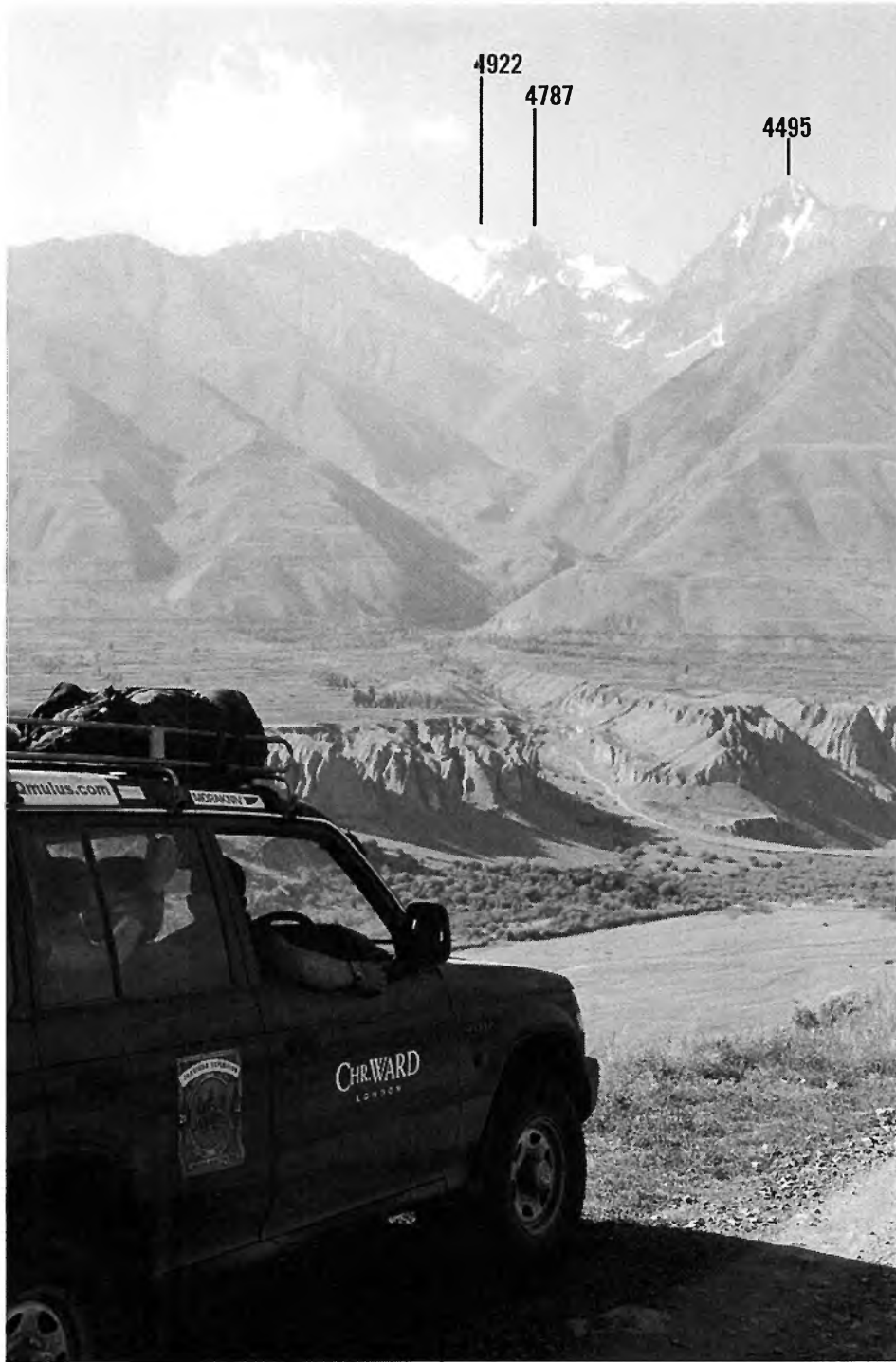
View from Mullach Siseal Scott towards Theonhard and Mount Christopher Ward. August 2013.



Theo and Struan c.100m below the summit of Mount Christopher Ward. August 2013.



Glacier walking, approach to Theonhard via Hotel Leodore. August 2013.



*View from the lower Zerafshan valley, showing two peaks and one point climbed.
(Right to left: Mount Christopher Ward, Theonhard, Mullach Siseal Scott)*

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful for the generous support of the Mount Everest Foundation – the funding provided was invaluable in enabling the expedition to succeed. Our thanks also go to the following organisations, whose valuable input helped us greatly, both in the planning stage and during the expedition itself.

- The Mount Everest Foundation
- The Captain Scott Society
- The BMC
- The Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust
- Christopher Ward (London) Ltd.
- Buff (Buffwear UK)
- Aquapac Ltd.
- Hultafors Group
- Snickers Workwear
- Getmie Safe Ltd.
- PICT Nets
- Thomas Tunnock Ltd.
- Alpkit
- GeoBar
- Morakniv
- Tilley Endurables Ltd.
- Qmulus Ltd.
- Buck Knives

In addition, we are indebted to the people who helped in planning, and 'in the field' throughout the expedition:

- Dilshod Fathullo
- Cengiz Buyukuncu
- Janice Setser

- Bakhtiyor Abdulhamidov
- Edward Lemon
- Jonathan Andrew
- Lindsay Griffin
- Mark Beaumont

APPENDIX A – ROUTE LOG / DIARY

Journey to Tajikistan

2nd July – The 'Inverness Contingent' travel to London, meeting the others and the vehicle in London. Some mechanical issues with the flywheel are faced but these are minor and are managed for the rest of the expedition.

4th July – Drive to Germany, crossing English Channel via Dover – Calais ferry. Good progress is made. The trailer wheel bearing on one side has a little too much play, so we stop at a garage and restock / fix. Camped in layby in Black Forest.

5th July – Drive to Poland. Very heavy rain means we decide to push on and drive though the night, when it becomes drier. Camped in trucker's layby.

6th July – Drive to Ukraine. Crossing the border takes 3 hours due to queues and a new focus on stamps / paperwork, but we have a picnic. Thunder storm. We attempt a short-cut on a 100km road rather than 300km of motorway – said road rapidly turns into a potholed dirt track and progress is slow, but still ahead of schedule. First police stops but we escape after some talk / gifting biscuits and 2 pence pieces.

8th July – Enter Russia. Ukraine / Russia border crossing takes 5 hours, border guards friendly. Stopped promptly by police to check for insurance, which we have. Excellent roads and progress.

10th July – Enter Kazakhstan in darkness. Border is slow and we are surrounded by black market money exchangers. Large 'no-man's-land' entering the country. The trailer lid comes off on extremely poor roads, and we hammer it back into shape. Very challenging driving conditions with severe potholes in tarmac. Lots of camels in desert terrain. Dinner in roadside diner and we hear that the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan is early this year and severe diesel shortages are expected – we had been informed of this but did not expect it to be a problem.

11th July – Beyneu, Kazakhstan. No sleep overnight due to insects. Re-packing car (mess). We fill all jerrycans (40L) with diesel, giving us a range of about 500 miles into Uzbekistan with enough to

return to Kazakhstan if no fuel. There is a sandstorm which makes visibility very poor.

12th July – Enter Uzbekistan. The Kulsary border crossing is excellent – very poor roads on Kazakh side, but we are immediately fast tracked as 'international athletes' after chatting to the Uzbek guards about English Premiership football – would recommend all expeditions in the area know names of several players from Man United, City, Arsenal and Chelsea, and mention them as quickly as possible to guards. Border still takes several hours. There is a challenging moment after searching the car they discover water purifying tablets, but we manage to explain these away with some difficulty with Max translating. Guard was also convinced 'Extra' chewing gum was 'narcotics'.

13th July - We manage to source diesel on the black market by going to the most expensive hotel in Nukus (first large town), recommended by a man at the border. A very kind guy insists on taking us, gets us to the diesel district, and refuses to take any money – we buy diesel for approximately £1/litre. The quality is reasonable, with no visible impurities, but we still filter it and are very wary to avoid sand in the fuel. We later stumble into a fuel station in the Azeri area of Nukus and this has diesel, and we are told they will sell to us as we are *not* Uzbeks.

14th July - We drive to Bukhara and spend the night in a roasting central dormitory. The food is good but car parking is difficult. Theo reveals he can speak Japanese when we meet a lone Japanese tourist.

15th July - We reach Samarquand and explore briefly, but then continue south and reach the Tajik border after travelling via Termez, near the Afghan border. The road is in construction, dusty, and very hot. To the south (towards Afghanistan) we see a barren and vast desert. We learnt from locals in Samarquand that the Panjakent border is now closed to non-Uzbeks. This is a substantial detour.

16th July – We cross the Uzbek side of the Tursunzode border very easily with friendly guards. Entering Tajikistan is more difficult as they make up a rule about not being allowed to import cars for more than a week. They invent a \$100 fee (not written anywhere), which we refuse to pay. We set up camp as a protest and prepare to sleep. They eventually give in at 10pm and escort us to the

customs building after someone is sent to pick us up from the capital city, Dushanbe. We sleep there in customs' car park and are assured that all will be sorted in the morning. In the morning, nothing is solved and guards just make excuses, we give up trying and drive off.

17th July – Rough roads, horrendous. We reach Dushanbe and pick up Leonhard who has flown out (he could not get his last visas in time). We find accommodation and sightsee, but there is not much to see in Dushanbe. We see the world's tallest flagpole. We meet Ed Lemon who is an English student studying the political situation in Tajikistan, who gives us useful information about the region we plan to visit.

18th July – We buy mountain food in Dushanbe. The little food that will be in Tajik supermarkets is poor quality and out of date, and at least as expensive as UK prices. Disheartening.

Arrival in the mountains

19th July – We drive to Gharm (minor town) along a very picturesque road which is challenging in places but generally good quality. We visit the American Institute in Gharm which is a US-funded Internet café and library which seems under-used, the staff and locals are very friendly and helpful. It seems no-one has ever gone north of the town, perhaps a hangover from when the area was more volatile. We ask a passer-by for 'Janice' (contact) and are immediately led to a lady who is incredibly helpful with suggestions about the surrounding mountains and how to access them. We drive north on the east side of the valley (Vahksh / Kamarou, NW of Gharm), then cross an excellent bridge, and pass several unmanned abandoned military checkpoints. We camp overnight.

20th July - Continue driving north on the west bank of the river, and the road becomes worse and worse until it descends into a jungle, with clearly not much traffic. It is then blocked by a landslide which appears to have happened some time ago. As we are still 30km from the mountains, we decide to try the east side of the valley. We drive north up the east side, going slightly further, before this too is blocked by landslides which are much fresher. Vehicle tracks are visible suggesting someone has successfully driven through earlier in the year. We meet some fisherman who are happy to watch our parked car, and we go for our first approach attempt. We walk 10km up the road past numerous landslides. The first three bridges are all washed away, but the fourth is valid although blocked with thorns and wire. We follow a vague track, probably worn into shape

by goats. This soon descends into almost nothing, on very steep loose scree with thorns, above a steep gorge. We realise this is very serious terrain and decide to abandon the attempt. Max has a minor slip and sustains cuts to his thigh, but only minor and Calum patches them up.

Major setback: the loss of Struan's Rucksack

20th July - We decide to sleep as it is getting dark. Struan puts his rucsac down for a moment, but we then see it roll off the ledge and fall 100m into the river below. Recovery is impossible, especially in the limited light, and we sleep after the upsetting loss of a lot of gear and paperwork which Struan was carrying due to the slight risk of theft from the car.

Items lost included:

- 1 x sleeping bag
- 1 x pair of boots
- 1 x tent
- 1 x GPS
- All Struan's technical clothing
- \$200 in cash
- Struan's passport.
- Struan's mobile phone
- V5 vehicle registration document
- Expedition food

The lost documents are a particularly pressing issue, as the expedition vehicle is registered in Struan's name, and Struan can no longer cross land borders due to lost visas.

(We would later consider rolling the vehicle off a cliff to surmount the enormous bureaucratic barriers to driving it back to the UK without its registered owner).

21st July - We discover several venomous Echis snakes, sun-bathing in the undergrowth, and are careful to make noise and poke the ground with sticks to allow them time to get away. After a difficult walk back to the car, we drive all day and return to Dushanbe. We avoid police check

points on the way by driving slightly beyond the police before stopping (police are too lazy to walk to us and check) and also by hiding Struan (no passport) in the car. The British Embassy is closed.

22nd July – Struan visits the British Embassy. No progress except emergency passport application. Struan will be forced to fly home immediately. Heat is intense, spirits are down. We find accommodation on Pushkin Street, on the floor of a hospitable German researcher (12th storey apartment).

23rd July – Glimmers of solutions appear, but are abruptly crushed by bureaucratic barriers. Struan persuades embassy to allow him a Tajik visa application on the emergency passport, to stay for a month. Theo and Max visit the embassy and discuss car ownership. No easy solutions emerge.

24th July - We are introduced to Bakhtiyor, a highly competent Tajik lawyer and advisor to the British Embassy. He offers his help at no charge (mentions accommodation in London at some point!), and we are immensely grateful. We spend hours in the frantic Dushanbe Notary Public office, but the Notary Public refuses to transfer the vehicle into Theo's name.

25th July – Strong progress as Notary Public is off sick and replacement Notary Public issues document verifying Theo as owner of our car. We pay for a translation into Russian, a Tajik stamp and a second stamp from the British Embassy. The arrangement will only stand in Tajik law, but we commit to attempt to drive back to the UK with the car. Struan engaged all day with visa formalities. Leo and Calum plan alternative mountain routes with Ed Lemon. Dinner outside the Opera, of Shaslik and fresh vegetables.

26th July – Struan receives emergency fast-track visa for Tajikistan, through sheer luck. Everyone is verging on mutiny up until this point due to heat and frustration. Lunch with Bakhtiyor and later we celebrate by driving out of Dushanbe, heading north towards the Zerafshan valley, delighted.

27th July – Drive from roadside campsite (western Zerafshan / near Aini) all day east towards Rog / Paldarok. The road is entirely dirt track / sand but with steady traffic of large vehicles going between sprawling farming villages. Terrain is breathtaking – dry, dusty mountains above and lush green fields in patches around us, and bright trees jutting upwards. Women turn away when we

drive past, but men and boys wave and raise their right hands to their chests in greeting. We enjoy two tea and bread stops with Tajik hosts. By sunset we reach a bridge across the river (south) and end up ascending steeply into the narrow chicken-swarmed alleys of a village, Paldarok. In the darkness of the village, a crowd of men surrounds us, before we are invited in to have dinner and stay with a host, Rajab, in a heavily carpeted room. The food is delicious and elders visit to speak to Max in Russian, examining our maps.

28th July – We arrange our gear and ascend on cattle paths to the south. Sun is burning hot, rests taken in any available shade when possible. We pass one remote inhabited sheiling, and reach 3500m with full packs and unload, making a cache. We are mistaken for gold prospectors and frowned upon by a farmer, but Max explains. Altitude effects are noticeable from 3000m, and we bivvy for the night much lower, close to Paldarok c. 2700m.

29th July – Acclimatisation continues with the team camped at two locations. Struan and Calum camped at 3100m. Theo staying with Max and Leo who are resting in Paldarok due to stomach upsets. Two full loads carried up to 3600m cache today.

30th July – Base camp established at c.4000m.

1st - 9th August – Mountaineering. Rest days interspersed with climbing days with very early starts. We receive regular weather updates for the area from Sam in the UK, and the conditions are consistently good. Flies are horrific! The topics of conversation at base camp are mountains and food (mostly food), and everyone is craving fresh fruit juice. How did we manage to choose such flavourless items as expedition food? Deep-frying dough is an absolute highlight of rest days. We only encounter other humans once – a couple of men with ancient muskets, hunting goats. We summit two peaks and three points; amazing climbs and amazing views.

9th August - We reach the village of Paldarok just in time for the end of Ramadan and the feast of Eid. A goat is killed in Rajab's courtyard and a delicious stew is made. We spend a day recovering and feasting with numerous villagers, then thank our hosts for the wonderful hospitality (leaving gifts of some climbing gear which intrigued them) and drive down the valley.

10th August - We reach Isteravshan, intending only to re-fuel, however we are invited to a wedding and have a great time. We contact Dilshod (a friend in Dushanbe, originally from Isteravshan), and he puts us in touch with Mannu, a real gentleman. Mannu finds us a place to sleep beside a swimming pool / Hamman, where old men eat together daily. Some of us swim a little, but Theo and Calum feel unwell and spend most of the time on medication trying to sleep.

11th August - Leo and Struan return to Dushanbe, hitching a lift in a car which breaks down a frighteningly short distance after having passed through the 'Tunnel of Death'. Their visas are set to expire and land borders are a no-go for both. Struan flies to Frankfurt and then to UK. Leo flies to St Petersburg and then to Germany. The team (now 3) continue in the Shogun towards Kyrgyzstan, hoping that questionable paperwork and charm will get us through the next few borders.

14th August - We drive through north Tajikistan and into Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. We have a serious problem as the Russians now refuse to issue visas in Central Asia after a sudden change in policy. As a result, we are trapped. Our route plan home is shelved by necessity. We are forced to make new plans, and decide to get Azeri visas in Bishkek, and then take a ferry across the Caspian Sea. Waiting takes almost two weeks, during which we drive around Lake Issyk-Kul, where we narrowly avoid an outbreak of the Black Death caused by a boy eating a marmot.

28th August - We finally get our visas and cross into Kazakhstan. We are treated like radioactive hazards at the border due to the plague outbreak (luckily no symptoms showing). Some mechanical issues are experienced but we fix them. We have an excellent dinner in a local's house after being invited in, as he thinks we are bear hunters.

2nd September - Driving across Kazakhstan takes approximately 5 days including a 60-hour gruelling, continuous stint. This is a race against our visas expiring.

3rd September - We arrive at the ferry port to find a ferry is leaving imminently. We get onboard across the Caspian Sea (3 days, one of which we are just waiting outside the harbour for a berth).

6th September – Upon arrival in Azerbaijan, we are assailed by the Azeri customs who spring a

\$400 (USD) fine on us. This is allegedly for the ticket, although we had bought a ticket at the other side. Despite being assured that this 'ticket' was all we needed on the Kazakhstan side, it is apparently only the ticket *to board* the ferry. Disembarking requires another. A considerable argument ensues, culminating in the very unpleasant Azeri ticket woman ripping up our ticket and saying "Now I call police". The police are accommodating, but the charge is imposed (sickeningly) before we eventually escape.

7th - 13th September - We stay in Baku (couchsurfing) and visit some interesting mud volcanoes. We then cross into Georgia and have an excellent time exploring the vineyards and eating hundreds of figs and cheesy breads.

14th September - We cross into Turkey, bemoaning the high price of diesel (£1.40+ per litre).

15th September - We drive across the country in hurricane-force winds, eventually reaching Istanbul.

17th September - Struan re-joins team in Turkey, having flown from London. Essential to have the car owner present to 'import the expedition' back into Europe. Border scrutiny of paperwork has been minor so far, but we anticipate severe difficulties getting the car back into the EU without Struan and his new passport.

19th - 27th September - We cross into Greece and then drive via the beautiful, swerving coastline roads of Albania, Montenegro and Croatia, where we fish and eat lots of Pomegranites. We camp on the way, with farmers at the pomegranate harvest, and on the baches in Croatia. We drive through Slovenia, Austria (on immaculate motorways), Germany, Luxembourg (to stock-pile diesel), and France and then cross the English Channel.

28th September - We drop Max in London, and have a final night bivvied on the grass in a field near Stafford on the way to Scotland.

29th September – Theo is delivered home to Castle Douglas, and Struan and Calum to Inverness.

APPENDIX B – KIT LIST

VEHICLE	Q	CLIMBING / GENERAL	Q	MEDICINES	Q
Jerry cans	2	Helmet	5	Deet repellent spray	1
Oil (canister)	1	Harness	5	Bear spray 50ml	2
Radiator fluid	1	Ice axe	8	Midge net	5
Antifreeze	1	Crampons (pair)	5	Tick removers	1
Tyre pump (manual)	1	Prussics	7	300mg Aspirin tablets	100
Car Jack	1	Krab	40	500mg Paracetamol tablets	150
Spare tyres	1	Belay plate	5	400mg Ibuprofen tablets	200
Sponge	2	Ropes	4	Diamox (acetazolamide) 250mg tab	40
Breathaliser	1	File (to sharpen cramps/ice axes)	1	Dexamethasone 8mg/2ml	8
Hi-vis vest	1	Avalanche rescue equipment	2	Nifedipine 20mg slow release	10
Spare sets of keys	1	Rack	1	Sun cream (fact 30) 200ml	5
Spare lightbulbs	2	Abseil kit / tat etc.	2	After-sun cream 200ml	2
Copper wire coil	1	Goggles (glacier / snow)	5	Tramadol 50mg tab	30
Cable ties	6	Cold weather sleeping bag	6	Tramadol 100mg / 2ml ampule	10
Jump leads (set)	2	Carry mats	6	Ciprofloxacin 500mg tabs	30
Towels / rags	4	Head torch	5	Amoxicillin 250mg tabs	30
Windscreen scraper	1	Spare batteries	20	Metronidazole 400mg tabs	42
Fuel Filter	1	Bivi bag	5	Flucloxacillin 250mg tab	48
Set bolts / spanners	1	Rucksack (small)	5	Augmentin 375mg tablets	15
Steel wire coil	1	Rucksack (big)	5	Clarithromycin 500mg tabs	7
Tow rope	1	Mobile phone + charger	5	Miconazole 2% cream	1
Snow shovel	1	Books / cards	5	Chloramphenicol eye ointment	1
Lube oil (3/1)	1	Clothes washing liquid	1	Loperamide (imodium) 2mg tablets	100
Pliers	1	Tents (2 / 3 man)	3	Prochlorperazine 12.5mg / 1ml ampule	5
Hammer	1	Spare tent pegs	15	Prochlorperazine 3mg buccal tablets	60
Fuelling nozzle	1	Satellite phone	2	Antacid tablets	10
Length of pipe (import)	1	Water purification system	1	Cetirazine 10mg tabs	40
Grip hessian sacks	2	Repair Araldite + grip tape	1	Hydrocortisone 1% cream	1
Piece of soldering wire	10	Superglue	3	Amethocaine eye drops	5
Wood planks (spread)	4	Duct tape	2	Haemorrhoid cream	1
Tire bead lube	1	Tent repair fabric offcut	1	Suckable sweets for sore throats etc. (pack)	5
GB sticker	1	Spare guys / nylon cord	5	Dental Repair kit	1
		Survival bags	2	Bandages (as per exped kit)	
		Mittens (pairs)	5	Sam splint	1
		Bufs	5	safety pins	20
		Camera + kit	2	Sutures + forceps	1
				local anaesthetic for suturing.	
				2ml Syringes	20
				20g 2 inch needles	40
				Rubber gloves	20
				Dressings	20
				Cellox	
				Wipes to sterilise	30
				Hand steriliser	2
				Pocket mask	1
				Belt (e.g for broken pelvis / toumequet)	1
				Steri-strips	40
				Zinc oxide tape	3
				Blister plasters	40

NAVIGATION	Q	CATERING	Q	PAPERWORK	Q p/person
GPS	1	Multifuel stove	2	Passport	1
Maps, printed	5	Stove repair kit	1	Passport copies	2
Maps, digital	5	Gas stove	2	Visa copies	2
Compass	5	Gas (backup)	5	Passport photos	6
Road Atlas	2	Pot holders	2	Driving license	1
Binoculars	1	Bowls	3	Driving licence copies	2
Route plan	1	Pots	3	Scotland postcards (gifts)	10
		Spoon	5	Emergency contacts sheet	2
		Petrol 1L	4	Tajikistan contacts sheet	2
		Knife	3	Insurance documents	1
		Windshield	2	Insurance doc copies	2
				Letter of purpose	1

APPENDIX C – FINANCIAL STATEMENT

The expedition was operated on a disciplined budget, but this was overrun due to the high costs of vehicle maintenance and fuel, as well as a number of unforeseeable expenditures and emergency costs. Using a benchmark figure of £7,750 in personal contributions to cover personal overheads, the expedition can be seen to have broken even.

	Detail	Debit	Credit
INCOME			
Income (grants etc.)		£9,800.00	
CAR			
Mitsubishi Shogun			£2,800.00
Vehicle MOT			£55.00
Road tax (UK)			£123.00
Roof rack			£150.00
Car insurance	For 5 team members (EU)		£1,200.00
Car insurance	International		£200.00
Diesel (c.15,800 miles)	Reliable estimate based on average fuel cost		£2,600.00
Breathaliser	EU regulation		£4.00
Trailer			£160.00
Jack			£10.00
Tyre pump			£12.50
Ratchet straps			£8.00
Cables			£3.00
Bearings	Germany / fix		£24.00
Tyre (replacement in Kazakhstan)			£60.00
Day insurance	UK purchase transit x 2		£79.00
Europe Atlas			£7.67
100 A fuses			£10.00
Alternator			£90.00
Springs			£25.60
Springs			£87.60
Wheel balancing	Labour		£20.00
Battery	New / replacement		£90.00
Mechanic	Labour / repair (UK)		£160.00
Flywheel issue / Starter	Labour / repair (UK)		£195.00
Various repairs	Labour / repairs (transit)		£400.00
Car tax (unforeseen)	Entering Azerbaijan		£280.00
GENERAL			
Ferry (Dover – Calais)			£80.00
Ferry (Kazakhstan – Azerbaijan)			£200.00
Ferry (Calais – Dover)			£90.00
Food (reliable estimate)	For 87 days, 5 persons + expedition rations		£1,550.00
Lifesaver Jerrycan	Water purification		£196.00
Water carriers x 3	Storage		£26.09
Water purifying tablets	200L capacity		£17.11
Batteries			£30.70
Sponges			£1.50
Fire spray			£6.00
GB ID plate			£2.99
Tow strap			£12.33
Jump leads			£10.00
Bribes	Reliable estimate		£90.00
Accommodation	(Incl. unforeseen/ during Dushanbe week)		£280.00

MOUNTAINS

Tents x 1	Expedition grade	£300.00
Stoves x 2	Ex-Arctic (used)	£95.09
Petrol for stoves	4 Litres	£55.48
Millbank bag	Water filtration	£7.00
Gloves	Spare (communal)	£31.07
Tent pole repair kit		£13.30
Ab tat / miscellaneous climbing gear		£53.99
Spinnaker tape		£6.45
Gorilla repair tape		£5.39
Powermonkey Extreme	Solar charger x 2	£120.00
Maps (Gharm etc.)		£18.45
Butane gas (1150g)	Backup stoves	£15.97

MEDICAL

Deet / Anthisan		£12.67
First Aid kit	Expedition grade	£206.54
Prescription medication		£111.00
Dioralite sachets x 36		£13.98
Compeed medium x 50		£9.40
Sun cream + lip balm	5 x 200ml	£46.99
Dental repair kit		£12.00
Tic remover		£2.50
Superglue	2 x 50ml	£3.50

OTHER

Miscellaneous travel	Essential to planning process	£230.00
Liquidisation	Expedition vehicle sale	£500.00

PERSONAL ITEMS (Costed as communal)

Personal contributions	Incremental	£7,750.00
Visa applications	Est. £360 per person	£1,440.00
Specialised mountaineering equipment	Essentials (reliable estimate)	£800.00
Training expenses	Travel etc.	£500.00
Miscellaneous (sightseeing etc.)		£60.00
Emergency visas / return visas	Struan + Leo (Tajik) + team (Kazakh / Azeri)	£600.00
Emergency paperwork	Tajik Notary Public ownership transfer	£70.00
Emergency diplomatic assistance	Letters etc.	£200.00
Miscellaneous / unforeseen travel	(Struan / Leo return flights etc.)	£1,500.00

TOTAL Dr / Cr

£18,050.00 £17,987.86

BALANCE

£62.14