



Reaching the Roof – Ski Tajikistan 2014



'An exploratory capsule-style ski-mountaineering expedition to the Pamir mountain range in Tajikistan, Central Asia.'

26th April – 23rd May 2014

Expedition Members

Susanna Walker – susannajw87@googlemail.com

Phillip Mark Thomas

Richard Jones

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*Please email Tom (climbing) or Suze (logistics) if you would like further information.

Introduction

The expedition came about through research into un-explored high mountain areas of the world. We concentrated on areas in Central Asia, particularly Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Tajikistan was chosen as we felt it had the most stable political situation out of the three countries and houses peaks up to 7000m allowing a wide choice of options if weather and snow conditions could not be accurately predicted.

The expedition aimed to climb and ski unexplored 5000m and 6000m peaks of the Vanj Range in the heart of the Pamirs. Originally the plan was to go further south past Khorog but due to some political tensions in the region and the final weather updates we headed to Poi Mazor that allowed a safer, closer and higher altitude drop off.



Aims:

The team set out to explore new high mountain areas in Tajikistan. Our specific goals were not defined due to the level of the unknown. We aimed to be a self-contained team using minimal outside help to achieve our trip.

The administrative goals were to use the expedition profile to raise awareness in the mountaineering community of the potential of Tajikistan as an adventure travel destination.

Administration:

The planning stage primarily involved Susanna, Mark, Tom and Google Earth. The most unbelievable amount of information is available and we picked our base camp location according to what we found here. Once we had outlined what we wanted to achieve and that high mountain exploration was our key goal Susanna set about applying for the appropriate mountaineering grants in September 2013.

As a group of confident and reasonably experienced mountaineers we chose a starting location that would offer the widest variety of skiing/climbing options if weather and snow conditions were unexpectedly extreme.

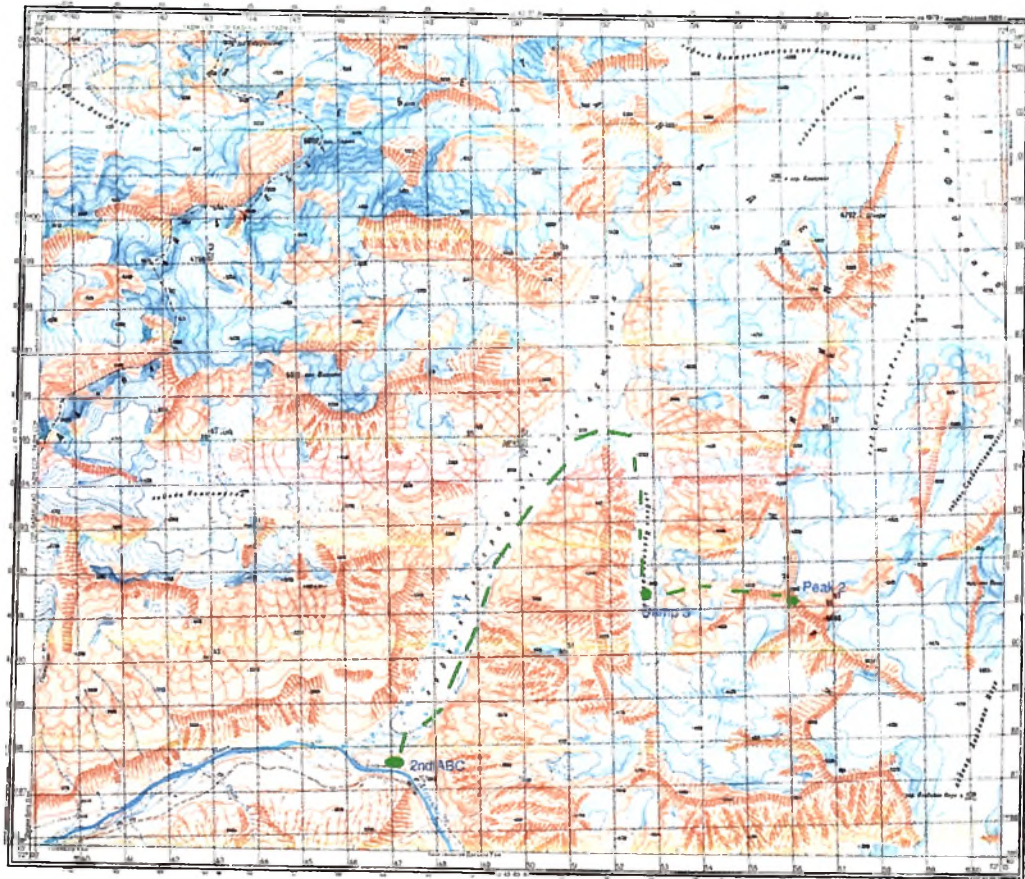
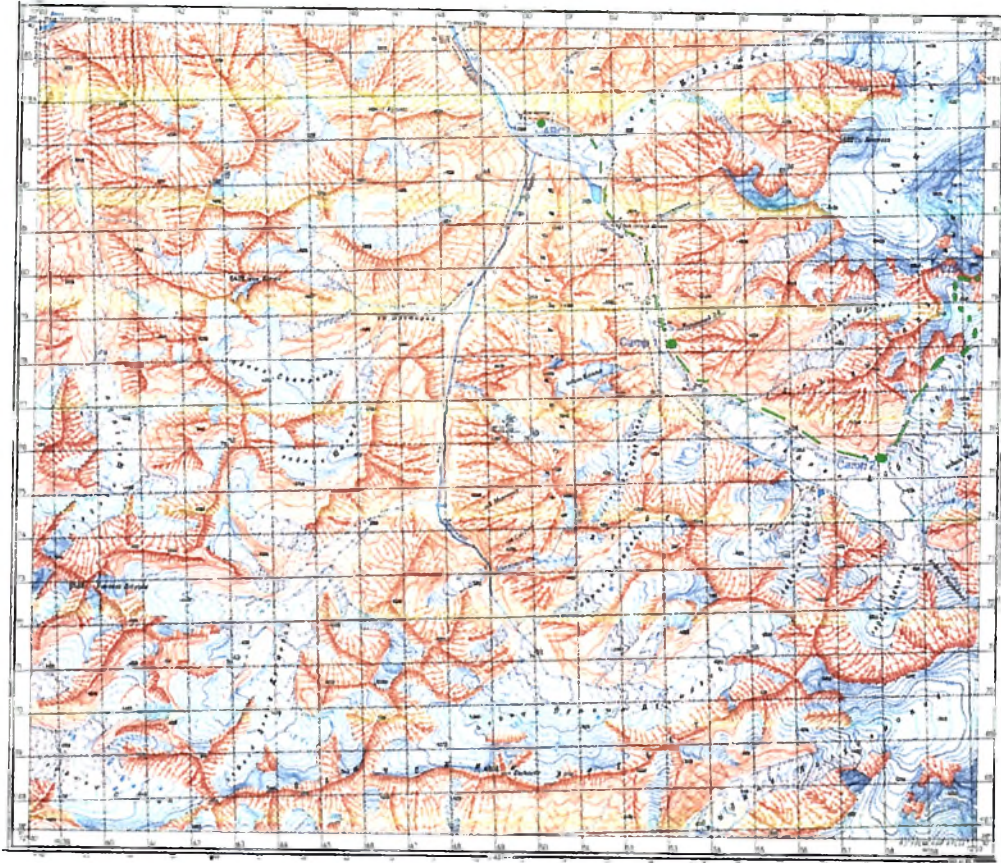
Originally we had hoped to explore the Rushan Range, but as we neared our departure in late April we learned the snow level was higher than expected, and we decided to shift our focus to the Academy of Science Range (Akademii Nauk), farther to the north. This massif is best known for the mountain once known as Peak Communism (7,495m), now called Ismail Somoni, the highest peak in the former Soviet Union. We planned to climb in the southern part of the range, west of the head of the huge Fedchenko Glacier.

The area accessed by the Vanj Valley offers many unclimbed 5,000m peaks and great potential for first ski descents. This area was explored by Soviet teams, but other than their ascents of the largest peaks, including Peak Revolution (6,940m), little is known of their activities. The Vanj Valley runs northeast with the RGS, Bear and Abdulkhor Glaciers splaying off from a valley spur in the same NE direction.

Below is one of the Soviet 1985 Military Maps which we found to be reasonably accurate – point heights are not accurate but general topography seemed precise.

Our route from Advanced Base Camp to Peak 1 (“Abdulkhor 1”) is marked in green on the first map.

The second map describes Mark and Tom’s route to Peak 2 using the Royal Geographical Society Glacier as an access route.



Poi Mazor was the ideal starting point as it has a serviceable ex-Soviet truck that can reach the base of the Academy of Science Range in spring. The subsistence-farming village is welcoming and spectacularly different from what we had expected to find in Tajikistan. Our home-stay family was unsettled about us heading up for 25 days. We soon found out why.

Heavy late snowfall affected by Central Asian sun meant that enormous wet-slab avalanches dominated. By day three we had moved everything to advanced base camp at 2,800m. Here we saw heavy rain and 20cm of snow but predominantly fierce daytime heat—we had been expecting it to be much colder. All of our climbs started at 2 a.m. to escape the thick, sucking slush that developed below 4,000m after midday.

Logistics:

The Pamir Alpine Club: Sharaf Saidrakhmonov

Sharaf came personally recommended by two separate friends of ours who had been working in Afghanistan and Tajikistan over the past 10 years. One of these friends had been stuck in a tricky situation trying to leave Afghanistan and could not get his paperwork together – Sharaf came along and worked his magic and he managed to get him out.

Basically we could not have chosen a better outfitter. Sharaf is kind, friendly, and always available on the phone. He responds quickly by email in the planning stages and has descent knowledge about climbing equipment (i.e. managed to buy us the right gas for our stoves from Krygystan before arrival). His prices are extremely reasonable and his personal negotiation services were often embarrassingly good – he would always fight the price down saying the 'tourists shouldn't have to pay more than Tajiks or they won't want to come to Tajikistan!'

The simplest travel plan to Poi Mazor:

Flights from Istanbul – Dushanbe with Turkish Airlines run twice a week and have descent excess baggage rules.

Dushanbe pick-up from airport in two taxi's 6am – One took all the clobber to the driver and his 4x4 so he could start loading the roof. The other took us to the market to buy the bulk dried food stuffs – rice/fruits/nuts/dried sausage/flour/sugar etc here we found one of the numerous street places to change Euro and US Dollar to Somoni (where you find a much better rate than with any bank). Then we went to a small supermarket to get the rest of our essentials – in hindsight we wished we had found a much bigger one! They exist, well worth asking!

Met up with the 4x4 and started the drive into the Pamirs – arrived late at a hunting lodge along the Panj River, amazing food and care, cheap and FANTASTIC rock climbing everywhere! We all wanted to go back.

Next leg of 21hour drive takes us past Vanj (cash point here) and to Poi Mazor homestead. Mountain stage starts with near disaster as the soviet truck

driver is away and his son takes us instead who didn't know how to fix the truck.... Truck eventually gets fixed and takes us to the head of the Royal Geographical Society Glacier where the snow starts in earnest and the slick and ancient tyres prohibit any further progress.

Permission & Permits:

- 1.) **Tajikistan Tourism Visa** – up to 45 days £20 for London Tajikistan Embassy. Easy to obtain, send off the tourism visa application form (found online) your passport with prepaid return envelope, a copy of your boarding passes, GBAO application letter and a very informal letter from your outfitter stating you are coming to see them on these dates. (For the Tajikistan address on the form we just used Sharaf's home address as we weren't stopping in any hotels).
- 2.) **GBAO Permit (Gorno-Badakshan Permit – essential for all travel into the west)**. Apply for this with your visa pack. Write a letter stating that you would also like to apply for the GBAO permit to include all regions. This will cover you if your plans have to change whilst in country.
- 3.) **Tajikistan National Park Fee's** – slightly trickier to figure out as we found them to be constantly changing and corrupt. Just before we reached Poi Mazor we went to the National Park Office. A very strange building with one guy sitting in it who seemed sure he had new rules stating that we had to pay about 300 euro each to enter the park as we wanted to stay for multiple nights. He then said we also were to pay for all our cameras, per day! We had never seen any information stating that there was a fee to enter the park. However, Sharaf said usually he just paid a few Somonis here and everything was fine. We spent 3 hours there with Sharaf calling up the guys' boss in Khorog (apparently equally corrupt), we hid our cameras and just let Sharaf do his bit. We didn't mind paying but didn't want to let anyone get away with ripping us off either. In the end we paid the equivalent of about 80 euro each and were along our way. I would recommend trying to get in touch with the Tajik National Park for their fee's before arriving, getting emailed proof which you could present on arrival to save time if not money.
- 4.) There were no **peak fee's** on sub 6000m peaks at this time (2014) and Sharaf assured us that we could climb whatever we liked and would only have to pay fee's back in Dushanbe if we wanted to name a +6000m peak.

Fundraising:

We received the following grants for the expedition:

Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust - £600

British Mountaineering Council Expedition Grant - £500

Mount Everest Foundation - £1350

The Alpine Club - £500

The Alpine Ski Club - £375

Mountain Hardwear Athlete Sponsorship - €500

Together with this sponsorship each team member paid approximately £930.

Expedition Money Spent:

€90 ½ tank fuel airport runs + toll's

£3360 - Flights

\$180 12 x Camping Gas bottles

£280 Visa & GBAO permits

€215 'InReach' Satellite Phone (does text & email only but brilliant alternative)

€80 Solar Charger

£100 Drybags

€85 Ketadyn Water filter 10litre

€312 Hoopster Mountain Hardwear Basecamp tent (70% reduction)

£24 InReach Sat Phone Line Bill

\$2400 Pamir Alpine Club Fee: Transport & fuel for 40+ hrs driving, driver and Sharaf for 5 days plus 5 nights warm accommodation.

\$100 hunting lodge food

\$40 Tip Truck Driver

\$300 Tip to Sharaf & Driver(Nazeer) for the amazing service

£240 Supermarket food

£44 - 5 x £8.89 transaction fees for ATM

Total Somoni Spent In Country: 4746 = \$1513

(Below is detail of Somoni expenditure)

480 Dushanbe taxi's

731 Market dried food & pans

180 tip sharaf & nazar @ poi mazor

100 poi mazor dinner

1300 Tajik National Park fee

145 food shop vanj

120 kalai khum lunch

250 hunting lodge accommodation & food

190 lunch Vanj

65 socks etc

840 excess luggage

1210 Truck to basecamp

360 Dushanbe dinner

Totals spent in:

Euro = 782

US Dollar = 4533

Sterling = 4048

Expedition Total Expenditure: £7483

Finances:

The only trouble we had was pre-paying into The Pamir Alpine Club Krygystan account from a UK account. Barclays wouldn't allow the transfer, so Sharaf just trusted us to turn up with cash.

Once in country it was really easy to change Euro and US dollar money and got the best rate from the shops on the streets found near the markets. UK Debit cards worked in Dushanbe stores and I easily could get US dollar out from a bank in Vanj.

Insurance:

We all used to be insured through the BMC who give great cover. This year due to the big price difference we were covered by the French Alpine Club(FFCAM). They dealt with our issues quickly and easily - although as expected they tried to back out of paying for our flight change fee's a few times after we were back. (We had to cut the expedition short by 4 days as Susanna's "sprained ankle" showed no improvement after 3 weeks).

After I sent them a costing of the claim for my full solo repatriation they quickly coughed up the 350€ for all four of our flight changes.

Food:

Great local food – loads of fresh produce in May in the Pamirs. Cheap and easily available in homesteads, cafés, restaurants and supermarkets. All your high-energy hill food was easy enough to get. We did take a reasonable supply of our own favourite fruit gels and sweets for the high mountain stage (as everyone has special preferences in order to keep them sweet!).

Accommodation:

All organized by Sharaf and The Pamir Alpine Club – we asked for cheap and cheerful and got just that. Lovely people and absolutely amazing home made everything – down to goats butter and enough bread to stop us from moving for a few days when we got down.

Communication:

We bought an InReach Satellite Communicator after seeing it demonstrated at one of the 2014 gear fairs in Europe. A brilliant relative cheap device compared to the Satellite Phone and well worth it. Allowed us to get weather updates from our man back in the UK who simply sent emails to the device each morning and evening. Weather updates were surprisingly accurate! Also amazing for trips who need media coverage as you can update straight to your facebook page if you wish.

In hindsight we wished we had have bought two of these – as the situation that arose with Susanna's injury meant that she was apart from the climbing group for reasonable lengths of time. She wanted the group doing the higher risk activity to take the device in case of incident. However, it was unnerving for both her and the group for her to be on her own at ABC (due to the bear and isolation factor) without communication. A very different experience to the one she thought she would have - but interesting non the less.

Risks & Hazards:

We expected mudslides, landslides and rockfall to be the main objective risks for our journey along the Pamir highway. For it's remote location it is incredibly well maintained, landslides are regular and huge but diggers are constantly

working to keep the Chinese, Iranian, Turkish lorries on the move. There was evidence everywhere of cars and lorries whom had fallen off the road but our driver Nazeer was really experienced and the land cruiser got us there no problem.

There are two tracks which run up to Poi Mazor – with a bridge near the head. The bridge was washed away on the return trip so we took the southern side and did a bit of road clearing along the way but it was not nearly so bad as Sharaf was making out. ‘Tajikistan roads are TERRIBLE’ says Sharaf – but I suppose he has been bouncing along them for years and the hilarious novelty has worn off somewhat.

The unexpected main risk we found in May in the high Pamirs was the enormous avalanches! The Vanj valley was almost continuously rumbling from 10am buy the end of the trip, with huge wet slabs coming down from over 4500m to the valley floor. Non of the group members had ever seen so much movement of snow and rock over such short periods.

Our underestimation of day-time temperatures affected our route choices and meant that we changed our body clocks and started our days at 2am or earlier to reduce the risk.

Medical Arrangements:

We took a full expedition medical kit. All of the team were shown how to use the kit and are first aid trained with two having wilderness emergency medicine qualifications.

We could cope with minor injuries and evacuation to the drop off point.

Our baseline procedure for serious or multiple injury was to use our satellite communicator to call for helicopter evacuation. This procedure is not immediate and we all were aware of this. It would take perhaps 30+ hours to mobilize the helicopter from Khorog. This is the risk of wilderness. We knew that Sharaf was on the ground and would do his utmost to help us in this situation and we made it known to him that we had full international insurance to cover this eventuality.

Vaccinations & Health Precautions:

We followed the British Government Health warnings for Tajikistan and had the appropriate vaccinations 3 months prior to departure.

It should be noted here that Tajikistan is a remarkably clean country. In the mountains we drank river and melt water without a second thought and ate everything that was put in front of us. Due to the presence of Cholera in the lower regions we were more careful when in towns.

Environmental & Social Impact Assessment:

As such a small team our environmental footprint was small. We used the local practice in Poi Mazor (as instructed) to burn non-reusable rubbish. The people of Poi Mazor are proud of their near-pristine environment and open to

talking about their practices. Plastic bottles and fuel containers were taken back to the drop off and donated to the truck driver who said he would find them useful. As we were on non-glaciated terrain human waste was disposed of personally.

One factor to be considered perhaps more carefully is the presence of bears. We saw hundreds of footprints and evidence all around the area, and were followed up the Abdulkahor by a big male. We had no problem with bears but would have felt happier with a noise-maker to scare one off if it had approached base camp— especially as we ended up splitting the group due to injury.

The social impact of our expedition from our perspective was extremely positive. The two homestead families we stayed with en route were kind and welcoming and asked us to come back. We left many gifts which we thought would be useful to the family in Poi Mazor such as woolen hats/gloves/socks/down jackets. They were gratefully received with little embarrassment as Sharaf let it be known that this was our way of saying thank-you for the care we had received.

We know that Sharaf is delighted with our project and any media coverage we were able to obtain in order to boost the popularity of Tajikistan as a mountaineering destination. This was our main social goal – to raise awareness in the mountaineering community of the wealth of opportunities available in the Pamirs and how simple and cost effective they are to achieve.

Conclusions:

The team feels that the expedition was a successful project as the following was achieved (in no order of importance):

Two new +5000m summits reached in a remote area of Tajikistan.

Research undertaken for future expeditions: hundreds of suggested routes, photographs and general logistics tried and tested positive. Interesting insight into the warm welcoming culture of Tajikistan – found boundless opportunity for future trips, at this time high mountain expedition to Tajikistan GBAO is not prohibitively expensive or too remote.

Publications which have hopefully raised awareness of The Pamir Alpine Club and Tajikistan: American Alpine Journal, Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust website, UK Climbing Magazine, The Alpine Ski Club Newsletter, The Alpine Club Journal, British Mountaineering Council Newsfeed, WhiteDot, Mountain Hardwear and Planks Clothing content.

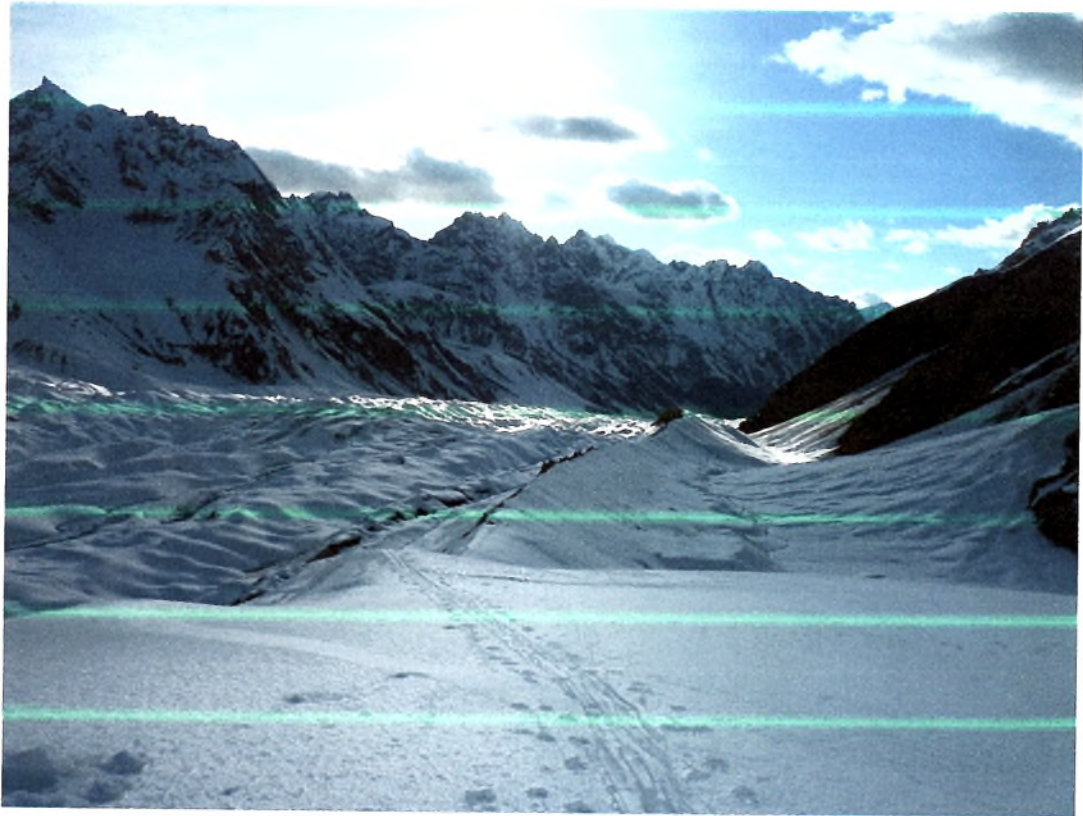
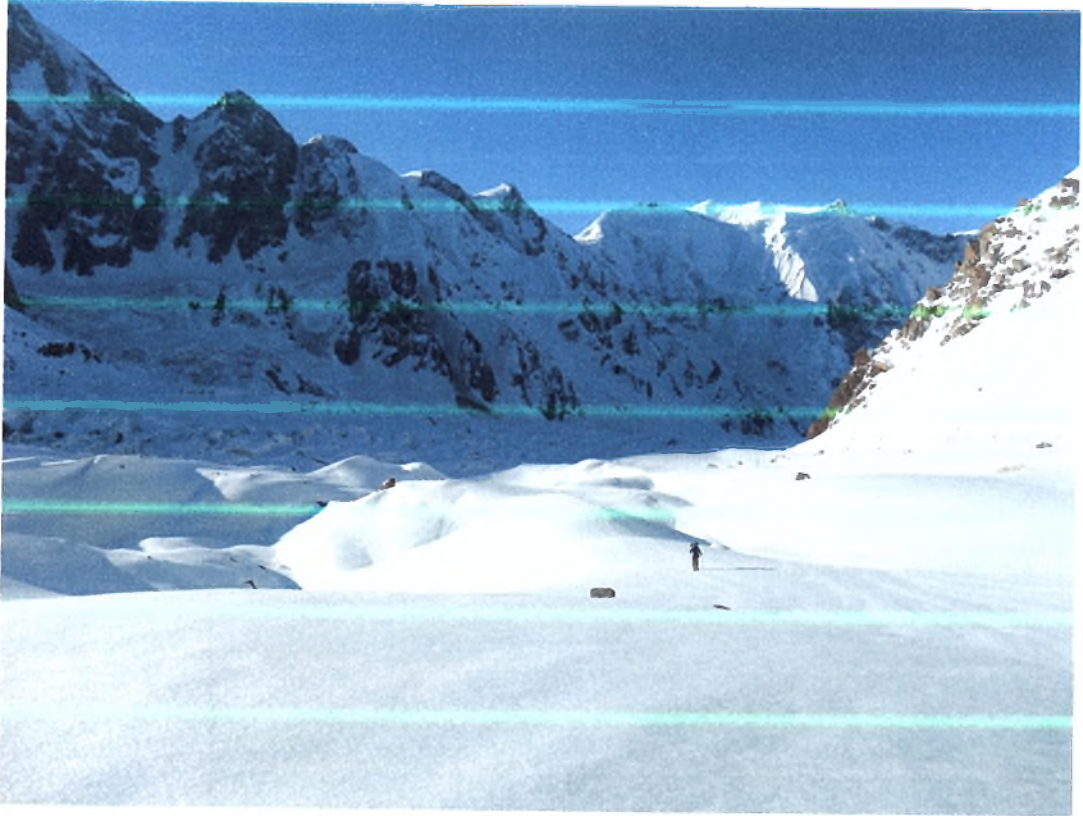
Expedition kit was minimalist and worked extremely well, we wanted for nothing except extra snacks!

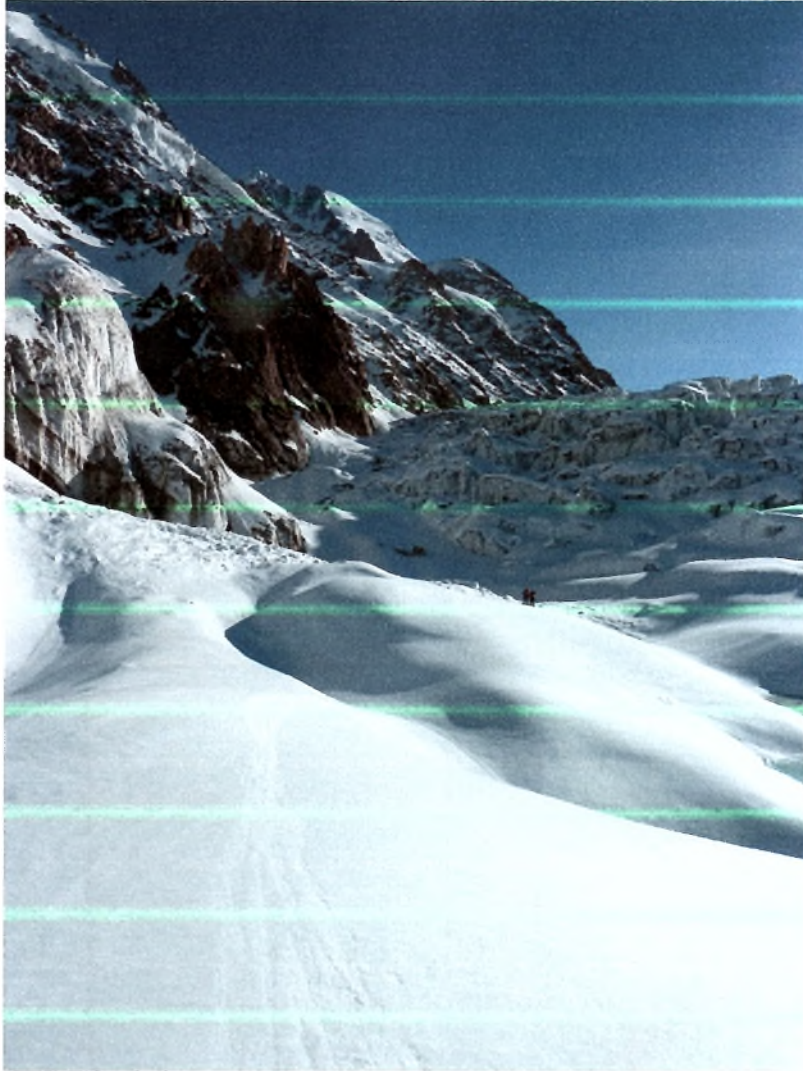
Successfully dealt with a reasonably serious injury in remote wilderness. The team all came back safe, sound and good friends.

Recommendations for Future Expeditions:

The Pamirs have huge potential for future ski and climbing expeditions with access to the best areas heading up the Abdulkuhor glacier. Here are some examples of the surrounding peaks – if you would like more information and specifics please contact Tom Coney who would be happy to go through photos and chat on the subject.







Acknowledgements:

The Mount Everest Foundation

The British Mountaineering Council

The Alpine Club

The Alpine Ski Club

The Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust

Mountain Hardwear Athlete Sponsorship

Planks Clothing Equipment

Jöttnar Equipment Sponsorship

Colin Jones for his unfailing weather updates!

Expedition Log:

Monday 28th April - Arrive in Dushanbe and get grub supermarket and 4X4 to the Hunters' Lodge.

Tues 29th - travel to Poi Mazor, pay our park fees, raining, puncture in car.

Weds 30th - Russian military lorry to moraine head RGS Glacier. Base Camp Reccie to old bridge, avalanches, big ones!

Thurs 1st May - reccie upto new BC towards bear glacier, big avalanches, skinning in slush, river crossing, gnarly weather and snow, sleep back down at BC.

Fri 2nd - Massive portage day up to new BC at head bear glacier, monster day, set up camp and sleep.

Sat 3rd - Pack for bear glacier, notice massive seracs, turn around and head back to BC, broken leg day.

Sun 4th - Me and Tom head over the snout of bear glacier and up valley to snout of Abdulkahor glacier, find spot for camp 1 and descend back to BC.

Mon 5th - crap weather, do another portering day back down to BC and bring up more supplies.

Tues 6th - big sacks up to Camp 1 and set up camp and sleep in the heat.

Weds 7th - up to camp 2 and set it up and ski all way back to BC.

Thurs 8th - up to camp 2 4100m, big day, sleep in afternoon sun.

Fri 9th - 3am start, up abdukahor glacier to make summit camp.

Sat 10th - up at midnight, climb SW Couloir of abdukahor 1 and west ridge to summit 5313m, abseil down, ski to Summit Camp and all way back to BC, monster day.

Sun 11th - Massive storm, snow to BC, Pancake day!!

Mon 12th - Me and Tom reccie the south couloir from bc at snout of bear glacier, 1000m up, good access couloir for peaks behind BC.

Tues 13th - move BC down to head of RGS glacier, big portering day, quick reccie up RGS Glacier.

Weds 14th - put a cache on the RGS, tough day, brutal moraine and slushy snow, hot.

Thurs 15th - pinned at ABC bad weather too warm, showers.

Fri 16th - me and Tom up at 3am and up to Cache on RGS, pick it up and head up the Nedhuk Glacier and put in Summit camp at 3700m.

Sat 17th - up at midnight, up North Face of Nedhuk 1, summit 5100m, abseil down to skis and ski North Couloir to camp and ski all way to BC, Brutal!

Sun 18th - move BC back to original BC for pick up point.

Mon 19th - Pick up by Sharaf from BC and down to Poi Mazor

Tues 20th - Poi Mazor - Hunters' Lodge.

Weds 21st - Hunters' Lodge to Dushanbe.

Thurs 22nd - Fly back to Geneva