

Ак Су '90.



INTRODUCTION

The Turkestan Range in Khirghiza was only opened to Soviet climbers in 1982 and foreigners had to wait until 1990 to be allowed to enter this interesting and challenging area sporting unclimbed peaks up to 5500m.

In fact one American group had managed to visit to Ak-Cy valley in 1987 (via an exchange visit arrangement) but bad weather curtailed their efforts and they were unable to climb any of the major peaks.

However one of the members, Sibylle Hetchel, wrote an article for Mountain magazine (issue No 122) which included a fantastic photo of the north face of Ak Cy (5200m). This photograph proved to be all the inspiration that was needed for Mick Fowler to apply for 6 places on the "Lyailak International Mountaineering Camp 1990". This rather grand sounding set up is organised via the Sportscommittee in Moscow and appears to provide the easiest way to gain access to the Turkestan mountains.

The reason for the previous inaccessibility is purely political. Being close to the Afghanistan and Chinese borders the pre-glasnost Soviet leadership were not at all keen to allow access to the area and the International camp was first convened in 1990. In fact ethnic strife in the area (I can think of no other reason) put people off and the 'International' flavour of the camp was non-existent. We, along with our Soviet hosts, were the only people there.

In view of the unexplored nature of the area it was decided to organise the venture as a mountaineering and mountain biking expedition. Mick Fowler, Chris Watts, Jerry Gore and Crag Jones were to be the climbers (with the main aim of climbing the North Face of Ak Cy) whilst Nicki Dugan and Siobhan Sheridan were to explore the area as thoroughly as possible on mountain bikes which they took out from England.

In the event the mountain bikers found the terrain rather unsuitable and all of the exploration of interest to mountaineers was carried out on foot.

EXPEDITION MEMBERS

Michael Fowler (34) Leader - *Civil Servant*

Numerous first ascents on rock and ice throughout Britain since 1976.

After successes on the North Faces of the Eiger and Matterhorn in 1980 he led successful expeditions to Peru (1982) and Kilimanjaro (1983). He first visited the Himalaya in 1984 and had his first Himalayan success on the Golden Pillar of Spantik (7027m) in 1987.

He had visited the mountains of the Soviet Union on two previous occasions; to the Caucasus in 1986 and the Altai in 1988.

Christopher Watts (33) - *Importer of Mountaineering Equipment*

Numerous first ascents on rock and ice throughout Britain since 1980.

Alpine successes on routes such as the Freney Pillar led on to successful expeditions to Peru, the Rocky Mountains, the Karakoram and Nepal.

In 1988 he was a member of Brummie Stokes' Everest North East ridge expedition.

Jeremy O'Brien-Gore (29) - *Manager of Cotswold Camping, B&N's-y-Coed*

A talented rock and ice climber with many spectacular British routes under his belt.

The most travelled member of the expedition with climbing experience in Tibet (Shishpangma), Nepal (Manaslu), India, Pakistan, Peru, North American, Iceland and Norway.

Caradoc Jones (32) - *Marine Biologist*

An enthusiastic and experienced climber with many British new routes to his credit both on rock and ice.

Having succeeded on many of the Alpine major classics (eg. Croz Spur, Dru Couloir) he moved on to more exotic venues and has completed challenging new routes in Africa, South America and the Falklands.

Nicola Dugan (34) - *Conservator of Works of Art on Paper*

An enthusiastic explorer with mountaineering experience in the Alps, India, Nepal, North and South American, Morocco and Jordan.

Dedicated mountain biker.

Siobhan Sheridan (31) - *Outdoor Gear Importer*

Outdoor enthusiast, marathon runner and mountain biker.

PREPARATION

Previous experience had shown that by far the easiest way to arrange to climb in the Soviet Union is by attending one of the International Mountaineering Camps organised by the Soviet Sports Committee in Moscow.

It seemed a waste of time asking Soviet representatives in Britain about these camps as both Intourist and the Russian Embassy have previously denied any knowledge of them and emphatically stated that it is not possible for Westerners to visit the Turkestan range. The key to the problem was to approach the Sports Committee direct. (Their address is given at Appendix II). As the result of a straightforward request, a programme of available camps was received which was worded in the form of an invitation. International camps now exist in the Tien Shan, Pamirs, Caucasus, Chimbulak, Altai and Turkestan ranges but the keyword in the communication is 'invitation'. Effectively this meant that, as invited guests of the Sports Committee, we were given considerably more latitude than an 'intourist' tourist and were not pursued by a courier

or forced to keep to a rigid itinerary. It also meant that we could look forward to being looked after whilst down in the valley. A rare mountaineering luxury.

Bureaucratically there was nothing to fear and preparation proceeded with no real problems. Admittedly, this was partially due to Mick's knowledge of the system; having organised two previous trips. The following time scale of events may prove useful and prevent undue concern to those new to the system.

20.09.89 Written request to Sports Committee for a copy of the 1990 information sheet. (These can be obtained from the BMC and the Alpine Club).

20.11.90 Information sheet (Appendix II) received from the Sports Committee.

29.01.90 Sports Committee advised in writing of our intention to visit the Turkestan range. (The deadline for receipt in Moscow was theoretically 25.04.90 but applications are best made as soon as possible)

06.04.90 Telegram received from the Sports Committee requesting that we arrange to transfer 1280 roubles per person to their account in Moscow by 25.04.90.

18.04.90 Payment in full transferred.

23.05.90 Telegram received, confirming receipt of the money transferred and instructing us to apply for visas.

16.06.90 Visas organised with the Soviet Embassy in London (Allow two full days of queuing).

20.06.90 Departure date.

It is worth emphasising that the start and finish dates shown in the itinerary are the dates that you should arrange to arrive in and leave Moscow. Any time spent in Moscow outside these dates cost £50 per night (1990 rates).

Each trip includes one day in Moscow, with an official tour available, so there is little to be gained by spending more time there.

Our timetable of events having arrived in Moscow was as follows:-

- 20.06.90 Arrive in Moscow
- 21.06.90 Guided tour of Moscow. We should have flown to Osh but a days delay was caused by ethnic strife.
- 22.06.90 Flight from Moscow to Frunze. Helicopter from Frunze to base camp.
- 24.06.90 Time available for climbing/exploration.
- 12.07.90
- 13.07.90 Bus to Osh.
- 14.07.90 Day in Osh due to delays caused by ethnic strife.
- 19.07.90 Flight from Osh to Moscow.
- 19.07.90 Flight from Moscow to London.

As far as flights to Moscow are concerned it is as well to bear in mind the importance of arriving and leaving on the correct day. Taking a cheaper flight which necessitates additional nights in Moscow can quickly turn out to be a false economy. In 1990 only British Airways flew on the correct days and as it is an increasingly popular route it is advisable to book early.

Visas were essential but could only be obtained from the Soviet Embassy in London after the Sports Committee had confirmed that our party had been 'invited' to attend the camp. Although they only took a few days to obtain, it is worthwhile contacting the Embassy in advance to find out the latest procedures and obtaining them promptly when places on the camp are confirmed. Queues at the Embassy are long and extremely tedious.

Prior to leaving, some very half-hearted attempts to learn the Russian language were made. In the event our linguistic talents were very limited but the fact that we had made the effort to learn the cyrillic alphabet did prove useful in reading signs etc. whilst travelling on our own in Moscow.

However, as an interpreter is allocated to each party and English is fairly widely spoken, even this basic knowledge of the Russian language was not essential.

Additional Insurance cover was arranged as any rescue expenses are not covered by the Russians.

With our British preparation complete, we arrived in Moscow on 20 June 1990 and were met at the airport by Olga, one of the Sports Committee helpers before being whisked away to the Hotel Sport.

Mountaineering is regarded as a 'sport' in the Soviet Union and enjoys a status comparable with rugby, athletics etc. in Britain. The Hotel Sport is used by all international sports people and as one of the highest buildings in the area (22 storeys), it gave us a fine view of our surroundings. It also meant that we were rubbing shoulders with huge weight lifters and 7' tall basketball players. Doubtless these athletes wondered in which sport the 10 stone British weaklings could possibly be representing their country at.

Regarding Moscow in general, it is well beyond the scope of this report to go deeply into the variations in Eastern/Western lifestyles but suffice it to say that there are enough thought-provoking sights to convince even the most enthusiastic and time conscious mountaineer that a day in the Russian capital is not a day wasted.

The difference which will most acutely affect most British mountaineers is that alcohol is not at all freely available. The bar at the Hotel Sport is permanently closed and only the airport duty free shop and the "beriozkas" (hard currency tourist shops) provide easily purchasable alcohol.

From Moscow, a large jet took us, in three and a half hours, to the town of Frunze, where we changed to a helicopter to travel the final 200 miles or so to our base camp in the Ak-Cy valley. This was a rather longer helicopter flight than usual but ethnic disturbances forced us to take a helicopter from Frunze rather than Osh.

RUSSIAN GRADING SYSTEM

A numerical, grading system is in use which corresponds roughly to that in Western Europe.

<i>Russian</i>	<i>Western Europe</i>
1 A	Facile (F)
1 B	Facile + (F Sup)
2 A	Peu Difficile (PD)
2 B	Peu Difficile (PD Sup)
3 A	Assez Difficile (AD)
3 B	Assez Difficile + (AD Sup)
4 A	Difficile (D)
4 B	Difficile + (D Sup)
5 A/B	Tres Difficile (TD)
6 A/B/C	Extremement Difficile (ED)

These are direct technical comparisons and it should be borne in mind that the approaches and descents from the Turkestan climbs can be much longer and more serious than in the Western Alps.

CLIMBING LITERATURE/MAPS

No accurate maps seem to exist and the only climbing literature that we have been able to identify is the Sybille Hetchel article in Mountain 122. The best map that you will be able to find is probably that at Appendix I.

SOVIET CLIMBING TECHNIQUES

We did gain some interesting insights into the ethics, methods and styles of climbing in the Soviet Union.

Most climbing is organised on a club level. Apart from the socialist principles involved there is the very real benefit that because of state support in various forms this may be the only realistic way active Soviet climbers can get equipment and be able to visit the mountains at all. Regulations and finance do not permit much alternative.

Everything is regulated even for 'amateur' climbers who do not partake in the competition system. Mountaineers must do two routes of a given grade and wait until the following season before they are permitted to attempt anything at the next level of difficulty. There is a strong patriarchy and a desire to stay within the regulations even by the younger climbers!

Competition climbing is organised by the central Sports Committees and also by the trade unions. They are extremely structured events with the team having to study the route for so many days before then submitting a written plan of action. They then lose points for deviating from this plan, if they use too much aid, do not rotate the lead climber etc etc. The whole affair is scored by a series of judges with binoculars. Medals are awarded. They are frowned on by many climbers as not being in the true spirit of mountaineering yet confirm a respected status on the leading climbers who participate. They are also another way to obtain recognition and resources enabling climbers to climb. Even some of our illustrious members were not immune to the potential glory and assumed a slightly glazed countenance at the prospect of being truly valued at last. The Russians felt the days of competition climbing were numbered which was an interesting reflection to say the least.

Within a club, teams are formed under a designated leader. They plan the next seasons campaign together, prepare all equipment and train regularly as a unit under their leader. Running, exercises, and even climbing walls are used to get the team fit. Clubs tend to organise the climbing as 'camps' in a given area. These are well organised with good mess tents and facilities at base, transport to and from their home areas. Foreign groups are attached to one of these camps with a manager cook guide if required and a few other

camp helpers who are usually keen climbers in their own right. All are very helpful and friendly.

There is a good 'social life' at base camp with great delight taken in constructing weird and wonderful home made saunas, whereby you are expected to prove your metal and various other parts of your body by alternating between this and a freezing cold glacial torrent. This is definitely more dangerous than the climbing. There are lots of singing nights. Folk songs are a much more contemporary aspect of Russian life than they are for us. They mistakenly think 'pop music' is our equivalent and don't realise most of it goes in one ear and out through the other.

A great deal of preparation is gone through before setting out on a route. It is often 'observed' prior to an ascent and also prepared in advance with some fixed ropes and camps. They make constant use of radios. The route is comprehensively documented and a large booklet produced for each completed line with every imaginable manner of information included. This is the normal method of approach used by Soviet 'teams' for substantial new lines, and has been put to very good use for some extremely impressive achievements. Choice, finish and quality of equipment is wanting in many respects but improvisation, innovation, ability and toughness have obviously made up for any handicap this causes.

The Soviets respect all forms of foreign ethics thus visiting climbers are allowed to climb in their own style, even if it causes the hosts total bewilderment at times. It is difficult to get across our principle of operating in small teams which offer a more purist challenge even if the chances of success are much smaller than with the large scale hyper planned approach. Our notion that we did not wish to carry radios because the very reason for going climbing was to get away from the safety net society provides and survive by ones own resources (for better or worse) caused a few raised eyebrows. It seemed equivalent to setting off to work on the wrong side of the road in the morning just for the sheer hell of it. Many a good natured discussion was had over such matters. They eventually interpreted our behaviour as being symptomatic of the healthy disregard which breaths vitality into western activities. The radios did weight about two pounds.

CLIMBING/EXPLORATION

Ak-Cy: North Face - (Attempt) *by Crag Jones*

This was our prime objective for the expedition. Rumours began to filter through just prior to our departure that the face had in fact been climbed. This was confirmed on our arrival in the area. For this initial period we were dependent on word of mouth for such information from the few people to begin with who were at the camp and had local knowledge

It had received two ascents within a few months of each other in 1987 under competition conditions, both parties if we understood correctly receiving 'gold medals'. The climbing is regarded as one of the most arduous in the Soviet Union because of its unremitting steepness, length (five and a half thousand feet) and high level of objective danger from regular rockfall. It is a 'big wall' route in a mountaineering setting. Both previous ascents had involved extensive preparation of the wall with fixed ropes and camps before a continuous ascent of eight days. The teams consisted of a minimum of six climbers, often more.

For our first day all four of us went up together to reconnoitre the north side of the mountain to ascertain the best lines, objective dangers etc. It was apparent that we were early enough in the year for much of the upper reaches of the central crack line of the North face direct to still hold climbable ice. We hoped that if this could be reached it would do away with the need to resort to continuous artificial aid and speed our progress considerably this also reducing the exposure to stone fall, which was still a problem even once the funnel of the initial couloir had been left.

After one day at base camp preparing equipment, food, fuel etc we returned to our selected bivouac at the foot of the north face. We left the following morning at 5 am in order to complete the first 1000' up the lower ice couloir before the stone fall into this became unjustifiable as the sun moved on to the upper reaches of the face. The choice of line for the first aid pitch was with hindsight, a mistake, the rampline on the left offers a more amenable introduction. The pitch involved A4 and free climbing on loose overhanging and verglassed rock and took four hours to lead. Jerry Gore was struck by stonefall which shattered his helmet. Fresh snow

on the upper reaches of the face in combination with the ice higher up in the crack melted in the afternoon to produce a full scale waterfall which we were also directly in line with, causing us to be both soaked to our underclothes. With no protected bivouac site we decided immediate retreat was the safest option.

A difficult series of abseils delivered us to terra firma sometime after midnight from where we returned to our previous bivouac on the glacier. We retreated to base camp the following day, leaving behind most equipment at the bivouac in readiness for our next objective.

On our return to base camp more climbers had arrived from Moscow. One of them (Andre) had a mobile office of route documentations and photographs which he kindly gave us access to. After studying this we had a much better idea of what had already been done in the area and what were the good remaining lines. They confirmed that the South Ridge of Ak Cy had not been climbed to date. It offered an elegant and classical challenge..

Ak Cy South Ridge: (Attempt) *by Crag Jones*

In order to reach this side of the mountain it is necessary to climb the ice fields to the col on the east ridge of Ak Cy which forms the normal line of ascent. We bivouacked on the col and came within shouting range of Mick and Chris who were descending the east ridge from the summit of Ak Cy after their successful ascent of the NW Buttress of the mountain (see later in this report). From the col we were able to observe and photograph a series of massifs to the south, the majority of peaks in which are still un-climbed by even the easiest route. In addition there were some superb looking long ridge lines which offer fine objectives for any future parties visiting the area. From the col we headed into the large snow bowl on the south side out of which the narrow South Ridge rises to the summit block in approximately 4,500' of climbing. The very first section is somewhat artificial in that it could be avoided on the right flank via a series of short easy slabs. Thereafter however the route becomes the epitome of a difficult alpine classic.

In the first days climbing we covered around 600' of climbing and established ourselves below the apparent crux section, a series of steepening bald aretes. The previously fine weather deteriorated

with nightfall into freezing rain and sleet which continued the next morning. With no prospect of free climbing the aretes in such conditions, or of drying out our very wet bivouac gear, we again decided to retreat. We regained the col after a slow ascent from the snow bowl with one very awkward pitch of vertical rotting ice to escape onto the upper slopes. This emphasised the isolated and remote nature of the south side. Another bivouac on the col was spent in very cold conditions (approx minimum 15o C).

An eight strong Russian team arrived the next morning also intent on a first ascent of the south ridge. We were told they had a further support team bringing the total complement to twenty. They also had to retreat after ten days of effort because of the continuous foul conditions. It was apparent that our alpine approach though giving us the potential for a much quicker strike at an objective also meant we were much less able to weather poor conditions and had to prepare to retreat without delay to prevent difficult situations getting out of control. The Russians confirmed that most of the major peaks we pointed out to the South were unclimbed. Our ropes were damaged during the following days descent of the ice field necessitating a return to base camp to replace one of them.

North West Buttress *by Mick Fowler*

Arriving at the foot of the North face of Ak Cy our tent was duly pitched on a flat spot on the glacier directly beneath our proposed line. A monstrous tower dominated the lower section of the spur and it looked best to gain the col behind this via a clearly dangerous couloir on the right. An early start was obviously advisable.

The 4.30 am alarm was greeted with resounding lethargy. I fumbled around with the stove whilst Chris stuck his head out of the door, complained of a splitting headache and was promptly sick. An inspiring start to the day. Pain killers were consumed and the alarm was reset for 5.30am. The second attempt at starting the day was not entirely successful. Chris lost his belay plate beneath an immovable boulder and it was not until 7am that we were off across the glacier. So much for our early start.

Moving as fast as our energy reserves would allow the huge gendarme was gradually passed on the right and by midday we

found ourselves beneath a 500ft rock wall leading to the col between the gendarme and the main face.

To begin with this obstacle didn't look too difficult but it soon became clear that it consisted of a series of very steep granite walls separated by block ridden ledges. Our sacks felt monstrously heavy as we struggled in the full heat of the afternoon sun. Progress slowed to a near halt. Morale was low. We had brought rock boots along for difficult pitches but this ground seemed to consist of overhanging chimneys smattered with ice and featuring numerous downward pointing flakes to complicate any sack hauling. The rock boots stayed firmly hidden as we struggled with big boots, sacks and dripping overhangs. The absence of Chris' belay plate meant that proceeding were regularly delayed as he fought to feed the ropes through an obscure knot which he assured me would operate in the same way as a belay plate. It certainly jammed when the ropes were being fed through it belay mode... fortunately it was never tested in the opposite direction. A full afternoon of desperate thrashing saw us emerge suddenly onto the col. I had feared the worst in the form of an horrific knife edge but Chris' optimism proved to be well founded and we were able to pitch the tent on a luxurious platform.

Above the col the rock became smoother and a great sheet of granite soared up for several hundred feet. There were a couple of thin finger cracks visible and with the evening sun now warming the rock it seemed sensible to get the rock boots out, take advantage of the conditions and fix a pitch before dark.

Although I have religiously taken rock boots to Alpine Ranges for years this was the first time that I had actually carried them on a route. It felt very strange to be up there on a big mountain teetering about in flimsy footwear that I had always associated with pleasant outcrops. Incompetence was immediately apparent; with feet flailing around on damp lichen progress was painfully slow. After an hour I had made about 80ft of free climbing and was contemplating aiding a rather nasty leaning crack when I spotted something rather unnatural above me.....a bolt. Sergei it seemed had been wrong. Try as we might we couldn't convince ourselves that this had appeared without a human body having been here to place it. Abseiling back to the ledge from the offending piece of ironmongery we took stock of our position. It was disappointing to realise that somebody had been here before but looking on the bright side we were not carrying bolts ourselves and this find meant that if there

were any really blank sections above there might at least be some bolt holes there to give us a change. (Later we were to discover that a Soviet competition team had in fact reached this point by climbing a line to the left of the monster gendarme and then continued up much the same line that we were to follow.).

We were awoken at 7am by the sound of an impressive avalanche thundering down our approach couloir. It seemed best to look the other way. Above us the rope snaked up 90ft to the Soviet bolt. It was at this point that the foolishness of not bringing a pair of jumars rather caught up with us. With only one shunt and a selection of prussic loops jumaring was both frightening and time consuming. I had never used a shunt before but it seemed like a good place to learn. It was almost midday by the time we had climbed, jumared and sack hauled up two smooth vertical pitches to a welcome ice band. Our sack hauling talents were on par with our jumaring efforts and both of us suffered sprained hands as a result. On the bright side we were now higher than the top of the monster gendarme that dominated the lower section of the route.

A series of vertical and overhanging Chamonix-like grooves gave the obvious way ahead. Caught by the sun though, progress continued in a tortuous and erratic manner. The sack hauling was the worst. Leading with a sack proved impracticable and a continued proliferation of downward pointing flakes necessitated regular manhandling of the hauled sacks by the second man dangling uncomfortably on the shunt and prussic. Meanwhile the leader endured continual hand strain caused by manfully hauling the sacks hand over hand.

I was just sorting myself out to jumar up a particularly nasty looking pitch when I inexcusably dropped my belay plate. As a close friend of mine for 15 years I was particularly sorry to see it go. Long shall I remember my distress as I witnessed the hawser laid piece of tat attached to it spiralling down the face. Regaining my composure it dawned on me that Chris had lost his two days before. Both of us were relying on sticht plates to abseil.

Progress was now further impeded by my having to learn the obscure belay knot and constantly compete with Chris in getting the ropes jammed.

A couple of tricky mixed pitches ended in an uncomfortably sloping sitting bivouac and a long night was punctuated with intense discussions on how to abseil using a caribiner brake.

By now we were only 300ft or so from the point where our route joined the NW Spur of the mountain so well seen in profile from the Ak Cy valley. A couple of exciting mixed pitches saw us escape from the oppressive walls of the face onto a sunny and easier angled spur. For the first time we could see the mountains to the South stretching off towards the Afghan border and - a long way above us - the two summits of Ak Cy.

By moving together remarkably good progress was made and after a few more challenging pitches, where the rock boots made a further appearance, we finally came across a superb bivouac site about 200m below the summit.

Stopping early we took the opportunity to address the abseil problem in earnest. Chris is deeply into mountaineering equipment, techniques, clothing et al so I had rather hoped that his ignorance in the field of caribiner brakes had been feigned. It was rather distressing when after 30mins of vainly clipping caribiners together I had to conclude that he was in fact as ignorant as me on the subject. I though had at least had the benefit of Steve Sustad using the system in front of me only six weeks or so before. I remembered him saying how lethal they could be and how easy it was to drop the caribiners. Chris was surprisingly ungrateful when I parted this useful information.

We were to put our theories into practise sooner than expected. Day 4 started with superb granite climbing which suddenly ended atop a spectacular gendarme. An abseil down the far side seemed the only practical solution. Chris, in the lead, wimped out and lowered whilst I bravely clipped caribiners haphazardly together and abseiled with a safety rope. Although fine under strain my efforts readily fell apart when my weight came off the rope. We would have to do better than this on the descent. Another unexpected gendarme gave us a second chance to practise before reaching the summit ridge and a junction with the East ridge - our intended line of descent.

The views were now superb, to the East lay Pyramide (5,500m) the highest peak in the Turkestan range whilst to the west the Sabac (5,300m) area looked particularly exciting. To the South an endless

panorama of barely touched mountains stretched towards the Afghan border and beyond whilst to the North the Central Asian Steppes rolled interminably away into the distance.

A few short pitches led us to an excellent bivouac spot under the summit block of Rocky Ak Cy (5216m) at midday. Ak Cy actually has two distinctly separate summits with the southernmost (Snowy Ak Cy - 5,355m) being the highest. Sergei had told us that we should allow 4 hours to traverse between the summits. If we allowed 4 each way that would see us back at 8pm - an hour before dark. After four perfect days the weather was at last showing signs of deteriorating. I was keen, Christ wasn't so sure.

By the time we had sorted out the gear and made the decision to go it was 1pm.

Only 50ft from the summit an abseil proved to be necessary. Chris was beginning to look distinctly reluctant. The single rope that we were using for the traverse between the tops sported a torn sheath about 30ft from one end. It was fine for the descent but would have to be retired after the route. Fearing loss of momentum in our bid for the main summit I made the retrospectively rash decision to cut off the 30ft section to abseil on. Throwing it down the line of the abseil it was immediately clear that a slight error of judgement had been made. It was about 80ft down to the first ledge system. My dismal 30ft fluttered uselessly in the wind. It was my turn to look unhappy. With a blinding flash of inspiration Chris decided to walk back 50ft and get the other rope.

The ridge continued down in an awkward but never desperate manner to a snowy col beyond which a long snowy ridge led to the realistically named Snowy Ak Cy. Altitude was taking its toll now. The ridge was icy and the wind strengthening. Stamina was lacking. It was 5.30pm by the time we collapsed onto the shaley summit and the dream of the last year turned into reality.

After a brief and unexpected visit from the base camp team (in a helicopter!) and an uncomfortably windy night squeezed under the summit block of Rocky Ak Cy it was time to test our caribiner brakes in earnest. The upper part of the East ridge is not really a ridge at all - more an 80 degree buttress festooned with monstrous hanging icicles. Ideal ground for testing abseil devices.

A few exciting prussic-protected initial efforts soon dispelled fears and led (despite the fact that our tangles of carabiners were subsequently found to be, let me say... unconventional), to a full days worth of abseiling, first down the frighteningly steep upper buttress and then via a long and tortuous narrow ridge. All the time the fact that one rope was 30ft shorter than the other was there to remind us of my rope cutting effort the previous day.

Back in base camp, there was much concern over our exceedingly slim physiques. Vast quantities of food miraculously appeared and much concern was apparent as we proved ourselves incapable of making any recognisable impression on this veritable food mountain.

Vodka and Champagne helped wash things down but Russian hospitality knows no bounds. A tent sauna was prepared, gifts ranging from caviar to ice fifis were distributed and in line with local customs - mouse excreta was produced to "restore our vitality".

Life felt pretty good really.

GENERAL EXPLORATION

ALEXANDER BLOK PEAK *by Crag Jones*

After one more rest day we returned to advance base and proceeded to the east to explore the north and east faces of "Alexander Blok" peak. Continuing bad weather with both white-out conditions and lightning storms, for the next two days curtailed any further hope of technical climbing. We continued our exploration up to the head of the glacier to the 'Ak Tu Biek' col and obtained a good view of the east face during a break in the weather. This offers some challenging potential for big wall routes in a very remote situation. Only one line has been achieved to date. There is also a massive outlying pyramid of rock immediately to the south east of the east face. It is about the same height and unclimbed to date. However, it would not be recommended for any team attempting lines here to base themselves in the Ak Cy valley, as this would be a much too circuitous approach. The nearest valley below would probably be the 'Ossan Ossan' or the one before it. We understand this to be much more difficult to get to from the lowlands than the Ak Cy valley thus presenting much more logistical difficulties unless helicopter support can be used.

THE ACHAT VALLEY *by Mick Fowler*

The Achat valley lies two valleys to the west of the Ak Cy valley and is not accessible by four wheel drive vehicle. A helicopter is the best way of approaching but failing this the head of the valley can be reached in two days walk from the roadhead or eight hours walk (at Russian speed!) from the Ak Cy base camp.

The dominating mountain of the area is Sabac (5,300m) which is one of the most difficult major peaks so far climbed in the range. The excellent north face has two or three very hard mixed routes on it - the product of a recent climbing competition.

Of most interest in the new route field is the line of mountains bordering the East side of the head of the valley. The three Pooro peaks (East, Central & West) are about 5,000m high & in summer 1990 all were unclimbed. Pooro West was being subjected to a sustained Soviet attack but it is probable that Pooro Central survived the 1990 season. It looks to provide fine climbing at around 'Difficile' standard. Pooro East was attempted by Fowler & Dugan but bad weather caused a retreat. Although this summit is the least impressive of the three it is at least a 'Difficile' standard and has survived several Soviet attempts.

An excellent multi day expedition would be to traverse all three summits by a superb looking delicate ridge.

ELSEWHERE IN THE RANGE

The peak at the head of the Uriem valley (between Achat and Ak Cy) is unclimbed at 5,147m but did not look particularly inspiring.

Arguably of most interest is the fact that Pyramide at 5,500m - the highest peak in the range - remains unclimbed. It lies about 10-15 miles to the east of Ak Cy (see map) and does not look to provide any serious technical difficulties.

Access is the main problem and a helicopter is probably the only realistic solution.

Income	£
Mount Everest Foundation	800.00
Sport Council/British Mountaineering Council	800.00
Members Contributions	5,462.00
Total	7,062.00

Expenditure

Air Travel (6 x £283)	1,698.00
1280 Roubles per person (Payment to USSR Sports committee)	4,744.00
Hill Food/Gas etc	100.00
Insurance	520.00
Total	7,062.00

The payment of 1280 Roubles per person to the Sportscommittee covers all food, internal transport etc and thus greatly simplifies accounting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks must go to the following organisations, firms and individuals who gave invaluable assistance:-

Finance

Mount Everest Foundation

British Mountaineering Council

Equipment

First Ascent

Karrimor

Individuals

George Fowler

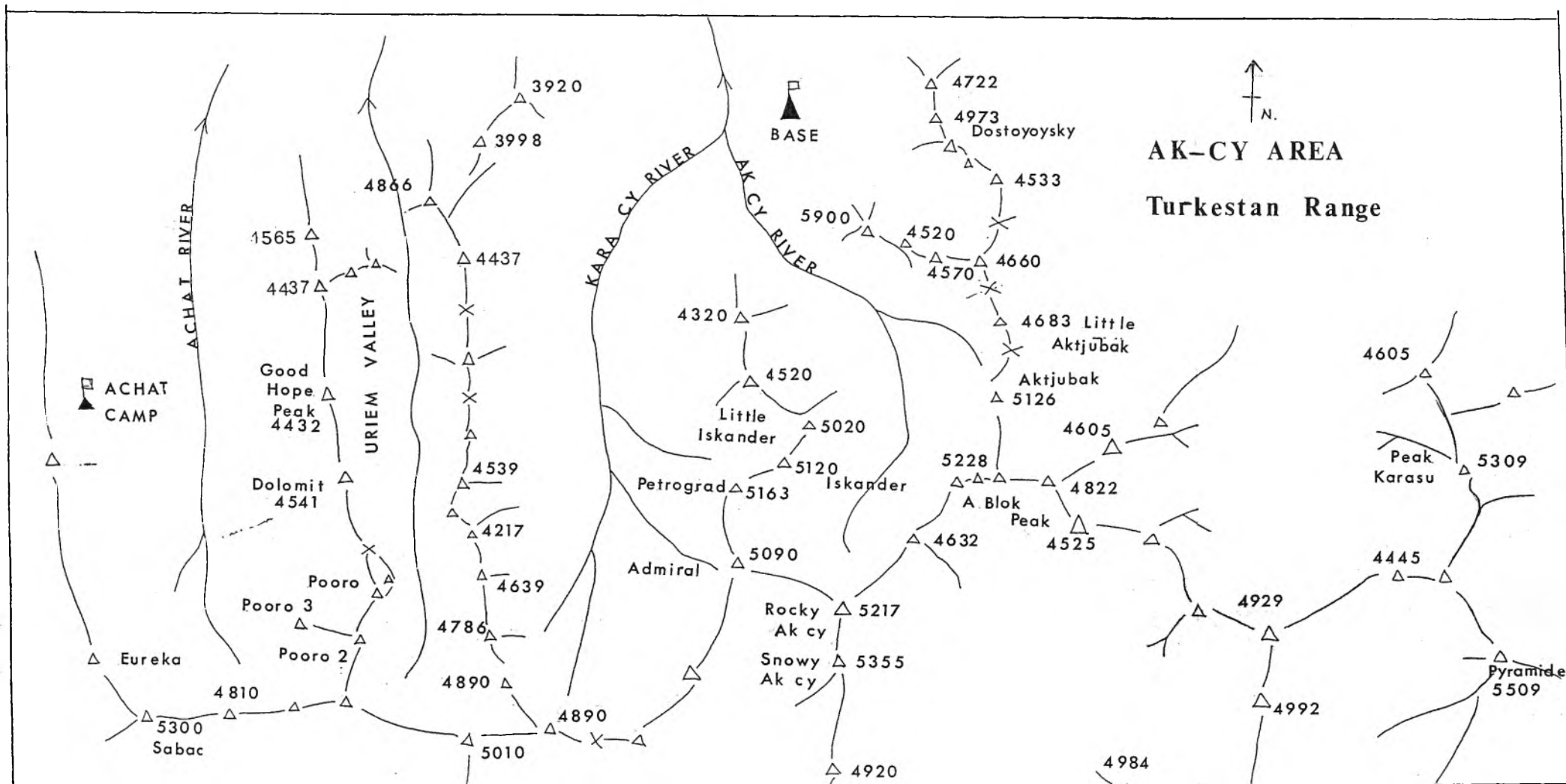
Sally Stables

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V/O "SOVINTERSPORT"

Firm "Alptur"

invites you to the mountains of USSR

During more than 15 years International Mountaineering Camps (IMC) receive foreign mountain-climber, hikers, rock-climbers in the mountains of the USSR.

V/O "Sovintersport", firm "Alptur" gives unique opportunity to ascend to the highest summits of Pamir, Tien-Shan, the Caucasus and other mountain regions of the USSR to get over mountain-passes, to go in for skiing on snow slopes.

The experienced amateurs of hiking and tours as well as the beginners can choose the programme and route in accordance with their desire and taking into account the level of training.

V/O "Sovintersport" will see to it that the guests of IMC could have a good time in the USSR, fulfil their sports plans, get acquainted with customs and traditions of different peoples and nationalities living in the USSR, monuments and sights of the country.

All programmes envisage the participants to take off from Moscow to the mountaineering camp on the next day of their arrival to the city, and to stay for one or two days in Moscow before their return home.

IMC "Pamir"

The eldest IMC has a basic camp and two branches, it suggests three traditional and two newly-developed programmes.

The participants of all programmes arrive by air from Moscow to Osh, one of the regional centres of the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist

Republic, from where they go by bus to the basic camp Achik-Tash and then according to the programme they stay in Achik-Tash or go by helicopter to the branches of Fortambek or Moscvina.

Programme I - the basic camp Achik-Tash (3700 m) has two shifts.

The ascent to peak Lenina (7134 m) is the most easy among the ascents to 7000 m mountains of the USSR and other summits of Zaala-isky mountain ridge being 5000-6000 m high. This programme is recommended to the alpinists who make the ascent for the first time.

The length of the programme - 26 days.

The arrival to Moscow is on the 4th or the 26th of July, the return home - on the 29th of July or 20th of August.

Programme II - the branch of Fortambek (4120 m)

The ascent to the highest summit of the USSR peak Communisma (7495 m) along the snow-rock edge of "Burevestnik" and to peak Moscow (6885 m), peak Abalakova (6446 m) on the north walls of the highest degree of complexity and other summits of the mountain ridge of Peter the 1st and Academy of Sciences.

The length of the programme - 30 days.

The arrival to Moscow is on the 6th of July, the return home - on the 4th of August.

Programme III - the branch of Moscvina (4200 m)

The ascent to peak Communisma along the edge of Borodkina and peak Korzhenevskoy (7105 m).

The length of the programme - 30 days.

The arrival to Moscow is on the 10th or the 12th of July, the return home - on the 8th or the 10th of August respectively.

To make the ascent to peak Lenina, peak Korzhenevskoy and peak Communisma it is necessary to set up intermediate camps for high-altitude acclimatization.

Programme "Comby" - the basic camp of Achik-Tash and the basic camp on the glacier of South Inylchek under peak Pobedy (7439 m) in Tien-Shan.

The high-altitude acclimatization in the region of peak Lenina (12-13 days), then a flight to IMC "Tien Shan" and the ascent to peak Pobedy or peak Han-Tengry (7010 m).

The length of the programme - 40 days.

The arrival to Moscow is on the 8th of July, the return home - on the 16th of August.

Programme "Lyailyak"

The ascent to supercomplex summits of Turkestan mountain range situated in the south-west of Kirghizia, 250 km far from the town of Osh.

The participants can try their skill in the rock and combined routes to peaks Aksy (5355 m), Asan (4230 m), Blocka (5239 m), Sabakh (5300 m) and others.

The length of the programmes ± 24 days, at any time during the period from the 20th of June to the 20th of August.

By preliminary requests IMC "Pamir" receives mountain hikers to go on a tour of different length and complexity, the programme of which includes getting over passes to 5000-6000 m, visiting the branches and regions of the ascent.

IMC "Han-Tengry"

IMC is situated in Tien Shan - mountain system in Central and Middle Asia.

The participants arrive by air from Moscow to the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic - Alma-Ata, then they go by bus to the basic camp "Karkara" (2200 m), then they go by helicopter to the camp of "Han-Tengry" on the glacier of North Inylchek (4060 m), 200 km far to the east from lake Issyk-Kul.

Programme A.

The programme envisages the ascent to one of the finest and the most complex summits in Central Tien Shan - peak Han-Tengry (7010 m) and other summits of this region.

The length of the programme - 30 days.

The arrival to Moscow is on the 14th or the 16th of July, the return home - on the 12th and the 14th of August respectively.

Programme B - backpacking.

The tour from the camp "Han-Tengry" having the total length 60-70 km through the glacier of North and South Inylchek (9 nights in tents). The participants of the tour will get the opportunity to see peak Pobedy besides peak Han-Tengry.

The length of the programme - 14 days.

The arrival to Moscow is on the 10th or the 20th of July, the return home - on the 23d of July and the 2nd of August.

Programme C - backpacking.

The trip (110-120 km) from the basic camp of "Karkara", using pack horses over the pass of Echkilitash (3723 m) to the valley of the river Sarydjas, then over the pass of Tyuz (4001 m) to the confluence of the glaciers of North and South Inylchek. Then the route will follow along the glacier of South Inylchek to the foot of peak Pobedy without horses, from there hikers will come back to the camp of "Han-Tengry" to go by helicopter to the basic camp of "Karkara".

The length of the programme - 20 days (16 nights in tents).

The arrival to Moscow is on the 18th of July, the return home - on the 6th of August.

Programme A demands the experience of the ascent from the participants.

The participants of all programmes see Alma-Ata before the return to Moscow.

IMC "Tien-Shan"

IMC is situated in Tien-Shan on the east of the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic 500 km far from the capital of the republic-Frunze.

Programme "Pobeda"

The ascent to the most northern 7000 m mountain of the world peak Pobedy (7439 m), the most difficult and complex 7000 m mountain of the USSR.

The participants arrive by air from Moscow to Frunze, from where they go by special flights to the basic camp on the glacier of South Inylchek.

The ascent to peak Pobedy demands an excellent physical training, good acclimatization and the experience of the ascents.

The length of the programme - 30 days.

The arrival to Moscow is on the 2nd, 8th, 18th, 24th, 30th of July, the return home - on the 31st of July, the 6th, 16th, 22nd, 28th of August.

Programme "Ala-Archa-Alamedin"

The ascent to the summits of the Kirghiz mountain range and trackings in the region of picturesque canyons of the mountain range of Ala-Archa and Alamedin, situated 40 km far from the city of Frunze.

There is a wide choice of routes of any complexity in this region: rock, snow-ice, combined routes to the summits 4000-4800 m, and tracking routes of different length.

The length of the programme - 24 days, at any time during the period from the 10th of June to the 20th of August.

IMC "The Caucasus"

IMC is situated in the most picturesque Baksanskoye canyon in the central Caucasus at the foot of the majestic two-head beautiful mountain - Elbrus (5642 m).

Baksanskoye canyon and neighbouring canyons are the centre of Soviet Alpinism and tourism.

The ascents to Elbrus, the highest summit in Europe, are attractive and complicated at any season of the year.

And the other summits of the central part of the Central Caucasus mountain range and its spurs arouse invariable alpinist interest: Ushba (4710 m), Shkhelda (4320 m), Dykh-Tau (5204 m), Shkhara (5011m) and many others.

Alpinists having different level of training can find routes in accordance with their strength and interest.

The hikers can have excellent opportunities to satisfy their interests in the camp. Dozens of routes of different length and complexity along beautiful canyons, over snow passes are made in this region of the Caucasus. The main task of the hikers is to choose the right route according to their training and experience.

The camp receives the participants of alpinist, tracking, downhill skiing and ski-tour programmes, the length of which is 7, 14, 21, 24 days during the period from March to October at any convenient time.

Programme "Kasbek"

The ascent to the most beautiful summit Kasbek (5047 m) during the period from May to September. The length of the programme - 10 days.

The participants arrive by air from Moscow to Ordzhonikidze - the capital of North Ossetia, having seen the city, they go to the foot of the summit to ascend.

In accordance with the desire (it should be sent in advance) it is possible to combine the ascent to Elbrus and Kasbek into one programme.

Terms of Reception

All programmes include staying at the hotel in a town, staying at tents at a camp, three meals a day, meeting and seeing off at the airport or at the railway station, transport, excursion service and medical aid, interpreter's service, transport of the luggage weighing up to 50 kg, consultations of experienced guides on the ascent routes, guide accompaniment on tracking routes, lifesaving service and other services.

The arrival of the participants to Moscow and the return home should be put in order and paid before their arrival to the USSR.

Requests should be sent to V/O "Sovintersport" not later than the 25-th (twenty fifth) of April, indicating the name of the camp, programme, terms of arrival and numerical strength of the group.

30 days before the arrival it is necessary to report the name, the last name, the date of birth, the passport number, the citizenship and the nearest town where the Soviet consulate is situated and

to pay for the participation in the programmes, to remit money to bank account No.60801042 V/O "Sovintersport", firm "Alptur" in "Vnesheconombank USSR", Moscow in accordance with the momentary rate of exchange. Payment should be confirmed by telefax or telex.

20 days before the arrival V/O "Sovintersport" renders the participants assistance in getting visa only in the presence of payment confirmation. Entry visa should keep the information about the way to the Alpinist camp in accordance with the invitation made by V/O "Sovintersport". The arrival to Moscow should be only on the dates given in the programmes.

15 days before the beginning of the programme you should inform V/O "Sovintersport" about the date of your arrival and departure, indicating flight number or train number.

All foreign participants of IMC should know that "Sovintersport"

- does not bear the responsibility for the level of physical and technical training, reasons of health of the participants and failure of the programmes because of these reasons;

- does not ensure life insurance, insurance against accidents, participants property insurance;

- makes every effort to ensure participants safety, but does not bear the responsibility for accidents and injury, damage, and loss of luggage or personal things not left in the cloak-room; does not pay damages in case entry visas are not given to the participants because of the violation of the Soviet legislation or other reasons

- does not pay for services which are not mentioned in the programme:

- does not provide with alpinist and tourist stock, equipment, clothes;

- puts food, gasoline as a fuel, radio station for communication on the participants starting their routes.

In case of non-participation in the tour according to the given programme by a group or by individual members V/O "Sovintersport" has a right to use penalty sanctions:

- less than 15 days before the arrival to the USSR 15% from the total value of the programme is imposed;

- less than 5 days - 30% from the total value of the programme is imposed;

- less than 48 hours - the total value of the programme is imposed.

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