

ASPEX '90

Anglo-Soviet Pamirs Expedition
1990

Bajsuntai Khrebet
Uzbekistan SR
USSR

July 9th - August 20th

Summarised Report
by
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During the summer of 1990 eleven members of the Eldon Pothole Club, co-operating with 10 members of the Speleocentre Polarex of the USSR, visited the Bajsuntai Khrebet region of the Peoples Republic of Uzbekistan.

The teams objective was the Hodja Gur Gur Ata (3921m a.s.l.), one of a group of tilted plateaus in the region, where they assessed the areas speleological potential paying particular attention to cave entrances located in the 32km long, 300m high limestone wall that forms the plateau's South Eastern rim. The geology and geomorphology of the area was also studied, particularly its relationship to local cave development, ~~and~~ The plateau ^{was} mapped.

Climate and Associated Problems

The region has a dry continental climate with summer temperatures soaring as high as 45°C during the day. Due to the arid nature of the terrain created by this climate, water supplies above 3000m are limited, in the main, to small streams fed by meltwater from the snowfields that are the remnants of the deep winter snows. However, these snowfields disappeared within three weeks of the teams arrival and alternative supplies were established by tapping into small patches of marshy ground, found on the plateau's South Eastern slopes. High winds of up to gale force in strength were also experienced, especially at night. Sheltered campsites are extremely scarce and on one occasion base camp was almost demolished during a particularly severe gale.

Geomorphology

The surrounding region is dominated by South Easterly facing rock walls. Dykes, schists and gneiss observed on the walk in suggest that the topography may be related to the Himalayan mountain building phase. The plateaus are seen to be little affected by faulting, but are thought to be one Jurassic shale to limestone sequence which forms a broad anticline with its western limb dislocated and overthrust thus forming the repeated topographical features of the area.

Travel

An advance team of two people left Heathrow airport on July 9th, and were followed by the main team 11 days later. Both teams travelled by air to Moscow, and the next day a further flight took them to Dushanbe, capital of Tadzikistan, where they met up with their Russian counterparts.

There then followed a bus journey of approximately 200km to the Uzbeki town of Bajsun, where they were accommodated for the night, before a truck took them 50km to the village of Kurgancha, situated beneath the South Eastern slopes of the Hodja Gur Gur Ata.

The next two days were spent on the walk in to a base camp which was established near the base of the wall at an approximate altitude of 3450m.

Exploration in the Field

The wall was sketched and photographed with a note made on the location, apparent potential and ease of access of the entrances. A fixed rope, 'The Stairway To Heaven', was rigged down the wall to provide a quick, safe route between base camp and the top of the plateau.

Cave exploration on top of the plateau was concentrated at its Northern end with the discovery of two mature, active systems which were explored to depths of -238m and -210m. Both caves could be seen to continue beyond the furthest point of exploration. Elsewhere on the plateau a number of deeply incised canyons run in a North Easterly direction away from the edge of the wall. Some minor cave development was observed within these canyons but this was mainly confined to groups of small resurgences.

The instability of the rock wall hampered attempts to reach some of the entrances. Many of these were beneath large areas of loose, overhanging rock making access via abseil impossible. The climbing involved was serious and poorly protected, pitches of 5b+ were commonplace, aid rarely being used because of the lack of suitable placements. Most climbing took place toward the end of the day as the wall basks under the full glare of the sun from dawn until mid-afternoon.

Of the seven entrances entered during the course of the walls exploration, five proved to be insignificant, the passage behind closing down after a few metres. One entrance, overlooking base camp and reached by an exposed traverse off 'the Stairway to Heaven' was explored for 320m in a single passage ending at a mud and ice choke.

Five km South West of base camp, a two day effort involving 230m of hard free climbing of around E1/E2 was rewarded with the discovery of more than 3.7km of passage containing ice formations unique to the area, including an ice river approximately 1km long. Exploration halted at a steep ice gully, leading to a pitch of unknown depth, in a large chamber with numerous inlet passages entering at roof level. Further progress was prevented as the expedition had only three days remaining before the descent to Kurgancha.

Exploration was hampered by the extremely unstable nature of many parts of the cave, numerous boulder falls having to be negotiated, and the low temperature (-2°C). The far reaches of the cave were the site of the expeditions only accident when a boulder slope ran in on one of the team. The victim sustained serious bruising to the lower back and both legs with crush injuries to the left foot. Fortunately he was able to exit the cave and return to base camp unassisted.

Brief Medical Report

During their first days in the field several expedition members experienced bouts of diarrhoea coupled with mild, flu like symptoms. A short course of paracetamol and immodium was an effective treatment with most cases clearing up within 48 hours.

Heavy nosebleeds were experienced by two members of the team most probably associated with the effects of the dry environment at altitude.

On the journey out, all of the team contracted shigella, with symptoms varying from mild diarrhoea to severe vomiting/diarrhoea, high temperature and headaches. Various treatments were tried with none proving effective in easing the symptoms and illness was left to run its course, all cases clearing up within a few days with the exception of one team member who is still undergoing treatment at the time of writing.

Conclusion

The Bajsuntai Khrebet has proved in recent years to be an area of considerable speleological importance, containing the potential for some of the worlds deepest caves. However as this expedition discovered, the problems associated in mounting a venture

like ASPEX '90 make the realisation of such potential a difficult task. As well as the problems outlined above, Soviet bureaucracy and the inexperience of our Russian counterparts in planning such ventures create numerous problems that have to be overcome both before and during any expedition to the USSR. The changing political situation in the USSR makes forward planning difficult as conditions change frequently and often at the very last moment. The logistics of mounting a caving expedition to such a remote mountain region, coupled with these difficulties, is an immense task which resulted in one team member working almost full-time on its organisation.

However as we discovered the rewards are there for any team committed enough.

ASPEX '90 - Team members

U.K. Contingent

Paul Vale	-	Joint Leader
Bob Dearman	-	Deputy Leader
John Middlemist	-	Medical Officer
Beck Daniel	-	Geologist
Bernie Maddison	-	Surface Surveying
Wayne Rickett	-	U'ground " "
Adrian Gregory	-	Cave Photography
Steve Brown	-	Eqp't Officer
Chris Moorcroft		
Rob Wallis		
John Tatton		

Russian Contingent

Vladimir Chowdinov	-	Joint Leader
Vladick Chouklanev		
Igor ?		
Uri ?		

Support-

Andrei ?	-	Radio Operator/Interpreter
Elena Komova	-	Interpreter
Vilytai ?	-	Driver
Albina ?	-	Cook
Sasche ?	-	Cook
Vladimir ?	-	Photographer