



British Mongolian Altai Expedition Монгол Алтайн Аялал

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EXPEDITION REPORT

Destination: MUNKHAIRKHAN MASSIF, ALTAI MOUNTAINS,
WESTERN MONGOLIA

Period: July 14th - 7th August, 1991

Summary

The Expedition was successful in making the first ascent by Westerners of Munkhairkhan (4204m) and Malchin (c4150m). The summits were reached on the 22nd and the 28th of July 1991 by the four members of the Expedition and their Mongolian adviser. The peaks lie approximately 11 miles apart and are the two highest in the Munkhairkhan Massif, which is one of the three highest mountain groups in Mongolia. Two members of the Expedition also made the first recorded crossing of the pass linking the Doloon Nuur and Shuurkhai, the two major valleys to the N of the massif.

Background

Mongolia is one of the least known countries in the world and to many people its name is a byword for the ends of the earth. Lying between the Soviet Union and China, it is roughly the size of Western Europe yet has a population of 2 million, over half a million of those living in the capital city Ulan Bator. It has one of the most extreme climates anywhere, with temperatures dropping from 20 °C in Summer to -30 °C in Winter. The average temperature stays below zero for 6 months of the year.

Mongolia has a proud history dating from the dawn of civilisation. Its horsemen proved time and again to be too much for the defences of its Chinese neighbours and on several occasions shook European civilisation to its foundations. In many cases these whirlwind forays left little to mark their passing but an exception was the great 13th Century empire of Ghengis Khan, stretching from Poland to Peking and centred on his Mongolian capital of Karakorum. The recent history of Mongolia began in 1911, when it declared itself independent of the Chinese Empire. After a short-lived restoration of the traditional Bhuddist monarchy, it became the People's Republic of Mongolia in 1924.

Most of Mongolia has remained out of bounds to the traveller until very recently and life for most Mongolians remains the same as it has been for centuries. The vast majority of the population are engaged in animal herding, living a nomadic life in their tents, or gers. Close relations with the Soviet Union restricted Mongolia's contact with the outside world until the advent of glasnost and perestroika. Most of the 50,000 Soviet troops formerly stationed in Mongolia were withdrawn in 1988 and 1989 and the country has recently seen the first free elections in living memory. The Mongolians are now very keen to establish new cultural, trading and sporting relations and this was an ideal time to build bridges as well as to climb mountains.

Expedition Objective

Until this Summer there has never been a British mountaineering expedition to Mongolia, yet it holds a wealth of unexplored and unclimbed mountains. The Altai mountains run along the Chinese border for a thousand miles, from the country's western limit until they lose themselves in the sands of the Gobi desert. The Hangay and Hentyn ranges lie more to the north and far north-west. All have peaks of alpine stature and, in the case of the Altai and Hangay, they rise to well over 4000m.

The Expedition's target was Munkhairkhan, 4204m, documented in much of the literature as the highest mountain in Mongolia, (though this prize in fact goes to another peak, Kuiten, some two hundred miles to the NW). The name is said to translate as 'His Eternal Grace'. The peak was climbed first by Mongolian mountaineers in 1952 and has since had a handful of ascents, the last in 1988 by a

group of E European and Mongolian climbers. No part of the range had previously been visited by Western climbers.

Personnel

John Town (38) is Senior Planning Officer at the University of Bradford. Married, with 2 children, he is a member of the Alpine Club with climbing experience in the Alps, Pyrenees, Atlas, Himalayas, Caucasus, E Turkey, USA and South America. In 1984, together with his wife, he was the first British climber to visit the Siberian Altai for 80 years and made the first British ascent of Bielukha (4506m), its highest peak. In 1987 he organised the first British expedition to the Amne Machin range of NE Tibet, which made the first ascent of Amne Machin IX (5690m).

Richard Wojtaszewski (26) is a youth leader and lecturer in further education, specialising in English, Communications and Outdoor Education. Originally from Oldham, he now lives near Todmorden and has climbed throughout Britain and in the Alps, as well as travelling in Peru and the Karakorum.

Helen Sweet (38) is a nurse by training, with experience in Switzerland and Australia, who now works as an Information Assistant with the Tame Valley Wardens at the Brownhill Visitor Centre, Saddleworth. Married, with 2 children, she teaches on environmental issues and has a variety of UK canoeing, walking and rock-climbing experience. She has travelled independently through Europe, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and India.

Alun Hughes (41) was employed by an independent film company, Mosaic films, to accompany and film the Expedition. Mosaic are engaged in producing 'Classic Adventure', a series of ten programmes for BBC1 to be transmitted in 1992. Alun is a qualified mountain guide and film maker from Tregarth in North Wales with a number of award-winning productions to his credit.

(T.) Byra (26) is a guide with Zhuulchin, the Mongolian National Tourist Organisation, specialising in hunting tours. Fluent in four languages, extensively travelled in Europe and the Soviet Union, he acted as the Expedition's local organiser and liaison officer.

Balto (26) is a Mongolian climber and member of the Mongolian Mountaineering Federation. Mongolian Rock Climbing Champion in 1990, he was employed by Zhuulchin to assist the Expedition.

Chegme (3?) was the Expedition's lady cook.

Access

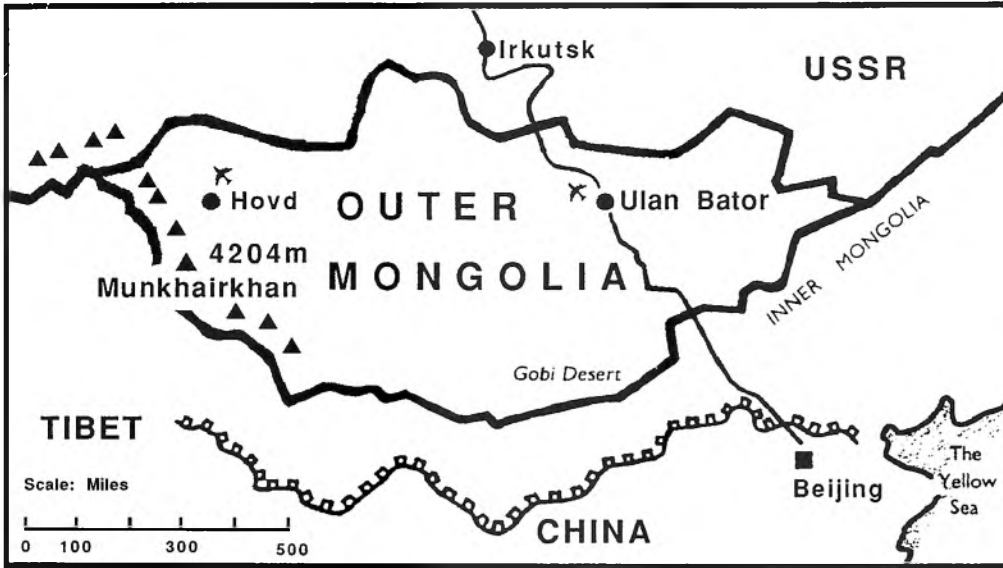
The team flew by scheduled Aeroflot flights on the 15th July from **London** to **Moscow** (3 hours) and onward via **Irkutsk** in Siberia to **Ulan Bator** (9 hours) arriving on the 16th. After a day's delay due to bad weather it continued by air to the provincial centre of **Hovd** in the West of the country (3 hours).

The final leg of 110 miles was by UAZ 66 military lorry over dirt roads to the regional centre of **Munkhairkhan** village and onwards on the 19th July to the first **Base Camp** in the **Doloon Nuur (Seven Lakes) Valley**. The journey from London to Base Camp took a total of five days, covering a distance of over 5,000 miles and a time difference of 6 hours.

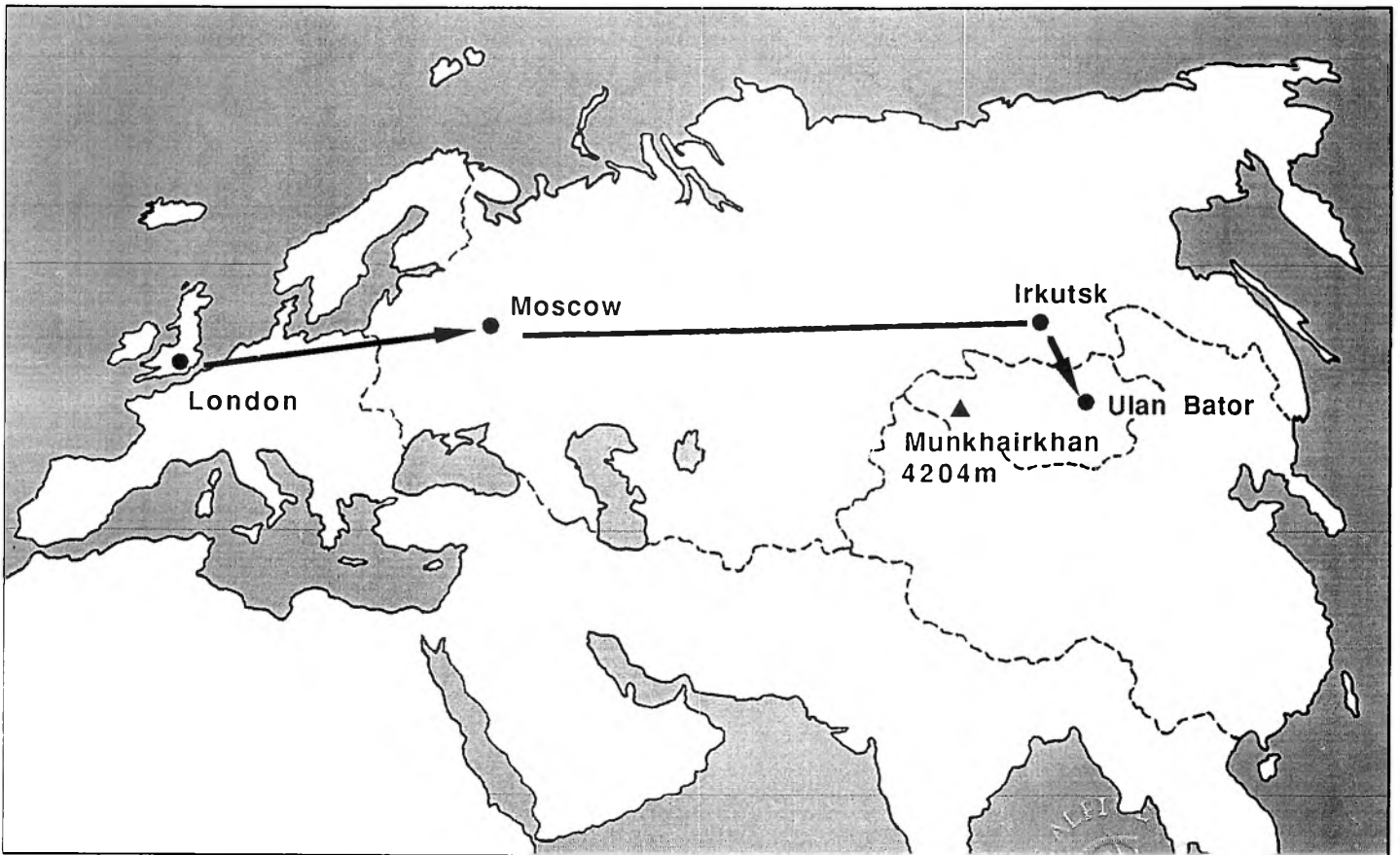
Climbing

The massif is about 30 miles in length and is well seen from one of the passes on the approach. Munkhairkhan is a wedge shaped peak with extensive glacial slopes on the East falling into a cliff-lined glacier cwm at the head of the Doloon Nuur Valley. The Western side of the mountain falls away in sheer and loose granite cliffs of perhaps 2000 feet into a spectacular hidden valley. The Expedition's first Base Camp was placed at about 10,000ft roughly 6 miles below the head of the valley and about a mile below the shoulder of the subsidiary peak of Munkhairkhan II.

On the day after arrival at Base Camp, the 20th July, an exploration was made of the upper valley and a straight-forward route was found up a prominent outcrop to the SE of the Doloon Nuur Cwm to a boulder platform where an upper camp was established at about 12,500 feet. This camp was occupied on the 21st and on the next day, the team started up the glaciated upper slopes of the mountain towards the summit cone. After crossing occasional crevasses they reached a small saddle on the SE ridge and then climbed directly up the steep snow and ice to the summit. The summit party consisted of Balto and the 4 British members of the Expedition. This was the first ascent by climbers from outside the former E Bloc.



- ✈ London - Moscow 1,550 miles July 15th, 1991
- ✈ Moscow - Ulan Bator 2,980 miles July 15th-16th
- ✈ Ulan Bator - Hovd 750 miles July 18th
- 🏠 Hovd - Base Camp 110 miles July 18th-19th



The massif's second major peak, Malchin, lies about 12 miles SE of Munkhairkhan. It is a shapely tooth of rock, flanked by snow, and lies next to a vast high granite plateau at least 6 miles in length which is a major feature of the massif.

On the 25th of July, John Town and Balto set off to traverse from the Munkhairkhan peaks towards Malchin. They collected equipment from the high camp but were prevented by bad weather from ascending Munkhairkhan III or IV. Instead they traversed at a lower level to the 13,000ft pass at the head of the the Doloon Nuur vally linking it to the Shuurkhai valley system. The E side of the pass was descended with some difficulty and a camp made at 8 pm about 3 miles beyond. On the same day the rest of the party moved the Base Camp by lorry to a plain in the lower Shuurkhai valley where it is joined by the Hokh Nuurin (Blue Lake) Valley. On the 26th July the traverse party continued a further 11 miles down the Shuurkhai valley, reaching Base Camp in mid-afternoon. The other 3 members of the party meanwhile conducted an extensive reconnaissance of the approaches to Malchin, reaching within half a mile of the base of the peak, traversing part of the high granite plateau and covering a total of about 20 miles.

Malchin was climbed on the 28th July in one very long day from the Base Camp situated some nine miles away. The mountain was linked to the plateau by a narrow spine of rock in a magnificent situation. This provided the only technical difficulty in circumventing an overhanging step. The mountain's NE ridge, though only a scramble, is a most attractive route and provided a suitable climax. This was the first ascent in 13 years and the first ever by westerners.

Geology

Granite is the predominant rock on the N side of the range, forming extensive grassy uplands up to 13,000 feet in altitude capped by a series of spectacular tors. On the N side of the Shuurkhai valley these uplands terminate in a series of spectacular granite walls up to 800 feet. Opposite these walls on the main watershed, the granite forms a unique high plateau running almost level for 7 miles at 12,000 feet between Munkhairkhan peaks and Malchin. Malchin itself is composed of a surprisingly sound schist which also forms some attractive cliffs on the NE flank of the Munkhairkhan peaks. There is also a good deal of less attractive rock on the N and NW of the same peaks, including fossil bearing slates. Rockfalls are particularly frequent on the walls of the cirque above the Doloon Nuur Glacier

Weather

The weather was excellent, with just the occasional day of rain and cloud. Temperatures were relatively mild, even high on the mountains.

Financial Support

The Expedition was not succesful in finding a major commercial sponsor and in this context is particularly grateful for the £2,300 in grants provided by the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council and the substantial donations made by Altai Components of Salford and Standard Wool of Bradford.

Detailed accounts have yet to be drawn up but the the following represents the approximate position of the Expedition on its return.

Expenditure		Income	
Air Travel London-Ulan Bator	£1,840	Expedition members	£3,150
Transport & Accommodation within Mongolia (\$220 p person p day)	£11,781	Mount Everest Foundation	£1,700
Food	£200	British Mountaineering Council	£600
Medicines	£150	Film Contract	£1,000
Film	£180	Cameraman's costs	£3,348
Insurance	£180	Altai Components Ltd	£1,000
Office & Miscellaneous	£800	Standard Wool (UK)	£500
		Sandoz Ltd	£100
		Mr Stanley Burton	£100
		Druck (Leicester) Ltd	£50
		Miscellaneous donations	£200
TOTAL	£15,131	TOTAL	£11,748

The shortfall has been financed by borrowings of approximately £3,400 by two members of the Expedition. Income from publications, lectures and sales of equipment are estimated at a further £300.