

Pyramide Mountaineering Expedition

1991

Expedition Report

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1. Introduction

Around about early December 1990 a small group of English climbers were getting itchy feet and beginning to look around for a suitable objective. Our main concerns were to find a region that was easily and quickly accessible and yet was still relatively unexplored - quite a contradiction in terms!

The idea for the expedition first came from a magazine article on the Ak Su range in central Soviet Asia. The area seemed to fit all our criteria for a small expedition - rapid access to unexplored peaks and an ease of organisation unknown in the rest of Asia. The low amount of mountaineering activity in the area would seem to be due to its proximity to the Chinese and Afghanistan borders. In fact the area was only opened to Westerners in 1990.

A bit more research revealed the ideal objective - Pyramide peak (5509m) in the Asan valley, reportedly the highest peak in the range and from what photos we could find a real beauty. We could not find any reports that Pyramide had been climbed which was both exiting and rather worrying. It was not until we reached Russia that we found out for sure that it had been climbed on at least two previous occasions by Russian teams.

Actually organising the trip proved to be very simple. All climbing in Russia is organised through clubs with quite rigid hierarchies. We applied to Sovintersport, a "clearing house" based in Moscow who took a cut of our fee and assigned us to the Ukrainian Club. The Ukrainians proved to be excellent hosts and our trip ran very smoothly - we were met at Moscow airport and reached the Ak Su valley in three days!

Being the guests of a club seems to be the only way of arranging an expedition in the USSR. It does mean that you lose a fair degree of independence but once in the mountains you are free to climb as and where you want. The quality of the host club does also vary a great deal. It is possible to apply directly to a club, cutting out the middle men. After our experiences with the Ukrainian club I have no hesitation in recommending them.

2. Expedition Members

Jas Losinski (29) - Property Surveyor

Has travelled widely in India, Nepal and China. With one previous expedition to the Karakoram, Jas is an enthusiastic if almost talentless mountaineer.

Trevor Martin (27) - Applications Engineer

The expedition leader - mainly because no one else wanted the job. When not forced into climbing can be found in his sleeping bag.

John McKeever (27) - Environmental Scientist

John was the most experienced mountaineer on the trip, with previous expeditions to Nepal, Kenya and India. Which meant, like all prima donnas, he could moan as much as he liked.

Paul Sparrow (30) - Computer Scientist

An experienced British rock climber, with Alpine experience and one previous expedition to the Karakoram. He needed a good reason to get out of the country for tax reasons.

Douglas Warburton (27) - Roofer

An experienced rock climber and Alpinist. This was Dougs first trip to the "greater ranges", and unlike the above pen pushers he was actually fit!

3. Outline of the Expedition

Our first stop was Moscow where, having cleared customs, we were met by a member of Sovintersport and bounced across the city to the Hotel Sport. Built for the 1986 Olympiad, the Hotel Sport is massive (22 storeys high), comfortable and clean. The food however did leave a lot to be desired, such as taste. After hunting down a bottle of the local wine (which reminded one member of his days as an alter boy!), and instantly regretting it, we retired to our rooms for a good nights sleep.

The next morning after a quick tour of Moscow (and on your left is the very fine ... ad nauseam) we took an internal flight down to Hodzent (previously called Lenninabad), which lasted about four hours. This was when you first began to notice your "status" as Dollar-wielding Westerners, escorted to the front of the queue, taken to your seats and, on landing, everyone is held up while you get off first. The gigantic scale of Russia also became apparent.

Everything was still going perfectly - we were met once more at the airport, by the Ukrainian climbers this time, their wives and children lending a party atmosphere to the reception. The surrounding country-side was arid, contrasting dramatically with Moscow, the brown hills rising from a haze of dust and heat. We left the airport for our hotel and a shower to remove both sweat and grime, and then on to the local Army hotel for an excellent evening meal, washed down by Champagne and all too much Vodka. My last memories of the evening are sitting on the hotel steps waiting for the Taxi, which took about 2 bottles of cognac.

Everything is a bit blurred for a while, except for the heat. The next stage of our journey was a bus ride up to the Ak Su base camp, with a group of Italians from Milano, the bus being a four wheel drive go (almost) anywhere monster. All our gear was loaded into an equally large lorry, and off we went. The journey was to last about five hours. We passed through semi desert, a few small villages most with huge statues of Lenin or Communist slogans, and very orderly communal farms. As we got higher, the road began to deteriorate until, finally, we came to a section which had been washed out by a mud slide. The driver made an attempt at crossing the quagmire, but only succeeded in sinking upto the front axle in mud - no amount of pushing would get the bus out. Fortunately the lorry turned up to haul the bus out, unfortunately on the wrong side of the slide. The bus driver refused to try again and headed back to the valley. The lorry driver was more adventurous, and got across without any problems. That left us with a ten mile walk to the Ak Su base camp, just as it was going dark, the women and children going ahead on the truck.

We walked for about an hour until we caught up with the lorry at a small camp-site, where we bivied for the night. Next morning saw a leisurely breakfast of bread and sausage, and a stroll (for Doug at least) up the valley to reach base camp just in time to see our helicopter taking off for the Asan valley. We were not to see another for five days.

The Ak Su international mountaineering base camp is a reassuring jumble of tents, we had seen photos of camp sites laid out in neat rows but I am glad to say we found total anarchy. The camp was, however, well equipped with a number of mess tents, an electrical generator, a radio mast and two camp doctors, one female and the other a monster of solid muscle (nick-named Arnold). We spent the rest of the day playing on the excellent granite boulders littered around the site and talking to Russian climbers resting at base camp. In particular we met Victor and Vladimir, a couple of young and enthusiastic alpinists, who had

been in the area for about a month but had done little due to bad weather. In the evening we were given a slide show by (a second) Volodia who had been on the Russian team who climbed the infamous South face of Ihotse, the previous year. The training had included been taken to 9000m in a vacuum chamber and then exercising. When questioned about Tomo Cesens' earlier ascent, he seemed to confirm the rumours that the Russians were suspicious of Tomos' claim to a solo ascent, a view seemingly at odds with the generous nature of most Russians.

We spent the next couple of days waiting for the helicopter and bouldering with the Russians. The only casualty was John McKeever, suffering from a bout of Vodka poisoning and receiving treatment at the hands of numerous attractive ladies, including one of the aforementioned doctors (not Arnold, thankfully)! Treatment included pressure massages and herbal tea - there seemed little incentive to recover! Each day we were promised that the helicopter would arrive so we packed up our gear and waited then unpacked it all again. It was all very frustrating.

On the third day we gave up hanging around and went off with Victor and Vladimir to climb Domazny ("Home peak"), a small limestone peak of 3900 metres, in order to get a bit acclimatised. The party numbered seven, so we split into two groups. One group of four did a rock route of about HVS standard, whilst the other toiled up scree and rubble to the summit. As luck would have it, both groups arrived on the summit at the same time though not without incident. During the climb some loose rocks had come down and one caught Doug in the face - blacking his eye and cutting his face in a couple of places. Back in the valley we woke up Arnold, who went to work with a bottle of iodine.

There was still no sign of the helicopter, so we took the opportunity to walk up to the top of the valley with Victor for a look at Ak Su peak, Alexander Block peak and to get another ascent in. The second peak climbed was Absorbne peak (4200m) which proved to be an utterly dismal climb, with bad weather coming in to boot. The actual route was up a long scrambling ridge which varied from loose, through chossy, to total death - most climbers' worst nightmare. About three quarters of the way up disaster struck. John was about ten meters in front of me when the section of rock he was on gave way, catapulting him over the edge of the ridge. He fell for about ten feet before hitting a small ledge. Pirouetting round he managed to grab a spike of rock, which was for once, solid. A very very lucky man, and having watched the whole thing I think I was more shaken up than he was - even as I write this my heart rate has gone up. We roped up for psychological purposes (we has no gear) and proceeded slowly to the summit, which we reached just as the clouds came down. Fortunately the descent was easy, and we arrived back in base camp just as it was going dark. I found somewhere isolated and quiet to recover my composure.

The next day was used as a rest day and to prepare for the next intended climb, a snow couloir up to a 4600m peak which had been done by an Italian party the day before. Then, just as the sun was setting, the helicopter came skimming, Apocalypse Now-like, up the valley - somewhere "The Ride of the Valkyries" was playing.

At first light the helicopter lifted us and twenty others over to the Asan valley and a base camp prepared for us by a vanguard of the Ukrainian club. We were provided with tents for the valley, including a huge mess tent which looked as if it could stand up to anything, even a direct meteor strike. Within minutes of arriving, Nadia, the wife of Valodia, the Ukrainian leader, had breakfast ready.

The Asan Valley is formed by huge walls of sound granite culminating in the magnificent triangle of Peak Pyramide, which dominated the valley. The rest of the day was spent in an ascent of a twelve pitch route on Point Holland, which our hosts had dismissed as a mere "Rock Gendarme". We had a fantastic days climbing of about TD standard on perfect granite, returning to base camp well after dark.

The following day saw the ascent of Yellow walls, one of the main trade routes in the valley and another fine climb. The next two days were spent either resting, walking or in the case of Paul and John, on an ascent of the pleasant Cathedral Ridge. After this initial frenzy, our activity in the valley was curtailed by a spell of bad weather. Time was beginning to run out and we had to make an attempt on Pyramide. It seemed likely that the weather would not improve enough to give us a sustained clear spell. Our best chance of success was to carry as much food as possible to a high point on the mountain and wait for a clear day to push for the summit.

So on the 9 August, accompanied by Volodia and Sasha, we hauled our massively overweight sacs up the glacier to a camp at the foot of the west ridge. We spent a subdued evening expecting a storm to break before morning. Miraculously, the following morning dawned with clear blue skies. The first days climbing saw us gain the unclimbed North West ridge to a height of approximately 3500m. Next day we reached the summit of the subsidiary peak (4900m) and descended to the col at 4700m. The final day of ascent took us to the summit with the major obstacle being a set of ice cliffs which took four pitches to clear. We returned to our camp at the col in a seventeen hour day. It took a further day to descend to the base camp via easy slopes at the head of glacier formed by the west ridge - the route of previous ascents of the mountain. As we reached the safety of the glacier the clear weather ended and the first rain started as we walked down to the base camp. After a couple of days rest we concluded our visit with some trekking and a further rock climb on Point Holland.

On 20 August, the helicopter returned to fly us out. Unfortunately due to a slight amount of confusion Paul had mislaid his camera at the foot of a climb and had gone to retrieve it. While he was gone the helicopter arrived and he still was not back by the time we had loaded all the gear on board. Since the pilot would not wait we had little choice but to leave without him. We also left with all his gear, money, passport and visa. No one could quite remember who loaded them onto the helicopter but I think that I can now safely (?) reveal it was me.

We reached Hodzent the same day and were greeted with the news that Gorbachov was "Out" though no one new why, or indeed, who was "In". All the phones were dead and there was only soothing music and old films (a sure sign of disaster) on the TV. It was not until we could pick up the World Service in the evening that we found out what had happened.

We now had to wait for Paul to catch up before deciding what to do - a joke is a joke but you can only take it so far when in "darkest" Asia. Meanwhile, all the Ukrainians in Hodzent seemed very relaxed about the situation, and that evening we dined once more in the local Army Hotel. As we got back to the Hotel feeling tired and emotional, Paul arrived looking older than I remembered, refused to talk to us and found a bed and went to sleep.

Our arrival back in Moscow on the 23 August coincided with the return of democracy, the destruction of Dzerjinskis' statue, and the end of the communism in the USSR. A dramatic and memorable end to an eventful and successful expedition, notable not only for its climbing but for the warm friendship, not only amongst its participants, but between the us and our Ukrainain hosts.

4. Rock Routes in the Asan Valley, by Paul Sparrow

2 August 1991 Point Holland SW Ridge

In burst of enthusiasm and frustration from not being able to do much climbing while in Ak Su Valley we decided to attempt the most obvious line on Yellow Wall, the diagonal crack across the face, on the morning of our arrival in Asan Valley. A route description was obtained from Brian Swales, currently resident at BC, and due to depart that same morning.

At approximately 8.30 am the party departed for Yellow Wall. An hour later we abandoned the attempt as we could not find a place to cross the river which would avoid getting our feet wet. A second objective, Point Holland, on our side of the river, was identified after some haphazard deliberation. We selected an area on Point Holland where we were fairly sure no routes had been attempted. Our route started from half way up the gully at the right hand end of Point Holland. To do the route we divided into two parties; John and Doug leading off, with Trevor and myself a pitch behind. The climbing was enjoyable on clean, dry, solid rock, with the exception of one pitch which was partially wet. The hardest pitch was approximately E1 5b and the route took about 6 hours (see the include route description).

Having reached the top, the abseil line, recommended to us by Brain Swales, went diagonally down the face and involved abseils of which a couple were distinctly unpleasant. We finished abseiling at dusk and descended the slope to the track running along side the river. During this descent we noticed a fire in the valley and heard occasional shouts, which we ignored. This turned out to be our Russian hosts looking for us, assuming we were climbing on Yellow Wall. On our arrival at the track we met our Russian hosts and were escorted back to base camp.

3 August 1991 Yellow Wall

Buoyed up with the success on Point Holland we decided to attempt Yellow Wall again. The whole team and Valodia left base camp at approximately 9.00 am. Jas and Valodia were going climbing on Little Asan, which was further up the valley. Valodia indicated the crossing point for the river - two large boulders with a six foot jump from the second large boulder. Having crossed the river we reached the base of Yellow Wall at approximately 10.00 am and started climbing at 10.30 am. For the climb we split into the same parties as the previous day, with Doug and John in the lead. The first few pitches were fairly unpleasant as the crack line was also the drainage line for the face. Once these pitches were completed the climbing was easy and enjoyable on clean solid rock.

The aid pitch, which was lead by John, was interesting involving several long reaches while standing in slings. The next pitch was the hardest non aid pitch on the climb, at approximately HVS 5a/5b with little protection. After two more pitches we arrived at the first summit, by which time we were behind scheduled. The next pitch was a curving wet crack which was aided as we were running out of time. This lead to easier ground, and the top at approximately 6.30 pm. The descent was a off to the left and down a track to the river. We waded the river, by which time it was dark, and returned to base camp.

5 August Cathedral Ridge

After a rest day, John and myself went climbing on Cathedral Ridge, which is the first ridge beyond Yellow Wall, while Doug and Trevor reccied the end of the valley in preparation for our attempt on Pyramide. Valodia escorted us to Cathedral Ridge to show us the starting point. This route offered pleasant and easy climbing, with several vegetation pitches, and took about 4 hours. The descent from the top involved one abseil (50m) into an ice filled gully, which was interesting in rock boots. Having descended the gully we found that my training shoes had been left on the route. After a frank exchange of views and blame apportionment we decided it was too late to retrieve the training shoes. The only option was to walk back to base camp in my rock boots. Instead of wading the river this time we crossed it via a fairly unstable wet tree trunk bridge.

16 August Point Point Holland Variation Direct start to the SW Ridge

After resting for several days John, Doug and myself went climbing on Point Holland again while Jas and Trevor went walking. We selected a route just to the left of our original line. When climbing started Doug and mine enthusiasm soon waned and all the leading was left to John. The climbing was slightly harder than on our original route with three pitches of about HVS 5b leading to one of E1/2 5b up a fine corner with a capping bulge. As the higher ground looking harder and the weather dodgy, we performed a pendulum and traversed rightward until we linked up with our original line. From this point we did 3 (50m) abseils down the face until we could walk off. We returned to base camp at 3.30 pm, just as it started to rain.

18 August Cathedral Ridge Revisited

As I only has plastic boots and rock boots after the loss of my training shoes I felt the need to recover my training shoes. I set out at 5.15 am to recover my trainers, after some enjoyable soloing I found my training shoes about halfway up the ridge. At this point I made a big mistake and decided to abseil down the face rather than continuing up the ridge. This involved 4 (25m) diagonal abseils, one off a dodgy 4 rock and one off a boulder which required 20 minutes of gardening to make adequate. The last abseil was the most diagonal of all and I slipped about ten feet from the ground and took a large swing across the face, luckily this abseil was from the best anchor point I had found on the descent. I returned to base camp at 10.30, with my training shoes, but severely shaken.

19 August One Of Those Days

During packing I discovered I had lost my camera while doing the Point Holland Variation. After sitting waiting for the helicopter all morning it finally arrived at midday. I decided to attempt to find my camera while it transporting the Italian Expedition back to Ak Su valley. I had about an hour, so I ran off up the valley. As I started to run out of time I put my rockboots down and climbed in trainers to where I thought my camera was. When I reached this point my camera was not there and during the descent, by which time I was out of time, I couldn't find my rock boots. I assumed the helicopter would wait till I returned but I sprinted back to base camp just in case, almost knocking myself unconscious on a low branch in the process. When I arrived at base camp the helicopter had come and gone with all the other expedition members and all the gear. It turned out the helicopter was going to return to collect the Russians who where supporting the Italians. To cut I long story short I linked up with the Italian Expedition and spent a cold night in Ak Su valley before meeting up with the other members of the expedition the next evening.

5. Ascent of Pyramidalny (5509m) by John McKeever

Pyramidalny, better known to Westerners as Pyramide, achieved a certain degree of fame due to two articles, both in Mountain, with rumours of virginity and more than a fair share of good looks. While she proved to be undeniably impressive, with a superbly sculpted geometric form, the rumour proved to be just that. It was not until we had met our Ukrainian hosts did we learn the truth; the West ridge was a "trade" route with many ascents to speak of by Eastern mountaineers.

However, not knowing of this, in early 1991 no fewer than three British teams had designs on this previously unknown peak. By July, my team had collapsed due to a "misunderstanding" with the MEF, and I was enrolled by Trevor Martin to the "Reed International" posse. In retrospect, this proved to be a stroke of good fortune, as our expedition turned out, helicopter trouble notwithstanding, to be a very happy and successful one. However, I am jumping ahead of myself, there is still the story of Pyramidalny to tell.

As indicated above, the helicopter proved to be notoriously unreliable. After a total of 12 days "waiting" for one to take us to the South side of the mountain, we came to appreciate that they were not the final solution for walk-haters like myself. After yet another broken dead-line we gave up the "first ascent of the south side of Pyramide" plan, and opted for the West ridge ploy; maybe this explains its' popularity! Not only were we short of time but the weather was relatively unreliable, with routine storms and showers in late afternoon - indeed, the excess of high altitude snow had forced the Brian Swales team to retreat just one day from the summit. So, in a rain shower, we trudged up the Asan valley, past 1000 metre granite walls glazed with verglass and powder and a rogue Yak which glowered at us with malevolent eyes. Apparently this Kirghizian minotaur had chased Valodia on a previous expedition to Asan, and our Ukrainian friend was taking no chances, giving the beast a wide berth.

Just two hours from Base, we set up camp in a grassy hollow on the left, and wrong, side of the glacier, and prayed for some decent weather. After a furtive night we crawled out to a clear dawn. Our raised optimism was only slightly diminished by the towering northern aspect of our objective. We were none the less inspired, and at 6.00 am we snaked towards the base of a prominent spur curving down from point 4900m, a shoulder on the popular west ridge. This "north west" ridge was the normal route, or so Valodia would have us believe, and we were assured that the day would see us to near 5000 metres. The dry glacier proved straight-forward, but the moraine below the ridge was horrific - three steps up to two down being the norm. Not surprisingly, considering our lack of acclimatisation, we were soon struggling with both altitude and sacks heavy with tents and two foot long sausages, our backup food supply for sitting out high altitude storms. On reaching the snow-line at about 3000m, our French speaking Russian porter named Sasha off-loaded various items then turned back, to follow our progress by binoculars from the primitive advanced base camp. Sweating in the early morning sun and feeling ready to pitch camp already, we sat on slate boulders and eat dried apricots and Mars bars.

Looking down the valley we could see the huge granite walls of Asan and the even more daunting Point 4810 metres in profile on the right, and the crumbling heap of Karasu peak on the left. This contrast was perplexing. It seems typical of the area that the transition from solid to shale occurs in a quantum leap with no intermediate state. Our route looked to belong to the latter category,

snowed over but obviously crumbly, and not the easiest looking voie-normale I had ever seen. Once again Valodia assured us that this was the way, though murmurings of dissent could be heard. But who were we to argue with a Soviet gold medallist and "Master of Sport"?

We floundered up ever slushier snow to the 50 degree slope leading onto the ridge. Valodia led over the Bergshrund, at one point dodging a falling slab which seemed intent on causing serious injury, before roping up with Jas on the steep gravel slopes above. This was a purely psychological measure as no belays were to be found; the rest of the team preferred to move unroped, picking our way from one snow patch to the next via horrifyingly loose shale. The technique which seemed most effective on this "rock" was classic front-pointing, hacking with banana picks into the gravel until some sort of dubious purchase had been attained. Three hours of this led to a couloir of insecure soft snow on hard, brittle, ice, which was fought up until eventually we were forced to get out the ropes a mere 80 m from the crest of the ridge.

I had inherited the sharp end, thanks(?) to my ice experience, though the above 80 degree verglas embedded with shale bore little resemblance to Scottish neve or New England water-ice. Blunted axes could barely penetrate the blackest ice I have ever seen, while crampons persistently skated out of their tiny nicks. Protected by two titanium ice screws I belayed Doug up to my high point, 10m from easy ground, but with some difficult stuff in between. I was intimidated enough to leave the rucsac behind, dangling with Doug on the foot-wide and disintegrating ledge. Thus liberated, I made good progress until the "ice" ran out and shale took over. Looking at a 50 foot fall I scrabbled for placements, swallowing panic and feeling like a beached whale as I flopped onto the soft snow. I was grateful to be alive, as were the rest of the team who had been dodging falling debris for the last hour. A rope was fixed using pegs in expanding cracks, and the rest began jumaring on time consuming and awkward prussic loops.

By one of those rare and fortunate coincidences there was a "camp site" nearby. As it turned out, this was the only flat ground for 1000m, wide enough for two Quasars with a certain amount of excavation, but with little room to spare. Doug, a taciturn Yorkshireman with a fresh scar above his right eye from a recent argument with a Russian rock, soon joined me to assist in digging out the ledge. Warmed by the exercise we could not appreciate how the rest felt, and after three hours Yash was still waiting to struggle up the rope. By the time he had dragged his frozen limbs to our camp the sun was setting, turning the sky a lurid red and the granite walls to burnt orange.

In the aftermath of our excretion we were suffering from numerous complaints, including headaches, loss of appetite, various blisters and sun burnt lips. Trevors cremated offering of Vegeburger and partially hydrated Smash was barely edible, but my co-habitees Doug and Paul, seemed to like it. I forced a few slices of sausage down, and took a diamox pill. I had never used drugs to combat altitude before, but as our acclimatisation routes had not taken us above 4200m I felt it could only do me good. At least it tasted better than the main course!

Enough of the snide remarks - while I was lying in 1200 grammes of goose down feeling sorry for myself Trevor was still outside in the bitter cold struggling over an MSR stove. One trademark of an experienced alpinist is the ability to be in the pit before anyone else! Listening to the gentle sound of cooking was very soothing and I was soon asleep, only to be disturbed a few minutes later by Trevor shouting that someone was walking up the glacier below. The pair of

Petzl torches were heading, not for our route, but for the head of the side valley suggesting an alternative, circuitous, route leading round the back of point 4900m and onto the West ridge proper. This tied in with my own feelings and, having experienced the horror below, I was praying for a different descent route. Doug and Paul were soon cocooned next to me (who said a Quasar is a two man tent; for those keen to save weight it is a reasonable and warm compromise). After a few minutes of jostling for position a good but short nights sleep was had by all.

5.30 am, dawn and noises from outside the tent. Trevor was cooking again - the man is a hero! One trademark of an experienced alpinist etc. A few mugs of tea through the tent door and I felt able to face the outside world. Harder to face were my boots, which had rubbed one inch long holes in my feet - not being one to complain, I proceeded to moan continually about it all day. The morning was clear, our luck was holding, and the snow had frozen well but the sun was doing its usual damage. By the time I had run out the first 150 metres, moving through a Friend in relatively solid rock and a single ice screw (luxury!), we were on slush and shale again. Doug joined me, scornfully glanced at my ice axe belay, then set off up an exposed and difficult section completely devoid of protection or solid ground. He was wading up to his waist at some points, gaining height despite the snow, altitude, heavy rucsac and exposure. Meanwhile Valodia had joined me, with his 4 foot alpenstock, and looked rather nervous at the prospect of re-leading Dougs pitch. I offered to take a rope up for him, which he seemed grateful to receive. Still the Voie Normale, Valodia? The next pitch was enjoyable, a snow groove on the crest of the ridge with, shock-horror, regular belays in the form of large spikes. By now we were starting to suffer with altitude and exhaustion. The ridge seemed eternal, 50m runouts from belays I would be reluctant to hang a sandwich from, seemed to have little impact on the overall length of the remaining route. We were gauging our progress from the North face to our left (a horrible prospect for any aspiring Nordwanderer), and the col between the main west ridge and Point 4900m. Eventually we were overlooking the col, and the ridge doglegged towards the subsidiary summit. Doug broke through wind slab on the final, broad, easy angled section, and the north west spur was ours.

Despite the indisputable fact that the quality of climbing left something to be desired, some definite and undeniable stirrings of pride were to be felt. Especially so when Valodia admitted that we had climbed a new "British Variant". By now this was hardly a surprise, as we could see two climbers at the Serac barrier of the summit ridge, and on their way to the top. We were not disappointed by this. Not only were we content with our variant, the footsteps would be welcome in the morning! On a more pessimistic note, high cirrus clouds were building to the north, announcing an imminent change in the fine weather. To fail now would have been unbearable.

Below was a wide flat glacier dropping down to the south side of Pyramide. This might have been our ascent route if the helicopter had turned up on time, a far more reasonable prospect than the north west ridge. The summit was a further 900m of vertical height above the basin, barred at 250m by a serac barrier then followed by relatively straight-forward snow. Described clinically, our chances sounded good, though judging by the slow progress of the two mountaineers above it was not going to be easy. 300 metres of easy ground, including a cool bum slide, took us down to a relatively flat camp site beside the path. And what is more, running melt water was to be found 20 metres away.

6.00pm. My boots were off - joy! The holes in my feet were gruesome to look at, and did not feel too good either. After another smash and vegeburger mix (the correct consistency this time) we settled down to a brief nights sleep. And I mean brief, three hours or so of restless dozing, penetrated by the sounds of the two climbers above, descending through the serac barrier.

How I loath alpine starts! So did everybody else by the sound of things, the black Pamir air disturbed by the noise of groaning, complaining climbers. The two mountaineers were Italians, both based at the Asan camp and known by our team. They were travelling light and looked exhausted, so we offered them our vacant sleeping bags before following their tracks to the base of the West spur. By moving rapidly we managed to keep warm, but a chill factor was penetrating our multi-barrier clothing, while an increased feeling of exposure was draining us mentally. We climbed as three pairs, with Doug and I breaking trail to the serac barrier, leaving belays in-situ behind us.

Half way up the 60 degree slope, word reached me that Jas and Valodia were returning to camp. This was partly due to the poor equipment owned by Valodia, and a wish not to hold us back. I was sorry to see them return, but at the time I was absorbed in achieving our objective, and hardly hesitated in moving up the face. In pale dawn light we reached a steep wall of blue ice which barred our way to the final snow ridge, shattered by the Italian ice axes, and described by them as 'diabolical'. They were right, the ice was brittle, calf shattering and time consuming to ascend, although not overly technical. One hanging belay later, we emerged from the frozen shade into the sun-light of early morning, and potential success.

The route to the summit followed a broad ridge, around a gendarme and a final 500 foot of unstable snow on a base of 60 degree ice. Doug was powering ahead, while I was struggling in the emotional aftermath of leading the serac barrier. Trevor and Paul were holding up well, though the strains of tiredness, lack of sleep and altitude was showing through a veneer of thin humour. I had been there before many times, and could appreciate the unfounded irritation at any small hassle. Close to the top we roped up again for a small step of unstable rubble, before crawling to the broad and corniced summit. The views were stereo-typically dramatic, 7000 m giants, many miles away, contrasting with the 5000 m granite pinnacles and crumbling rubble heaps of the Kirghizian range. Unable to really appreciate the beauty, we abseiled from Russian ice-screws, after the traditional photo session.

So, 17 hours after leaving the high camp, we staggered back to a warm welcome and hot soup. All that remained was to sleep away some of the tiredness and to follow the normal route (almost a path!) back to base. The descent went smoothly, other than the final 1000 ft of snow. I started a bum slide on pleasant neve, which rapidly turned to sheet ice. 800 feet later I came to a halt, unscathed, in a snow drift. Trevor and Jas were less fortunate. They were totally out of control dramatically somersaulting down the slope. Their multiple grazes and bruises were to provide many days to come of painful iodine from Arnold, sympathy from the girls, and derisive remarks from the rest of the team.

6. Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the help of the following people in the success of this expedition;

Susan Smart	Reed Information Services
Mike Brightwell	Director of Sport Brunel University
Nick Parks	Alpine Guide
Mick Fowler	Leader of 1990 Ak Su Expedition
Brian Swales	Leader of 1990 Asan valley Expedition
The BMC and MEF	For their financial support

Appendix

Appendix A Expedition Budget by J A Lozinski 15-11-91

A. Expenses

The table shows our Budget and Actual Costs excluding VAT for the various categories.

Item	Quantity	Budget cost (£)	Actual cost (£)
a) Travel			
Flights: London to Moscow(rtn);	5	-	1350
Visas and Procuration Fee;	5	-	62
Additional Helicopter Charge;	-	-	300
Total Travel		1800	1712
b) Fee for Sovintersport	5	4840	4840
c) Food High (Altitude Food Only)	-	350	100
d) Communal Equipment			
Tents;	2	-	531
Technical Gear (Pegs/Friends);	-	-	174
T-Shirt Production;	100	-	430
Total Communal Equipment		1200	1135
e) Insurance			
Expedition Team Insurance:	5	-	550
Communal Gear Insurance:	-	-	35
Total Insurance		660	585
f) Miscellaneous			
Cash in Russia:	-	-	400
Red Star Letters/Parcels:	-	-	48
Telephone:	-	-	110
Medical Equipment:	-	-	30
Presents:	-	-	50
Total Miscellaneous		1000	638
Total Expenditure		£9850	£9010

B. Income

The sources of income were;

Item	Quantity	Budget (£)	Actual (£)
Source Members Contribution (5*£1411.27):	5	7856	7056
Sale of T-Shirts (broke even):	100	-	430
Mount Everest Foundation:			500
British Mountaineering Council:			400
Reed Information Services:			624
Total income		9850	9010

Appendix B

How to go climbing in the Soviet Union by J A Lozinski, 10-11-91

In all honesty, being of Eastern European origin, I am surprised how relatively easy it is to organise a mountaineering expedition to the Soviet Union, a country well known for its bureaucracy.

We set about deciding which area in the Soviet Union we intended to visit and in particular which unclimbed large mountain was on offer. Here our information came from initially the magazine "Mountain" where articles on mountaineering in Russia were featured on a regular basis. Two articles in particular were instrumental in assisting us on deciding our objective. The first was by Mick Fowler who last year had visited the Ak-Su area of the Pamir Range in the republic of Kirghizia and secondly an article by Brian Swales, a member of the Fell and Rock Climbers Club, who also had visited a neighbouring valley called Asan. We followed up these leads with the usual visits to The Royal Geographical Society (for maps), The Alpine Club (for expedition reports) and The British Mountaineering Council (for their information pack on Russia which cost approx. £3.50). Having collated the necessary information, we cold-called both Mick Fowler and Brian Swales to seek their advice on the best approach and on what to expect. Their enthusiasm for the country and for the largely unexplored and unclimbed mountains, convinced us of the need to organise this trip with speed. Our objective became Peak Pyramide, a 5509 metre mountain situated at the head of the Asan Valley in the Pamir range in the republic of Kirghizia. It is reputed to be the highest peak in this part of the Soviet Union.

So how do you go climbing in the Soviet Union? In the first instance, you must choose a mountain(s) that is in a locality where an "Official Mountaineering Camp" is based. There are many such camps situated throughout the mountainous regions of the Soviet Union and they operate only in the recognised climbing season. These "Official Mountaineering Camps" are organised by a number of state agencies that are based in Moscow. It is worth noting, that one is not obliged to organise a trip through such an agency. Instead, it is possible to contact a climbing club in the Soviet Union, and through them arrange the visit. However, it is advisable to have some knowledge of the club in question and about its members. Quite simply, we wrote to an organisation called Sovintersport, who are based in Moscow and who are in fact a government agency responsible for organising foreign expeditions to their country. They in turn, sent us their program for summer 1991. It was Mick Fowler who suggested that we contact them as previous British teams had been led astray by unscrupulous Soviet agencies/mountaineering clubs. Sovintersport however, we were assured were efficient and trustworthy, although expensive.

Our man in Moscow, Victor Nikolaev (Sovintersport's manager) requested the names of our team, our passport numbers, our dates of birth, the objective and the date of our arrival. This information was sent to him over a period of months by registered post which is essential or by fax, which speeds matters up considerably. Our proposed objective was not in fact within Sovintersport's 1991 program and as a result we were therefore obliged to send them a sketch map of the relevant peak and surrounding glaciers, our choice of approach, position of base camps and the climbing route. It was a surprise, when the agency approved of our goal but no doubt they were keen to accommodate our

objective within their nearest mountaineering camp. However, although in theory Sovin enthusiastic towards our objective, the reality was that we were never able to climb Peak Pyramide from our chosen approach or route. To a certain extent it was not the agency's fault as we had to rely upon helicopter transportation and this was determined by weather conditions and demand placed upon the helicopter.

Over the preceding months, Sovintersport responded to our queries and information either by telex or by fax. Their standard of English was more than adequate and understandable. Towards the end of the preparations, we had problems with the issuing of visas by the Soviet Embassy in London. Having received our details, Sovintersport in turn telexed the embassy in London officially inviting our expedition and advising them to issue the visas and details of the areas to be visited by us ie Moscow, Hodzent, The Pamirs and back. Knowing full well the bureaucracy of this great nation, we decided to enlist the services of Intourist, the Official Soviet Tourist Agency based in London. In addition to acquiring our plane tickets via them, for a small charge Intourist will arrange for the issuing of visas and more importantly deal with this often frustrating process. They were very helpful indeed, but the exercise took three weeks to conclude because the Soviet Embassy had lost Sovintersport's vital invitation fax. Added to this, when at last the visas had been issued, one of the points of destination was not included and three days before our departure, this small matter had to be resolved. We were later to find that there was a second destination error on our arrival in Moscow, but because of the political chaos in the country, it did not create any difficulties.

The question of finance was an interesting one. The cost of attending such a mountaineering camp was mentioned in Sovintersport's program literature. This initial figure was increased to reflect our deviation from their itinerary, a few extra days and extra use of the helicopter service. The cost came to about £1000 per person. This sum did however include absolutely everything- accommodation food and sight-seeing in Moscow; internal flights and travel; helicopter time; base camp accommodation and food and drink including copious quantities of vodka and Crimean Cognac; a doctor and experienced mountaineers who were familiar with the area and who were keen to climb with us. The sum did not include return flights from England or use of radio transmitters whilst climbing. The payment of this money which totalled some £5000 was initially to be sent to Moscow by electronic transfer from our bank to the Vnesheconombank in Moscow which has recently fallen on hard times. The idea was very worrying and we convinced our Russian friends, that as we did not trust their banking system, we would ourselves bring the money in German Marks (a common denomination requested by the Soviets) in cash. The money was officially cleared by Soviet customs and handed in person to Victor Nikolaev. This method is fail-safe provided one is not robbed at Moscow's Airport or whilst travelling to the hotel. It is however, important to ask for an invoice from Sovintersport on your arrival in Moscow in the event of a dispute.

On leaving Moscow, we were in the hands of the Dniepropetrovsk Climbing Club (known as "Radegast"), a club from the Ukraine. They were to act as our hosts for the duration of the actual expedition. Basically, Sovintersport sub-contract this work to various climbing clubs who benefit by earning some extra hard currency. As far as foreign expeditions are concerned, it is the

luck of the draw as to what sort of club becomes your host. Some are more interested in saving their foreign currency rather than feeding you adequately. Whilst others are only too happy to look after you. We did in fact hear of such unscrupulous clubs. Our hosts however, were absolutely fantastic. Nothing was too much trouble for them, the food was excellent and plenty of it and we were treated like royalty. Such hospitality not one of us had experienced before and we would highly recommend future expeditions to use the services provided by the Dniepropetrovsk Climbing Club. It is precisely here in this case where, having established strong links with a club that we would advise by passing the Moscow agencies.

To summarise,

I have set out below the important points to consider, namely:-

- a) Be very careful when dealing with the Soviets. Always check and double-check in order to prevent any disputes or disappointments eg the visas.
- b) Correspond with the Soviets in simple English.
- c) Seriously consider what "Radegast" (Dniepropetrovsk Climbing Club) has to offer in their climbing program. It will be cheaper than what Sovintersport will charge and they will be more flexible in arranging your particular objective. Judging by the way they treated us, you will not be disappointed.

References:

Mr V Nikolaev Sovintersport Soviet Foreign Economic Association Bolshoy Rzhevskiy per
Tel: 291-11-48 Fax: 230-29-48

Mrs L Phillips Intourist Travel Limited Intourist House 219 Marsh Wall LONDON E14 9FJ

Tel: 071-538-8600

Fax: 071-538-5967

"RADEGAST" USSR,
320027 DNIEPROPETROVSKO ktyabrskaya Square

Tel: 47-03-11 Fax: 05-62-47-03-10

"Mountain" No 136 "Back in the USSR" by Mick Fowler. "Mountain" No 137 "Asan Acquaint Swales.

Appendix C Medical matters by J A Lozinski, 10-11-91

In view of the better health standards that exist in this north western part of the Greater Himalayan Range (being close to the major Soviet Asian conurbation) and the relatively easy terrain underfoot whilst on expedition, the team were limited to really only climbing injuries, accidents and related illnesses. Our medical officer, Jas (bigboy) Lozinski held basic Public and Mountaineering First-Aid qualifications and had previously additional tuition from a number of medical students from St Bartholemews Hospital in London. Jas was not experienced in minor surgery nor intra-venous injection/use of drips. This was reflected in the contents of the kit which was based on previous expedition medical kits and advise from various medical sources. It did however include an AIDS Kit, an absolute must in these remote parts of the World (sterile needles, syringes, stitching thread and butterfly sutures and selection of dressings).

With nobody being a member of the medical profession, we found it impossible to amass items for free from the pharmaceutical companies. However, we were lucky that we had a sizeable stock of medical equipment saved from previous expeditions/other climbing sorties that was taken with us. Any additional items were bought at home in the local chemist. Before departure, most of the team were immunised against Tetanus, Typhoid, Hepatitis A (Gamma Globulin), Rabies and Tick Born Encephalitis, a disease that attacks the nervous system and is found in the foothill forests of Soviet Central Asia. Although, advised to take anti-malaria tablets, we decided that due to their unpleasant nature and our limited exposure time, the risk to us was minimal. On arrival at Base Camp, our basic medical proficiency was greatly improved by the presence of a Russian doctor Sergei, who was later to be nick-named "Arnold" after his rather immense and very muscular physique. Sergei was a sports doctor and his knowledge of and experience in dealing with mountain injuries/illnesses was second to none. As regards his medical equipment, it was comprehensive and modern but lacked key drugs. It did however, include a nasty antiseptic called iodine which was used in copious amounts for every minor graze and cut. It proved very unpopular with the team as "Arnold" insisted on its use and was of great amusement especially as we really could not argue with this giant of a man. Seriously though, Sergei was very gentle, caring and proficient in his application of First-Aid.

The pressure for Jas to perform in an emergency was now not necessary. His role was to assist. On the eve of our climb on Peak Pyramide, Sergei insisted that each member was not allowed to go unless they had passed his medical examination. We were confused and perplexed by this authoritarian attitude but succumbed. He checked the heart-beat and its strength, blood pressure and our recovery rate in order to assess our acclimatisation and fitness. We were all very nervous but thankfully passed with flying colours.

The following illnesses were reported and treated:-

1. Diarrhoea Mild forms of this disorder as expected struck some members of the team Russian diet is similar to our own. Certainly the fat content in their food proved ha as did their choice of some foodstuffs eg eating raw pig fat and drinking "kwas" a fe bread concoction with a low alcohol content. Electrolyte solution to replenish lost li with aspirin and immodium if necessary were prescribed. Antibiotics were not required
2. Minor Cuts Mainly sustained to limbs in everyday activity. Treated with relish with iodine.

3. Acclimatisation Having been flown in by helicopter to base camp at 2500 metres, the team was not properly acclimatised. A few suffered minor headaches early on. A high fluid intake and a good solid diet sorted this problem out quickly. Diamox was used by some of the team members to improve performance whilst climbing. It also did improve sleeping at high altitude.
4. Limbs. Nobody suffered any serious injuries to arms ankles or knees. Jas Lozinski did however, remove a small layer of his skin from his arm following a fall of some 40 feet on his return from Peak Pyramide. He was treated by Sergei with copious amounts of iodine on a daily basis for sometime. He was not amused (others were!).
5. Other Injuries. Douglas Warburton whilst on a climb was very lucky not to lose his eyesight when a small stone ricocheted of the rockface and into the top of his cheek-bone, just below his right eye. He sustained a bloody cut that was treated by Sergei over a period of days. It unfortunately became infected and the puss had to be carefully drained out using hot disinfected water and of course iodine. Doug was later to recover fully.
6. Miscellaneous. The usual problems of sunburn, colds and exhaustion which was very apparent at the end of the expedition, were noted. At the end of the expedition, a large proportion of the medical kit was donated to Sergei.

Finally our thanks go to :-

Dr Ellie Barnes, St Barts, London Dr Andrew Pollard, St Barts, London Richards Pharma
London

Appendix D Contact Address

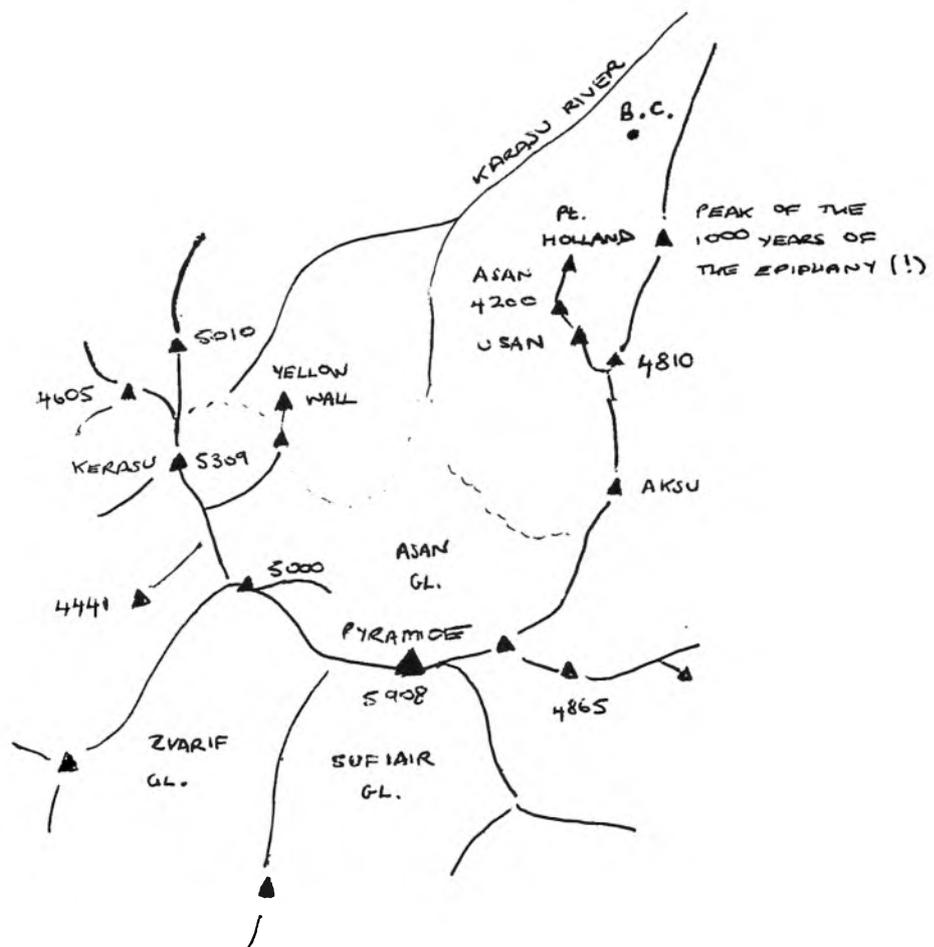
If you need further information please get in touch with;

Trevor Martin

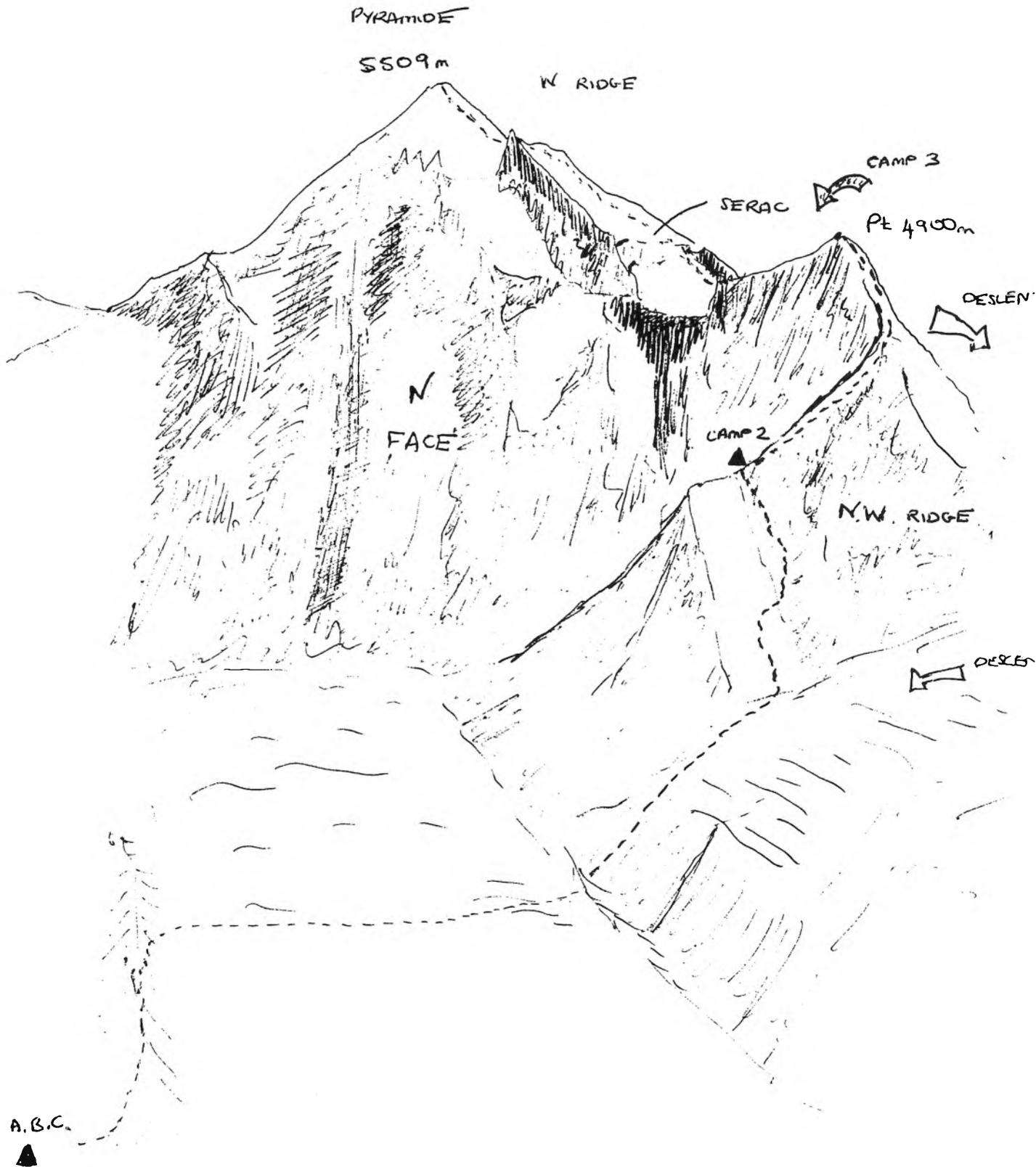
32 Claverdon Road
Coventry
CV5 7HP

(0203) 694600

SKETCH MAP OF THE PYRAMIDE REGION



N.W. RIDGE OF PYRAMIDE (5509m)



POINT HOLLAND

S.W. RIDGE

10 pitches E1 Sb / TD -
Direct E2 Sb / TD

