

ASAN PAMIR 1993 EXPEDITION REPORT



Asan (I), and Pyramidalny (back), from near the base camp in Karasu



EXPEDITION TEAM

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OBJECTIVES

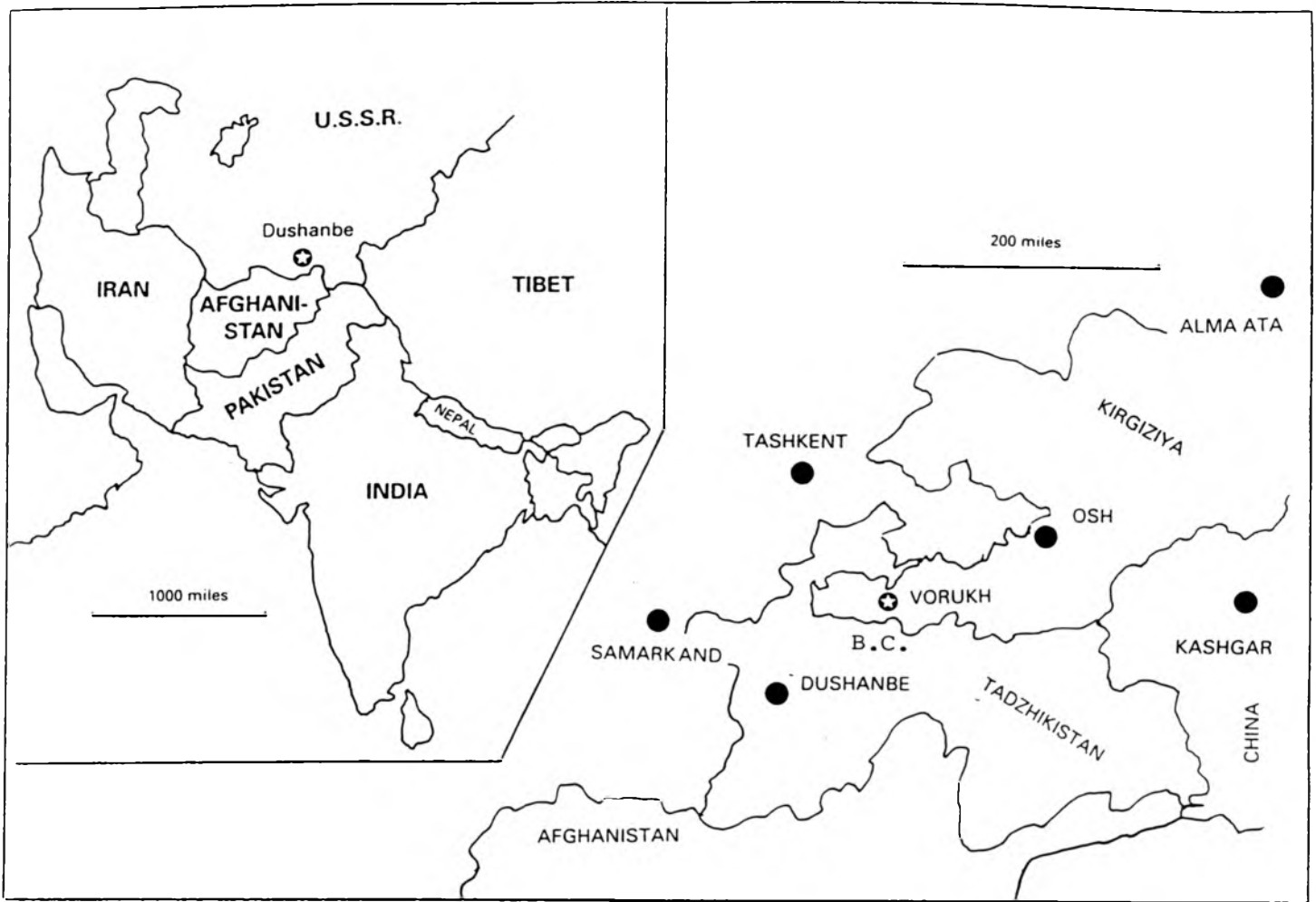
The idea of climbing in the ex-Soviet Union was spawned from the possibility of climbing in an area only just opened to Western teams without requiring a permit. We understood that we were only the fourth British team to visit the valley and to climb and investigate objectives. After looking for suitable areas, the Asan valley was chosen because of its outstanding peaks and beautiful alpine lushness. It has been called the 'Russian Patagonia', for there are perfect granite climbs of 1200m+ in length. The largest peak of the area - Pyramidalny (5509M) - is very Eigerish, with a 2000M north face which was obviously going to prove tempting. However, the beauty of the valley lies with its steep granite walls with appallingly big routes on monolith structures, requiring numerous days and siege tactics for a successful ascent.

The South ridge of peak 4810 was our main objective: we proposed to take a free line on an otherwise impregnable piece of rock with only hard aid climbs. The line had been spied in 1990 by Brian Swales on the first Anglo-Soviet trip to the area, and would require about 1100M of climbing.

ABOUT THE AREA

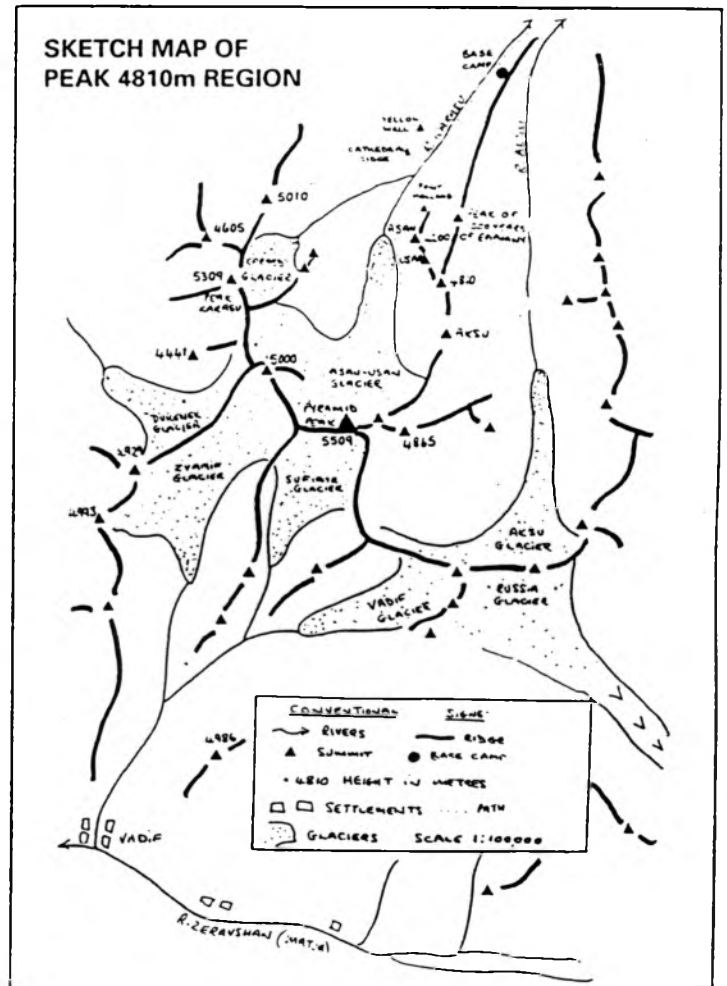
Tadzhikistan, in Central Asia, borders on Afghanistan and China, and is separated from Pakistan only by the Afghan corridor of some 20 miles; it also shares borders with Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan. Only 7% of the republic's area is either on a plain or has elevation lower than 915 metres. Most of Tadzhikistan is occupied by the Pamir range with heights rising to 7495m with Pik Kommunizma and 7134m in the case of Pik Lenina - these being the highest peaks in the CIS. The Pamir extend into China and Afghanistan with the Tien Shan in the N, the Karakoram in the E, and the Hindu Kush in the S.

The Karasu (meaning black water) valley adjoining valley Aksu - white water - are situated in the Karavshin region of the Pamir, about 100km north of Dushanbe, the capital of Tadzhikistan. The valley is occupied by shepherds, both Tadzhik and Kirgis and can be very confusing as they operate on the basis of living in different time zones. They are a hard breed and stay all year round in the valley, surviving the -40C temperatures in winter. The political exiles sent to the valley during the Stalin era to mine mica did not survive and it is said that none sent to the area returned back to their families, and much evidence of their hard existence is still present. Tadzhikistan at present, as with many other CIS states, is in a state of civil war. Dushanbe has a curfew operating from 10pm to 6am, and there is plenty of gunfire to be heard during this period. Mujahadin rebels have destroyed many roads which makes travel difficult.



Above: General area map of Russian Pamirs.

B.C. - Base Camp



ORGANISATION

Climbing in the CIS is a very organised affair. The only way at present is to be invited by a host club which will attend with you at base camp during your time. There seems to be no shortage of people willing to help you as it allows them to have a cheap, if not free holiday and maybe even be paid for it. However, money exchange has to be made months before leaving, so a reputable group is required. This came from a recommendation of a previous trip to the Asan valley¹, but their charges were too high. The biggest problem at the moment in Russia is the very high inflation - as much as 1000% - so no-one knows the cost of essentials months in advance, or whether they will be able to get them.

Initially we approached Sergei Efimov from Sverdlovsk, a prominent Russian climber who has made notable ascents in the Himalaya, including 4 eight thousanders. Brian¹ had used him for the first trip, though his costs were beyond our means. Communication with Sergei was done by fax and the occasional phone call, though it was often very difficult to make contact, and was a slow chore taking about 3 to 4 weeks for a reply. Jenny Robinson² organises trips to the ex-Soviet Union, and held a bank account of Sergei's which would have enabled us to transfer money easily from England without the trouble of going through American banks and charges. Jenny offered to help in the organisation of the trip in January; this was much appreciated, as it eased all the problems of communications and visa application. It was through Jenny that we found another person willing to help us called Illiya who had organised caving trips to the Caucasus.

Illiya organised the transport into base camp, and the supplies required. Also, he enrolled various people including doctor and family, cook, photographers, and two Russian climbers, so at base camp we ended up with a merry band of 13 including us. This certainly makes life easy, but the taking away of the control of the expedition can result in a certain amount of frustration, especially if you are not kept informed of what is going on. Part of the fun and challenge of any expedition is in the organisation, e.g. porter hire etc. and we found that we had to keep asking what was happening, and sometimes felt we were herded around like sheep. All the Russian side of things was sorted out for us, so all we had to organise was insurance and flights.

EXPEDITION DIARY

24 July The four of us all met together for the first time, at Heathrow airport. We were met by Sasha and Anna, who were to be our hosts in Moskow and treated royally. The excellence of the hospitality in Moskow led us to expect great things of the food/drink situation at base camp.

25 July Taken on a tour of the Kremlin by our interpreter (for these few days only), Ludka.

26 July Flew to Hadjent via somewhere in Kazakhstan, and nearly drank too much of the vodka kindly supplied by the airline. On landing, we were all rather cheered by the captain's plea for the passengers in the front half of the plane to remain seated 'so as not to upset the balance of the aircraft'.

¹ Brian Swales: 1990 and '91 expeditions to the Asan valley. Account in Mountain 137.

² Jenny Robinson: Russian Ranges Climbing and Trekking company.

27 July By now the whole expedition team was assembled consisting of the four of us, two Russian climbers (Vladimir and Iga), a couple of photographers who were paying their way (Gleb and Natasha), the doc, his wife, son and dog, plus the cook and his little brother (Hujet and Abdul Rahman): - a somewhat motley crew, it has to be admitted.

And so the team and supplies headed for the hills in a truck and a jeep, stopping at a bazaar on the way to pick up further supplies. We continued up a jeep track (more than worryingly unstable at times) until it was dark, when we stopped to stuff ourselves with apricots, bivouac, and be woken up every now and again by frogs jumping on us.

28 July The truck and jeep continued to the end of the navigable track minus their passengers, who walked. Only five donkeys could be found to take our gear up to base camp; unfortunately it was quite clear that about twenty would be needed, for the 28Km walk up the gorge of the Aksu river (1300m of ascent).

29 July The donkeys set off at the crack of dawn, but returned several hours and about a quarter of a mile later, having found the drums full of climbing kit etc. too difficult to carry. The four of us walked up to base camp with Vladimir, carrying large sacks, arriving in the evening. We were fed by a group of climbers from Moskow who were camped about five minutes away from us. During the couple of weeks that our stay in the valley overlapped, these people, with their convivial company, excellent advice, jolly good cook and well stocked drinks cabinet were a real bonus, given the comparative austerity of our own camp.

30 July No sign of any donkeys yet. The four of us wandered around, sniffing out climbs in the Karasu valley, in which our base camp was situated. Our base camp (at about 2900m) was just about ideal - tents pitched on levelled out patches of grass slope, plenty of shade, no danger of flooding, and a ready water supply (clear in the mornings). Looking south, the head of the valley was dominated by the north face of Pyramidalny. On the left, the granite pillar of Asan towered over the base camp, and on the right, there was a fine view of Yellow Wall.

31 July A desultory band of donkeys finally showed up. We walked over into the next valley - Aksu - and had a look at the back side of peak 4810, and some possible routes on peak 3850.

1 August News is relayed that a horse has lobbed off a bridge into the glacial torrent with a couple of drums of climbing gear. This turns out to be true and false - the drums, containing assorted junk, including the soon to be mouldy bread, were recovered, but not the horse. We went down for a few hours to the scene of the disaster, picked up as much gear as we could and hoisted it through excellent heat up to base camp.

2 August We climbed Yellow Wall (550m, altitude about 3700m, grade TD/HVS/A1/Russian 5a - take your pick), as two pairs (both successful); Ivan and Adrian followed by Reg and Jim.

Reg writes: *"Despite Vlad's exhortations to take bivi gear and radios, we were confident of finishing in a day, so 9 o'clock on a fine morning saw us departing from base camp. An hour later, we were starting up the rake which splits the otherwise impressive buttress. This rake gave us several pitches of quite easy, but slightly loose and only adequately protected climbing, before tapering into a wide flared crack, which was the crux. After watching Adrian take a most triumphant swing on this section, we were a*



Left: Pt. 3850 in Aksu valley. The route attempted by Reg & Jim is just to the right of the sharply defined arete in the middle of the photograph.

Below: Ivan & Adrian on the crux section of Yellow Wall.



little apprehensive. Although pride demanded that we reject Ivan's offer of a backrope, we were happy to let them leave their gear in place.

It was a wild position in which to learn how to aid climb: directly below, the buttress plunged 300m to the moraine. After the crack, there was a delicate, poorly protected free section on which I dithered for ages, roasting in the sunshine while Jim froze in the shade. I was relieved that Jim didn't find the pitch a breeze either. He led through, and when I arrived at his belay he pointed out a vile looking chimney with Damoclean flakes stuck out at improbable angles and said 'Just up there I think'. I disagreed vigorously and traversed left to a more plausible looking line up some cracks."

There followed a lot of off-route twiddling around up dead-ends, pullings out of promising looking pegs, and losses of temper before returning to the vile chimney, which turned out to be rather more amenable than it appeared - the flakes being surprisingly well glued together. Having climbed a few more pitches - mostly easy - to the top of the wall, we were faced with a blatant diagonal crack leading to the second summit. *"By now it was indisputably pitch dark, and my head torch was having an attack of the yips, requiring me to select runners whilst hanging from a layback/hand traverse position. Thankfully this marked the end of the difficulties and only the supposedly 'walk off' descent remained; but even this took on an epic quality as we allowed ourselves to get funnelled into a stream gully where we became entangled in a maze of smooth convex slabs and gorse bushes. Jim eventually extricated himself and headed home, but after a further two hours of blundering around, I needed to make a prickly abseil before escaping, arriving back at the tent at 5am, much to the amusement of Ivan and Adrian, who were back by about 9.30pm."*

3 August At about this time, a final troupe of donkeys and horses arrived with gear and any remaining members of the expedition. Any gear that had not yet made it up to base camp had long since disappeared from the place where the truck left it.

4-6 August We set off as two pairs to do different routes (pairings as before). Ivan and Adrian bivouacked below the Alpenin route on Asan (1000m, altitude 4300m, grade, ED1/E1/E2/A0/Russian 5b). On the following day they climbed from 7am to 8pm where they stopped for an uncomfortable bivouac, plagued by strong winds and worries about cloud development. Ivan writes *"The climbing involved first of all, a delicate 5c wall which was followed by two steep pitches to the bottom of a horrendous looking chimney and crack. After a lot of pushing and struggling, and five more pitches, we reached a 10 foot overhang barring our way. This did succumb with only a small amount of aid to leave us in a great position on top of the pillar. Another finger crack pitch and seven more pitches allowed us to find a reasonably comfortable bivi ledge, overlooking the West face, which was much appreciated after 13 hours of continuous climbing.*

At about 1am the wind and cloud really picked up, indicating a possible front, which showed how vulnerable our position was. At 7am we set off again, reaching the summit at about 9.30am after two more steep pitches, and a further five easy pitches of about 4a standard. The summit consisted of a narrow ledge with terrific exposure down all faces. The descent involved a total of 14 abseils and we finally reached camp at about 7.30pm, just in time for a bowl of goat soup." Their return marked the end of the only meaningful spell of good weather that we had.

Reg and I went to do point 3850 in Aksu valley (700m, Russian 5b), as Reg writes *"...spectacular mainly because of a stunningly sharp arete which has been climbed at an amenable grade. Nevertheless, any illusions of delectable 'Silly Arete' style climbing were rudely dissipated by Iga who drew us a topo showing several mean and wide*

fissures. On the way in, we exchanged (un)pleasantries with a group of French climbers who had been active on 3850, and they gave us some potentially useful information about the descent. We decided to go for a one day ascent, carrying only emergency bivouac kit.

The first six pitches were disposed of quite easily, taking us up loose ground to the foot of the arete. Closer inspection revealed the arete to be more the rounded edge of the face, split by a monster man-size crack. Jim set off wading up the first serious pitch, and by dint of a more manageable size crack in the rear of the chimney made good progress through overhangs. We were now building up a fine collection of Russian aluminium pitons as Jim pulled them out with his fingers.

The next pitch had the curious luxury of four bolts within the first ten feet of protectable climbing before the crack widened to unlovely proportions and the bolts vanished. From here, the crack soared - an endless 'Right Eliminate'. Precarious wall climbing avoided the issue for a few feet until the crack became the sole way of ascent. After grovelling miserably without success for a while, we turned tail.

The abseil retreat was rather fraught due to the obviously temporary arrangement of the rock hereabouts, and we descended with less than the usual reluctance to leave gear behind. At the bottom, we were caught up by a French pair who had just done a 6c new route and equipped a new abseil descent. So much for total efficiency... and a bolt gun."

7-11 August A fairly solid spell of noxious weather, with the level of new snow getting nearer and nearer to base camp every night. Otherwise this period was only notable for an excellent earthquake on the 9th, and our increasing desperation to eat anything other than goat. On the 11th, Ivan, Reg and Adrian took a stroll up the valley, decided that the weather was vaguely clearing up, and that as an interim measure, we should all go and climb Karasu - a fairly straightforward looking mountain, about 5300m - right away.

12-13 August Karasu attempt: Reg writes "We anticipated taking two days over the route - one day to a high bivouac, then to the summit and back to base on the second. The first day was merely walking, and we had plenty of opportunity to view the correct descent from Yellow Wall, which was obvious in the daylight. Unfortunately Karasu remained wreathed in cloud, and we had to make a rather uneducated guess about what direction to take. Towards afternoon, the snow returned and we stumped blindly upwards through buckets of the stuff.

Luckily an ideal bivouac spot was available - but it didn't provide much protection from the manky weather, which rendered cooking a miserable affair, enlightened only by Jim's battle with the concept of division, as he tried to split the food into four equal parts. The next day dawned fine however, but our high spirits were soon dampened when we found ourselves clambering over appalling rock on steep slopes, which was held in place only by a foot or so of unstable snow. We retreated. But at least we could console ourselves with the fact that we all appeared to be nicely acclimatised, and with the excellent view of 4810 from our high point which was roughly level with that summit."

14 August Weather much improved: Reg and I took a rest day, whilst Adrian and Ivan took a bivouac at the foot of the ordinary route on the west side of Pyramidalny.

15 August Ivan and Adrian up to the shoulder at around 4800m to bivouac. Ivan writes "The route involved about 3 hours of plodding to the bottom of a 500m snow

slope. This was about 50 degrees, and in places we ended up wading through knee deep porridge to get to the foot of two bergschrunds to cross. It must be my eyesight, but I honestly believed that on crossing the second, it was only a further 10m to the ridge; but after 180m of climbing 50 degree unstable snow, avalanching all the time, we arrived on the ridge at about 3pm. The ridge consisted of unstable rock and snow, and after another hour we stopped, with myself feeling pretty sick. We got in our bivi bags just as it started snowing again and spent the night throwing and belching giardiod rotten eggs." Reg and I bivouacked at the foot of the North face of Pyramidalny - a feature which dominates the head of the Karasu valley, and had been our ambition ever since our arrival at base camp. Information about routes on this enormous 2000m face were very sketchy, but we elected to follow a line of ice well to the left of centre, but to the right of a rocky ridge that had been climbed by Russians. Our line would join the Russian ridge after a bit more than 1000m - probably just before the end of the main difficulties - leaving a long section of ridge to the summit, and some 800m of ascent.

16-18 August Ivan and Adrian made an early start for the summit, but their bid was foiled by Ivan's nausea, which unfortunately manifested itself substantially at around 2am. They descended, and were met by Vladimir and Iga who kindly guided them down a most horrendous scree slope which was nearly the undoing of the lot of them. Of our attempt on the north face, Reg writes: "*The midnight alarm alerted us to a stunningly clear night (there had been a flurry or two of snow in the evening), so it was all systems go. Our breakfast consisted of porridge and a whole tin of condensed milk - definitely a mistake, as we felt wave upon wave of condensed nausea as we plodded up 45/50 degree slopes which made up the first few hundred metres of the climb (with a couple of pitches of grade III ice in the middle).*

By dawn we had reached the start of the ice pitches. These were relentlessly steep and sustained, and for six successive pitches we had slumped stances on ice screws. The exposure was breathtakingly felt. By early afternoon, we were within a couple of pitches of the ridge. It had begun snowing, and heaving our way up the last hundred metres of by now sodden ice was a miserable affair, not helped by Jim taking a sponge onto an ice screw runner when the axe placements he had clipped into proved inadequate.

We came out on a horrible, mushroomed knife edge ridge with only a sloping boulder for a belay. Through the mist and snow, the next section also looked unpromising, so Jim sat on the boulder, and I flattened out a bit of the ridge. We crawled into our bags and sat out the everlasting night. The relentless noise of serac fall was not so entertaining as the previous night, as each time I heard a rumble, I was convinced that it was Jim's boulder rolling off, with us about to follow it.

We were relying on some sunshine the next morning to thaw us out, but instead we were presented with cloud and light snowfall. Since the weather usually got worse during the day, we decided to sound the retreat. It seemed as good a place as any to learn the art of ice thread abseils: these worked well - the slight doubts about the strength of the anchors being offset to some extent by the ease of pulling the ropes through.

As we reached the foot of the steep ice, it began snowing in earnest, and quite a lot of spindrift accompanied us as we downclimbed the snow slope. Within a hundred metres of the bergschrund, an exceptionally powerful flurry knocked me off. I was descending first, and felt the rope go tight on Jim for a bit before he too was pulled off his feet. The sensation of flight as we plummeted over an outcrop of rock was almost

surreal and not actually unpleasant (I couldn't disagree more - ed.). We landed in a heap in the avalanche debris: Jim's extra velocity ensured he had cleared the bergschrund easily, but I lay half in and half out, in a tangle of rope. We had both bumped our heads, and when I came to my senses I had no idea of where we were or who my partner was, although I had sufficient presence of mind not to ask him this for fear of him thinking me completely potty. Jim, it transpired, was equally clueless, and so we had a bizarre conversation in order to re-establish reality.

Jim had broken his right arm, and his legs and ribs were in a bit of a state, which meant that walking was a problem. I felt relatively uninjured and escorted him down to the flatness of the glacier where we bivouacked. The next morning I blundered back to base camp, passing some shepherds who looked at me quizzically - Jim hadn't told me my face was blood-soaked."

Some climbers from the Sverdlovsk team saw Reg's unaccompanied return to base and came to see what had happened, and about ten of them got involved with stretchering me back to camp that afternoon in particularly vile weather. Most memorable was the crossing of the seriously swollen river in pitch dark and pouring rain. First on the scene was the doctor from the Urals team who filled my arm with morphine. From our team came Ivan & Adrian, the photographer and the doctor, who rigged up an excellent plaster for my arm. So there were about a dozen people, working six at a time to complete the back breaking job of the six hour carry back to base.

19 August A helicopter had been summoned by radio, but did not arrive today. Adrian and Ivan were rather dischuffed to learn that the expedition had been unilaterally called off by the cook - who, it emerged at this point, was the man who had been put in charge of the mountain stage of the expedition - and we were all to take the helicopter to Dushanbe. They were still hoping to make an attempt at 4810, but it seemed that everybody else was bored with life at base camp, and a lot of organisational hassle and a bit of money would be saved for Hujet if we all piled into the helicopter. Quite a few yarns were spun (roads being blown up, cholera epidemic/quarantine preventing alternative routes being used...), in order to bring them round to this point of view - and after this had failed, it became apparent that everybody else would be going whatever they felt about it.

20 - 29 August The helicopter came, and we were all flown to Dushanbe. I had a four hour operation on my right elbow (I will never forget the sight of the Tadzhik surgeon leaning over me, scalpel in one hand, rubbing the thumb across the fingers of the other, mouthing into my ear the word 'dollarrrrr'). Reg also had an X-Ray to look at a whip-lash injury to his neck. We were both kept in until the 25th, which, in Reg's case seemed an excessively long time as he was not undergoing any treatment. When we were released, Reg joined Ivan and Adrian, whilst I waited in Dushanbe for my repatriation to be organised.

During this period, Ivan and Adrian spent a good deal of time sniffing around the bazaar in Dushanbe, having bad doses of the trots (as did Reg and myself in hospital), eating and drinking well, and several days at a mountain refuge not far from town. Near the refuge, Ivan was able to do a bit of top rope climbing in the roasting sun, on a crag that was numbered and equipped French style. When Adrian had recovered from his trots, he was immobilised by the bite of a spider. After a few more days of walking/scrambling/cragging, drinking, eating, doing nothing and having saunas, it was time to go home.

30 August Adrian, Ivan and Reg took the train to Moskow (3200 miles for \$12 first class - average speed 50 Km/h) at 10pm stocking up in the bazaar beforehand.

31 August - 3 September I was finally repatriated at this point, along with the doctor that the insurance company had sent along to keep an eye on me about five days before; it had proved to be very difficult to get tickets for the flight to Moskow, which was the reason for the delay. On arrival in the U.K. I checked into hospital for what was regarded as an urgent revision on the internal fixation of my elbow.

The other three soldiered on in the train, through exciting changes in scenery (from mountains to desert to lush forests and fields) and blazing heat, rehydrating alternately on water melons and vodka. Apparently the compartment they had was quite comfortable, but the bogs were shite, and windows got broken by stone throwing youths.

Inbetween alcoholic stupors, the three were able to notice how much they were enjoying the journey. They were regarded as a bit of a novelty by the natives on board, and shared a thousand toasts with them. They arrived in Moskow late on 3rd Sept, to be met by Sasha.

4 September A bit of tourism around Moskow, being very well looked after by Sasha and Anna, ended at a party in Gorky Park which was graced with sky-divers plunging through the night. Again, they were fed like kings, with sing-a-long Sasha and his guitar supplying further entertainment.

5 September Ivan, Reg and Adrian visited the climbing wall at the Institute of Sport, and tried valiantly to save the name of British mountaineering in the face of stiff local competition, but unfortunately the three of them had drunk too much vodka, so the only thing to do was fly back to London, sad to be leaving so many new friends behind.

SUMMARY OF CLIMBS ATTEMPTED

CLIMB	CLIMBERS	LENGTH	ALPINE GRADE	SUCCESS?
Yellow Wall	I, A, J & R	550m	TD	Yes
W face of Asan	I & A	1000m	ED1	Yes
Point 3850	J & R	700m	TD+	No
N face of Pyramidalny	J & R	2000m	ED	No
W face of Pyramidalny	I & A	2000m	AD+	No

WEATHER

We occupied base camp from 29 July to 20 August. The weather was completely reliable until 6th August (but even then it could get really cold when a bit of wind picked up in the afternoons). The weather was then terrible for six days, after which time it was never good for more than a couple of days at a time; meaning that the big rock routes never got clear of snow, and snow and ice climbing was slightly risky - as demonstrated.

FOOD

One of the disadvantages of going on a trip where everything is organised for you, is that you have to put up with the organiser's choice of cook, and the cook's choice of

food. This may well involve eating an inadequate number of inadequate meals per day, with the emphasis on stringy, pungent, goat soup, mopped up with bread so old that it is more green than brown. What is more, if you are lucky, at the end of the trip, you may well catch a glimpse of previously very well hidden delicacies being sold to people who need it less than you do.

On the whole, I feel that I have done considerably better on the food front on trips to Pakistan costing half as much as this one. However, during our time in Moskow and Dushanbe &c. the food and hospitality were excellent.

MEDICAL

Before leaving England, we made sure that we were up to date on the following injections: tetanus, typhoid and gammaglobulin/havrix. With regard to malaria, our approach was simply to avoid being bitten by any mosquitoes which looked like carriers (although we did have supplies of chloroquine and paludrine to use if things started to look bad) - we would fully expect such an attitude to be condemned by the medical establishment, so don't try this at home.

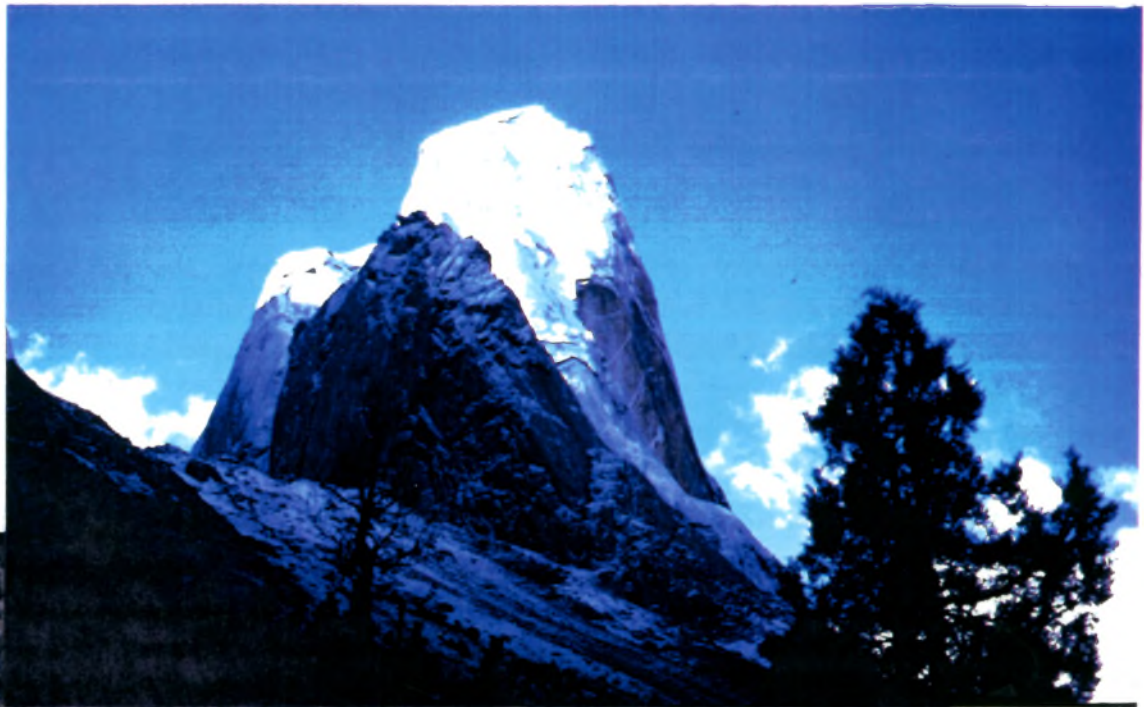
We brought with us a fairly basic level of first aid stuff, including a few pain killers and antibiotics (with some emphasis on metronidazole - one course of which was used to deal with a gut problem). We also brought a couple of anti-AIDS kits (needles etc.), which did not get used despite my having a dozen or so needles stuck in me after the accident; somehow one doesn't feel like making a fuss when poised under the knife of a fierce Tadzhiki surgeon.

Also at base camp was a Russian doctor and his hospital tent. His supplies were quite impressive, and as well as filling me with morphine and neat alcohol, he was able to fit me up with a pretty decent temporary plaster to immobilise my arm. This accident was obviously the medical highlight of the expedition, the main injury being a compound fracture dislocation to the right elbow. Injuries to my ribs and legs, and to Reg's neck being less of a worry. The doc's expertise on stomach disorders seemed rather more limited; he gave Ivan the rather unorthodox advice of eating buckets of sugar to alleviate his trots.

Everybody got the trots at some stage, although not all that much until we got back to Dushanbe. Adrian reports that he shat himself no less than twice, and to cap that he got bitten on a calf by a spider resulting in a couple of weeks of numbness in that area.

FLIGHTS

We booked all our flight with Aeroflot, which cost about half as much as tickets offered by other airlines. The rumours of rubber chickens for flight food were dispelled on the flight from London to Moscow. By writing to the Aeroflot offices in London, we managed to obtain a 50% reduction in excess baggage both ways, resulting in a cost of about £3/Kg on top of the 25Kg allowance. We had tried to make the expedition the same as an Alpine trip by travelling light though some people did require a different jacket for every day, and 3Kg of jelly babies. In total, we had about 125Kg of baggage, including the 5Kg of hand luggage which was weighed. However, on the outgoing flight we had a tame checking in officer, and the excess charges were waived, but



Top: Asan after a spell of bad weather.

Middle: Transport from base camp back to Dushanbe.

Bottom: The North face of Pyramidalny. The route taken by Jim & Reg was to the left of centre, arriving at the ridge a long way from the top.

for the return flight we bought the amount of excess required at the discount rate (not refundable), in advance at Heathrow.

The flight from Moscow to Hadjent (Leninabad) is now run by Tadzhikistan airlines though we booked the flight at the Aeroflot offices in London. This is a very casual affair and for people like Reg who hadn't flown before, it may be a bit disconcerting, but fortunately there was as much vodka as you could drink to while away the time, even though the pilot joins in. Our excess baggage was paid by our Russian hosts and was charged at about £1/Kg of 1% of first class fair. By being tourists you have to buy tickets at the foreigners rate, whilst Russian citizens (and foreign correspondents) get a cheap rate (about a third) - at the time about \$55.

INSURANCE

We hunted around for insurance quotes, but a number of companies refused to offer us insurance for the Pamir. In the end we used Snowcard Insurance which proved to be fine, given Jim's successful evacuation after the accident. The insurance premium was the cheapest quoted, but it should be noted that this company is starting to get slightly cold feet about insuring expeditions, so it is important to give them full details of the aims and structure of the expedition so as to avoid invalidating any policy taken out.

Snowcard Insurance Services Ltd.
Lower Boddington
Daventry
Northants
NN11 6XZ
0327 62805

FINANCE

Climbing in Russia is fairly expensive. A predetermined amount is paid to the host club in the C.I.S. running your trip. This money is used to buy and organise everything for your stay in Russia. I personally spent an additional £3 for personal items during our six week stay. This enables you to know accurately how much the trip is going to cost, though it also precludes the possibility of getting cheaper. Inflation in Russia is catastrophically high, and this makes it very hard to predict prices. This year the exchange rate was 1000 roubles to US\$1, but only 3 years ago, it was 1 rouble to £1. However, Tadzhikistan is part of Asia, and so food and travel is rather cheap. Food is picked up in bazaars, so if you are good at haggling then bargains can be had which is a fun, if frustrating, way of doing business.

Sergei Efimov's initial offer was for \$1600 each, though when pushed to reduce this, he withdrew, and Illiya kindly took over. With the collapse of the pound against the dollar during the autumn of '92, it is thanks to the generous support of our sponsors that the trip was able to go ahead.

In Moskow, trade is carried out as easily with US\$ as it is with Roubles, but in the bazaar, keep any dollars buried in your pocket, as they could cause a riot. A normal monthly wage is the equivalent of a mere \$50, so even our petty cash looked a lot. Whilst we were in Moskow, there was an overnight change from old bank-notes to new

ones, which obviously caused utter chaos, as the banks did not have enough new ones in stock.

EXPEDITION ACCOUNT

This includes all expenditure and income for the trip. The small contingency fund was to allow for any unexpected items which might not have been paid for in advance.

Item	Debit / £	Credit / £
BMC		500
MEF		400
Foundation for Sports & the Arts		500
University of London		2000
Queen Mary and Westfield College		600
Personal (4 x £600)		2400
Flights: London-Moskow rtn. (4 x £240)	960	
Flights: Moskow-Hadjent o/w (4 x £108)	432	
Insurance: Snowcard (4 x £65)	260	
Communal equipment	340	
Medicines	38	
Contribution to Russian hosts (4 x £1050)	4200	
Excess baggage	90	
Contingency	80	
TOTAL	6400	6400

NOTES ON RUSSIAN CLIMBING STYLES & EQUIPMENT

Mountaineering in Russia is a wholly competitive activity. Routes are graded from 1a,1b,2a...6b, though for hard rock routes the French system is beginning to be adopted mainly owing to Russian teams competing in international competitions. Within mountaineering they have certain classes of climber, e.g. 'Master of sport' who have achieved a certain number of hard climbs. In the Asan valley we met a team from Moscow who were paying for a referee to watch them attempt a climb. The referee determines the difficulty of the climb, including such points as length, grade, weather and seriousness. On the granite walls, much aid was used - mainly skyhooking - and the technique of skyhooking bolt holes with cheat sticks was proudly demonstrated to us. The Russian climbers in our team could not understand the alpine approach of two people climbing as a pair, and tried to make us take radios (we later found out that they knew perfectly well that these did not work anyway) and stacks of canned food on route. Russian climbers seemed to have very different techniques for climbing steep ice. They employ the use of two fifi hooks attached to etriers so they almost aid up hard ice. Their attitude of mistrust with snow and ice was also shown.

Climbing equipment is both good and bad. Russians are copying western products, and some - Petzl-like jumars for example - were very good. Lightness is their deciding factor and they are excellent engineers of titanium, but there are some pretty shoddy items too, so beware. Some ice screws we used bent at the tip, whilst their pitons are of poor design. Friend imitations look quite reasonable and can be purchased from Alp Industries in Moscow for about \$10 each. The original climbing shoes look like granddad slippers, although sticky rubber shoes have become available more recently. Everyone wears jeans so don't think about buying Levi's out and making a fortune, though Goretex jackets are in demand.

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Jenny Robinson
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VauDe
Aeroflot
Illiya.

We would also like to thank the members of the Russian expeditions (from Moskow & the Urals) in the Karasu valley for their help and hospitality.

*Right: On the walk
in to base camp.*

*Below: Our last day
at base camp, from
left: Reg, Adrian,
Jim, Ivan.*

