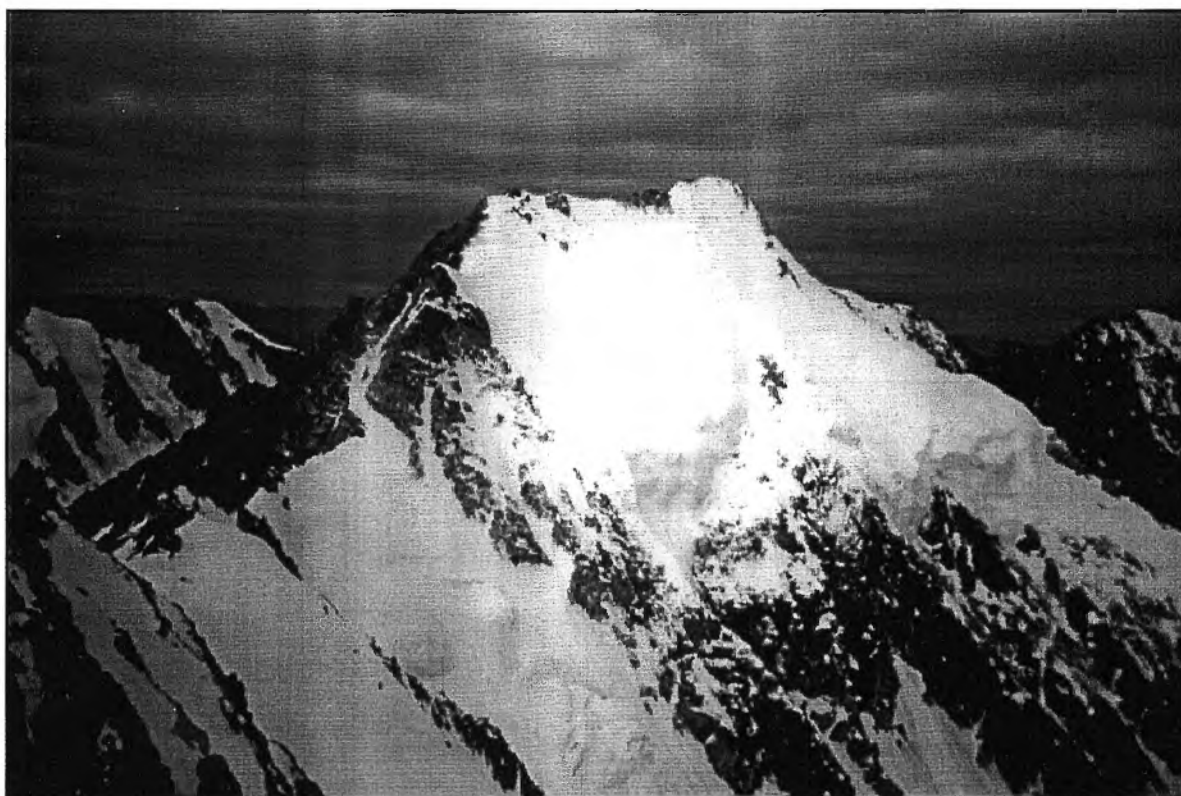


# Cherskiy Mountains Expedition Экспедиция Хребту Черского



North Face of Gora Pobeda (3147m)

## Expedition Report

Winners of the Polartec Performance Challenge.  
Awards from the Mount Everest Foundation, British Mountaineering Council  
and Foundation for Sport and The Arts.

Leader: Paul Knott  
Other members: Michael Doyle, Simon Inger, John Kentish.

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## Summary

The Cherskiy Mountains Expedition took place in July/August 1994 and visited the Buordakh Massif, with the objective of making first ascents of peaks in this Siberian range.

The first British or "Western" visitors to these mountains, the team had the range to themselves. They made seven first ascents, climbed Gora Pobeda (3147m) by a probable new route, and reached two further summits. To reach civilisation from base camp they had to walk two days across the mountains and a further seven across tundra.

Travel and logistics were negotiated beforehand with a company in Yakutsk and went very smoothly. Unlike many recent expeditions to Russia there was no local or Russian involvement once in the mountains. This reflects the very lightweight style and the lack of backup, which most Russians found incomprehensible.

Thanks are due to the many people who went out of their way to help the expedition. Valuable information was provided by Nick Drobotenko, Janusz Kraszewski, Pavol Breier and Andrzej Mazurkiewicz. Ever Grayes translated from Polish. Mick Fowler agreed to be our Patron. Hospitality and support in Russia was given by Mikhail Bogomolov and Andrei, and the director of the Pobeda mine. Gavriel Gavrielov of YakutskIntour and Pavol Kazakov efficiently handled the liaison in Yakutia and were prepared to adapt to our chosen style. We are indebted to many others also.

We are grateful for sponsorship from a number of organisations. Financial support was received from Malden Mills (Polartec Performance Challenge), the Mount Everest Foundation, the British Mountaineering Council and the Foundation for Sport and The Arts. Equipment was supplied at a discount by Phoenix (Goretex jackets) and Harvest Foodworks. Bombproof plastic storage barrels were supplied free of charge by Harcostar.

## The Cherskiy Mountains

The Cherskiy Mountains form one of several extensive chains East of the Lena River. The highest peaks are in the Buordakh Massif, just South of the Arctic circle in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). The summits are around 3000m in altitude, with glaciers reaching down to 1500-1700m and up to 9km long. The peaks are Alpine in type, although the south sides of most peaks hold little snow and the scale is relatively modest. In winter conditions are typically anticyclonic with an average January temperature of -40°C in the mountains. In July the average temperature is well above zero but the weather is unstable.

The range was first crossed in c.1885 by the Polish explorer Jan Cherskiy, after whom it was later named. The glaciers of the Buordakh Massif were not explored until the 1930s. The area has now been well explored and a trekking guide has been published. There has also been some ski touring in the range. Virtually all passes, some difficult, have been traversed but many of the peaks are still unclimbed. The area never became popular in the Soviet era, probably due to its remoteness and the lack of mountaineering status attached to climbing peaks of such low altitude. The climbing prior to our trip is shown overleaf.



The heights on the map are the “traditional” heights which correspond with all maps and information available until recently. However, they differ from the formerly secret Russian survey maps and were found to be inconsistent with altimeter readings. The information we found was as follows:

Name or location	Traditional height	1:100K survey height (if known)	Altimeter reading	Opinion based on visual comparison
Gora Pobeda	3147m	3004m	3070m	
Pobeda West Peak	3100m	2884m		
(South of Sasyr Pass)	3000m			2600m
“Peak Castle”	3033m /3035m			2935m
	3029m		2900m	
(Western end of Leker Glacier)	3075m	2960m		
Yubilyeiny (Jubilee Peak)	2890m		2900m	
(West of Leningradskiy Pass)		2747m		
(West of 2747m)	3001m			Similar to 2747m
Sovetskaya Yakutiya	2885m / 2870m		2860m	

It appears (tentatively) that the actual heights are lower than the traditional heights by around 100m.

Many unclimbed peaks remain. The peaks around Peak Buordakh look interesting. Several elegant peaks border the Obruchev Glacier. Oyunskovo (3100m) looks worthwhile. Peaks 2843 and 2816 by the Mitskyevicha and Stroda Glaciers look steep and rocky, as does Peak 2776 by the Sumgina Glacier.

## Expedition Outline

Date	Events	Notes
17th July	Fly Manchester-Moscow. Overnight stay with friends.	6 hour delay
18th July	Fly Moscow to Yakutsk.	5 hour delay. Stop in Novosibirsk.
19th July	Arrive Yakutsk; food shopping.	1:100K maps available at 60\$ each!
20th July	Fly to Ust-Nera; buy petrol and more food. Stay in hostel at airport.	2 hours by Turboprop; daily flight. Hostel full of drunken dodos.
21st July	Waiting for weather in Ust-Nera. Moved to hotel “Solnechnaya” in town.	Equivalent of 30\$/night for 4 people.
22nd July	Helicopter to junction of Kiureter and Leker rivers, at c.1400m.	Clouds too low to land at bc. Landing site at limit of vegetation; mosquito infested.
24th July	Completion of load-carrying to base camp in a moraine hollow by the Leker glacier (c.2100m).	7 hour ascent across boulders. Two heavy carries per person.
25th July - 8th August	Climbing / moving camps / waiting for weather (15 days in all).	see “Climbing”
9th - 16th August	Commence walk-out by descending to Buordakh River. 165km further to nearest road.	see “Walk Out”
17th August	Truck to Ust-Nera and flight to Yakutsk. Stay in Gavriellovs’ flat and eat.	150km truck journey provided free of charge by Pobeda Mine.
19th August	Return to Moscow.	Non-stop.
21st August	Return to UK.	

Before departing for the mountains we were asked to sign a disclaimer, stating that any problems in the mountains would be our own responsibility. A line of recommended walk-out was drawn on our map and we agreed on our arrival date at the road. If we were more than 2 days late the alarm was to be raised. There was no rendezvous arrangement as such — we were to go to the Pobeda mine and ask the Director to telephone.

Had the possibility of the walk up to base camp been anticipated, some changes would have been made to supplies. With hindsight the walk-in was not unlikely.

## Climbing

After setting up base camp, the team crossed the nearby Volgogradskiy Pass (2580m) to make camp on the Tsariegradskovo Glacier. From here a total of six peaks were climbed, all first ascents. During this time there were two bad weather days on which no climbing was done.



Pavol Kazakov

The Leker Glacier taken from the Bukovinskiy Pass. The pass behind is the Volgogradskiy, with "Castle" to its left and "Pyramid" to its right. Base camp was in a moraine hollow beyond the glacier, below and to the right of the snowslope to the pass.

Peak	Route climbed	Team	Date	Status
"Peak 3000m"	Snow route from Sasyrskiy Pass. Glacier was in poor condition but snow was good near summit with some ice.	MD, PK	26th July	1st Asc
Peak E of Volgogradskskiy Pass [proposed "Peak Pyramid"]	Snow route on W side leading to summit rocks. Good snow conditions. Climbed by JK and SI from base camp. Both pairs had time to climb another peak the same day. Altimeter reading c.2800m	All team	28th July	First Ascent
"Peak 3033/3035m" [proposed "Peak Castle"]	Rock rib on E side, leading direct to highest summit, 3rd from left looking at the face. Pleasant scramble on good pinkish rock, 400m.	MD, PK	28th July	First Ascent
Peak S of Omskiy Pass ["Omskiy South Peak"]	Snow/rock from Omskiy Pass. Altimeter reading c.2700m.	SI, JK	28th July	1st Asc
Peak between "3033/3035" and "3029"	Rock rib on E side. Pleasant scramble, 400m, to distinct summit with snow. Altimeter reading c.2900m	SI, JK	30th July	First Ascent
"Peak 3029m"	Rock rib from SE, one rib right of the summit; 400m, pitches of Severe; snow arête to summit. 2½ hours from glacier. Rockfall during the single abseil on the descent cut 2 of the expedition's 3 ropes.	MD, PK	30th July	First Ascent

Next the team crossed the Shatier Pass (2450m) and made camp on the Sumgina Glacier below the North face of Pobeda. The distinctive snow summit of Yubilyeinyi was taken en route. As expected the peak had been climbed previously; a cairn and message were found on the summit. Snow fell that afternoon and continued intermittently for several days, building up around the tents and on the rocks. The team returned to base camp on 5th August in damp, unpleasant conditions which still prevailed the following day.

Peak	Route climbed	Climbers	Date	Status
Yubilyeinyi (Jubilee), 2890m	N ridge from Bukovinskiy Pass. An elegant snow peak. Confusing summit message.	All team	2nd August	Previous Asc: Belarus team.

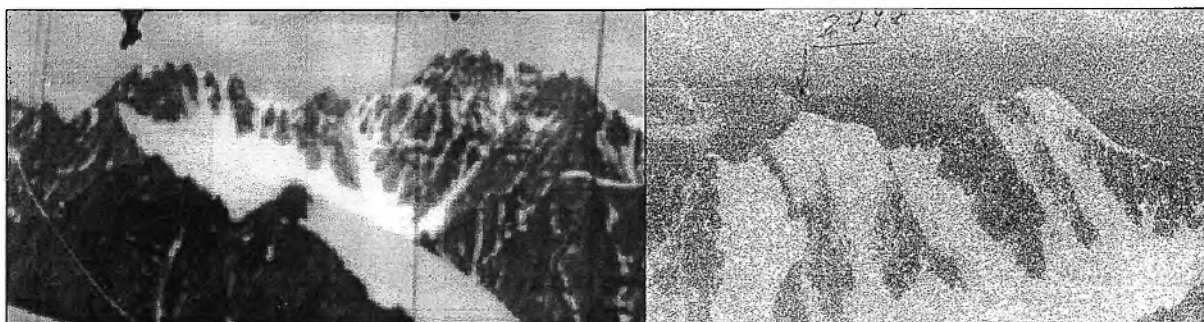
During the afternoon of 6th, all detritus at base camp including some from previous parties was burned and buried. Surplus fuel, food and equipment was left in the barrels which were buried in boulders with only the tops exposed. The following morning the team carried all remaining equipment and 10 days' food and fuel over the Shatier, Bukovinskiy (2550m) and Kiureterskiy (2500m) Passes to camp on the Obruchev Glacier. Another snow peak, Sovetskaya Yakutiya, was taken en route. The good weather held for the last climbing day, during which the team split to make the first ascent of the Bieliy Parus

and climb Gora Pobeda (the highest peak in this and surrounding ranges). These ascents were some of the most enjoyable of the trip.



Sovetskaya Yakutiya (2885m) taken from the south side of Pobeda. Our route was up the ridge facing. The peaks behind and to the right are the "Buordakh Group", apparently unvisited.  
[Photo: Paul Knott]

Peak	Route climbed	Climbers	Date	Status
Sovetskaya Yakutiya, 2885m	N ridge from Kiureterskiy Pass. Good viewpoint reached in 40 minutes from the col on good snow.	SI, JK, PK	7th August	Previous Asc: Minsk 1988; 1st Ascent: Moscow 1977.
Biely Parus (White Sail), 2821m	N face. Good snow up a superbly elegant mountain, 1¼ hr from Obruchev Glacier.	MD, JK	8th August	First Ascent
Gora Pobeda, 3147m	Couloir from S, leading to W ridge: Scottish gully leading to equally Scottish iced-up rocks, both II.	SI, PK	8th August	New route? [route of 1988 Slovak group unknown]



Left: South Face of Pobeda — our route started up the broad left-slanting couloir, and continued up its right-most branch to the bottom of the rock of the East ridge.  
Right: Looking across the Obruchev Glacier to Peaks 2747m (left) and 3001m (right).  
[Photos: Pavol Kazakov]

## Walk out



The walk out lasted a total of nine days and turned out to be a uniquely gruelling experience. Long days carrying 25kg sacs across mixed terrain took their toll, particularly in plastic boots or trainers which were the only available footwear. A strict daily schedule had to be maintained to ensure meeting the Yakutsk flight; on most days this was 25km. We were glad to have trusted our own judgement rather than the local advice that the walk would take only 4 or 5 days. It was gratifying to note that Russian "Tourists", who are known for carrying enormous loads of potatoes, tins of peas, and guitars for very long distances generally walk only 12km per day.

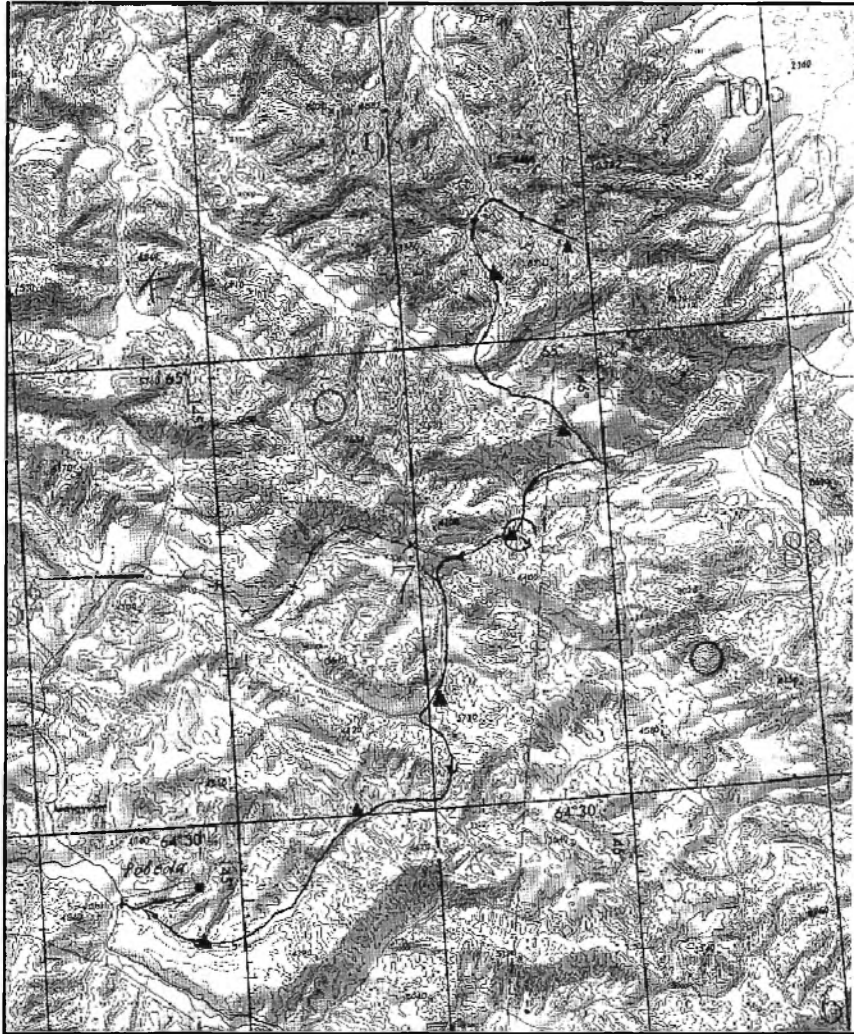
With such heavy sacs everyone went at their own pace to minimise exertion. On occasion the party became too widely separated and there was confusion over the route. Coordination improved as the days passed and the situation eased after meeting the tracks. On the last

few days the teamwork was very smooth but fatigue had taken its toll. When muscles and joints had cooled in the evenings, walking around the camps became slow and uncomfortable.

Date	Hrs	Destination	Terrain	Notes
7th Aug	12	Obruchev Glacier	Glacier crossings and 3 cols.	Poor snow and hot sun. Climbed Sovetskaya Yakutiya from Kiureterskiy Pass. Beautiful weather.
9th	10	Buordakh River	Glacier to Leningradskiy Pass (2500m). Descent through boulders, to first vegetation.	Appalling snow; crawled across glacier. Very loose boulders by Kaskadniy river. No problems crossing Buordakh.
10th	9	Darpir River	Mostly on vegetation. Col at 1500m with significant height gain.	First "backpacking" day. Very wet afternoon. Failure to walk required distance was worrying.
11th	11	Drainage of Tirekhtyakh	Mostly boggy and tussocky in wide valleys with lakes.	No problems crossing the Chukcha river. Beautiful scenery.
12th	9	Eriket Hills	Mostly poor tracks with some unpleasant bogs and mosquitoes.	Time taken to find tracks due to inaccurate and inadequate map.
13th	9.5	Andygychan Valley	Track often disappeared into bogs and re-crossed main river.	Reindeer herders passed in evening.
14th	9	Burustakh River	Tedious boggy ascent to col (c.1200m, final watershed) led to improving stony track.	Burustakh valley very monotonous. Impossible to be sure of progress.
15th	9	Burustakh River	Stony track frequently crossing main river.	Monotonous valley. Impossible to be sure of progress but quite confident.
16th	3	Pobeda River	Stony track frequently crossing main river and going through quarries.	Finished at 0900 as intended. Hitched to Pobeda goldmine.

For most of the distance only a 1:500 000 pilotage chart was available for navigation, on which our agent in Ust-Nera had drawn a recommended route. From the fifth day the route followed the tracks of a "winter road", with great psychological benefit. Unfortunately, however, the tracks went through knee-wrenching tussocky bogs and made around 150 river crossings. The only people seen on the route (or at any time during the trip) were some Reindeer herders in the evening of day 6.

The landscape was continually changing during the walk. The first day had a Himalayan feel, with acres of boulders. The next couple of days were very reminiscent of Scotland, until a series of lakes were reached at the Eriket-Tirekhtyakh watershed. These came complete with squawking gulls, and together with the wide valley gave an atmospheric feel to the night's camp. After this the vegetation became richer and the hills lower to give the appearance of the Black Forest or Jura.



The tundra was mostly pristine wilderness, except for the vehicle tracks. In places these had chewed up boggy areas quite badly. Sometimes engine oil was present in the bog water. Near to Burustakh there were several large abandoned quarries.

The team reached the road on schedule on 16th August. At the Pobeda mine the telephones to Ust-Nera were not working. The mine's director took it as his responsibility to look after us and we were ushered to the sick bay for rest and unreasonable quantities of food. The following morning a truck sped us to Ust-Nera in time to pick up our tickets from a surprised Pavol Kazakov and catch the flight to Yakutsk. The first Vodka was drunk to toasts of, "We got away with it!"

The extract from the Pilotage Chart (left) shows our route, with the camp sites ~25km apart.

## Logistics

Because of the remoteness of the area and the small number of previous expeditions, organising the logistics took a great deal of effort. Unlike many previous expeditions to Russia and Central Asia the trip was not organised on a joint basis but involved Russians only in logistical support. The reasons for this were the increased costs of supporting Russian expedition members and the discipline imposed by the walk-out. Few Russians would be familiar with such a lightweight approach, nor with the lack of communication. Friends in Moscow and Kiev found our approach almost incomprehensible. Greater independence in Russia is facilitated by increasingly Western values, particularly given a little knowledge of Russian.

Our contact in Yakutsk was Gavriel Gavriolov, Manager for Tourism at "YakutskIntour": Box 373, 677013 Yakutsk, The Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Russia; Tel 411-22 607-40 / 607-80; Fax 095 2302919; Telex 135134 LENA SU. Telex was the best means of communication. Arrangements in Ust-Nera were handled by Pavol Kazakov. He was very knowledgeable about the mountains, base camp sites, helicopter landing sites, and the route of the walk-out.

For transport into the mountains helicopter was the only reasonable option, despite its expense of over 4 million roubles (\$2000). This would have been \$700 in 1993 and \$100 in 1990. Taking the helicopter for the return journey seemed inappropriate because of problems of communication, unsettled weather and cost.

The nearest habitation to the mountains is Sasyr, around 50km to the East. However, we were advised that heavy rain might preclude crossing of the intervening bog and the Moma river. In addition Sasyr is connected to Ust-Nera only by air. Initial indications were that the walk-out to the South-West would join a vehicle track at the top of the Andygychan valley. Later it transpired that we would have to walk



the whole 165km to Burustakh. In the event we did see a truck in the Andygychan, travelling up the river bed. It is unclear why a vehicle from here was never presented as an option. Another solution worth considering would be a makeshift raft down the Andygychan River; the 1988 Slovak team used a raft on the Moma river to the village of Khonuu.

Due to the expense and weight of suitable HF equipment, the team had no communication whilst in the mountains. An option that could be considered in future would be radio contact with the small planes that flew over at 3pm daily.

A potentially serious logistical error was committed by Simon, who omitted to count the freeze-dried food until after arrival in the mountains. As a result there was a 6-day deficit, which fortunately could be made up by the deliberate over-supply of staples.

The team had no medical problems of any consequence. Precautions were taken against Giardia on the walk out but it was never established whether the organism was present.

## Budget

Expenses	£	Income	£
Scheduled air flights	3856	Polartec Performance Challenge	3200
Helicopter charter	1415	Mount Everest Foundation	700
Insurance	580	British Mountaineering Council	800
Food	380	Foundation for Sport and The Arts	800
Agents in Yakutsk & Ust-Nera	270	Individual Contributions	<u>1480</u>
Moscow stopovers	170		£6980
Yakutsk/Ust-Nera stopovers	100		
Damage to ropes	53		
Excess Baggage	40		
Miscellaneous	<u>116</u>		
	£6980		

Travel to Yakutia is expensive. Prices once there are 2-3 times higher than in Moscow, making them often higher than in Britain. Expenditure significantly exceeded the original estimates; without the generosity of the sponsors the burden on expedition members would have been extremely high.

## Equipment

The minimum of equipment was taken to the mountains, to keep the weight carried on the walk out as low as possible.

The two Wild Country Quasar tents were more than adequate as there were no storms, but the ability to pitch them with few guying points was useful on the wet glaciers. Unfortunately the moraine dirt at base camp caused problems with the zip pullers on the flysheets. The one Thermarest taken was of significant benefit on the glacier camps (base camp was the only moraine campsite used).

Plastic mountaineering boots were taken, plus trainers for base camp and walk-out. Compromise boots may have been better as there was little steep ice and "plastics" are hardly the best footwear for backpacking. The one pair of Yeti gaiters taken was useful for some of the river crossings. Cheap or even disposable snowshoes would have been useful for the thin crust on the glaciers.

Three MSR X-GK stoves were taken. Frequent cleaning was needed but provided this was done the stoves performed well. A total of 24 litres of 75 octane Russian petrol (0.25\$/l) was taken in the helicopter. Of this, 12 litres were left at base camp and a further 1 litre remained at the end of the walkout. Allowance made for inefficient burning of poor fuel had been unnecessary, and in most cases running water had been available even on the glaciers.

The damp conditions in bad weather meant that fast-drying thermal and fleece clothing including that from Polartec was important in maintaining comfort.

## Food

Freeze-dried food, chocolate and other items were taken from the UK, around 40kg in total. Staples were bought in Yakutsk. There were few problems with availability, but quality was not always the best. Items such as meat and cheese had all been imported from Western Europe and were very expensive.

The freeze-dried food used was from Harvest Foodworks. These were satisfying in quantity and the taste was generally liked, but they were relatively expensive and took 15 minutes to cook. Simple meals made with pasta, soups and flavourings were also found surprisingly acceptable.

Popular food choices included Folgers Coffee Bags (bought in USA), Instant Custard, Knorr Beef & Tomato Cup-A-Soup, and Sainsbury's Cook-in Sauces and Garlic & Cheese Cup-A-Soup. Semolina, used for some breakfasts, was popular and filling, but contains only 147kcal/100g which compares unfavourably with alternatives. Unpopular items included Batchelors Golden Vegetable Cup-A-Soup, porridge "horse oats" bought in Ust-Nera, and most of the Russian biscuits.

## Weather and Conditions

The months of July and August are characterised by low pressure weather and high precipitation. The most persistent bad weather came from the East, possibly because of the Kolyma Plain and the Arctic Ocean. During the 19 days spent in the main massif there were 8 days of bad weather; it was seldom settled. Conditions in bad weather were damp and unpleasant rather than stormy.

Snow conditions were disappointing. On the most days we were breaking through inadequately frozen crust, probably due to the short nights. On the last day it became so hard to climb out of the holes that the team resorted to crawling on all fours across the worst section of glacier. During the walk out the nights were becoming noticeably longer and frostier.

There was almost no vegetation above 1500m and so few mosquitoes at base camp (2100m). By the time of walk out their numbers were already declining to manageable proportions, although the headnets and repellents were worth having. There were no problems with larger animals. One set of small bear tracks was seen above the Burustakh valley. There were plenty of Reindeer and horses.

## Geology

Since the party included a geologist the opportunity was taken to clarify the geological information about the area available in the West and to establish the scope for future work. Contact was made with the Institute of Geology in Yakutsk. Simon Inger reports:

The Cherskiy Mountains are the remnants of a magmatic arc, probably Triassic in age, which has suffered little deformation or uplift since its formation. Intermediate to acid extrusives and hypabyssal intrusives dominate the area, suggesting volcanism on a continental margin or a mature oceanic island arc. Country rocks to the magmatic sequence are clastic sediments which have suffered minor deformation and contact metamorphism. The tectonic explanation for such a pristine arc in a continental interior setting is problematic. It seems likely that the whole of NE Siberia represents a collage of exotic terranes, emplaced by strike-slip movement analogous to the western seaboard of North America. Priorities for future work are therefore the delineation and timing of such terrane boundaries, although research prospects are hindered by the very difficult and costly access to the area.

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