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# northern chuisky expedition

## 1997

Supported by:  
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The North wall of Maashey-Karagem, with Karagem on the L. The NE Ridge of Maashey is visible rising up and right from the triangular rock buttress that reaches down to the glacier. The N Ridge is facing.

## Expedition Report

MEF Reference: 97/39

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## Summary

This was the first visit by British or American climbing teams to the Maashey valley. Despite boasting the most impressive North Wall in the Altai outside of the Bielukha region, this valley remains known to relatively few climbers even inside Russia. Success came early with two new routes on the N side of Maashey (4177m), the highest peak in the Chuisky massifs, though both produced a 23 hour epic due to their length and difficulty of access. The next trip out was curtailed by a prolonged storm which blew avalanche prone snow onto many slopes, but achieved ascents of peaks Tamma (3800m) and Burevestnik (3700m). Finally ascents of Ak-Tru (4044m) and Kurkurek (3982m) confirmed that the snow conditions still precluded routes on the N face of Karagem (3972m), a major remaining objective.

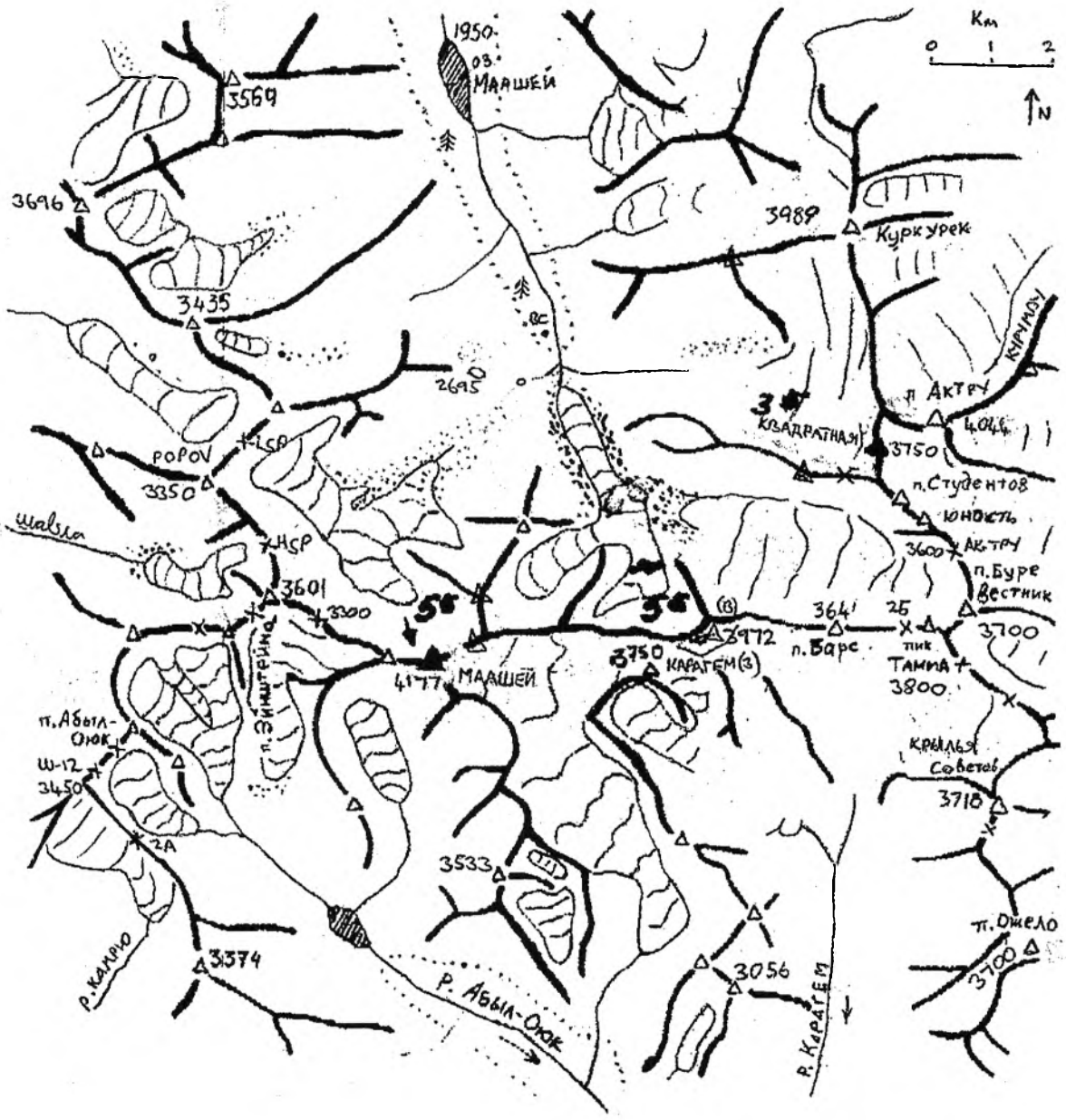
<b>Area visited:</b>	Northern Chuisky Range, Altai Mountains, Siberia.
<b>Leader:</b>	Paul Knott c/o 6 Meadow Road Canterbury Kent CT2 8EU England Tel: 01227 464464
<b>Members:</b>	Justin Canny (USA) Michael Doyle (UK) Bill Fischelis (USA)
<b>Objectives:</b>	New routes and first British/American ascents of peaks around the Maashey valley.

## Description of the area

The Altai mountains straddle the border area of Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China. Much of the mountaineering interest in the range lies within Russia, broadly speaking in SW Siberia, or more precisely in the Altai Republic. General information about the area is to be found in 'Trekking in Russia and Central Asia' by Frith Maier, and in the Lonely Planet guide.

The Siberian Altai is probably best known for the Katun Range, and in particular the Ak-Kem wall of Bielukha (4506m). This area has been visited by a number of British parties (including the author's in 1990; report in AC library and RGS; Mountain 143) as well as being the site for a number of years of one of the established base camps characteristic of the Russian mountaineering scene.

Some 80km ENE of Bieukha lies the Northern Chuisky Range. This range, like the Katun Range, has had a Russian camp for many years, situated in the Ak-Tru valley. This camp has easier access than the Ak-Kem, and perhaps for this reason remains very popular with local climbers. Despite this it has still received little attention from foreign parties. Curiously, it lies somewhat to the East of the highest part of the range and, characteristically, other areas have received much less attention from mountaineers despite being well frequented by trekking parties. The only significant foreign climbing team was a British school party organised by Leslie Fox, then of Trent College, in 1990. From a base in the Shavla valley, at the Western end of the range, ascents were made of a number of peaks of which Krasavitsa (3700m) was probably the most impressive (detailed report in RGS library).



Sketch map of the Maashey - Karagem area of the Northern Chuisky (original drawn by Sergei Kurgin)

The Maashey Valley is central to the Northern Chuisky Range, and at its head lie the highest and most glaciated peaks of the range. The main peaks were climbed in the 1960s-70s, but generally only by their easiest routes. Prior to our trip there had been virtually no new route activity since. Visits by non-Russians had been few, and of these the only climbing teams were one from Poland in 1994 and one from Hungary in 1996 (details in Alpine Journal Area Notes).

The highest peak both in this valley and in either of the Chuisky massifs is Maashey (4177m). This has an extensive North face on which the only existing recorded route was on the NW Face at Russian 5B (~TD+). Reports of considerable new route potential on this extensive face were instrumental in the choice of location for this expedition. The NE Face, between our two routes, remains unclimbed.

Immediately to the East of peak Maashey lies the smaller, but arguably more photogenic, Karagem (3972m). Its North face is broken by a series of five rock ribs, clearly visible in the photograph (although later in the trip these became almost completely snowed over). Identifying the existing routes on this face is problematic. In addition to the routes described in the picture caption below, a North Buttress route is also listed at 4B (G. Shilyanskiy, 1965). This may approximate to the left hand rib, which we considered the easiest and safest of the five.

The rock on Karagem, as elsewhere, is a dark brown sedimentary rock. This and other problems such as the discontinuities in the ribs and the threat of seracs in the gullies may make the routes both harder and more objectively dangerous than they appear. In addition the easiest descent (given the impassable state in which we found the Tamma Pass) appears to be the North Face of peak Bars, which calls for reasonable snow/ice conditions.



N Face of Karagem. Local climbers assume the 1962 Kuznetsov Route (5B) to have been taken by the central rib leading directly to the summit. The L skyline shows the E Ridge 'normal' route. At the right hand end of the picture Karagem East (3750m) is just visible. This face is taken by another rock route, also at 5B, climbed by V. Andreev in 1956.

During our stay we met a number of Russian trekkers, who came to see the glacier, to visit the two mountain lakes above it to the W, and sometimes to cross to the Shavla valley. There was also a German party, guided by Sergei Kurgin and his team, that spent several days in our base camp area. The only climbers were Andrei Kolesnikov and Kostya Vinnikov from Barnaul, who completed a traverse from Kurkurek round to Maashey. This traverse had been achieved before, by Valery Karpenko in May 1997, and is a logical expedition given that the main ridge is generally easy and safe in comparison to the ascents on the N Wall.

The approach to the area via the main Chuya valley has some historical, geological and climbing interest. The climate seems much drier than in the Katun region, leading towards the Mongolian plains. The valley has many sandstone deposits, which around Yarbalaq form large terraces providing perfect fruit growing conditions. In several places there are large, steep limestone crags, which almost certainly have not been climbed on. Close to Inya, and probably elsewhere, ancient Petroglyphs can be found on the rocks (our driver Andrei knew of their location). On grass terraces near the entrance to the Maashey valley there are burial mounds, thought to be made by the semi-nomadic Pazyryk people in 3-6 century b.c. The museum in Gorno-Altaiisk contained extensive information about the archaeology and history of the area.

## Travel and logistics

Our transport in Russia, and other matters such as visas, were handled by the Novosibirsk firm of SIBALP: 630087 Novosibirsk, Nemirovicha-Danchenko 155/1-47; Telephone +7 3832 495922; Fax +7 3832 469059. Although this part of the Altai is accessible from a main road and is comparatively well frequented by tourists, the use of such an agency still seems the best approach. Sergei and his colleagues were good sources of information. Sergei provided a hand drawn sketch map (not entirely accurate), to augment the 1:200 000 survey map (freely available covering the whole Altai region).

In Novosibirsk we spent one night in a hotel in order to get our visas stamped. In principle fines can be levied on leaving the country if this is not done. For two further nights we stayed at the Sibalp office. Travel around the city was easy and cheap using the metro and buses. The thriving Central Market was probably the most striking of the places we visited.

We took much of our food supplies from the UK and USA, leaving only simple items like Pasta, Russian sweets, cheese etc to be bought locally. These we ended up buying near Gorno-Altaiisk. Later, in the centre of Novosibirsk we found a supermarket (near the Hotel Tsentralno) which was extremely well stocked with international as well as Russian foods and could have supplied all but the most specialist items for the trip.

## Expedition diary

10-12 July	American team members fly (separately) to London.
13 July	Fly to Novosibirsk. Lufthansa flights via Frankfurt (not Moscow).
14 July	Drive to Manzherok sports base (well frequented by rafting groups) by Katun River near Gorno Altaiisk. Familiar all-night cacophony of vodka-crazed Russians.
15 July	Drive along the Chuisky Trakt highway, leaving it at Chibit for a minor road to campsite at junction of Chuya and Maashey rivers.
16 July	5 hour walk-in to base camp in bushes near Maashey glacier snout.
17 July	Carry of remaining food up to base camp.
21 July	N Ridge and NE Ridge of Maashey (4177m), both new routes. 23 hour day.
24-27 July	Ascent to Ak-Tru and Tamma passes, crossing peaks Tamma (3800m) and Burevestnik (3700m). Storm and heavy snow dump.
29-31 July	Camp and climbing from side valley E of base camp. Ascents of Ak-Tru (4044m) and Kurkurek (3982m).
1-2 August	Clearing of base camp and walk to Chuya river.
4 August	Drive to near Gorno-Altaiisk. Wild camp by Katun River to save the noise and expense of the sports base.
5 August	Visit museum in Gorno-Altaiisk. Drive to Novosibirsk. Night in Hotel Tsentralno.
6-7 August	Sightseeing in Novosibirsk. Swimming amongst the dead fish of the "Ob Sea".
8 August	Return to UK



## N Ridge of Maashey (4177m)



N Face of Maashey. The route took the R of the two snow slopes L of the ridge, traversed R to the ridge then took the rock buttress to the snowy subsidiary top and hence the snow arête to the summit ridge behind. Descent was via the normal route on the R skyline. The NW Face, of which the top is visible to the R, is taken by the 1960 Budanov Route at 5B.

*New route and first British and American ascent. Climbers: Fischelis and Knott*

Visible from afar, but hidden from many angles by a lower peak, the focus of this route was an elegant subsidiary summit (c.3750m) connected by a snow arête to the main ridge of Maashey.

The route was climbed directly from base camp, crossing moraine boulders for 3 hours by moonlight to reach the bottom of the rock ridge (c.2700m) that led to the subsidiary summit. The rock appeared uninviting so we decided to take the ice slope to its left. This made for rapid progress as the ice was clear of snow, soft, and at around 45°. Moving right, a snow/ice line could be seen leading directly to the subsidiary summit but the climbing was becoming steeper and less amenable. Two roped pitches enabled an escape onto an upper rock ridge. It soon became apparent that the rock quality was appalling, and this combined with its steepness, moves up to VS (?) and occasional snow and verglas made for slow and tortuous progress. Huge blocks crashed down our ascent route, with smaller rocks hitting the second and cutting the rope. We finally reached the subsidiary summit at 1pm, after six hours climbing 300m of rock. From here a weary plod up the snow arête led to the main summit ridge. The other party (see below) was just ahead. Descent was via the W Ridge, the 'normal' route on the mountain given Russian 4A. This simple snow ridge led to an icy but straightforward descent to the glacier. As the moraine boulders were reached darkness fell, rain started and hence the scene was set for an epic finish. Base camp was finally reached at 2am after 23 hours on the move.

The descent, although graded 4A on the Russian scale, did not seem to have any significant difficulties in the prevailing conditions. It was far easier than another 4A route climbed by the author on 20th October Peak (now re-named Altai Crown) in the Katun Range.

## NE Ridge of Maashey (4177m)



NE Face of Maashey, from Ak-Tru. The NE Ridge is visible approximately facing camera, with the snow slope taken to reach it visible on its R. The N Ridge is in profile on the right. There are no recorded routes up the obvious NE face.

*New route and first British and American ascent. Climbers: Canny and Doyle.*

The NE Ridge of Maashey is visible from the main valley as a long rock ridge leading to a snow section with seracs and finally a rightwards slanting slope leading to the main ridge of the mountain (see cover photograph). On a reconnoitre it was observed that the rock ridge could be bypassed by taking an ice tongue on the NW side of the ridge, or the slope to its right.

The route was climbed directly from base camp. An icefall prohibited a direct approach via the Maashey glacier, so a laborious route had to be taken via the lateral moraine. The moraine was taken to the N side of the W branch of the glacier, and from here dry glacier could be crossed to the S bank.

The climb took the slope to the right of the obvious ice tongue. After crossing the bergschrund a rising traverse was taken to the centre of the slope, which was climbed solo in good ice conditions at c.45° (some stonefall). The ridge was joined 100m above the col, and followed to a loose 40m rock section then easy snow ridge. Higher, where the ridge steepened, slopes were taken on the L, then a snow basin and a schrund crossed by a collapsing snow bridge. This section was time consuming due to poor snow and the need to navigate through crevasses. From here after a rightwards traverse a further serac was avoided and the E ridge reached, 5½ hours from the col. This easy ridge was followed, past the point where the N ridge joins. Descent was as for the N Ridge (see above), with the same epic finish.

## Eastern end of the 'Maashey Wall'

*First British and American ascents of Burevestnik (3700m) and Tamma (3800m). Whole team.*

This trip out was originally thought of in terms of the simple crossing of the Tamma Pass (3200m), graded a moderate 2B on the Russian trekking scale, to explore peaks and routes from the head of the Karagem valley. After a surprise clearing of the weather, a late start on 24th combined with an

intricate section of the upper Maashey Glacier necessitated a camp below the Tamma Pass. From here it was observed that the route to this col took a broken and dangerous looking hanging glacier on which a feasible route could not be clearly seen.

The next day, therefore, we ascended the easier and safer, but higher, Ak-Tru Pass at 3600m. From its top we traversed over the snow peaks Burevestnik (3700m) and Tamma (3800m), and descended to the Tamma Pass. We camped here in readiness for an ascent of the E Ridge of Karagem (3972m). Squally afternoon showers turned to an alarming electrical storm and a prolonged dump of heavy snow. Two disorientated Russians appeared through the storm like an apparition, descending blindly towards the hanging glacier. To our relief they returned some time later asking to see a map.

Eventually the next morning visibility improved sufficiently for us to attempt a retreat. We reached the Ak-Tru pass without difficulty but its descent required better visibility so we waited out another night of snow and wind at its top. The following morning dawned calm and crystal clear to reveal a newly white landscape looking like a freshly iced cake. We gingerly descended through fresh avalanche debris to the safety of the Maashey glacier.

## **Ak-Tru (4044m) and Kurkurek (3989m)**

*New route and first American ascent, Kurkurek (3989m). Climbers: Canny and Fischelis. First British and American ascents, Ak-Tru (4044m). Summitting climbers: Canny, Fischelis, Knott.*

These peaks are more often climbed from the traditional base camp in the Ak-Tru valley. However, they were accessible from the unnamed side valley East of our camp in the Maashey valley.

On 30 July, from a pleasant moraine site at c.2940m, Doyle and Knott took a snow route to Ak-Tru (Knott summited alone). Meanwhile an enthusiastic Canny and Fischelis took a rock ridge and snow couloir to the forepeak W of Kurkurek and traversed from here, via Kurkurek and a rocky section of ridge (given 4B in the Russian routes book), to Ak-Tru. On both routes much of the snow was found to be in poor condition, and on the descent of W facing slopes which by this time were in the sun, sizeable snow slides were occurring. Luckily none of the larger slides hit the descending climbers, but the warning was sufficient that lower slopes of this orientation were avoided in favour of a shale rock buttress.

The height of Ak-Tru is often quoted as 4176m, but altimeter readings more closely supported the survey map height of 4044m.

## **Weather and conditions**

In common with earlier expeditions to other parts of the Altai, we experienced unsettled weather virtually throughout the trip. Early in our visit the ice slopes were well stripped of snow which made for rapid and safe progress. This was reportedly due to unusually hot spring weather which had stripped the heavy winter snowfall. Later we experienced several days of storm with heavy snowfall blown by changing winds which plastered most slopes and gave the mountains a winter appearance. For the remainder of the trip rock routes were covered by fresh snow and most snow slopes were highly avalanche prone. Local climbers recommended September as possibly a less unsettled period.

## **Equipment**

The clothing and climbing equipment used was similar to that typically used in for summer climbing in the Alps. The tents used were a Terra Nova Quasar and a similar tent made by Moss. These served both as base camp and mountain tents. We were pleased with the REI branded sleeping bags, clothing and other equipment supplied to the expedition by REI.



We used two MSR X-GK stoves for all cooking and snow melting. These were reliable thanks to their field maintainability, essential given the poor quality fuel (in addition the fuel was filtered to remove the rust that flakes off Russian petrol cans). On one of the stoves a pair of pliers became necessary for replacement of the cleaning wire.

A small tarpaulin provided a useful cooking shelter for the often wet weather at base camp. Ski sticks were useful for the heavy carries and river crossings of the walk-in.

## Environmental

Although we were the first British or American climbing teams in the valley it is relatively popular amongst Russian trekkers and some local climbers. In a number of respects the treatment of the area by these visitors gave rise to considerable concern. In the base camp area, close to the glacier snout, there was only shallow soil, bushes and a few trees. Despite this all parties we saw cooked exclusively on wood fires, for which fresh wood was often cut. Furthermore, many tin cans and unsightly fireplaces had been left and human waste could be found close to the streams flowing through the area.

On our trip we cooked exclusively on petrol. Since we only used a total of 8 litres this imposed little extra burden. We burned our garbage but carried down the remains and disposed of it in Novosibirsk. In addition we carried down some of the tin cans left by previous parties but could only make a small dent in the total number scattered throughout the valley.

## Budget

Expenditure	£	Income	£
Flights UK-Novosibirsk	1816.20	MEF Grant	650.00
Flights USA-UK	1125.13	BMC Grant	700.00
Transport to airport (UK)	132.25	REI Grant	632.91
Food (UK and USA)	362.75		
Food (Russia)	95.57	Individual contribs (UK)	1111.00
Fuel (stoves)	3.00	Individual contribs (USA)	2427.91
Altai Tourist Licence	126.58		
Transport Novosibirsk-Altai	411.39		
Expenses in Britain (US members)	191.77		
Food and expenses on journey	93.19		
Agents in Novosibirsk/Altai	178.48		
Accommodation in Novosibirsk/Gorno Altaisk	98.34		
Visa expenses	84.29		
Insurance	211.11		
Petrol cans	7.98		
Damage to rope / equipment	100.00		
Telephone charges USA-UK	35.67		
Camera film and development costs	448.10		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5521.82</b>		<b>5521.82</b>

The individual contributions for the US members of the expedition are greater because of additional expenditure on travel to and within the UK.

In addition to the above grants, we are also grateful for the considerable amount of equipment supplied to the expedition by REI.