

British-Soviet Caucasus Expedition 1970

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It is a pity that so few British climbers have the opportunity to climb in the Caucasus, and to date no postwar official American party has climbed there.

There are only three ways of climbing in this region: a) an official invitation can be given by the Mountaineering Federation of the U.S.S.R. to the senior club of a country, b) an invitation can be extended by one of the Trade Unions whose guests can stay at one of their mountain centres, and c) (the one which we used on this visit) to go as tourists via Intourist, the Russian travel agency, which has an office in London. The drawback this way is the cost. One must pay full hotel rates, in the region of £3 per day for bed and breakfast in the luxury Hotel Itkol—very smart and built on modern lines.

With the aid of Fiat of Turin, who loaned us two vehicles, we drove out via East Germany and Poland. We took all our food with us. It is a somewhat tiring journey, but official camp sites are well located and not too expensive, and of course petrol is very cheap.

At the Hotel Itkol there is a mountaineering representative, Mr Rototaeo, the Vice-President of the Mountaineering Federation. He gave us a tremendous amount of help in choosing suitable routes, in supplying up-to-date weather information, and so on.





31 *Girls at the Caucasian Trade Union Mountain Camp doing a crampon dance*

Unless the party is a highly competent one, used to climbing in high mountain regions, a certain amount of restriction will be imposed until they have proved themselves capable. This is a very sensible precaution of course, for these are dangerous mountains. The Control Time still operates; this, as most climbers know, is an estimated time for the completion of the route. Should the party not return within the estimated time a search party goes out looking for them—within fifteen minutes. Before starting a climb all members of the party must undergo a medical examination.

There were six members in our party—Paul Nunn, Alan McHardy, Chris Woodall, Paul Braithwaite, Hamish MacInnes and a *Sunday Mirror* representative.

We chose as a training climb the North face of Nagra Tau a 4000 ft route first climbed by Abalakov—his first return to mountaineering after losing most of his fingers and toes with frost-bite.

Though the weather was not too bad, there was little frost and this attempt very nearly ended in disaster when a very big sérac, which triggered off a further avalanche, just missed our party by a few feet after we had sprinted in crampons across a steep ice-slope. Because of the objective dangers and the deteriorating



32 *Pic Shchurovsky from the German bivouac*



33 *Ushba*

weather this climb was then abandoned. Indifferent weather kept us off the higher peaks for some time, but we became fit going up and down on various sorties.

The North face of Pik Shchurovsky held a fascination for us. It was one of the steepest faces we had seen in the Ushba region and the existing climbs on the mountain were among the hardest in the area, though the peak is lower than Ushba. I was particularly interested in a new line on the wall, to the left of a route done by Abalakov some years previously—which has not been repeated. Our proposed route followed a very steep mixed line, which we felt would give a climb of the highest order. Fortunately, I had climbed in the Caucasus in 1961 (*A.Ž.* 57 54) when I had traversed the ridge of Shkhelda with a Russian party, and this no doubt influenced Mr Rototaeo to give us permission to attempt this route.



34 *Using terrordactyls during the course of the climb*

Despite the bad weather, both Paul Nunn and Chris Woodall were still at the German Bivouac on the Ushba glacier, as we had all hoped to attempt a route on Ushba when the weather cleared. Alan McHardy and Paul Braithwaite had returned to the hotel due to the rain, and meantime I was recovering from sunstroke.

Despite the heavy rain I went up to the bivouac to join my colleagues, hoping that the weather would clear. In two days the weather conditions improved and we left our Czech, Polish and Russian friends at the bivouac at midnight and moved across the glacier to the base of the wall.

We climbed with headlamps and were using our new dropped pick ice-axes of 78° . We had also with us terrordactyls, 45° dropped pick ice tools which I had developed in Scotland the previous winter. Moving unroped we reached a



steep ice-chimney above the schrund, and there, in the first light of day, we roped up. We made good time up the chimney/gully on to the face proper. The angle was now high and the last man ascended on jumars to save time.

Near the middle of the face there is a wide band of very steep rock, with many overhangs. We called this the 'barrier pitch'. Everything was used to climb this section, hyten pegs, ice-screws, terrordactyls and chocks. It was as difficult as most of the new hard-ice climbs in Scotland. Above, the difficulties continued, and we had trouble in finding anywhere to bivouac, for there are virtually no ledges on the face. Eventually we found an ice/rock shelf, some 25 cms wide when excavated, where we spent a most uncomfortable night with continuous snowfall. We were all frost-bitten as well as somewhat concerned by our predicament, for there was insufficient equipment to rope off the climb. We had to go on.

At dawn, with the snow reduced to intermittent showers, we continued upwards. The difficulties, though not so hard as the barrier pitch, were persistent, and nowhere was it easy.

By late afternoon we were caught in a bad storm of hail and high wind. In worsening conditions we forced our way up 70° ice which was covered with about 5 cm of fresh snow in a dangerous state.

Towards late evening we reached the summit in poor visibility. It was difficult to find our way along the corniced summit ridge in the dark under these conditions and we were forced to bivouac on the lower slopes of Ushba. Paul was suffering from both altitude sickness and exposure and he was kept in a bivouac sack whilst Chris and I fought to dig snow-holes, which filled in with spindrift as quickly as we dug. It was a miserable night. The following morning we managed to descend the Ushba ice-fall, which was in a dangerous condition, entailing a 45-m free abseil from an ice-screw from an overhanging sérac. We arrived at the bivouac by late afternoon.

We decided to call the route the 'Centenary Climb', in honour of the Lenin centenary year.

I am convinced that the Caucasus offers some of the best mountaineering in the world, and this, coupled with a fascinating country plus wonderful hospitality, makes it an ideal area for a mountain holiday.