The International Mountaineering Camp 1984

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Plates 49–53

The last Scottish party to climb in the Soviet Union had taken part in the ill-fated First International Camp in the Pamirs in 1974. Since then the regular invitations received by the Scottish Mountaineering Club were never taken up, until December 1983 when Desmond Rubens and I applied to Moscow. A few weeks later a brief telegram arrived, confirming our places on the 24-day camp, based in the Prielbrus region of the Caucasus.

Apart from the well-known classics of Freshfield, Mummery, Longstaff, Brasher, Hunt and MacInnes, the lack of any up-to-date information in English came as a surprise. John Town had visited the area in 1979 (*AJ86*, 126–132, 1981), and after a couple of long sessions with him on the telephone we had a much better idea of what we were letting ourselves in for.

By May 1984, a second brief telegram had arrived from Moscow, demanding immediate payment of the camp fee of US $800 each, not including the return fare to Moscow. For British climbers wanting to visit the Soviet Union, the cost is the main problem. Our total budget came to almost £1000 each. As well as booking return flights we also arranged a few extra days of independent sightseeing in Moscow through Intourist UK.

The extra weekend in Moscow turned out to be well worthwhile. Monday 23 July was the official starting date for the Camp, and the end of our independence.

John Town had assured me that the weather was 'no worse than the Alps', though many earlier parties seemed to have had more than their fair share of bad. One writer summarized pessimistically 'the weather never seems very settled, with good snow and ice conditions only rarely obtainable.' We were able to form our own first impressions of the weather next morning. A heavy rainstorm in the mountains had washed away part of the road from the airport at Mineralniye Vodi, delaying until early evening the exciting and bumpy drive up the Baksan valley so that we eventually arrived at our destination after midnight.

The 'Camp' turned out to be the busy eight-storey Cheget Hotel, which we shared with an assortment of Soviet holidaymakers. We were officially welcomed to the Camp by Yuri Reishi, Chief Administrator, who had accompanied us from Moscow. Leo Dobravolsky, Chief Guide, introduced the Soviet advisers/guides who were assigned to assist each group. This was the tenth season of camps, with other parties coming from Austria, East Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland, Spain and Switzerland, a solitary Englishman and an American—about 50 people in all. Valentine Ivanov, Chief of Rescue, outlined the Soviet system of route lists, control times and radio communications, and the



Photo: Des Rubens

49 Ushba from Dongus Orun.

introductory formalities finished with a brief medical examination. Right from the start the camp administration emphasized that their main aim was to help us fulfil our plans, and so it turned out.

Des and I were the only party which did not have the ascent of Elbrus as its main objective. All we wanted was as much interesting climbing as possible in the 18 days which lay ahead, but with more heavy rain and low cloud the prospects did not look very encouraging. Our advisers were George and Gena, two bronzed and fit-looking enthusiasts from Leningrad. It took a while to convince them that we were determined to start for a climb the following day, and it soon became clear that we would have to prove ourselves before attempting any serious routes. They recommended Jantugan (3991m) as a suitable introductory peak and we started packing immediately.

The rain was pouring down again next morning as the camp bus drove us down to the foot of the Adyl Su valley. Normally the bus can continue several miles up the valley, but the rough road was blocked near the bottom by a mudslide, leaving us a wet walk. We passed several busy climbing camps, the Soviet equivalent of our outdoor centres from which all climbing is carried out on a highly organized basis. George accompanied us as far as the end of the road, leaving us to find our own way up to our bivouac at the 'Green Hotel'. A brief break in the cloud revealed an impressive snowy tooth towering above us—Jantugan. It was no surprise to find that the Green Hotel consisted of a couple of shanty-style huts surrounded by dozens of tents dotted over a flat grassy moraine, an uninviting prospect in the mist and rain. Things started looking up when we were invited to join a remarkably cheerful group of wet and bedraggled victims of the weather who plied us with tea and stew, offering us the use of a tent slightly more water-resistant than our own. An invitation to dinner was followed by a memorable evening of songs, poetry and recitation in very pleasant company. The weather showed no signs of improving so, retiring rather late, we set the alarm more out of a sense of duty than with any conviction of an early start.

Poking sleepy heads out of the tent door at the appointed hour, we were set into motion by the unexpected twinkle of a starry sky. Soon we were tramping up the moraine and, slipping on verglassed rocks, we picked our way up on to the glacier. Though by no means a giant, Jantugan dominates the head of the valley and we had chosen the easiest route by the E ridge, expecting plenty of fresh snow. As the sun rose, the broad twin-topped cone of Elbrus glowed a warm pink behind us. As we approached a broad col, more and more spectacular peaks gradually came into view. A shallow couloir led up to the ridge and deep soft snow filled the rocky chimney leading to the summit. The Soviet grading for the route was 'IIa category' (about PD), and we were well pleased with our time of five hours. The rocky spire of Jailik dominated the peaks of the Adyr Su valley, and in the distance we could see the Bezingi giants. To the south and west, cloud was building up quickly, obscuring the view, and a cold wind cut short the usual summit pleasures. On this and all our subsequent climbs we had the mountain to ourselves.

Back at Cheget, we started organizing our next climb straight after dinner. Together with Marina, our interpreter, and George and Gena, our advisers, we



Photo: David Broadhead

50 *Looking back to the W summit of Dongus Orun from the traverse to Nakra. Route of ascent (the NE ridge) in profile in centre.*

flicked through a large photograph album of assorted views of the more interesting peaks in the area and discussed the routes. Earlier in the day Jailik had looked very attractive, but its plastering of fresh snow made us turn instead to the icy N face of Ullu Tau Chana (4363m), 'V category' (TD), which dominates the head of the Adyr Su valley. The photo of the broad face was striped with dotted lines and we were pressed to choose one quickly, so that a detailed route description could be translated from the rather dated Russian guidebook. Once a route had been chosen, details were submitted on a route list which was duly signed by the camp doctor and the Chief of Rescue. The whole process was remarkably speedy but unpleasantly committing, since a change of heart meant a change of plan and back to square one.

A bus ride away down the Baksan valley is a dramatic rock-step which blocks the valley. Ingenious engineering has overcome this obstacle by means of a lift which takes smaller vehicles but not buses. Beyond it, we walked up the valley, enjoying the scenery and the sunshine at a leisurely pace. At the end of the road our three Russian companions, George, Gena and Albert, stopped at Ullu Tau Camp while we continued up the moraine to the busy Cheget Bivouac 500m higher. Once again, we were taken under the wing of a hospitable Soviet group and were happy to accept their offer of space in a tent as more heavy rain started at dusk. We were snug in our pits when an enormous enamel mug of steaming hot tea was thrust through the ventilator. Grateful, we passed it around and the weather suddenly seemed less depressing.

It was still raining when our alarm went off at 3am. By 4am a few stars had appeared, and although our hosts were stirring we decided to slumber on and give conditions a day to settle. Our control time was generous enough to allow us some flexibility. The morning turned out fine, and George and Albert came up to see how we were getting on. We were joined also by a party of 30 or so enthusiastic beginners from Jailik Camp doing basic training in snow and ice craft. Almost all the Soviet climbers we met used the same old-fashioned equipment—heavy hardwearing cotton clothing, tents and rucksacks. For more specialized gear, keen climbers have to rely on making their own. We were particularly impressed by the titanium ice-screws which have become standard currency in exchange for foreign gear.

Eventually, we packed our sacks and climbed up the glacier for an hour or so to a bivouac at the foot of the face. Despite high hopes and a clear evening sky, we were woken at 2am by more rain, but as the morning wore on the weather improved sufficiently to tempt us to start. A short steep ice pitch led over the bergschrund, but the face above was not quite as steep as it looked from below. Our concern about the state of the snow was confirmed by an alarming little avalanche from the rocks above which rapidly convinced us to retreat.

After dinner we had the album out again. Having for the time being lost our appetite for ice faces, we decided to try a local speciality, a long ridge traverse. George recommended the traverse of Dongus Orun (4454m) and Nakra (4277m), the impressive snow peaks towering above the hotel and dominating the view from our bedroom window.

Shouldering our sacks again next afternoon, we took a narrow path leading directly from the front door and climbing steeply up the hillside opposite,

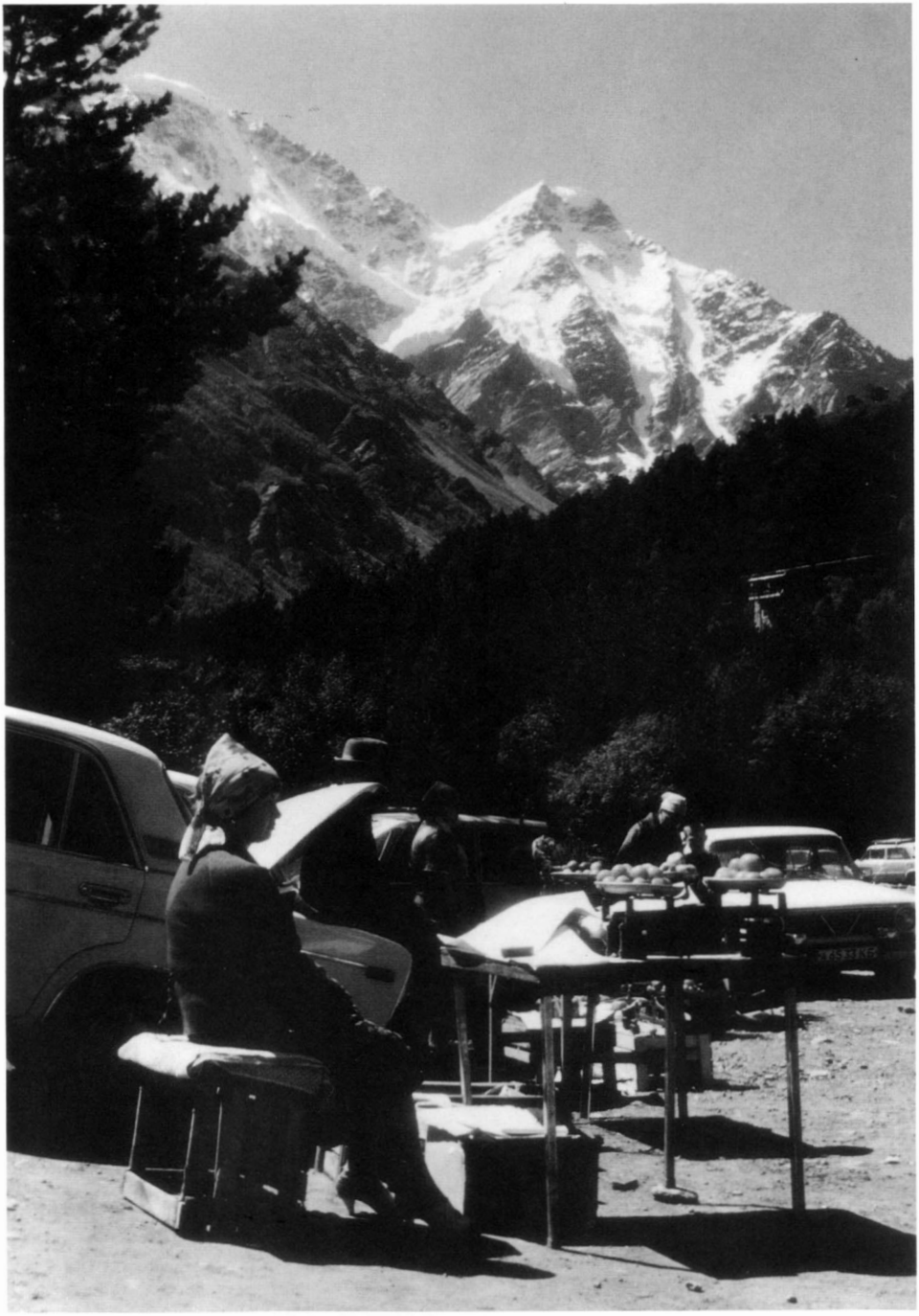


Photo: David Broadhead

51 *The fruit market outside Cheget Hotel, with Nakra in centre of picture and Dongus Orun in the background.*

below Kogu Tai peak. Passing quickly through forest and shrub, alpine meadows and moraines, we stopped just below the snout of the glacier. We felt very lonely here compared with our previous bivouacs, for there was not even a trace of another party near us. Before long the familiar pitter-patter of rain had started, and it continued all night. By dawn we had lost some of our faith in Goretex, for by now we were far too wet to do anything but head despondently back to the hotel below. Close to our bivouac we had noticed a small cave to which we returned that afternoon for a second attempt. That night, snug in the dry cave, we slept soundly, waking early to discover that the weather had a new trick to play—thick mist. Spirits ebbed to their lowest point, but after a couple of hours the fog lifted and we followed the glacier beneath Kogu Tai to the foot of the NE ridge of Dongus Orun. In spite of our late start and the long roundabout approach we made rapid progress, scrambling up mixed rock and snow on the ridge. Higher up the climbing became more serious and as the mists rolled in again we enjoyed magnificent Brocken spectres. The route took on a real 'Scottish winter' flavour, the rocks plastered with snow and festooned with icicles. The ridge was graded 'III category' (about AD), and we were able to avoid any difficulties on the crest by brief excursions on to the exposed snowy faces on either side.

Sometimes we had the sneaking suspicion that our Soviet advisers knew more about the routes and conditions than they were prepared to admit for, just as we were leaving for our second attempt, George had presented us with two brand-new titanium ice-screws with no further explanation. Near the top of the ridge we were confronted with an unexpected short steep ice-pitch on which the screws were very welcome. This crucial pitch led on to a ramp which broke through the nasty-looking cornice, leaving a straightforward pull up on to the summit plateau and a short walk to the top.

In thick mist, with only an hour or so before dark, we decided to bivouac on the summit and scooped out a shallow windbreak in the snow. Snug in our Goretex bags we brewed supper, and feeling reasonably comfortable we settled down to sleep as a few stars appeared. As it got dark the wind picked up and the prospect of peaceful slumber disappeared as we were showered with spindrift. Although we were never in any danger of being buried or blown away, the wind made sleep impossible. As the snow built up against our bags, it locked our limbs uncomfortably rigid. Energetic wriggling every few minutes shifted it and brought temporary relief, but built up a chilling layer of snow between the struggling sleeper and the insulation beneath. Slowly we became colder and colder. The sleepless night dragged on, and in the back of our minds was the nagging uncertainty of just how bad the weather might be in the morning. At last the interminable darkness gave way to the grey light of dawn. With some trepidation we broke out of our cocoons, sitting up to discover a clear cloudless morning. It was a perfect day, apart from a little spindrift blowing close to the ground.

I could hardly believe my bleary eyes as I looked across the whole range stretched out before us. After digging our buried gear out of the snow and struggling into frozen boots, we took an early morning stroll to the highest of the three tops to soak in the sun and the view. Our first view of the twin horns



Photo: David Broadhead

52 *W side of Jantugan from the N face of Ullu Kara Tau.*

of neighbouring Ushba confirmed its reputation as one of the world's most beautiful mountains. Starved of suitable weather, our ambition to climb it had gradually withered: 'Ushba by the hardest route . . . Ushba by the easiest route . . . Just a glimpse of Ushba?' Face to face at last, with the sun shining and our spirits soaring, we felt we were getting somewhere.

Compared with the ridge we had ascended, the traverse to Nakra presented no difficulties. The descent, however, was more complicated, and despite a detailed description we were glad to have a clear day to find our way down. In the absence of good maps and guidebooks and the strong possibility of poor visibility, the descent routes often felt more serious than the climbs, especially since few of the peaks seemed to have an easy way down.

Now Ushba dominated our plans, and the following afternoon we walked up to the German Bivouac beneath the N faces of Shkhelda and Pik Shchurovsky. Accompanied by George and Gena we negotiated the Ushba ice-fall next morning, to reach a cosy bivouac on the Ushba plateau. After our unpleasant experiences in Goretex bags, my old faithful nylon home-made bivouac tent was back in the team. We passed the rest of the cloudy day lazing about, with regular visits to our comrade neighbours who demonstrated their culinary skills with a nifty little home-made pressure cooker, producing delicious soups and a tasty stewed apple concoction called 'campot'. Relying on fresh and tinned food on the hill, Soviet climbers tended to turn up their noses when offered a taste of our dehydrated and freeze-dried packets, though they enjoyed splitting the occasional spare Mars bar.

In between snacks we discussed our 'sports plan', since for once there was a choice. Most attractive was the complete traverse of both summits, a long and serious expedition. However, the unsettled weather made a quick lightweight romp up and down the N ridge of the lower N peak seem more feasible. We had invited George and Gena to accompany us since neither had climbed Ushba before but, although this had been approved before we left Cheget, that evening they were instructed not to attempt the climb. We were interested to note that they seemed to accept this with equanimity.

Our early start followed the now familiar pattern—bad weather at 4am, looking better by 7am. A short section of glacier, then a steeper rising traverse, took us over the bergschrund and across to a rocky ridge on the right. Moving together, a long, long snow and ice slope led us to the ridge proper. Belaying and pitching, lots of traversing mixed with short ups and downs took us over a couple of false tops to the summit, six hours later. The sun had shown its face briefly just below the top, but otherwise we were blanketed in thick cloud all the way. The ridge is graded 'IV category' (about D); a serious *voie normale*. The descent took another five hours of mostly monotonous 'facing in' until the cloud started to lift as we crossed back over the bergschrund.

With time running short, we still hoped to climb something more technical before yielding to the temptations of 'The Big E'. George was very keen for us to try the N face of Ullu Kara Tau (4302m, 'V category'). Situated at the head of the Adyr Su, the route looked challenging enough in the album, though there was no guidebook description and we had no recollection of seeing the face after we climbed nearby Jantugan. According to the photo, our route followed a



Photo: David Broadhead

53 *Elbrus E peak, from ascent to W peak. The twin peaks of Ushba in background.*

distinctive rocky rib up the centre of the face.

We returned to the Green Hotel where thick, low cloud and rain obscured the view. Uncertain even of the position of the face in this enormous coire, we thought we could just see the foot of the rib keeking out from below the grey curtain of cloud. Declining further offers of hospitality, we continued across the glacier to camp alone on an idyllic flower-speckled moraine below the face. As we settled down to enjoy the situation, we were rewarded with a clear view of our route as the clouds briefly parted, unveiling a nasty little surprise. The photo in the album had not shown that the only access to the rib was *via* a distinctly unattractive ice-fall. Weather was not our only worry as the rain started again in the evening.

By 6am the weather had brightened up enough for us to make a start. A short walk across the glacier, and we were soon among the tottering séracs and avalanche debris, moving as fast as we could, anxious to spend as little time as possible in the ice-fall whose only redeeming feature was shortness. A steep ice-pitch led to safer ground and deep soft snow. To our left was Jantugan, a familiar yardstick with which to measure our upward progress. Above, the foot of the rocky rib looked close but seemed to be getting no closer when suddenly the clouds vanished, leaving us to sweat in the sun. As we drew level with the rib, the soft snow gave way to perfect ice. The angle of the slope steepened and at last we started to enjoy the climb. The face soaring above now seemed much less threatening. Following the good ice, pitch by pitch, we gradually approached the crest of the rib, a graceful snow arête. A short traverse leftwards avoided the enormous cornices close to the summit, where we arrived at about 1.30pm. Already more cloud was building up. We descended to the Kashkatash Pass in a heavy hailstorm and down through the Kashkatash ice-fall whose fierce reputation had been enhanced by a recent fatality. From above it looked a formidable route-finding problem. Fresh snow had covered any obvious tracks of previous parties, but a lucky blink of sunshine revealed the slightest trace of old tracks which we followed down without difficulty.

Clear blue skies made an encouraging start to the following day. A sea of cloud filled the valley below us, slowly draining away as the sun rose and as we followed the moraine down to the road. Having failed to get through on the radio and faced with a long trek back to Cheget, we were astonished when, after we had hardly walked a few hundred yards, the bus appeared, with George grinning in the front seat. It meant we were able now to head for Elbrus that afternoon and spend the night at Priut XI hut.

We had heard much about the hut. An interpreter was always stationed there for radio communications, and all the other foreign groups had spent several days there, waiting for suitable weather. A bus ride, two cable cars and a chairlift reduced the effort of reaching the hut to a mere hour's walk. Cosily divided into small rooms on three floors, Priut seemed particularly popular with the lassies—we were greeted by a group clad only in bikinis, doing aerobics in the snow. In the kitchen we were immediately plied with a huge meal. Elbrus obviously had attractions other than the distinction, at 5642m, of being the highest peak in Europe.

Early nights were not part of the normal hut routine at Priut. The hubbub of

chattering, singing and twanging guitars lasted till late into the night, so when we rose at 2am it was tempting to wake everyone to let them know about the marvellous clear morning waiting outside. Instead, we silently munched some breakfast muesli, then shouldered our sacks, carrying with us only a little food and a lot of spare clothing.

As we climbed slowly in the cold, cold moonlight, an air of magic lay about the sea of silvery peaks glimmering below us, enhanced by the occasional flash of lightning in the distance. After a couple of hours we were still climbing steadily, wearing everything by now, and looking expectantly to the east for signs of the sun. By the time the first warming rays reached us we were cold enough to be thankful that we had not started any earlier. Illuminated to its full glory as the dawn tints quickly faded, the view was breathtaking.

We followed a direct line for the lower E summit (5621m) with a slight northerly wind in our faces. By the time we reached the top we had to lie flat on the snow behind the cairn to find enough shelter to make ourselves heard and understood above the wind during our 7.30am radio communication. With the mountain to ourselves and almost perfect weather, a flush of high spirits sent us literally running down to the col between the two summits where we left our sacks, continuing more slowly to the W summit.

By the time we reached the top the wind had slackened again. Under a cloudless sky we revelled in a magnificent panorama. To the north, the brownish-green steppes stretched away into the hazy horizon, giving way in the west to a sea of anonymous snowy peaks. Closer at hand, Dongus Orun and Ushba stood out like old friends and we recognized Ullu Kara Tau and Jantugan among the Adyl Su crowd. Further east, below us at last, the Bezingi giants tempted us to think about coming back again another year. Eventually, the cold forced us to move and we gave the ragged red flag a final wave. For the first time in almost three weeks there was no sign of any cloud building up during the morning, and we were able to enjoy the best of the view all the way back to Priut and down the cable cars.

As we passed swim-suited skiers and couthie day-trippers in shirt-sleeves, skirts and sandals at 4000m, the summit suddenly seemed a long way away. We were back at Cheget in time for lunch.

The glorious weather continued on our last day, though we were content to laze around the hotel and trade some gear, trying to explain that there was a limit to the number of ice-screws we could use. At a small ceremony we were presented with certificates verifying our ascent of Elbrus, together with some of the attractive enamel badges, pendants and small handicrafts popular throughout the Soviet Union. In the evening, the farewell banquet confirmed the camaraderie that had grown during the 'Camp'. Abundant toasts were washed down with plentiful champagne, vodka and local wines. When the speeches eventually finished, the guitars came out and the singing started, despite the prospect of a very early start next morning.

Feeling a little fragile, we bumped and rattled along the pot-holed road down the valley, watching the sun rise on yet another fine day. The mountains stayed in view almost all the way back to Mineralniye Vodi, white banners floating high above the haze.