Eagle Ski Club Tien Shan Expedition

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(*Plates* 35–37, 63)

Glasnost, it is to be hoped, will mean more to us in time than seeing Our Lady of Finchley doing her party-political broadcasts on Russian television. Mountaineers, no less than other seekers of new horizons, physical or intellectual, stand to gain from Mr Gorbachev's drive for openness. For bureaucracy, or fear of it, has kept that sizeable portion of the world's mountains which lies within the USSR largely untrammelled by Britons.

Sifting through the archives of the Alpine Club and Royal Geographical Society for information on the north-western Tien Shan, the realization dawned that our six-strong party looked like being the first British mountaineers to probe this distant corner of Kazakhstan. Confirmation was provided by our Soviet hosts last March over an ample meal at Moscow's Sport Hotel – an alcohol-free base for those physiologically remarkable products of People's Athletics.

According to Boris – chief of the Kazakh alpine scene, but no desk-bound *apparatchik* as the stumps of three frost-bitten fingers testified – we would be the first Brits to attend a Soviet International Mountaineering Camp in the Tien Shan. He wondered why. Perhaps part of the answer lies with that very British bureaucracy – the BMC. The Manchester Kremlin has a full list of the camps and the dates, but this seems to have a 'classified (unless specifically asked for)' stamp on it. I only learnt of its existence after our return.

Not that we were complaining about being pioneers. We were about to enter a central Asian range only two days' travelling from Heathrow where every ascent would, by *reductio ad absurdum*, be a British first, and virtually every ski descent a first ever. The Soviets are only just catching on to ski-mountaineering, and our Eagle Ski Club and MEF-sponsored visit apparently provided a pretext for the import of a batch of Silvretta touring bindings. How else could Grisha, Master of Sport and our 'consultant' for the 16-day trip, accompany us up 4000m peaks? In the event, to our relief, he did not try, but seemed pleased with the performance of his new equipment on the slopes closer to base.

The title 'International Mountaineering Camp' was something of a misnomer. It has the whiff of canvas and the sound of many tongues about it. But the 'camp' at Chimbulak was the hostel of a rudimentary ski resort. Here again, language is being stretched. There is, for anyone fancying something completely different from Verbier, a two-stage chair-lift from 2200m to 3000m and two T-bars. The concrete and steel hostel is bedecked with banner exhortations to the USSR's ski protégés, who are its main business. As for

'international', our party comprised three Scots – leaders Dave and Moira Snadden and Eric Pirie – and three English – Nim Rodda, Steve Lenartowicz and myself – and no one else. A group of about 30 West Germans had pulled out at the last minute: I will not dwell on the immense grief this caused us.

Chimbulak is 25km south of Alma Ata, a city of about 1.2 million souls and capital of the republic of Kazakhstan. The name means 'Father of the Apples', a rustic touch that hardly fits with the grey, post-war reality of the place, though there are orchards beyond. It stands on the edge of the Kazakh steppe, where industry and topography have combined to create a smog trap. Only as our battered yellow 'sport bus' sputtered up above the murk and into the valley of the Alma Atinka river did the mountains appear at all. But then, rising above the hurrying stream, the birches and the higher spruce, what mountains they are.

The greater Tien Shan stretches for 2450km west to east, half in the Soviet Union, half in China. The highest peaks, Pobeda (7439m) and the imposing spire of Khan Tengri (6995m) – where Boris lost those fingers – stand on the border. The central zone of these Celestial Mountains (to translate their Chinese name) has seen limited international effort, and the Chinese side has seen rather more. But look in the Alpine Club Library for information on the 1200km length of the Soviet Tien Shan and, despite Mrs Johnson's persistence, you will look in vain.

The bus, clawing its way up through the snow in four-wheel drive and repeatedly overheating, was taking us into the Zailiyskiy Alatau, a range which runs 250km west to east and about 30km across, with peaks up to 5000m. John Cleare refers to the range in *The Collins Guide to Mountains and Mountaineering* (p 151). He does not name it, but accurately describes the peaks as 'jagged, icy and alpine in character'. Cleare also notes Hot Henry Barber's visit in 1976 and his ascent of Free Korea Peak (4800m). The Americans also put up new routes around Pik Talgar (5017m), the highest peak in the range and some 20km east of Chimbulak.

Heights should be treated cautiously. The only useful map for mountaineering that the RGS had was a line drawing of the Zailiyskiy Alatau by Jerzy Wala, who is Polish. The Soviets were very interested to see it! They offered no map at all until several days into our visit. It was another sketch map. Heights differed and so did the alignment of some ridges. There is also a certain Kazakh chauvinism which pushes up Talgar to keep it over 5000m. I used Cleare's figure above; the undiplomatic Pole marks it down to 4973m. The Kazakhs also keep Khan Tengri above the magic 7000m barrier.

The yellow bus finally crashed into a stationary twin, cooling its engine in the middle of the track. Plainly a hopeless optimist, our driver believed that there was room to squeeze by. We walked the rest of the way.

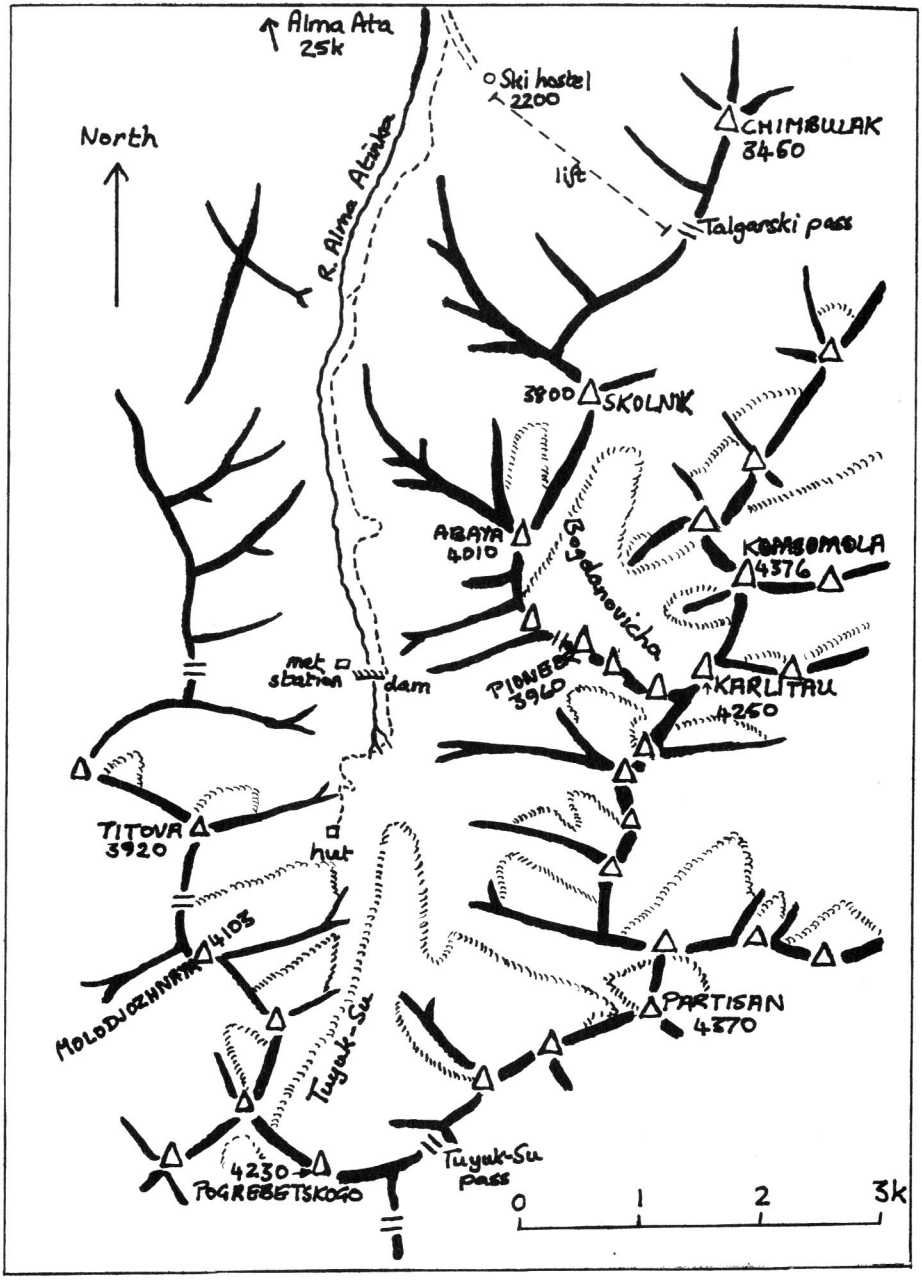
Though we had missed a night's sleep somewhere between Moscow and Alma Ata, we were keen to loosen our ski-legs on what remained of our first day. There had been perhaps 50cm of fresh snow over the preceding days, and the temperature out of the sun had remained well below freezing. Conditions on the *piste* were good. To our shame, early embarrassment over our privileged status to jump the lift queue did not last long. But then neither did we have more



63. *Approaching Pioneer Peak (L) from Bogdanovicha glacier.* (p 101)



64. *On Gillman's Point, early morning.* (p 175)


Alma Ata
25k
North
Ski hostel
2200
lift
CHIMBULAK
3460
Talgarski pass
R. Alma Atinka
3800
SKOLNIK
ABAYA
4010
Bogdanovicha
KOMSOMOLA
4376
met station
dam
PIONER
3960
KARLITAU
4260
TITOVA
3920
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Tuyuk-Su
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Tuyuk-Su pass
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than a handful of runs down the main *piste* before cutting our own tracks.

From the col above the lifts, the Talgarski pass (3165m), we climbed Chimbulak peak (3450m), part way on skins, then an easy snow and rock ridge scramble to the summit. Grisha accompanied us at an ever-increasing interval and we picked him up on the descent. However modest, it was, we presumed, a British first.

If Day One had proved some kind of fitness point, Day Two was a necessary exercise in diplomacy. We had to get it through to the almost overbearing host 'committee' that we wanted to get away from the Chimbulak hostel to a glacier base. Dave and Moira, who had conceived the trip and then toiled to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles, pressed the message home at a mealtime head-banging session. And the committee succumbed, content to let us first do a day-tour to learn the local geography and to acclimatize. They did, however, seem mildly shocked to hear that we did not want to return for lunch. These Soviets seemed to be three-square-meals-a-day mountaineers.

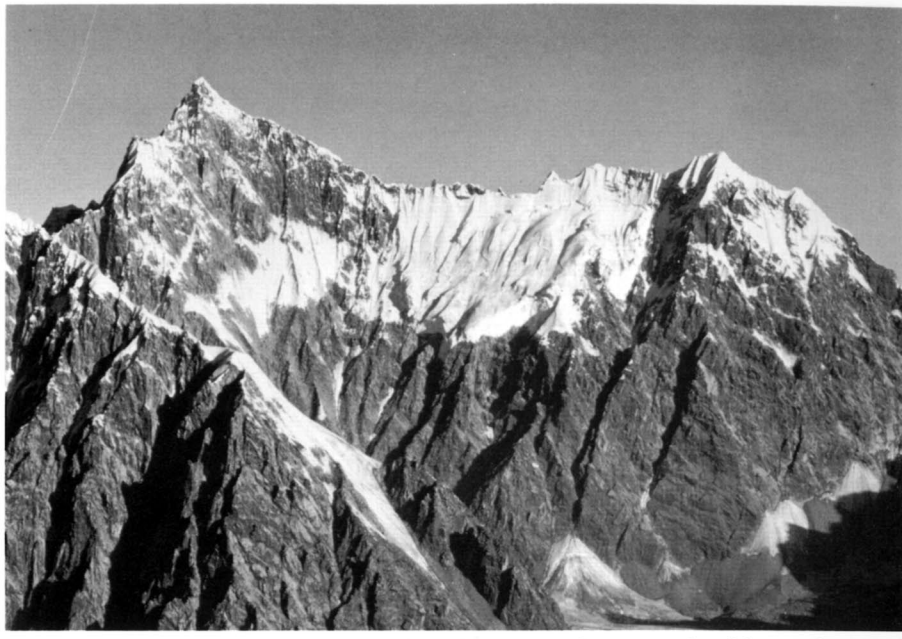
Grisha accompanied us to the Talgarski pass to point out possible peaks, though he knew them as summer routes and not at all as ski peaks. Talgar stood out 20km to the west, rather out of practical reach from Chimbulak. We went opposite ways from the col; Grisha down to the *piste* and we to explore the Bogdanovicha glacier. A little over 3km long, it curves in descent from a north-westerly track to north-east, ringed by 4000m peaks; on at least three of these we had designs for the days to come.

However, the Bogdanovicha was not quite the piece of icing-sugared cake it appeared. Not long after skiing from the col and putting on skins, Steve was leading a zigzag up a short slope when a room-sized area settled with a thump, an ominous crack spreading across its top side. Warned again as Dave tried a direct line on foot, we began to detour.

We had hoped to reach a col to the west of Pioneer Peak and look across the promising Tuyuk-Su glacier system but, loaded with fresh snow, the steep slope below it looked too risky. Four of us climbed to the cleft between Abaya and Skolnik on the glacier's W side in the hope of finding a different route back to the hostel; but we could not see a clear line and did not want to alarm the committee with an early epic.

Next day we left for a hut at 3500m on the edge of the Tuyuk-Su glacier. We had decided to split our remaining 10 days between the Tuyuk-Su and Bogdanovicha peaks, taking tents and operating from a high glacier base. However, the night before we set out the Soviets disclosed the existence of a hut above the Tuyuk-Su, and later still admitted that it was manned, radioing back weather reports.

The 6km skin up the upper valley of the Alma Atinka presented no problems other than the sweat of a 1300m height gain with 20kg packs. The early part of the trail through the Tien Shan spruce was crossed by the tracks of deer and fox, but we saw little of the area's reputed wildlife. The shapely spruce are left behind below 3000m and the valley opens out to what must be summer pasture. Like the Bogdanovicha, it is ringed by 4000m peaks – 13 abutting the glacier itself – but in a much wider arc which allows the eye to take in a magnificent sweep of spires, snow-caps and shattered granite ridges.



34. *Shiwakte III from the SE. Shiwakte IIIa is the snow shoulder at the R. Route followed ridge on extreme R to smaller snow shoulder below Shiwakte IIIa.* (p 97)



35. *Skolnik from the N, showing NE ridge.* (p 101)

There is a small dam at 3016m, redundant in winter, below which shelters a second met hut and a spinney of radio masts. The two observers were clearly expecting us and laid on a welcome cup of tea and bread with apple jam. A large fish was less enticing: we left it for the committee, three of whom we understood to be following.

Another couple of hours' skinning brought us to our base for the next three days. Described as the Geographical Society hut, it was in fact only one of a collection of wooden shacks. Viewed from the surrounding hills it looked like a movieman's deserted gold-rush settlement, set in a frozen wasteland. In summer it is a centre for field study and outdoor pursuits.

Igor the met man housed the six of us in a bunk-room and the varying numbers of our 'support team' on his kitchen floor. Five in all visited the hut; none ventured out far, but the evenings were convivial. Nice work if you can get it! This is what the state apparently paid them to do. They certainly brought up plentiful supplies – including whole chickens, several pounds of beef and a salmon – but then they had little to do all day except to eat.

Against this novel background the mountaineering itself was positively familiar. Our first objective was Molodjozhnaya (4103m) or 'Peak of Young Persons'. A massive mountain, its steep northern slopes and hanging glaciers fill the south-western aspect from the hut. We intended to approach it via a small col on the ridge which runs north to Titova (3920m), unmarked on our Polish map. But a snow-pit dug as Dave zigzagged warily up to the col revealed a disturbing profile – 25cm of soft snow overlying a hardish slab, beneath which was an air-layer and then a deep bed of cup crystals. Time and again we found similar conditions, with some crystals up to 7mm across, the perfect roller-bearing slide. In contrast to the Alps, where frequent freeze and thaw speed consolidation of the snowpack, the constant sub-zero temperatures of this part of the Tien Shan result in prolonged instability.

We took Titova as our consolation prize, carrying skis up to the ridge, then trudging to what we judged to be the S (3900m) and middle (3920m) summits. Unpronounceable or unnamed peaks stretched away into the hazy distance, all unvisited by Brits. The crust over the air-gap and crystals held for our descent of a wide, south-facing couloir, and we had time before dusk to nose into the main Tuyuk-Su glacier. At its head, Pogrebetskogo (4230m) looked an impressive snow mountain, maybe skiable; it became our next goal.

It was −14°C when we set out at 8.30 next morning. But we could not complain. An incongruous pair of mongrels and their roly-poly pup lived outside the hut, one in an old barrel. The glut of food-scraps we presented gradually won over these noisy guardians and made trips to the distant bog less fraught.

The steady skin up the Tuyuk-Su to the hub of a wide circle of 4000ers with the early sun breaking over the jagged eastern rim was one of the most satisfying moments of the tour. Pogrebetskogo's ice-laden ramparts appear to close the head of the valley, but tucked behind a spur lies the shallow Tuyuk-Su pass (4100m). The ramp up to it is crevassed, and we roped up. As it steepened we put harscheisen on the skis; but the ice hardened to green and we turned to front-points, with skis on our packs. The 1.5km ridge from the col was

curiously crevassed – Eric and Steve plunged through to their shoulders – and culminated in a mixed snow and rock scramble. The Kazakh name means 'enclosed pools': a sort of Three Tarns under the ice and snow. From the summit, reached in just over six hours, we looked south over the parallel Kyungey Alatau to distant thin cloud, probably above the inland sea of Lake Issyk-Kul. Not only was this a first British ascent, but the first ever ski descent of the Tuyuk-Su glacier from the col.

That night in the hut Igor opened up on weather conditions. The session ended more philosophically, correcting East–West stereotypes and damning Trident and SS20s in equal measure. It seemed that we had hit on the best of a rather limited season for ski-mountaineering. According to our guardian there is ample snow by February, but it is extremely cold and the days are short. The March window of settled weather is followed by more snow in April, with high winds piling up an avalanche risk. Or, rather, a greater one! We noticed the next day that our descent pattern on Titova had been partially erased by the fan of a moderate slide. We also crossed the debris of two sizeable new avalanches on our return down the Alma Atinka valley two days later.

After Pogrebetskogo, named after the geographer who first climbed Khan Tengri, we turned again to Molodjozhnaya. This time we approached it from the long E ridge, ascending by a gully of exhaustingly unconsolidated snow on its southern side. Skis were redundant, though we carried them to the ridge: an almost futile exercise, as it turned out. It was a classic 2km stretch of winter mountaineering – mixed rock, ice and energy-sapping deep snow – with steep snow-fields and hanging glaciers on the N side and rock walls and icy gullies to the south. The summit itself is fairly nondescript and almost flat.

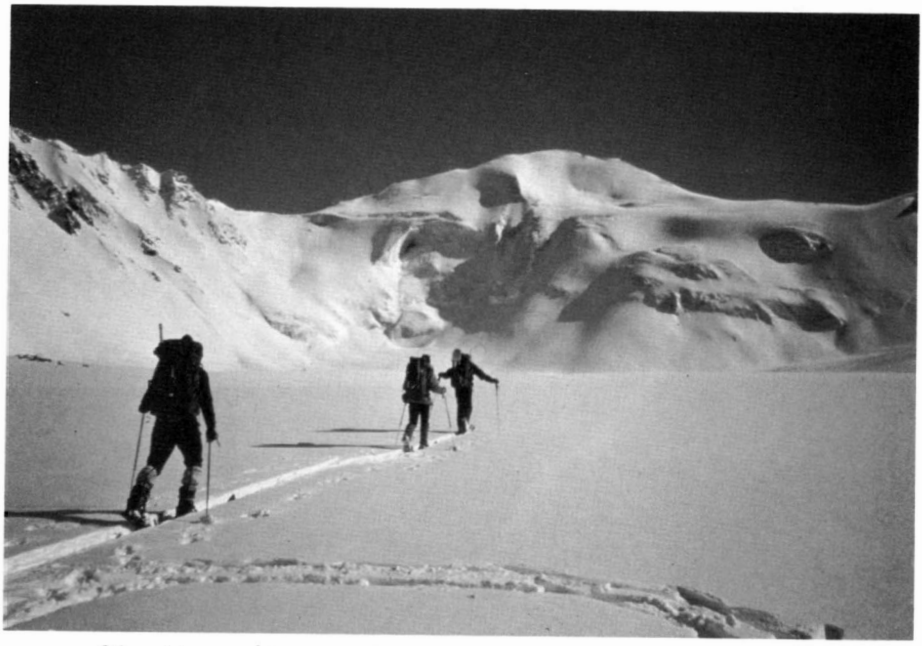
Next day we ski'd down to the Chimbulak hostel where the committee subjected us to the dubious pleasure of their basement sauna. A Kazakh sauna is to ordinary saunas what vindaloo is to curries.

In our finaa week we returned to the Bogdanovicha glacier, needing the tents this time, and pitched camp at 3430m on what we assumed to be moraine above the ice. Soon after settling in, however, we stumbled, literally, on a small crevasse under the snow in our brew-up zone. Our foundations were, apparently, a less sound amalgam.

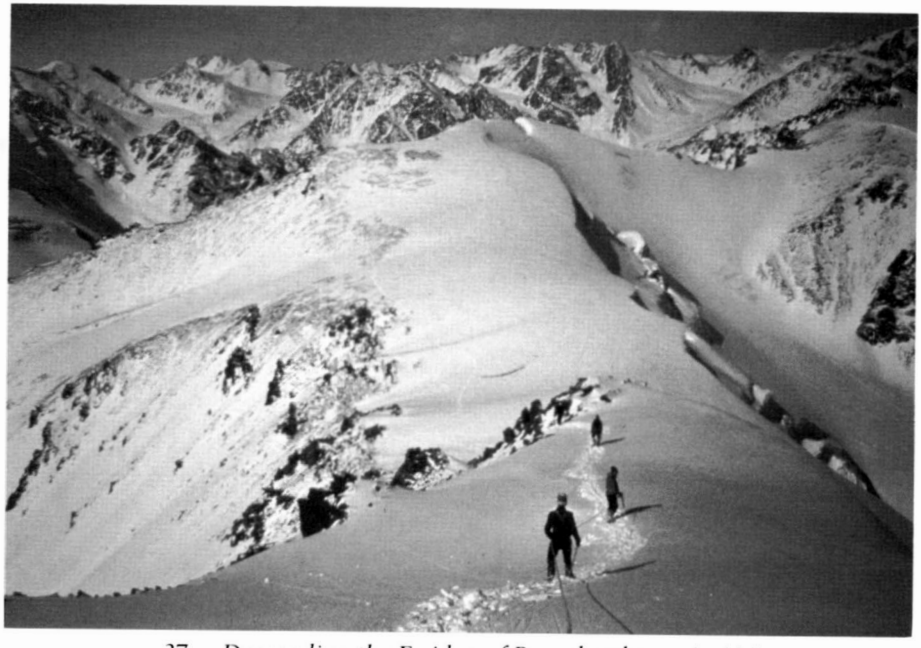
From this high base we made attempts on three peaks: Komsomola (4367m), the highest in the Bogdanovicha group, Karlitau (4250m), its southern neighbour, and Pioneer (3960m), rearing majestically from the ridge directly south of our camp and plainly no ski peak.

Memory has abbreviated the weather during those few days to 'cold and clear'. But a reread of my diary shows this to be a gross simplification. A typical entry reads: '8am, it's −16°C. But clear blue sky offering us another chance at Komsomola. Melting snow for tea and semolina. Trying not to dislodge the rime frost on the inside of the tent.'

The first attempt at Komsomola ground to a halt at 4130m after a tedious slog up 200m of slippery scree and snow from the col with Karlitau. Readers of the heavy press may be familiar with the word Komsomol (youth) from regular quotes from *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, official organ of the party youth wing. Not that this nugget of intelligence was much use to us. We were expecting a



36. *Approaching Pogrebetskogo from Tuyuk-Su glacier.* (p 101)



37. *Descending the E ridge of Pogrebetskogo.* (p 101)

rock and ice route of about Scottish Grade II. So, perhaps, we were lost. Anyway, cloud was building up, it was windy and, as ever, damn cold.

Karlitau looked a stroll from this vantage point, if a somewhat nervy one on crampons. One slip on the bare ice of its dome-like W side and a long slide would ensue, one or two hundred metres either to the soft snow below the col or to the not-so-soft boulders also waiting there. Karlitau means 'snowy mountain', but its E face falls away sheer with huge cornices along the summit ridge. About 25m below the top, Dave decided that the risk of a slab avalanche was too great. Between Karlitau's snowy cap and the ice were our old friends, the cup crystals. The consolation of ski-mountaineering, though, is the descent. We had left the skis not far below the col and were able to ski easily down the glacier to our tents.

Next morning the camp was enveloped in cloud and fine snow was building up on the tent sides. Things improved by midday, leaving time for a look at Pioneer. It is approached by Pioneer pass, a col at around 3700m which provides at least a summer way over to the Tuyuk-Su glacier. A granite pinnacle stands on the col, looking rather like a sea-stack. Russian imagination sees it not, however, as an Old Man but as entwined dancers, calling it the Bolshoi.

20 metres before we reached the dancers' feet, skis had to be abandoned as we tried to thread our way round narrow crevasses. Mixed climbing followed from the col, up a steep gully, briefly front-pointing and then swimming in loose snow, and finishing grandly from side to side along an airy castellated ridge.

An abseil and rapid descent of the gully was followed for Dave and myself by a fall into a crevasse below the col; Dave managed this feat with his skis on. Seen from the end of an embedded axe, it looked an evil slit, fortunately not too wide. Back at the camp we had a visitor. Consultant Grisha had come up from the hostel, full of good cheer and with three not particularly useful provisions: half a kilo of porridge, a box of sugar lumps and a grotesque sausage. Perhaps, despite the groaning packs we had carried up, we were falling behind Sovintersport's statutory calorie intake.

Our last day on the Bogdanovicha was the one my diary recorded as 'clear blue sky' etc, but the second shot at Komsomola was only marginally more successful. It petered out after some Grade II or III climbing, about 60m above our previous point, myself perched on a narrow ramp casting around in vain for a way ahead. We abseiled down the blocky wall which had been our only advance, leaving another first British ascent waiting for whoever divines the true route to this confusing summit.

After extricating our tents we ski'd back to the Talgarski pass in dense mist. It was not easy to locate, and it was dark before we rattled down the Chimbulak *piste* and into the hostel.

With one day left before returning to Moscow we settled for Skolnik (3800m), the 'Scholar,' which had the attraction of being both a good-looking peak and easily accessible. It lies on the ridge south of the Talgarski pass and so – let's admit it – we were able to get a leg-up on the chair-lift. From the col it took about four hours to the summit, most of it on foot after leaving the skis at 3360m. Rock ribs provided pleasant climbing but soon gave way to unconsolidated snow. Dave and Steve negotiated a way across the top of two

exposed gullies and shared the trail-breaking through deep snow to our last Kazakh top.

By evening Eric Pirie had won the Eagles' Tien Shan Downhill Trophy in our last dash down the *piste* – a hard hat spotted below Skolnik and found, to our relief, to be empty. And by midnight he was pretty 'tired and emotional', to use a parliamentary euphemism. Nor was he alone. Perhaps it was the Kazakh champagne or the Armenian brandy or the vodka (drained from scrapped SS20s), or maybe it was just the speeches and song, which helped the Tien Shan International Meet to break down some final barriers.