Siberian Adventures

The 1988 British Altai Expedition

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(*Plate* 38)

The temperature is rapidly heading towards the high 90s, the humidity has long since passed 100%. I am trying to control my imagination and thus, hopefully, my body's responses to the stimuli it is receiving. Numerous articles in the climbing press stress that mountaineering is a head game and that controlling one's mental processes is the key to big numbers, fame and fortune. But I never imagined the circumstances that would prove these theories correct.

The problem was simple. The birch twigs which were striking my back with frequent regularity and considerable force were wielded not by the 'Blond Swedish Air Hostess' of my dreams but by Mick Fowler, famous London bureaucrat, mountaineer and leader of the British 1988 Altai Expedition. Mick, relishing the role of a 'Naked Civil Servant', was introducing us to the delights of a Russian sauna – Fowler style!

Fortunately, the mental struggle is soon over and I am bundled out of the sauna to stagger the few painful yards before plunging ungracefully into the glacial Ak-Kem lake. The sudden immersion into the freezing meltwater quickly removes all thoughts of handcuffs and, prompted by my most basic survival instincts, I hasten back to the sauna. Here, not without considerable pleasure, I wreak my revenge on the now prostrate Fowler.

It was after several rounds of this self-inflicted torture that my constitution finally gave up, resulting in the involuntary ejection of a half-bottle of vodka which had been consumed earlier. On recovering from this mild setback, I was horrified to discover that our honourable leader had left, in a state of total undress, on a mission to raise the female members of the camp to join in the fun. Not surprisingly, his unsubtle pitch was rejected and we retreated to our tents without further ado.

You may well enquire how a well-balanced yuppie like myself happened to get embroiled in this bizarre scene of medieval brutality. It was a question I regularly asked myself during the three weeks spent at the 1988 International Mountaineering Camp in the Altai Mountains in Siberia.

Indeed, this question of why I had chosen the Altai nudged into my consciousness as early as the first night of the trip, while I was tucking into my fourth bowl of boiled cabbage in the aptly named Hotel Sport in Moscow, the starting point of our adventure, and trying to ignore the looks of disdain sent in our direction from the Adonis-like physiques of our fellow-guests: a rare mixture of Olympic shot-putters, pole-vaulters and weight-lifters.

Inevitably, so it seems in hindsight, it was Mick Fowler's fault. Mick

needs no introduction and he had already thrown off his respectable Civil Servant image, becoming completely immersed in his *alter ego* of manic adventurer. His partner, Phil Thomas, is by contrast a quiet, thoughtful Welshman, short and stocky, probably described by everyone who knows him as 'solid'. Phil is a fully-fledged mountain guide and looks the part. Alas, the B team will never be described as solid. My partner Paul Allison's greatest contribution to the trip was to attract the attention of a passing American tourist who, captivated by his Gothic/hippy appearance, insisted on taking numerous photographs of this 'fine specimen of Gorbachev youth'.

If the official British Altai team was not incongruous enough, our fellow attendees on the camp also added to the colour. We were joined by four compatriots: Andy 'Gusher' Bond, 'Shifty' Steve Gould, Gerry Bumford and his wife Caroline. There were also eight Germans, one in traditional lederhosen, eight Swiss and a lone Austrian temptress who intimidated us all by doing pull-ups at every possible opportunity.

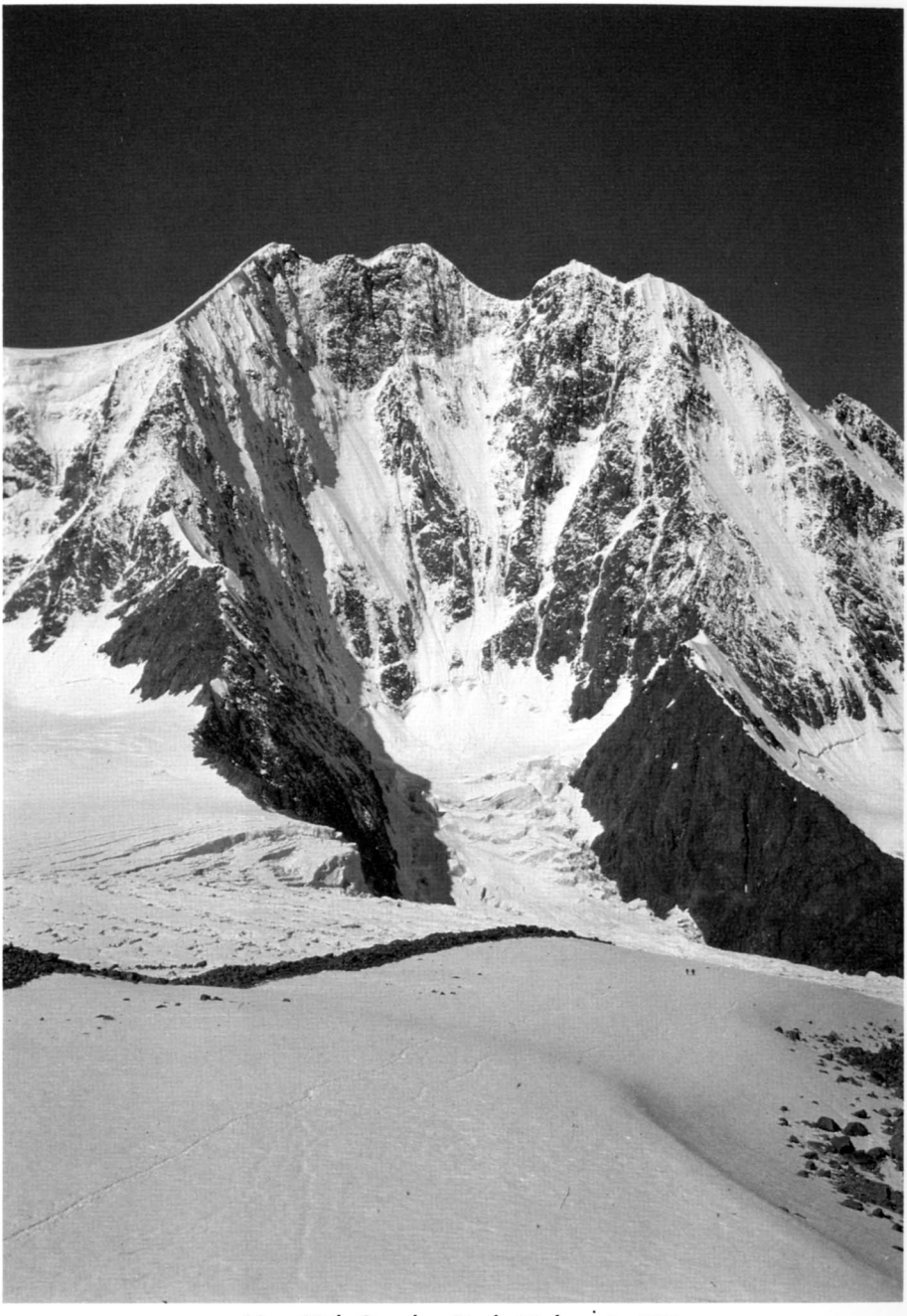
After being shown the sights of Moscow we were whisked away via two internal jet flights and a terrifying helicopter ride to Base Camp on the Ak-Kem lake at 2000m. Here we were introduced to our Siberian hosts.

The Altai mountains are alpine in scale, Bielukha at 4506m being the highest peak. They must resemble the golden age of alpinism as there are no fixed huts, cable cars or crowds. Despite this and their renown for beauty and rare flora, the mountains have received little Western attention. John Town was the first Briton to take advantage of the camps (*AJ* 90, 47–53, 1985) and has, until this year, been followed only by Alec Erskine and Mark Phillips who, amongst other achievements, made the first British ascent of the N face of Bielukha.

Home for the next three weeks was the delightfully situated Ak-Kem camp. Unfortunately the infamous Altai weather set in with a vengeance and prevented us from taking full advantage of the place. Apart from one good day early on when we made the obligatory training ascent of Ak Ayuk by the N face (Russian 3b or Alpine AD), it rained heavily in Base Camp for 12 days, denying us the opportunity to climb anything worthwhile.

Despite our forced inactivity we surprisingly managed to avoid the normal 'Snell's Field/Expedition' depression. This can be put down to two reasons – the sauna and our Russian friends. The sauna has been adequately described already, but a few words are needed about the latter.

They can best be described by the Russian word *korrosho*, which roughly translates as 'the business', 'sound' or 'all right'. From Slava, the camp leader, through our translator, Victor, to Tanya the cook, they did everything possible to make our stay entertaining. Apart from providing three cooked meals a day, they engaged us in many a happy hour discussing ideology, Russian climbing trends, *glasnost* etc, all lubricated by copious amounts of vodka. In marked contrast to two Americans who later joined the camp, they enthusiastically participated in the series of outrageous games we concocted (although, to be honest, a session at cricket did appear to leave them rather bewildered). Not even a massive landslide which almost destroyed the camp managed to subdue the atmosphere.



38. 20th October Peak, N face. (p 109)

Alas, all good things come to an end and, although there was no improvement in the weather, we were forced to set off for our main objective. Our decision to go was based on the simple estimate that we would need six days to complete the traverse of Bielukha via the N face of the superbly named 'Twentieth Anniversary of the Glorious October Revolution' peak. There were only six days left until the helicopter, our only form of return, was due to arrive.

Fortune didn't favour the stupid. For on Day Two, shortly after leaving Advanced Base under a starlit sky, the clag set in; beginning as a heavy mist, it quickly turned to snow and then developed into a full electric storm. Self-preservation and the sheer misery of the occasion led to a unanimous decision to return to our Advanced Camp.

Six hours later we re-emerged from the claustrophobic shelter of our Geminis to the stark realization that we had failed in our objective without even reaching the bergschrund. The face was still shrouded in heavy cloud and, even if the weather was to clear, we had run out of time. The humorously written message of warning from Victor could not raise our spirits and we were a sorry crew lounging around the boulders by our camp.

We now had only four days left. Rejecting the option of a further few days' dossing we decided on a repeat ascent of Bielukha by the *Voie Normale*, a hopefully achievable objective. Two impressive avalanches in quick succession down the N face reconfirmed our decision to ignore the added challenge of that approach.

Our ascent was remarkable only for its lack of incident. We left the Tomsk bivouac at 6am and crossed the Delone pass to gain the beautifully secluded Men Su glacier where the early morning gloom lifted over distant Mongolian peaks to provide a stimulating backdrop for our endeavours. We pressed on past the tents of the other British team also attempting Bielukha that day, completing the tedious plod up to the Borelski saddle. More than grateful to be following their tracks, we struggled up the long, complicated approach in deteriorating weather. A brief stop to chat with the others provided welcome relief before we continued up the striking final 300m of the E ridge. A total whiteout ensured that for us the summit would not be 'the tremendous viewpoint providing tempting panoramas of distant Chinese, Mongolian and Siberian landscapes' so enjoyed by John and Sheila Town. Instead we had to be content with snatched glimpses of our closer neighbours, as we hurriedly collected our summit pictures cuddling up to Lenin's bust.

The blizzard continued as we hurried back down the route to begin the familiar routine of ignoring numb digits while struggling with uncooperative poles and frozen Goretex in a mad rush to erect our Geminis. It seemed ages before I could join Paul in the shelter of our portable home.

We were somewhat surprised to wake the next day not to the expected storm, but to a silent dawn: no wind, no snow and not even a distant cloud in the crystal-clear skies. Even the walk back up and over the Delone pass, now on crisp névé, was a pleasure. The descent to the Tomsk was marred by the distressfully clear views of the Twentieth October Peak and the Bielukha N wall. Once again the dreaded phrase 'if only' entered our heads.

Mick and Paul shared my feelings. The weather was too good to waste.

Good sense prevailed over ambition and we rejected the obvious challenge of the Twentieth, dismissed the N face of Bielukha as boring and plumped for the Tomsk ridge on Delone. This fine-looking line took the obvious ridge in the centre of the impressive N face. Giving 1200m of Russian 4b mixed climbing, it seemed the ideal choice for a day of fine alpine climbing. More important, it started less than 10 minutes' walk from our camp.

After lounging away the rest of the day, sunbathing and binging on American delicacies, we retired early. An uncharacteristically prompt start saw us above the initial 40-degree ice-fields and established on the ridge proper at first light. Mick had changed out of his sluggish mode of the last few days and was racing ahead, relishing the challenge of steeper mixed ground. We caught him up at the central rock buttress where he appeared to be having some difficulty. Noting the 500m drop below and leaning on the hard-earned experience that 'what Fowler struggles on I can't do', I unselfishly offered Paul the rope. The only problem was that Mick had the gear and, having disposed of the rock step, he was already disappearing out of sight. A hurried shout resulted in the gear being deposited at the top of the pitch, leaving us to make do with a classical spike-belay for protection.

With the comfort of the rope above, the pitch went surprisingly easily, and we chased Mick's crampon-marks around the corner. Paul had only stopped to place a runner and this set the pattern for the climb, Mick soloing ahead with the B team following, moving together and placing gear every 40m or so. We knew from studying the face from below that there appeared to be a line up an icy ramp to the left of the crest. With this in mind we made a descending traverse leftwards (Scottish 4) which we hoped would lead to the ramp.

Our predictions were correct and the ramp provided the ideal route to the summit. The climbing was a delight, giving Scottish-type mixed action at a consistent Grade 3 with an unnecessary deviation to include a short section of unprotected 4. Our joy on reaching the summit was only slightly marred by Mick's gloating that he had been waiting for an hour or so (we didn't remind him that we had waited for a similar time on Bielukha). However, his enthusiasm for summit photos showed that he had enjoyed the climb as much as we had.

The descent down the Delone (E) ridge provided a fitting conclusion to a classic mountain day. Our eventual return to the Tomsk bivouac was once again met with instant helpings of Boris's mouth-watering soup, our first food for 12 hours. This is a delight we would all like to return to the British scene.

To the total shock of the Russian trainers, we ignored the pull of an early night, packed our rucksacks in the inevitable evening hailstorm and set off for the three-hour retreat to Ak-Kem Base Camp. The next few hours are best forgotten. We literally ran down in a headlong and frequently uncontrolled gallop, hoping to cross a treacherous boulder-field before dark. Needless to say we all failed, and none of us escaped the ignominy of at least one bone-shaking fall which, in Mick's case, could have led to drowning. Apparently he ended up, at one stage, suspended from his rucksack straps above a raging whirlpool!

The rapturous greeting we received in the arms of Tanya and the others

made it all seem worthwhile and we were treated to a feast befitting heroes returning from the Eastern Front. We finished the night warming ourselves by the fire, polishing off the last of the vodka and listening to the sounds of Russian harmonies drifting across the still shores: the ideal climax to a wonderful few days.

My only footnote is that, if you have the good fortune to visit the Altai, please listen to the locals' advice and take your sauna *before* gorging yourself with endless courses of Russian delicacies, vodka and champagne – and not afterwards.