The Pirin Mountains – Kingdom of the Thunder God

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(Plates 63, 64)

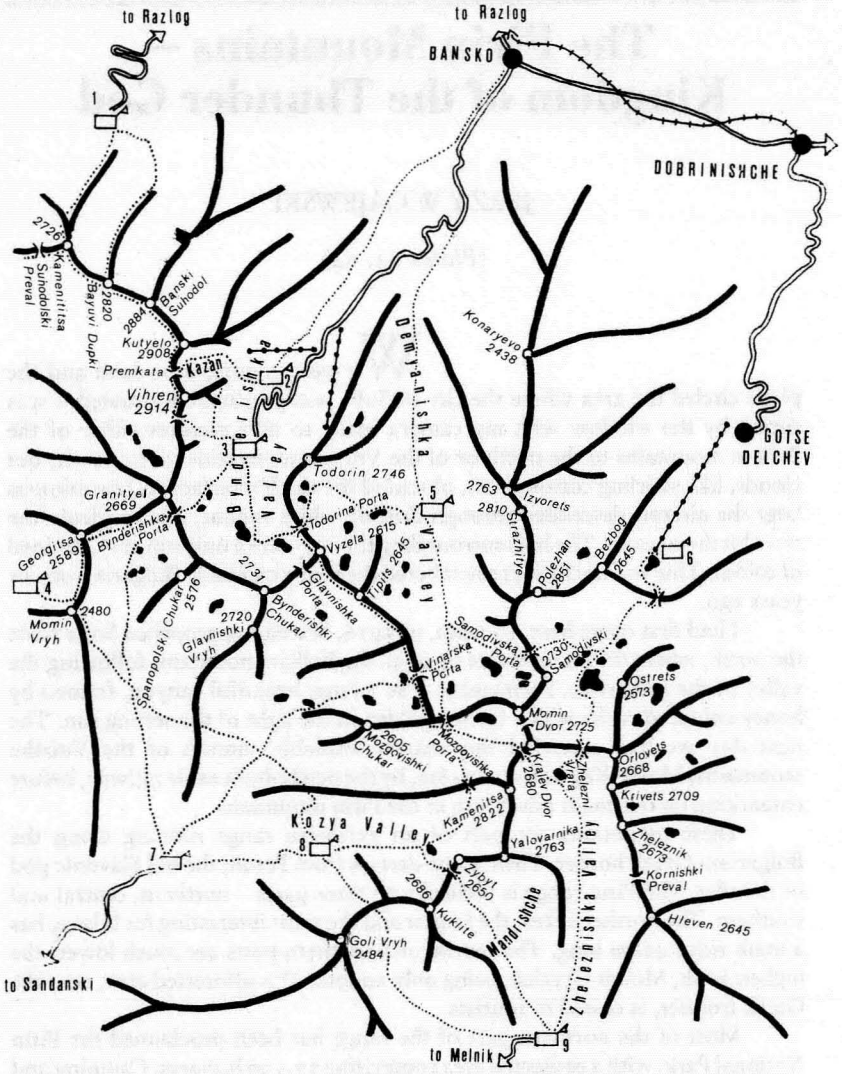
We were coming in to land and the plane circled the area where the city of Sofia was presumably situated. I was sitting by the window with my camera ready to take pictures either of the Balkan mountains to the north or of the Vitosha mountains to the south; but clouds, like swirling cotton wool, obscured the earth's surface. A few minutes later the aircraft descended through drifting white vapour, and suddenly the tyres hit the runway. The hills surrounding the city were a uniform grey, drained of colour. This was not how I remembered the sunny capital of Bulgaria from 13 years ago.

I had first come here, by train, in 1976. We had approached Sofia from the north, where the railway cuts through the Balkan mountains following the valley of the Iskir river. I remember it as a long, beautiful canyon, framed by honey-coloured rocks which turned golden in the light of the setting sun. The next day we had ascended the nearest available summit of the Vitosha mountains, Mount Kopitoto at 1348m, by the newly-built cable railway, before embarking on our main adventure in the Pirin mountains.

These mountains are part of an extensive range running along the Bulgarian–Greek border. Their name derives from Perun, the old Slavonic god of thunder. The Pirin range is divided into three parts – northern, central and southern. The northern area, the largest and the most interesting for hikers, has a main ridge 42km long. The central and southern parts are much lower, the highest peak, Mount Oryelek, being only 2099m. This afforested area, near the Greek frontier, is closed to tourists.

Most of the northern part of the range has been proclaimed the Pirin National Park, with a protected area comprising 27,500 hectares. Camping and the lighting of fires are now prohibited, but I remember how, in 1976, we camped not far away from the Vihren refuge and, since it usually snowed at nights even in August, we made a fire every evening from branches of the dwarf mountain pine. It is still possible, today, to wander at will outside the marked trails – but for how much longer?

The Pirin mountains are not the highest in Bulgaria – the Rila mountains are higher, with Mount Musala at 2925m. But the only goal for the majority of tourists is Mount Vihren at 2914m. The Pirin mountains are popular because of their alpine character, with rocky peaks and numerous lakes, and they are visited in force by hikers as well as by mountaineers. Winter climbing, in


to Razlog
to Razlog
BANSKO
DOBRINISHCHE
GOTSE DELCHEV
1
2
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8
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2726
Kamenititsa Suhodolski Preval
2820
Bayuvi Dupki
2884
Banski Suhodol
Kutyelo 2908
Premkata
Kazan
Vihren 2914
Bynderishka Valley
Demyanishka Valley
Konaryevo 2438
Todorin 2746
Granityel 2669
Bynderishka Porta
Georgitsa 2589
Todorina Porta
Vyzela 2615
Tipits 2645
2763
Izvorets
2810
Strazhitye
Polezhan 2851
Bezbog 2645
2480
Momin Vryh
Spanopolski Chukar 2576
2731
Bynderishki Chukar
2720
Glavnishki Vryh
Glavnishka Porta
Samodivska Porta
2730
Samodivski
Vinarska Porta
Ostrets 2573
Momin Dvor 2725
2605
Mozgovishki Chukar
Mozgovishka Porta
Kralev Dvor 2680
Zheleznitsa Vrata
Orlovets 2668
Krivets 2709
Kamenitsa 2822
Kozya Valley
Yalovarnika 2763
Zheleznik 2673
Kornishki Preval
Zybyt 2650
2686
Kuklite
Mandrishche
Zheleznishka Valley
Hleven 2645
Goli Vryh 2484
to Sandanski
to Melnik

particular, is becoming increasingly popular. Bansko is the main starting point for the highest summits, such as Vihren, Kutyelo and Todorin. It is situated at the entrance to the Bynderishka valley at the foot of the highest mountain ridge. Two mountain huts and a small leisure resort are well placed for climbing Mount Vihren. This fact, and the building of chair-lifts to the N ridge of Mount Todorin and to Chyrna Mogila (1976m), have intensified the popularity of the area.

There were 12 in our own party – really too many for the small coach which transports tourists to the Bynderishka valley. But we all packed in somehow, with other passengers mostly from Germany and Poland. The winding road finishes 14km beyond Bansko at the Bynderitsa hut (1810m). 30 minutes' walk further on there is the other refuge of Vihren at 1950m. Although this hut is preferred by the Bulgarians, both huts are usually crowded. But we were in luck and spent the next two nights in the Bynderitsa hut. The interior was typical: a steep staircase, creaking wooden floors, closely-packed bunks and a cooking area in the basement – or outside in the yard. Fast-moving grey clouds from the invisible main ridge and a cold wind reminded us that we were in the heart of the Pirin.

Our first trip was to Mount Todorin, 2742m. 13 years ago we had climbed it directly from our camp near the Vihren refuge, up the couloir running straight down from the top. From below this had looked easy, but in fact it was steep and monotonous and we had to hack our way through the almost impenetrable branches of the dwarf mountain pines. The summit cone turned out to be a big heap of stones. Today a chair-lift runs up the N ridge to within 400m of the top. As the lift rises, more and more superb views are revealed of the white pyramids of the Vihren and Kutyelo peaks. From the summit we were lucky to have a good view of the Vihren main ridge framing the panorama to the west. Green wooded slopes descended to the north while, to the south and east, a sea of rocky peaks faded away into the blue distance. In the Vasilyashki cirque and in the upper part of the Bynderishka valley, the stony desert landscape was enlivened by masses of green and gold lakes, glittering, like tiny mirrors, in the sunshine. We descended by the classic route down the SW ridge to Mount Malka Todorka (2710m), and steeply down again to the Todorina Porta (2580m), an important pass between the Bynderishka and Demyanishka valleys. Our route back to the hut passed near the lakes of Ribno and Dolgoto which reflected the last rays of the sun as it vanished behind Mount Granityel (previously Mount Muratov, 2669m).

The next day was our only chance to climb Mount Vihren, which was especially important to those who had not done it before. Unfortunately the morning was gloomy and cold, so that only a few of us decided to venture out, hoping, optimistically, that some blue sky would show up later. Two trails lead from the huts to the top: one runs over the Kazan cirque and up the N ridge, while the other passes over the pleasant hanging valley of Dylbakoto Dere to the Vihrensky Preslap pass (which separates the marble and granite parts of Pirin) and the S ridge. An experienced hiker should reach the top in 3 to 3½ hours. On this gloomy morning we quickly attained the ledge of the lower Kazan cirque. The wind dropped and the leaden clouds seemed to be standing still. An

oppressive silence enveloped us as we stood in the centre of the grassy arena surrounded by marble walls and gazed up at the Golyam Kazan, a stone cirque closed off by the 400m high NE face of Vihren. We crossed the N ridge of Vihren in heavy mist which parted only for a few seconds to reveal green passes and meadows on the southern side of the mountain. To reach the top in clear weather would be an exciting moment indeed.

The top of Vihren is easy to reach in summer. The first winter ascent was made on 9 January 1925 by T Atanasov, D Stoikov, B Bainov and N Bodzhilov. The first climbers on the NE face were Germans: W Mosyl and F Auer in September 1934; the first winter ascent of this face took place on 15 February 1949 (A Byelkowski and V Lobidin). In 1976 we observed many climbers on the white walls of Vihren but in 1989 we did not meet any climbers at all. Possibly the National Park regulations prohibit rock-climbing or perhaps, nowadays, mountaineers find the area of Malyovitsa in the Rila mountains more attractive.

The NW ridge of the Pirin mountains runs from the Vihren over Kutyelo (2908m), Bansky Suhodol (2884m), Bayuvi Dupki (2820m), Kamyenititsa (2726m), to Mount Pirin (2593m). Their N faces run down to other big cirques full of caves. The whole of this area is protected, as the Bayuvi Dupki-Dzhindzhiritsa reservation. The most frequently visited parts are the long trail running over the highest summits to the Predel pass, and the area around the Yavorov hut (1740m), accessible from the north from the town of Razlog.

A less visited area lies more to the east: the Demyanishka valley with the Demyanitsa hut (1895m) and, further east still, the resort of Gotse Delchev (1450m). Our plan was to attain this resort and the Bezbog hut (2237m) above it, and to cross the main ridge of the Pirin to the S side, finishing the trip in Melnik, a small town with marvellous, unusual scenery. In 1976 I finished my trip in Melnik, too, but by a different route. We crossed the main ridge straight from the Bynderishka valley via the Byegovitsa hut (today named Kamyenitsa hut), lying in forests on the S slopes of Pirin. This is a good starting point for Mount Kamyenitsa (2822m), shown in the guidebooks as an attractive pyramid reflected in the lake, which I climbed in 1976. I remember that we were surprised, after crossing the main ridge to the south, to find a changed landscape of soft green hills used as pasture for sheep and donkeys. The climate was different too: the air was warm and dry and it grew hotter and more stagnant as we approached Melnik. We had left the cold wind and snow behind.

In 1989 we made our way to the Bezbog hut above Gotse Delchev by train, taxi and on foot (because the new chair-lift was out of order). We spent the next night in tents on the banks of the Byezbozhko lake (2240m), but at midnight a strong wind blew up, damaging the tents and forcing us to evacuate ourselves to the hut (an unforgettable experience for the younger members of the party). We spent a day exploring the peaks of Bezbog (2645m) and Polezhan (2851m) which, from the valley, looked rocky and inaccessible but which were actually quite easy. After boring climbs to the passes we enjoyed the route-finding and scrambling over the stone cirques and ridges.

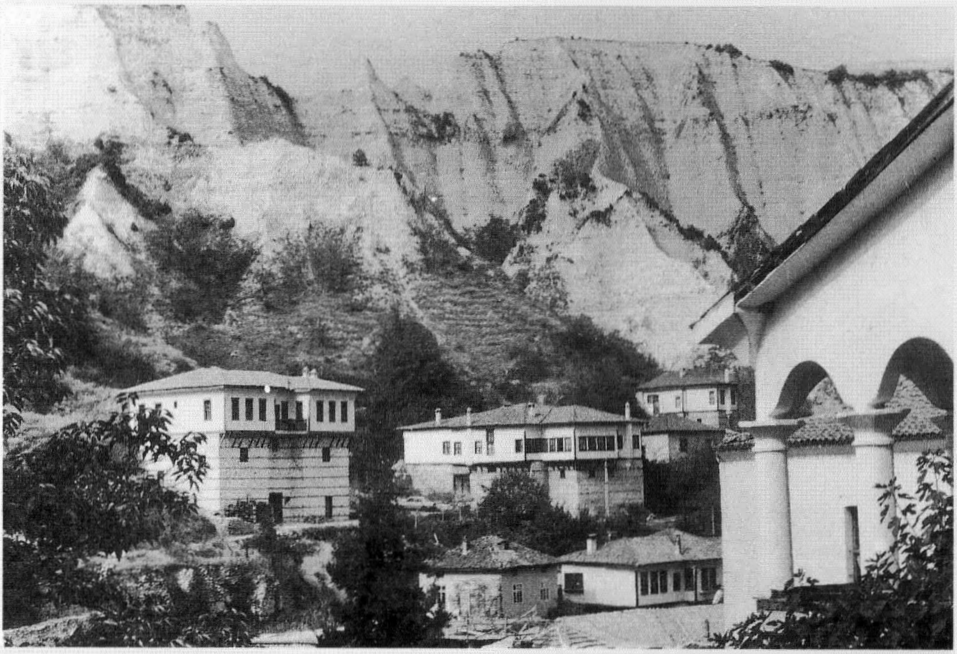
Next morning we set out on our longest trip. First we came down over the Bezbozhki Preval pass to Lake Popovo, the largest of the 158 lakes of Pirin. Situated in a wide valley, this lake is the junction-point of marked trails from the

Demyanitsa hut (over the Samodivska Porta pass previously known as the Dzhengalska pass) and from the Bezbog hut over the Zhelezni Vrata pass (previously Demirkapya) and the Zheleznishka valley. The lake is set in a wide, open landscape, quite different from the Vihren area, with clear views to the peaks of Samodivski (previously Dzhengal, 2730m), Momin Dvor (2725m) and Kralev Dvor (2680m) on one side, and of Ostrets (previously Sivriya, 2593m) and Orlovets (Dzhano, 2668m) on the other.

The Zhelezni Vrata pass, which was our goal, could be seen from the lake as a trapeze-shaped depression on the skyline. We came upon it almost unawares: suddenly, to the south, lay another world. To our right, the rocky peaks of Kamyenitsa and Yalovarnika, topped with white clouds, framed the Zheleznishka valley; while, to the east, on our left, the tops of Orlovets, Krivets (previously Chengenchal, 2709m), Zheleznik (Demirchal, 2673m) and Hleven (2645m) rose above a long and deep valley. A winding footpath threaded its way along a stream, towards the twin lakes of Argirivo and Mitrovo, and the Demirkapiyski cirque. We knew that the Pirin hut, situated at the far end of this valley , was still a long way away.

As it was such a nice day, two of us decided to make a detour by climbing over the E ridge and descending the hills more or less in the middle of the valley where we would rejoin the rest of the group. This was a very good idea indeed and we look back upon it with pleasure. The precipitous ridge finished at the top of Orlovets and we moved above the valley from top to top without trouble. To the east, the Pirin mountains sloped down to the Mesta river valley and the green hills of the Rodopi mountains; to the west, rugged rocky peaks reminded us that we ourselves were among them, at the same height. Afraid of missing our comrades, we turned straight down towards the valley, following a precipitous route among rocky ledges and unaware that a comfortable footpath ran down from the next pass, the Kornishki Preval, to the bottom of the valley where the rest of our group was waiting for us.

Our walk on the final day of our trip was along tracks through the dense forest, with dry ditches running alongside them. At one time these had probably been used to irrigate the lower areas and villages. Five hours later we reached the Rozhenski Monastery, with its Orthodox Church full of the subtle smell of thin wax candles and the murmur of oft-repeated prayers. Now a fascinating trail ran through deep canyons hidden deep within the soft southern mountain-side of the Pirin. Soon the view to the south, towards the Slavyanka range which lay on the Greek border, disappeared behind the curtain of yellow hills surrounding Melnik. Our journey through these sandstone pyramids and tetrahedrons, with their rocky towers and pinnacles, left us with an unforget-table memory, and it was not surprising that our day ended in the local wine-vault! Indeed, our visit to Melnik was the highlight of our trip, and anyone travelling through the Pirin mountains should make a point of going there.



63. The town of Melnik in the Pirin mountains. (J W Gajewski) (p 155)



64. Vasilyashki Cirque and Todorini Lakes. Mt Kamenitsa (2822m), Mt Yalovarnika (2763m), Mt Zybyt (2650m). In the background Mt Kuklite (2686m). (J W Gajewski) (p 155)