Mongolia's Holy Mountain

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(Plates 57, 58)

The lot of expedition organiser is seldom a happy one. The potent combination of alcohol and Victor Saunders were probably responsible for seeding the idea of a first British climbing expedition to Mongolia. More alcohol and the 1990 Bowline Club Dinner found me a partner and we were shortly joined by Helen Sweet, a determined ex-nurse from Saddleworth. Our target was Munkhairkhan (4204m), a holy mountain whose name means 'His Eternal Grace'. Thought for many years to be the country's highest peak (but probably third), there were no photos or firsthand accounts of the range.

By Christmas, we had grown to five expedition members and had an agreement, signed at the Mongolian Embassy, in which Zhuulchin, the national tourist agency, would arrange everything in return for US$220 per person per day. From the start they were friendly and businesslike. The Ambassador himself created our expedition logo in flowing Mongolian script. Spring, however, brought problems, as the recession yielded little return from an enormous fund-raising effort. In January two members dropped out for personal and financial reasons. In May my original partner dropped out. To have no money six weeks before departure is par for the course: to have no members either smacks of carelessness. We were greatly relieved when Richard Wojtaszewski joined us at the last minute. We never did get the major sponsorship we needed but thanks to the BMC/MEF and to the generosity of Altai Components and Standard Wool we somehow scraped through. Two weeks before departure we gained Alun Hughes, commissioned by Mosaic Films and the BBC, to film our efforts.

We set off on 15 July 1991, after an hour's battle at Heathrow with Aeroflot as to what constituted hand baggage – the old days when your lethal weapons might be confiscated but otherwise you could stagger on board with 20kg of hardware appear to be over. At Moscow Sheremetievo we caught a bus for a pleasant ride round the airport perimeter and late that night we were finally into the air again. At 5am the next morning a miserable dawn saw us cooped up in the plane in Irkutsk for an hour as the rain poured down outside. A final short hop and we were suddenly down into a strangely deserted airfield. All around lay a wide open landscape of sparse grassy plains and rolling hills with a massive arc of sky – not a tree, not a fence, not a person – Mongolia at last.

Mongolian charm was immediately on show. The most likely candidate for link-man politely explained that he had come to meet us yesterday, when we had failed to arrive, but that today he couldn't as he had come to meet someone else. Nevertheless transport was rustled up from somewhere and a half-hour drive took us into Ulan Bator to the Bayangol, the second of the city's two

hotels. Ulan Bator is a pleasant uncrowded city of wide avenues with a backdrop of partially wooded hills. Large areas of the city are unique in that they are composed not of houses, but of thousands of the neat white circular tents or *gers* used in the countryside. Facilities in the hotels are good, but proved the setting for a perpetual search for nourishment. In Ulan Bator we survived mainly on the leavings of large Japanese parties. In the country things were less easy with little but flour and often dubious meat. Other arrangements were very efficient. Contact was swiftly made with T Byraa, our guide, who had previously specialised in western hunting parties. We also had Balto, a Mongolian mountaineer who had recently won their national rock-climbing title, and our lady cook, Chegme.

On the 18th, we rose at 4.30 to catch the morning flight to Hovd, 1300km to the west. As the Antonov 24B droned westward we began to realise the impressive nature of the country. The size of Western Europe, Mongolia has only 2,000,000 inhabitants, of whom 500,000 live in Ulan Bator. This sparse population is, however, spread remarkably evenly. From 3500m, a single white *ger* is easily visible. We would pass one and then, a mile or two further on, a second, and so on. This went on for the best part of 1000km. It was interesting to note, despite the overall steppe character of the landscape, the extensive wooded areas on the northern slopes of the hills and ridges of the Hangay range. At its western end we passed the isolated and impressive snow peak of Otgon Tenger (3905m), visited by the Japanese in the late 1980s and again by Balto and an Italian party just prior to our arrival. A little further on, the tents stopped and the wide ribbon of the Dzavhan Gol river cut the edge of the steppe like a knife. Beyond it, sand dunes stretched to the horizon and beyond them, 30km away, floated a snow-covered massif. This was the Sotai, still untouched by westerners, but mysterious Munkhairkhan continued to hide beyond the horizon. We descended steadily over the ridges and snow patches of the Zhargalant mountains, the deserted waters of the Haar Uus lakes and swiftly down into Hovd.

Hovd was very hot, with a squalid hotel full of flies, and had little to detain us. By early afternoon we had transferred all our gear to a UAZ 66 military lorry from the Hovd Special Purposes Lorry Park and were off on the dirt road running SE across the semi-desert plains south of the lakes and the Zhargalant range. Towards late afternoon the lorry began to boil and proceeded to do so every half mile until the cool of evening. This gave us an excellent opportunity to meet the local mosquitoes and horse-flies on their terms. As dusk fell we turned off the plains and into a narrow canyon which wound its way up into the hills and eventually emerged onto a high granite plateau. At 10pm we crossed a high pass and were rewarded by moonlight with our first-ever view of Munkhairkhan and the rest of the massif. A first reaction was relief at finding heavily glaciated alpine peaks. The second was that, while Munkhairkhan dominated the northern end of the range, the southern end was dominated by another major peak, whose shapely outline made it an immediate second objective.

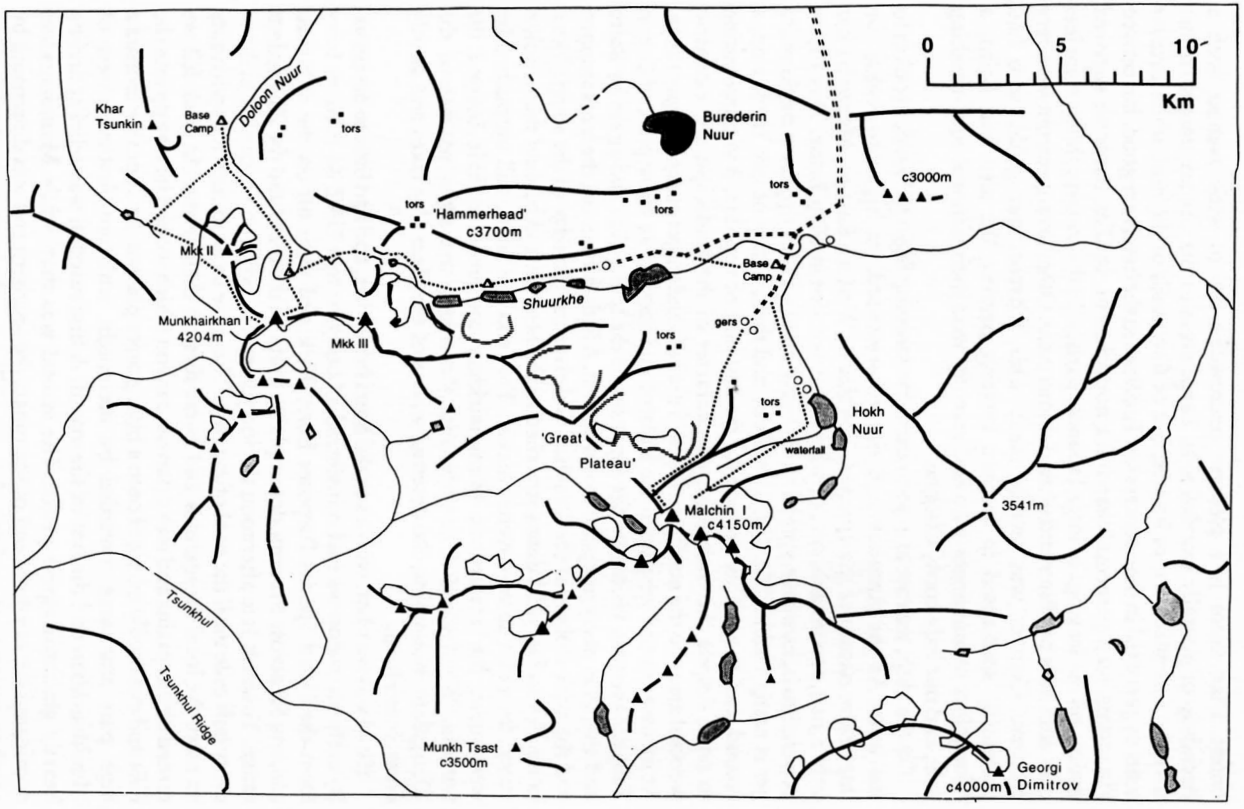
After camping in darkness we awoke next morning to find ourselves within sight of Munkhairkhan village, the administrative centre for the local Uriankhi Mongols. After a short stop we plunged across the river and westward up a



57. Malchin, *c*4150m, with local transport. (*John Town*) (p62)



58. On the N ridge of Malchin, Mongolia. (*John Town*) (p62)



The Munkhairkhan Massif, Mongolian Altai

steep defile onto further granite uplands. This high area gives easy access to the mountains via either the Doloon Nuur or Shuurkhe valleys, which bound it to the NW and SE before curving towards each other. On this occasion we forked NW and on to the Doloon Nuur (Seven Lakes) valley. After crossing the river, we had our first close-up view of snow peaks. Undeterred by the lack of any visible track the lorry continued up the valley through streams, over boulder fields and between bogs for another 8 or 9km to deliver us to a Base Camp at about 2900m. As we were later to find, this virtuoso driving performance was far from unusual. Mongols rarely walk anywhere if they can ride, and everywhere a horse can go (which is just about anywhere) they expect to take a lorry.

An evening walk revealed the main peak of Munkhairkhan to be about 10km away, out of sight round a curve in the valley, behind a subsidiary 'training' peak of about 3900m which rose immediately beyond the Base Camp. With everybody feeling fit and curious we continued the exploration the next day, reaching the foot of the Doloon Nuur glacier cwm. Its far end was fed by a succession of large seracs falling from directly below the snow cone of the main summit. On the right a series of ice faces and rotting buttresses dropped from the ridge between the main summit and the training peak, forming a two-mile wall perhaps 300m high. On the left, a clearly defined rocky ridge led upwards to an extensive boulder-covered platform, which appeared to give easy access to the relatively gentle upper slopes of the mountain. In order to provide some suitable TV footage, Alun climbed the ridge while Rick and I cavorted along the moraine top with the wall as backdrop. This over, we turned abruptly left up atrocious scree to meet Alun and Balto on the platform. Here we pitched Camp 1 at about 3800m before descending to Base Camp. The ridge itself provided attractive scrambling with the prospect of more serious climbing on a series of well-defined schist ribs to its left.

The next day had been intended for the training peak, but this had meanwhile been conquered in training shoes by two itinerant French photo-journalists on a one day visit. Things seemed to be going for us so we decided to dispense with the hors-d'oeuvre and returned to Camp 1 on Munkhairkhan main peak. From there, at 6.30 the next morning, 22 July, we set off across the boulders and were quickly onto the glacier. We made good progress up uncrevassed and easy-angled slopes, trending gradually right to meet the main ridge. This dropped precipitously away on the other side and we turned N towards the summit cone. To add a little interest we climbed this direct, on steep snow with a couple of crevasses, and arrived on the final crest of snow at about 1pm. Balto made a small offering below the wooden Soyembo (the Mongolian national ideogram) and we descended a few metres on the western side of the summit to a rocky turret hanging above enormous shattered granite cliffs. From here it was possible to look straight down into the deep and probably uninhabited valley systems which burrow into the range from the south. Flogging north across the slopes of the training peak in gathering cloud, two lammergeiers swept round us on the updraught of the storm and eyed us dispassionately.

Everybody now wanted to climb Malchin (*c*4150m), the shapely peak we had seen on the way in. Called Hokh Nuurin Uul ('Blue Lake Peak') by the locals, it

was about 30km away and I had ambitions to undertake a long traverse of the flattish ridge joining the two peaks. We had left Camp 1 in place as a starting point. From Munkhairkhan, however, there had looked to be a low awkward pass on the ridge which would involve a great deal of descent and reascent. (We were mistaken – this was in fact the end of a subsidiary ridge. The eastern peak of Munkhairkhan is an enormous snow dome which obscures a number of crucial sight lines and whose slopes still form something of a topographical mystery.) The second alternative was to go from the Doloon Nuur valley to the Malchin region via a pass which lay to the north of the main ridgeline. Neither project met with much enthusiasm from my colleagues. The pass separated the snow peaks of Munkhairkhan from the highest part of the uplands, which was scattered with outlandish granite tors. We named this the Hammerhead because of its shape on our 1:1,000,000 air map.

Undiscouraged, Balto and I set out on 25 July while the others prepared to move the Base Camp round by lorry. At Camp 1 the cloud was down on the ridge and we were pelted with hail. The ridge traverse, with all its navigational uncertainties, was not on and instead we traversed down across a couple of small glacier bays towards the pass, which we reached at about 5pm in overcast and stormy conditions. Pass crossings are not in vogue these days but I can see where the excitement came from. The grassy slope we had marched up was replaced by a steep edge which appeared at first sight to drop sheer into a small turquoise lake 300m below. After a pause for regrouping, nutritional and psychological, a closer inspection revealed a shallow gully of large blocks and we scrambled our way precariously down this. Half-way down we made radio contact with the others at the new Base Camp. Attempts to identify common visual points of reference were not a great success, since in fact we were some 20km apart.

Our new valley, the Shuurkhe, was spectacular even without storms and double rainbows. To the left, forming the western edge of the Hammerhead, ran 5km of impressive granite cliffs, the Shuurkhe Khad. These culminated in a huge barrel buttress 300m high. On the right a series of glacier bays dropped from the enshrouded snow dome of Munkhairkhan's eastern peak. From the base of the pass, which is not used by the locals as it is impassable to horses, we hurried down past terminal moraines, a bigger lake, and a large herd of curious yaks, to camp by the third of what turned out to be the valley's seven lakes. I had hoped that cultural prejudices might ensure me more than my share of the food, but events proved that purveyors of Banana Crumble and other instant desserts have a bright future ahead in Mongolia.

The next day we continued for another 6 or 7km to some *gers* where the valley opened up and bent to the NE, and a further 7km to the new Base Camp at the junction of the Shuurkhe and the Hokh Nuurin valleys. Byraa enlivened the day by promising horses over the radio, but these did not materialise. *He* eventually did, telling us it had only taken him an hour to get to us from Base, without letting slip that the hour had been spent on the back of a motorbike. The others had meanwhile been reconnoitring Malchin, which rose some considerable distance S of the camp. They had climbed up and onto the massive granite plateau which forms the main ridgeline and looked across at Malchin,

which is linked to it by a narrow spine of rock. They had then returned round one of the plateau's massive northern corries, completing a circular route of maybe 25km with a short lorry ride.

After a rest day, on 27 July we set off in the half-light at 6am at breakneck pace across the plain towards Malchin. By 9am we were two-thirds of the way onto the plateau, though worried about Helen and Alun who were 45 minutes behind. Helen had miscalculated when throwing her sack across a river in the half-light and had followed it in. Reunited we pressed on to the plateau and across to the start of the spine, where Balto pointed out the silvery droppings of a snow leopard. The spine proved straightforward apart from a 15m overhanging step which was turned on the right. Beyond it the great shark's fin of Malchin reared alarmingly but easy scrambling in fine positions, over sound schist and snow, brought us to the summit by 3pm. There was not a breath of wind to compete with our own wheezings and a large horse-fly sat and watched us. Balto opened a little capsule to reveal that the last ascent had been by Bulgarians in 1978, some 13 years before.

We descended easily onto the large glacier E of the summit and then NE into a side valley which joins the main Hokh Nuurin (Blue Lake) valley at an attractive waterfall just S of the lake. Balto had promised a 'Mongolian Tea Tent' and our subsequent efforts to burn each other off were followed by the swift despatch of four bowls of tea and six of 'yak vodka'. There was a suitable fairy-tale ending with the appearance of a lorry (no road) and a white charger, which Balto 'borrowed' to find Helen and Alun, who were indulging in further aquatic activities on the other side of the lake. Richard gained virtue by being the only one to complete the 25km circuit on foot.

The rest was winding down. We realised too late the vast rock-climbing potential of the surrounding area but did one single pitch route on superb granite. There are endless opportunities for 150m routes on numerous crags and the virgin walls of the Shuurkhe Am would by themselves justify a visit from Britain. On our return we visited the Terelj, a region of pine forests and rock scenery an hour's drive from Ulan Bator. There is so much attractive granite visible from the road it would be difficult to know where to start. Perhaps that sums up Mongolia as a whole. There are much bigger and more spectacular mountains elsewhere in Central Asia but nowhere else does such a range of opportunities for exploration lie so easily within reach.

Summary: British Mongolian Altai Expedition. Members were John Town, Richard Wojtaszewski, Helen Sweet and Alun Hughes, with Balto, a Mongolian climber, and T Byraa as liaison officer. The expedition was successful in making the first ascent by Westerners of Munkhairkhan (4024m) and Malchin (*c*4150m) on 22 and 28 July 1991 respectively. The peaks lie approximately 25km apart and are the two highest in the Munkhairkhan massif, which is one of the three highest mountain groups in Mongolia. Town and Balto also made the first recorded crossing of the pass linking the Doloon Nuur and Shuurkhai, the two major valleys to the N of the massif.