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Mountains of Dagestan

(Plate 47)

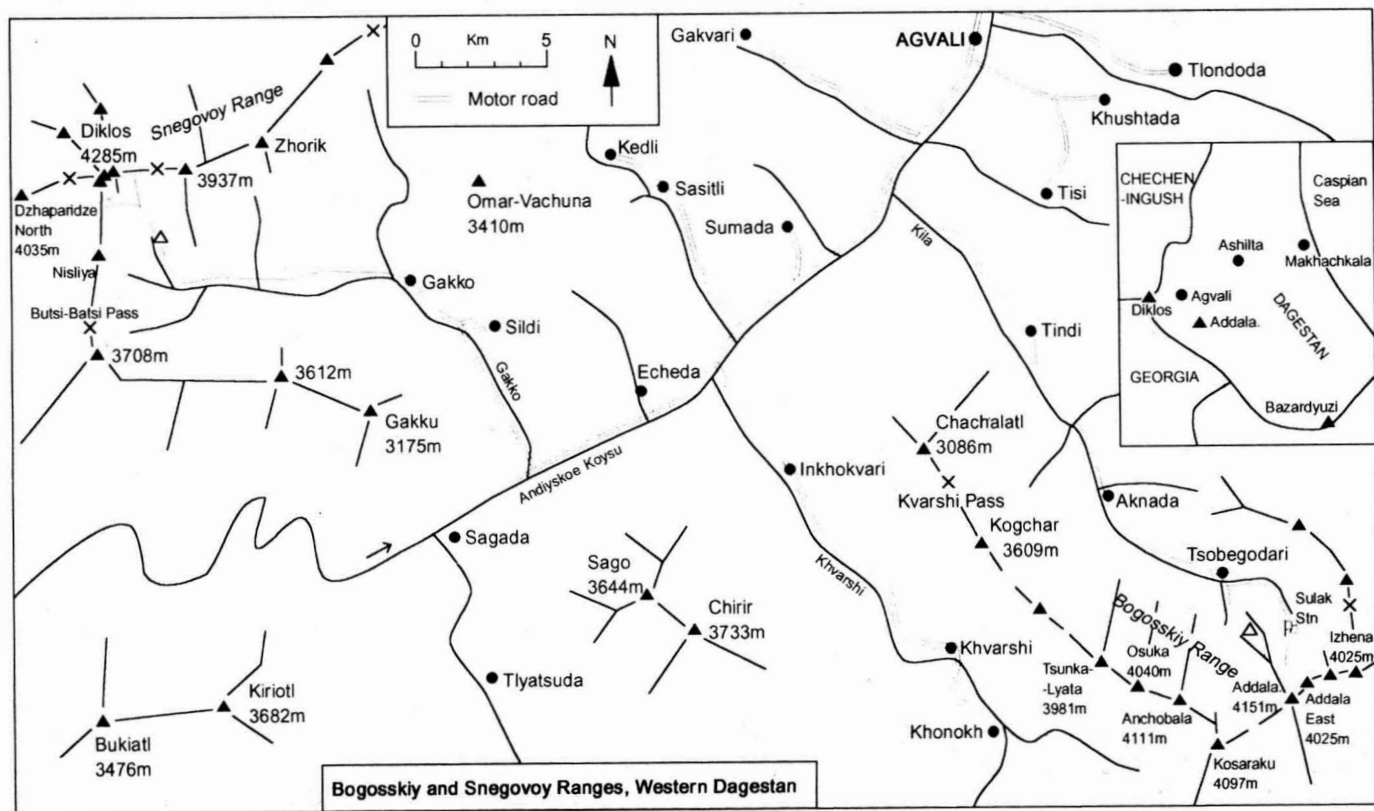
We were speeding west in the mist. Suddenly the tarmac ended and we were crossing rough ground. Then the road worsened some more and it turned dark. We were in a kind of tunnel – rough and unlined, wet and bumpy. Lit by a string of light bulbs, it was like some kind of fantasy film set. This was the road to the wilds of Dagestan.

Lying at the Caspian end of the Caucasus, Dagestan contains a number of mountain groups above 4000m. These have always been overlooked in favour of the peaks of the Central Caucasus, and were almost completely neglected during the British exploration of the Caucasus in the late 19th century. In 1890 George Yeld and G P Baker climbed Bazardyuzy (4480m)¹, but these appear to have been the only previous British climbers in Dagestan. The first climber in the Snegovoy and Bogosskiy ranges, which we visited, was the German explorer Gottfried Merzbacher in 1892.² Entering from Georgia, he made 9 first ascents in only 38 days. He was followed by another German Moriz von Déchy in 1897.³ There appear to have been no visits by Western climbers since, but fortunately both explorers published detailed books and maps.

We were travelling with friends from Kiev, Nick Drobotenko, Yuri Cherevko and Mikhail Bogomolov. Even they had found information on the mountains hard to come by, but they had obtained two rather doubtful guidebooks.^{4,5} There had never been Mountaineering Camps in Dagestan, so until the collapse of the Soviet Union the area had been extremely difficult to visit. We had travelled together by train to Makhachkala on the Caspian Sea, and were now in a bus heading for the mountains.

After half an hour under the Gimrinskiy ridge we emerged in the setting sun to a moonscape of loose rock. The road wound its way down a steep-sided valley to the village of Gimri, birthplace of the hero of Dagestan, Imam Shamil. The buildings were roughly built from the local shale, and terraced upon one another's flat roofs. We continued through most of the night along unmade roads with diversions and many hairpins to the junction of the Andiyskoe Koyusu (river) and the Gakko river. This was as far as the bus could take us towards our first objective, Diklos (4285m) in the Snegovoy range. We were in a deep, barren valley with turbid water and nowhere to camp, so we spent the day moving to a higher base just below the village of Gakko, using a Lada to transport the gear.

Local children watched us constantly, with a look of wonder on their faces which became even greater when they saw us eating chocolate. The next day we gratefully took up an offer to lock our belongings in a room in the village.





47. Dagestan: Diklos, 4285m. The first crenellated section of the South Ridge. (*Paul Knott*) (p130)

Gakko stood on an isolated lump, high above a river junction and built in the primitive flat-roofed style we had come to expect. Watched by up to 30 people, we pitched the tents on a terrace outside our room.

The next morning we set off for the mountains along a shepherds' path. The landscape was now a pleasant mixture of pasture and forest. With assistance from a shepherd and his donkey, we reached the end of the valley in 2½ hours. We continued up steep grassy slopes towards the hanging valley south of Diklos and found a campsite on a terrace overlooking a waterfall. Bad weather came in, which had not cleared by the morning, so we spent the next day reconnoitring. Mike Doyle and I were attracted by an open couloir leading to the S ridge, convinced that the rock was too poor to have technical difficulties. Everyone else opted for the easiest route via the E ridge; the S ridge was supposedly hard and had only been done in descent.

We set off under clear skies. The approach was soon over and we crossed the glacier and the bergschrund without difficulty. The couloir above was easy but long. By the time we reached the top at around 4000m a mist had come up, but the view west was still clear. We were looking down into the Cheros valley in Georgia, from which Merzbacher had climbed 100 years earlier. An easy shattered ridge led to a forepeak, from which we could see contorted looking gendarmes leading to a final tower.

The ridge looked similar to many in the Pennine Alps but climbing on it was utterly different. The shale was totally insecure, shattering both along and against the grain and offering virtually no belays. The climbing relied on balance and careful footwork. We were knocking down a constant deluge of loose rock. Progress was slow but five hours from the couloir we reached the final tower after which, according to the Russians' book, the going should get easier. Beyond, the ridge continued if anything more precariously than before to another peak. It was barely 50 yards away, but it took a traumatic two hours to reach. I had to retreat off a particularly malicious gendarme; we were forced to turn it on the right with a tentative abseil. The second peak (probably the highest) still did not mark any relenting of the difficulties. We seemed condemned forever to this nerve-shattering game.

At a further peak the crenellations continued yet again, but after a short distance they gave way to a corniced ridge. This was the E summit, after which we would be on the normal route for the descent. We passed below the summit cornice at 7pm, and shortly afterwards we found the others' footprints. They had turned back 200 yards below the summit in a whiteout. Following their footprints, we were established on our descent towards the camp when darkness fell and it started snowing. After endless moraines, snowfields and wet grass we finally reached the camp at midnight.

Over the next two days the mountains remained almost permanently enshrouded in mist. We decided to move to the Bogoskiy range some 40km further east, in search of more attractive routes and possibly better weather. Back at Gakko we found that our belongings had been raided. A large number of roubles had been taken (essential for our return journey), along with all our chocolate and something out of every bag and box. There followed many heated arguments between our Russian friends and the villagers. During one

such discussion, Ewan's boots were stolen from outside the flat. This increased the tension still further; some of the villagers started playing with their hunting guns on the balcony outside. We slept inside the room that night to keep close together, and with all our gear.

The next day some of the money and equipment was returned, but even so we did not want to spend another night in the village. We crammed ourselves and our gear into an ancient bus bound for Tindi. As it struggled up the road with a tortured grinding of gears, snowy peaks were visible at the head of the valley. Tindi was perched high above the valley, like Gakko, but it seemed a happier place. Here was a different nationality, one of 40 in Dagestan. One of the village elders found us a campsite and negotiated animals for onward transport. Yuri left next morning with the donkeys. The four English – Adam White, Ewan French, Mike Doyle and myself – set off with light sacks. The walk was pleasant, up a steep-sided valley with several gorges and occasional views of snowy peaks. We were invited into a very primitive peasant woman's house to eat. After another two hours' walk we found Yuri at the hamlet of Tsobegodari, situated in a grassy widening of the valley. We cooked on an open fire as we had no stove between us.

Nick and Mikhail arrived the following day in pouring rain. The day after was wet also, with snow in the mountains – the weather seemed no better than in the Snegovoy range. Then in the afternoon it started to clear so we moved to a higher camp for an attempt on Addalashukhgelmeer (4151m). After the experience of Diklos, we were all agreed on the normal route, the NW ridge first climbed by Merzbacher.

It was a cold, clear night and we set off up frozen scree, making rapid progress. After crossing an old glacier bowl we took a snow slope to the ridge itself. There was much less snow than Merzbacher had found; the ridge was now purely rock. It was loose but easy, particularly since it was frozen together. It steepened to a forepeak, becoming quite delicate in places, then just before the top there were a few moves on good granite – probably the only piece of solid rock in the region. Four hours after leaving camp Adam and I were on the summit; the others followed shortly afterwards. The snow and ice melted to allow a bounding descent on freely running scree.

The following day Adam and Yuri had to leave for home. The rest of us walked up to the Sulak weather station on the north side of Addalashukhgelmeer. It was a low concrete building perched at about 3000m on a shoulder overlooking the North Addala glacier – the ideal alpine hut position. The next afternoon the clouds parted to reveal an impressive cirque. Straight above us was the N face of Addalashukhgelmeer, first climbed in 1984 by Y. Krasnopol'skiy at D+, but requiring 50cm pitons for the loose rock. To its left was Addala East (4025m), a beautiful mountain with a snowy spur running up the NE face that was simply waiting to be climbed. There was also an established route up the N ridge at PD+, for the descent. The peaks beyond this, Tunsada (4015m) and Izhenia (4025m), were across hard-looking glaciers.

I was ill with some kind of food poisoning, but at 5am the stars were out and I decided to climb anyway. Ewan stayed in his sleeping-bag, conveniently leaving four of us. We went up a grassy spur and onto the dry Addala North

glacier, then across and up to a shoulder beneath our route. For once the weather showed no signs of deteriorating. Mikhail sped off, quickly finding a way through the short rocky section and onto snow just left of the crest of the spur. The gradient was easy, so we plodded steadily upwards. We could see straight down to the weather station, and across to Diklos and the Snegovoy range. As we neared the top, the slope steepened and the névé became softer. Mikhail and Nick happily continued, but Mike and I found it insecure. After some less than smooth ropework, we reached the top with the help of the Russians. The summit was a beautiful place to be, in the sunshine for once.

We descended by the same route, using a Russian technique whereby one pair would be roped and moving together at any one time, belayed by the other pair. The position would then be reversed. It was confusing at first, but it was fast as well as safe since three people had a top rope and two also had a handrail. Counting ropelengths, we found it was 500m down to the rocks.

It was time to leave the mountains. It was a week before our flight to London, but we needed all this time and had little room for missed connections. We descended to Tsobogodari to meet the donkeys for the next day. At Tindi we hitched a lift on the back of a truck to Agvali, where we were relieved to find our driver from Makhachkala waiting for us. We continued that evening as far as the bridge over the Andiyskoe Koyusu at Ashilta. The next day it would be closed, and the diversion via Chechen-Ingush was unwise with Dagestan number plates. When we reached the bridge it was half dismantled having only about a third of its planks and a four-metre section with no cross-members. After rearranging the planks as best we could, we got across without problems and commandeered the back of a lorry to sleep on at the other side.

We set off as the sun rose, savouring our last hours in the wilds before entering the tunnel to civilisation once more.

Summary: The Snegovoy and Bogoskiy ranges in the west of Dagestan, Eastern Caucasus, received their first visit by British climbers from 11 August to 8 September 1992. A joint British/Ukraine expedition, led by Paul Knott and Nick Drobotenko, made ascents of Diklos (4285m), Addalashukhgelmeer (4151m) and Addala East (4025m). The expedition took place 100 years after the ranges were first climbed on by Gottfried Merzbacher.

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