
Above and Below the Snow-line



79. Ian and Loretta McNaught-Davis in 'The Valley of the Moon', Atacama Desert, Northern Chile. (*Jim Curran*) (p133)



80. Atacama Desert with Volcan Laskar (5690m). (*Jim Curran*) (p133)

JIM CURRAN

Fifty Not Out

(Plates 79, 80)

It happens to me every year on January 8th, the same birthday as Elvis Presley. But 1993 was the great five, oh. There is no denying that now I have to accept that even if I live to be ninety I'm well past halftime and almost certainly a lot nearer the final whistle than I would choose to be. (There wasn't much consolation, either, in knowing that just up the road from me Paul Nunn was, as usual, two whole days older.)

So I resolved that 1993 must be a good one. It got off to a promising start with a quick foray to Nepal to shoot a documentary with Chris Bonington at Everest Base Camp to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the first ascent (was I really only ten then?). I have to say that despite or because of a brief and personally unmemorable trip to Everest from Tibet in 1988, I had never harboured any great desire to go there again. I had no great expectations that I would ever really enjoy doing the most famous trek in the Himalaya.

But I couldn't have been more wrong. It was a wonderful, if hectic, time, and brought home to me the realisation that even with all Nepal's much publicised problems of exploitation, pollution and overcrowding, the approach to Everest is still a fabulous experience. In fact many of the clichés are simply not true. For instance, most of the litter is now being buried; yes, of course there *are* many other people on the trail but it's not as bad as one is led to believe. It's still a very big landscape to move through and if the sight and sound of other trekkers offends, well, just look up, and be stunned.

For me the memories are of chance meetings with several old friends along the way and the making of new ones as Everest itself loomed nearer. In particular, Pertemba, who was masterminding our trip, was a wonderful companion as he gave us the benefit of his knowledge and insight into Sherpa customs and culture. For Chris, of course, this was a trip down memory lane and frequently he would be greeted with sudden recognition and affection by Sherpas and porters dating right back to the early sixties.

At Lobuje we met John Barry and Rebecca Stephens as they approached Base Camp after warming up (if that is the right phrase in a particularly cold spring) on Island Peak. They looked fit and confident, as did Harry Taylor, and it was no great surprise to hear of their success. Gorak Shep and Base Camp were marked by a near terminal power crisis to our main video camera and only the presence of a solar-powered battery, loaned by the Brits, saved us from humiliation. My own arrival at Base Camp caused Bill Barker to ask, with studied innocence, how long had I been interested in photography!

Despite Chris getting a nasty throat infection sending him temporarily and uncharacteristically speechless, and some very poor weather, we eventually snatched the opportunity for Chris to do his pieces to camera against a theatrically stormy background on Everest and Nuptse. With relief at having justified the expense, we turned for home. I decided on the plane to use the loot to fund two more trips during the year.

Four months later I again left Heathrow with Chris, this time to Moscow to film and climb in the Caucasus. With us were Jim Fotheringham, Chris's secretary Louise Wilson and Gerry her husband, and the filmmaker Richard Else. It was a happy and relaxed little group, united in our desire to film/climb Elbrus, 5633m, but at heart we were more interested in experiencing a wider spectrum of climbing in the Caucasus, as well as imbibing a varied range of alcoholic beverages but invariably based around champagne and vodka!

It was a hectic three weeks. We first camped in the Adylsu valley where, from the romantically named Green Bivouac, we climbed Via Tau 3820m and Gumatchi 3810m. Chris and Jim, the 'A' team, bagged Cheget Tau 4110m and Jantugan 3931m, all four being Alpine scale peaks.

Then we all set out for the Ushba plateau. It took two gruelling days to get there but, to my relief, the Ushba icefall was in reasonably friendly condition this year, even if the weather wasn't. We spent three nights camped on the plateau, marvelling at the spectacular Shkhelda Towers across the way, as they floated in and out of the clouds. We also managed to snatch two easy routes and almost, but not quite, a hard one. The easy ones were the W summit of Chatyn Tau 4368m and the SE ridge of Pic Shchurovsky 4259m. (This is the normal descent route used by hard men who have climbed the major N face of the mountain.) Chris and Jim set out with Sacha and Vocca, our two delightful Ukrainian guides/interpreters/friends, and in vile weather they made a valiant attempt to climb the classic NE ridge of Ushba 4696m, eventually getting to within 50m of the summit before beating a prudent retreat to avoid a stormy bivouac. The next day, in gentle drizzle, we wobbled gingerly down the icefall and plodded the few hundred miles or so down the valley to hot showers, food and more champagne.

Which only left Elbrus. It was by no means an anti-climax, far from it in fact, for it was a wonderful cloudless day and we were all acclimatised enough to do it with a bit to spare. The view from the top was every bit as good as we had been told. Given the unfortunate publicity Elbrus has had recently, it would seem to be, in the featureless vastness, a very serious place in bad weather. It's also not a good place to learn to use compass, crampons and ice axe. I can't help feeling that inexperienced trekkers could be biting off a lot more than they can chew in anything other than the perfect conditions that we experienced. But it provided a nice finish to our three-week foray, though the two final days in Moscow were also interesting for different reasons. (OK, mainly alcoholic ones.)

The return coincided with the end of my teaching career, for I had managed to get early retirement from the University of the West of England

as a 50th birthday present. With gay abandon I marked the occasion by lashing out on yet another huge airfare, this time to join the larger than life President of the BMC (yes, we're talking Big Mac here) in Santiago, where he was attending a UIAA meeting. Mac proposed a trip up to Northern Chile to visit the volcanoes of the Atacama desert, the driest place in the world. A flight to Antofagasta and the hire of a four-wheel drive Toyota made this a reality.

We spent a few days walking and exploring around the oasis of San Pedro de Atacama with Licancabur 5916m always piercing the horizon. But neither of us was really acclimatised enough to attempt it and with mixed feelings we drove north to the wonderful scenery of the Lauca National Park right on the borders of Peru and Bolivia. Here the volcanoes are bigger and snowier and the altiplano higher. We camped by the shore of Lago Chungara, looking out across the lake at billowing storm clouds over the Bolivian border, with the perfect volcanic cone of Parinacota 6330m dominating everything. At least we were camping high and getting some mileage in, but after a pleasant ascent of a large hill called Guaneguane 5099m, we reached an impasse. It seemed a very long shot to get up Parinacota, and anything else was either too remote or not worthwhile. Mac, thinking laterally, suggested a return to San Pedro de Atacama and I agreed whole-heartedly. Licancabur was calling me back.

So after a near heart failure caused by almost running out of petrol in the most desolate part of northern Chile, we arrived back in San Pedro. It was Sunday afternoon. Our flight back from Antofagasta left on Thursday morning and my flight home was on Friday. That gave us Monday and Tuesday to reach the foot of the volcano through a maze of lethal dirt tracks made, all too obviously, by the army, get some way up to bivouac, and then climb the thing. It would have been a good move to bring with us Graham Little's 1992 *AJ* article on the subject, but we forgot.

The first part of the plan went OK and by Monday evening we were ensconced by a small snow patch optimistically imagining we were nearly halfway up the W face. Next morning brought an early setback. Mac had suffered a slight chest infection since he arrived in Santiago. Now at around 5000m he felt as though one lung was barely working and wisely decided to descend. Rather unwisely he urged me to carry on, and very unwisely I agreed.

I set off at 7.30am, giving myself until 2.30 to get to the top. I followed a long rib of lava blocks, slabs and towers, preferring to scramble and even climb little buttresses and cracks than fight up the interminable scree slopes surrounding them. I spent most of the day thinking about Lindsay Griffin's accident in Mongolia. At least, I thought, I'll be able to make a quick descent down the scree. The day seemed never ending and, judging my height against the skyline ridges, the top seemed miles above me. By midday I was beginning to flag; by 2 o'clock I was getting faintly alarmed. 2.30 came and went, with the top still apparently far away. Then, just before 3, the angle abruptly relented and I stepped out onto almost flat ground. The summit was only about 30m higher and suddenly I could see down to the

amazing vivid waters of Laguna Verde and across into Bolivia. I plodded up to the crater rim and took a quick picture down into a little frozen pond at the bottom, followed by a precautionary remote snap of yours truly (you've got to get the evidence these days!).

Then it was off down the central scree slope we had spotted from the bivvy site. Horror of horrors, it was almost immobile. After ten minutes I had descended only a few metres and had fallen over on my nose about twenty times. Wearily I leant against a boulder and tried to think. Only about four hours' daylight and I had to get not just back to the bivvy site, but all the way down to the truck, over 2000m lower. Necessity being the mother of invention, I resorted to starting a huge avalanche of scree, jumped on, and by lying down on the shifting, bouncing rocks, descended slowly in state and a huge cloud of dust. Shattered and suffering what felt like a terminal asthma attack, I reached the bivvy site at 5. Stumbling, cursing and stopping for wheezy rests, I got back to the point where I could signal Mac with my head torch in the last glimmers of daylight. At half past eight I arrived at the truck where Mac cheerfully took a flash photo of my ripped and dusty salopettes. I looked as though I'd spent six months in Hope cement works.

Two weeks later I was climbing in the Wye valley with Stephen Venables, gleefully recounting my adventures in my customary self-effacing way. But despite legs like tree-trunks, my performance on rock was undistinguished.

'Let this be a lesson to you,' advised Stephen kindly. 'All this mountain climbing is just another step down the road to old age. You'll be joining the Austrian Alpine Club next and learning to yodel.'

This, coming from a man who had climbed Everest and fallen down Panch Chuli, was advice that could not be ignored. 1994 will be a good one too, I hope, but this time more climbing and less summits!