MIKE BANKS

At Heaven's Gate

Golden Oldies in the Chinese Celestials

(Plates 38–41)

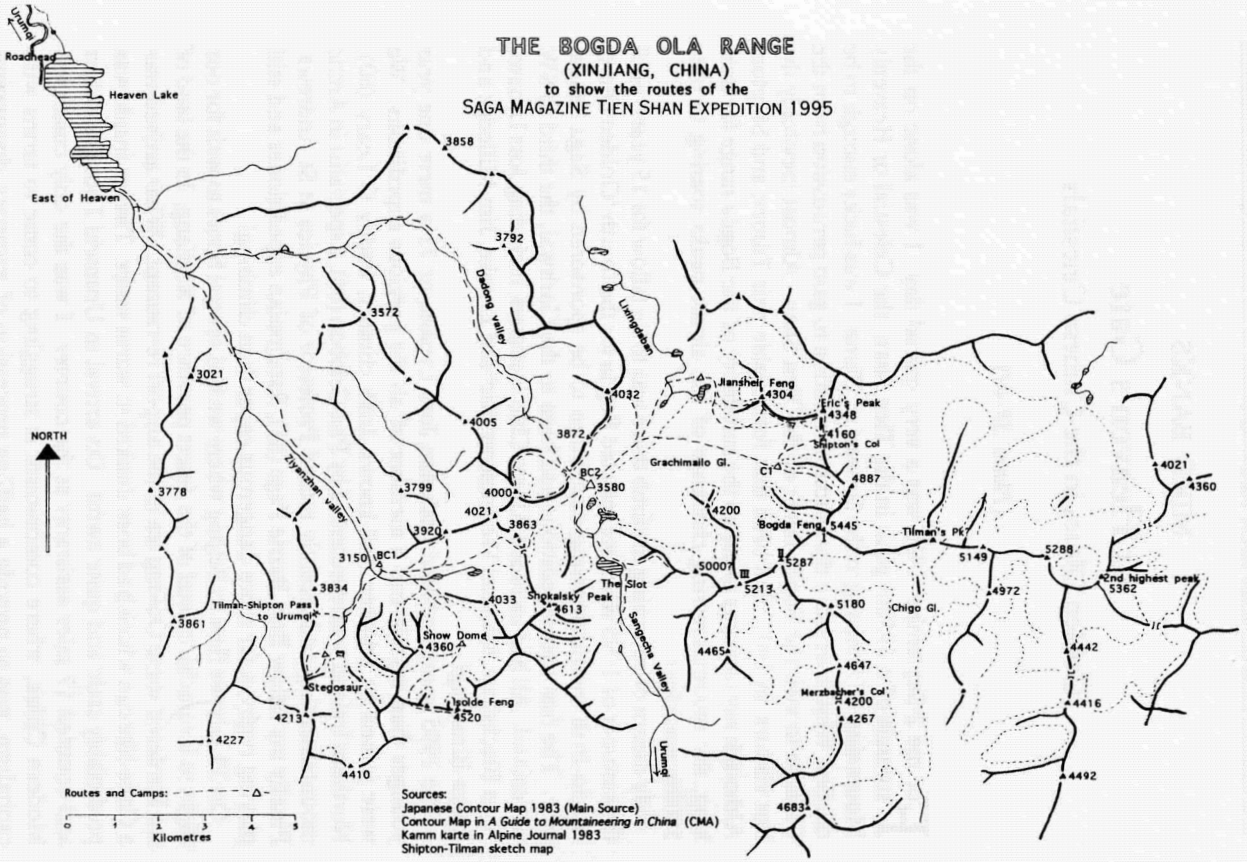
For me 2 September 1980 was a very special day. I was alone on the summit of a 3950m peak in the Tien Shan, the Celestial or Heavenly Mountains, of Xinjiang in the far west of China. I was lucky enough to be the first Westerner since the Maoist revolution to gain permission from the Chinese to visit the Bogda range of the Tien Shan. Almost inevitably the last visitors, in 1947, had been that formidable pair Tilman and Shipton. Although my task was to assess the suitability of the Bogda range for trekking, the mountaineering challenge of the alpine peaks soaring to over 5000m was clear.

My dream of returning to climb there was to lie fallow for 15 years, until the summer of 1995 when we selected Bogda for the fourth 'Golden Oldie' Anglo-Irish mountaineering expedition to be sponsored by Saga Magazine. The first two expeditions had been to the Garhwal, the third to SW Greenland. All had included Alpine Club members, including Joss Lynam, Alan Blackshaw, Michael Westmacott, Richard Brooke, Jim Milledge and Roger Birnstingl.

The 1995 team included Irishman Joss Lynam, at 71 a mere one year younger than myself and a member of all the previous expeditions. We were joined by another well-known Irish climber, Paddy O'Leary (60). Northern Ireland was represented by Phil Gribbon (66), a specialist in Arctic mountaineering and recently retired Professor of Physics at St Andrews. Finally my fellow Brit, Barrie Page (61), Patagonian expeditioner and still playing rugby, a far more dangerous caper than climbing!

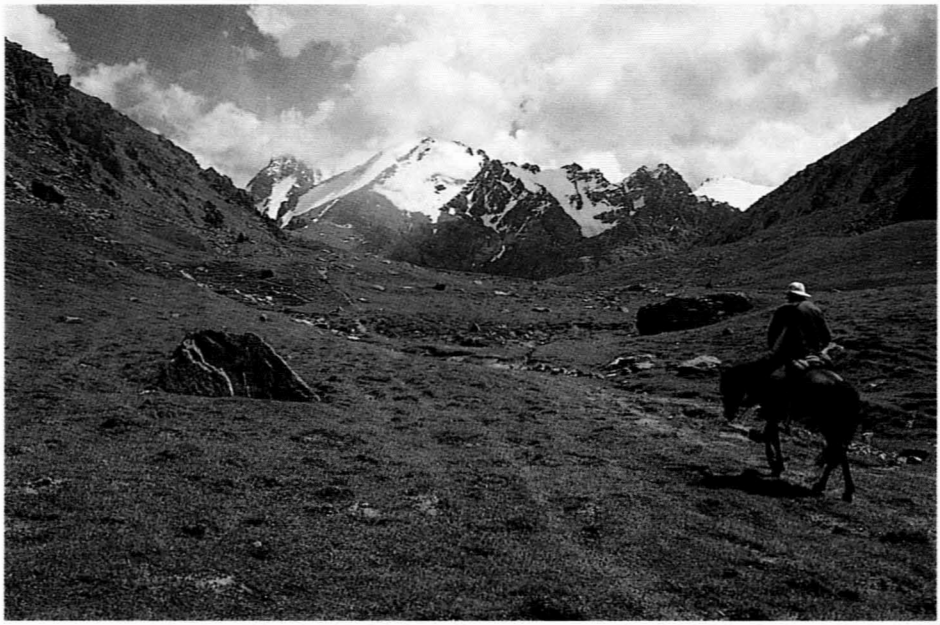
On 30 July we flew to Beijing where we had several hours to wait for our flight to Urumchi, capital of the desert province of Xinjiang. In the land of tea I ordered some Oolong tea in the airport restaurant. What arrived was a Coke-like can which had been dunked in warm water. The tea inside was predictably stale and quite awful. On arrival in Urumchi I bought a shirt and counted 17 sales assistants at the counter. I was the only customer! Modern China, where communism is struggling to come to terms with capitalism, was to provide a baffling procession of surprises, disappointments and occasional delights.

The Bogda range is only 80 miles out of Urumchi. The road climbed to 6000ft and ended at a lake endearingly called 'The Heavenly Pond'. A boat


THE BOGDA OLA RANGE
(XINJIANG, CHINA)
to show the routes of the
SAGA MAGAZINE TIEN SHAN EXPEDITION 1995
Urumqi
Roadhead
Heaven Lake
East of Heaven
NORTH
Dadong valley
Lixingdaban
Ziyanzhan valley
Jiansheir Feng
4304
Eric's Peak
4348
4160
Shipton's Col
Grachimailo Gl.
C1
4887
Bogda Feng
5445
Tilman's Pk
5149
5288
2nd highest peak
5362
4972
Chigo Gl.
5180
5287
5213
50007
4200
4465
4647
Merzbacher's Col
4200
4267
4683
4442
4416
4492
4021
4360
3858
3792
3572
3021
3778
3799
4005
4032
3872
BC2
3580
4000
4021
3863
3920
3150
BC1
3834
3861
Tilman-Shipton Pass to Urumqi
4033
Snokalsky Peak
4613
The Slot
Sangecha Valley
Show Dome
4360
Stegosaur
Isolde Feng
4520
4213
4227
4410
Routes and Camps:
0 1 2 3 4 5
Kilometres
Sources:
Japanese Contour Map 1983 (Main Source)
Contour Map in A Guide to Mountaineering in China (CMA)
Kamm karte in Alpine Journal 1983
Shipton-Tilman sketch map



38. The Chinese Tien Shan Expedition. *From L* Mike Banks, Paddy O'Leary, Barrie Page, Phil Gribbon, Joss Lynam. (*Mike Banks*) (p103)



39. Approaching the Bogda Range of the Chinese Tien Shan. Kazakh horses were used to establish Base Camp. (*Mike Banks*) (p103)

carried us across the lake where we met up with the local Kazakh hillmen who provided pack animals. That night we slept in a cosy Kazakh *yurt.*

Next day we saw Kazakh horses in action. Wiry and sure-footed, they splashed through mountain torrents and stepped daintily across rough boulder scree. We toiled upwards for about 4000ft through fragrant conifer forests and then more open grasslands. Three of us hired riding horses. Joss Lynam, who had not ridden for nearly 50 years, ended up with two huge raw blisters on his stern. Thereafter he walked!

We found a pleasant meadow for our base camp. Our Chinese staff consisted of a happy young Chinese cook who worked wonders with a hatchet, a chopping board and a wok. Our interpreter, the friendly and charming Leung, rapidly became our friend. Finally, there was the liaison officer.

The next day we climbed an easy scree mountain of 3810m to take a good look round. We had little background information beyond the Tilman and Shipton books.[1] They had reconnoitred the range and climbed a couple of peaks. Scots mountaineer, Sandy Allan, had led a trek to the area in 1987 and, with a client, had successfully stormed the main peak Bogda Feng (5445m).[2] Most of the other visiting mountaineers had been Japanese and little information on their activities had been published in English.[3] We were, in effect, in exploratory territory.

We first attempted a gleaming white mountain we christened Snow Dome (4360m). We got a nasty surprise to find the snow was wafer-thin, with hard ice underneath. This meant front-pointing, pitched climbing and banging in lots of ice pitons; all very time consuming. I had teamed up with Paddy O'Leary, one of Ireland's most experienced expedition climbers. We had climbed only about 150m by 4pm with lots more to go. We climbed gingerly down.

Paddy and I therefore decided to look for a rock route to the summit on the far side of the peak. After a rainy night in a bivouac, we found a long rock gully which took us to a snow ridge high up the peak. As Paddy hacked his way through a snow cornice he called down 'We're there!' The summit was only a few yards away. We had claimed our first Heavenly summit.

Four of us then explored a valley to the west of Snow Dome where we climbed an entertaining rock rib. Things started off too easily and ended up too hard. Rock forays to the left and straight up could not be pushed, so a difficult snow exit was made which led only to a subsidiary summit. Paddy and I made amends when, in a near blizzard, we climbed a snow mountain south-east of Snow Dome which Paddy christened Isolde Peak (4500m), his daughter's name. The day before, the other three members had climbed Snow Dome by our route.

To enjoy a change of scene we now moved base camp a few miles east to the Grachimailo glacier where the highest peaks were situated and this we did in a snowstorm. We shared our new campsite with Japanese climbing and trekking groups.

From the new base camp Phil Gribbon and I set off up a glacier to carry a load up to a high camp. Phil suddenly stopped and said:

'Hey, I've found an ice axe!' There it was, protruding from under a couple of inches of snow.

'Finders keepers,' he chortled. We were puzzled to find a camera attached to the ice axe. Next we spotted a radio transmitter and then some more equipment and clothing.

'This looks like an accident,' I said to Phil. 'There might be a body.'

'I think it's over there,' Phil replied, pointing to a bundle lying in the snow.

Full of unease, we walked across. Two legs, clad in boots and gaiters quickly confirmed our sad find. The rest of the body had decomposed over the years and the head had disappeared, possibly taken by a snow leopard. A Japanese girl climber had perished in a crevasse in this area 15 years ago. We walked on up the glacier for a further half an hour to where we knew a large Japanese expedition were camped. They carried the body down and buried it at base camp.

We flirted with the idea of climbing the main peak, Bogda Feng (5445m) but when we saw that a large party of fit young Japanese needed 1700m of fixed rope (which they very properly removed on their descent) we switched to softer options! Phil Gribbon and I therefore climbed a pleasant 4348m peak north of the main massif which we called Eric's Peak because it was above a col visited by Shipton. Paddy and Phil then attempted a formidable rock peak of some 5000m at the western extremity of the main massif. Their spirited attempt was defeated by the baffling complication of the upper mountain and also by some unexpected and rock-hard ice.

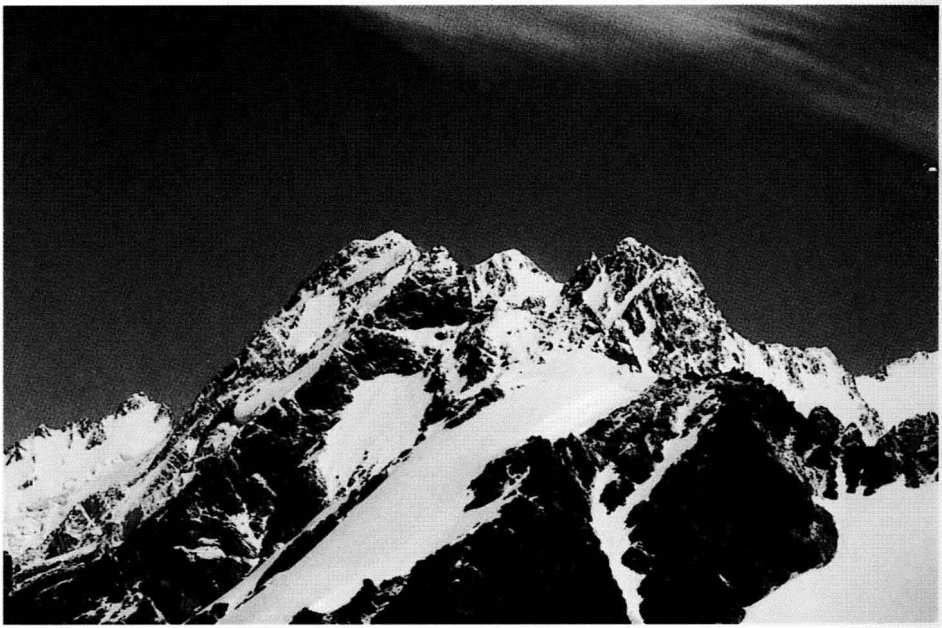
Barrie Page, Joss Lynam and I then climbed a 4304m peak called Jianshier Feng. The descent was down seemingly interminable scree. In all we had some splendid runs down fine-grained screes not yet eroded by the feet of countless climbers.

In between times Phil Gribbon and Joss Lynam had separately soloed two 4000m peaks close to base camp at the head of the Da Dong valley. On the very last day Paddy, our strongest climber, shot out of base and soloed Eric's Peak and Jianshier Feng in a final, flamboyant gesture. Six peaks over 4000m had been climbed, members attaining summits on 17 occasions in total – a fair score for OAPs! We had not climbed any of the peaks above 5000m, where considerable scope remains for first British ascents.

It should have ended there but, as a most attractive 'add-on', four of us elected to sample the 800-mile drive from Kashgar along the Silk Road through the Pamirs past Muztagh Ata, so nearly climbed by Tilman and Shipton in 1947. Then we turned southwards down the spectacular Karakoram Highway to Pakistan, passing the foot of Rakaposhi, a peak I had not seen since Tom Patey and I made the first ascent back in 1958. But it was Tilman who had found the key route to the summit in 1947.



40. Peaks in the Bogda Range. Snow Dome, 4360m, climbed by all five expedition members, is to the right of the central peak. (*Mike Banks*) (p103)



41. Bogda Feng, 5445m, the left hand summit, is the highest peak in the Bogda Range. (*Mike Banks*) (p103)

The good news: Saga Magazine are willing to sponsor another expedition in 1997. The bad news: no snow or mountains! If any Club member over 50 has an idea for an enterprising expedition, be it by mountain bike, camel, inflatable or whatever, do drop me a note – but no longer please than Tilman's stipulated length for an expedition plan: what can be written on the back of an envelope!

Summary: The Chinese Tien Shan Expedition, sponsored by Saga Magazine, climbed six peaks over 4000m, probably first British ascents, in the Bogda Range during July-August 1995. These included Isolde Peak (4500m), Jianshier Feng (4304m), Eric's Peak (4348m) and Snow Dome (4360m). The participants were Mike Banks (72), Phil Gribbon (66), Joss Lynam (71), Paddy O'Leary (60) and Barrie Page (61).

NOTES

1 Eric Shipton, *The Mountains of Tartary*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1951.
H W Tilman, *China to Chitral.* Cambridge University Press, 1951.
2 Sandy Allan, 'Sojourn in Xinjiang' in *AJ93*, 88-91, 1988/89
3 Shigeru Kodama, 'Bogdo Ola Group Survey' in *AJ88*, 70-76, 1983