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A Siberian Adventure

(*Plates 51–54*)

My curiosity was fired by tantalising pictures showing the Cherskiy mountains under clear blue skies. The peaks were beautiful, unclimbed and in an extremely remote setting in North-East Siberia. The source of the photographs, a Polish magazine,[1] added extra mystique, and a little research further fuelled my enthusiasm.

The range was discovered in 1891 by the Polish explorer J Cherskiy, but exploration did not begin in earnest until the 1926 visit of V A Obruchev. It was not until 1961 that the main Buordakh massif came to the attention of 'mountain tourists', when a group from Sverdlovsk crossed the massif and climbed the E summit of Mt Pobeda (3147m). Subsequently, all the main valleys and passes were explored[2] but few of these parties climbed peaks. The handful of 'alpinist' visits, of which the most notable were a Moscow team in 1977[3] and one from Slovakia in 1988,[4] still left most of the mountains unclimbed.

Many problems had to be solved to realise the adventure: information was limited, transport was sparse and costs were high. After much negotiation by Telex my Yakutian contact, Gavriel Gavrielov, agreed to a minimalist approach involving a long walk-out and no radios, guides or interpreters.

Flying via Moscow and Novosibirsk, we were met by Gavriel in an ominously cold and wet Yakutsk. The city was striking, with buildings on stilts, over-ground pipes and unpaved roads. We were shown videos of life at – 60°C in winter. We continued by turboprop to the small mining town of Ust-Nera and were met by Pavol Kazakov, the key to the rest of our journey. After parting with a large cash sum for the helicopter, we had to wait a couple of days for flying weather. Ust-Nera's dowdiness made Yakutsk look like a smart metropolis; many of its wooden houses were sinking into the bog. Perhaps seeking solace, some of the locals kept us awake all night with their drunken discord.

Finally, on 22 July, Michael Doyle, Simon Inger, John Kentish and I watched the helicopter fly off, leaving us alone with our clouds of mosquitoes. We were totally committed to a 165km-plus walk-out to Burustakh, a route that we had been assured would be of only medium difficulty provided the rivers were not too swollen. We had been asked to sign a disclaimer stating that we undertook the trip on our own responsibility.

I felt a sense of relief that our carefully-laid plans had fallen into place and there was nothing else to go wrong except the climbing. Any idealism was quickly shattered, however, as we carried monstrously heavy loads for seven hours across boulders to reach a site for Base Camp, in a moraine hollow beside the Leker glacier. After a second heavy carry and a rest day, Mike and I set off for unseen, unclimbed peaks around the Tsariegradskovo glacier. This glacier, 9km long, is the largest in the range, reaching down to 1600m. As we ascended in the dawn light to the Volgogradskiy pass, our first views of the range unfolded. They were, as photos had suggested, very pretty mountains but as we crossed the pass we found snow conditions disappointing, the thin crust on the glacier making for laborious progress. We walked down past rocky peaks to our west, but the rock was shattered and unattractive. We settled for the snowy 'Peak 3000m'.

Early next morning the snow was poorly frozen and the weather looked threatening, but we continued regardless and were rewarded with spectacular views over the boggy tundra to the east. Icy slopes above the Sasyr pass led to a pleasant summit which, to our frustration, turned out to be much lower than the surrounding peaks.

After an interlude of bad weather, we set off for the isolated peak at the head of the glacier which we later named 'Pyramid'. Progressing rapidly up firm névé, we were surprised to meet John and Simon descending (having started from Base Camp at midnight). It was still early, and from the summit the rock ribs of the nearby Peak 3035m looked inviting. We descended, and continued straight up the rib leading to its highest summit, revelling in climbing the blocky pink granite in the warm sunshine. From the top, our third unclimbed peak of the trip, we started looking for more challenging routes. Enthused about the rock climbing, we were tempted by the buttresses of the nearby 'Peak 3029m'.

From our glacier camp we scanned the rock buttress with a monocular and decided we should try it despite a steep-looking start and signs of rockfall. On 30 July, after another bad weather day, we approached the mountain. The angle looked even steeper from close up, but the hoped for ramp line materialised and to begin with we were able to solo climb. Three roped pitches up to UIAA IV then took us to the top of the initial steepness and we continued enthusiastically up the airy rib to its top. A steep snowy summit ridge rounded off one of the most satisfying climbs of the trip. On the single abseil taken on the descent, I dislodged a loose spike that cut two of the expedition's three ropes. We climbed down gingerly to the glacier.

John and Simon had also succeeded on the peak between 3035 and 3029 and, earlier, on the peak south of Omskiy pass. Satisfied, we all returned to Base Camp in the continuing unsettled weather that appears to be the normal summer pattern in this range.

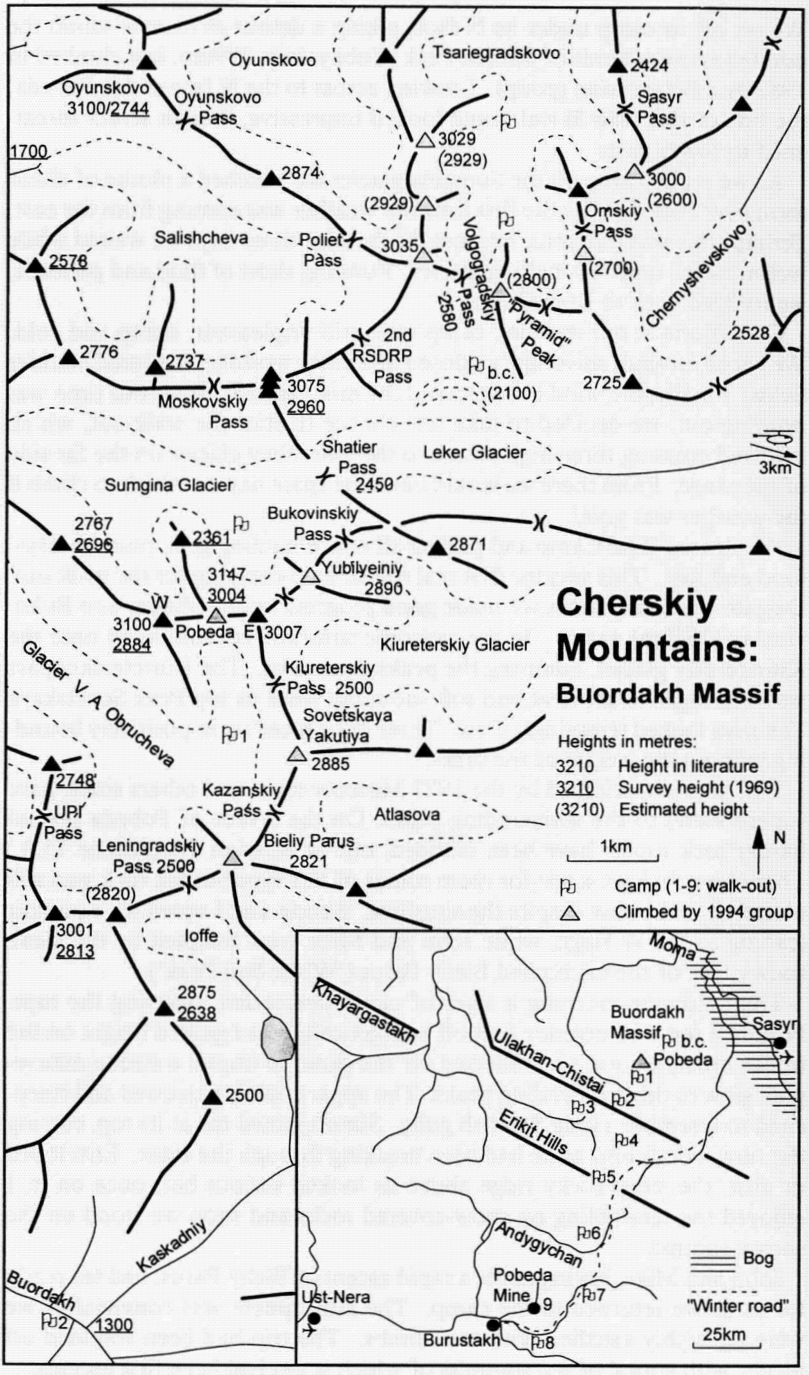
Two days later the weather had improved enough for us to attempt the highest peak in the range, Mt Pobeda (3147m). Despite its obvious attraction the main summit was not climbed until 1966, by a team from Yakutsk.



51. The Cherskiy mountains, Siberia. Mike Doyle on P 3029, with 'Pyramid Peak' behind. (*Paul Knott*) (p147)



52. Bieliy Parus ('White Sail Peak'), 2821m. The North Face seen from the Kiureterskiy Pass. (*Paul Knott*) (p147)


Oyunskovo
Oyunskovo 3100/2744
Oyunskovo Pass
Tsariegradskovo
2424
Sasyr Pass
1700
2874
3029 (2929)
(2929)
3000 (2600)
Omskiy Pass
(2700)
Salishcheva
Poliet Pass
3035
Volgogradskiy Pass 2580
(2800)
"Pyramid" Peak
Chernyshevskovo
2528
2576
2776
2737
2nd RSDRP Pass
b.c. (2100)
2725
3075 2960
Moskovskiy Pass
Shatier Pass 2450
Leker Glacier
3km
Sumgina Glacier
Bukovinskiy Pass
2767 2696
2361
2871
3147 3004
Yubiliyeiniy 2890
W 3100 2884
Pobeda E 3007
Kiureterskiy Glacier
Kiureterskiy Pass 2500
Glacier V. A. Obrucheva
Sovetskaya Yakutiya 2885
2748
UPI Pass
Kazanskiy Pass
Atlasova
Leningradskiy Pass 2500
Bieliy Parus 2821
(2820)
3001 2813
Ioffe
2875 2638
2500
Kaskadniy
Buordakh
1300
Cherskiy Mountains:
Buordakh Massif
Heights in metres:
3210 Height in literature
3210 Survey height (1969)
(3210) Estimated height
1km
N
Camp (1-9: walk-out)
Climbed by 1994 group
Moma
Khayargastakh
Buordakh Massif
b.c.
Pobeda
Sasyr
Ulakhan-Chistai
Erikit Hills
Andygychan
Pobeda Mine
Ust-Nera
Burustakh
Bog
"Winter road"
25km

We set off to camp under its N face, taking a detour *en route* to climb the pointed snow summit of Jubilee Peak (Yubilyeiniy, 2890m, last climbed in 1983 by a Belarussian group). Looking across to the N face of Mt Pobeda, the line of the 1988 Slovak route looked impressive, though séracs threatened its lower parts.

As we set up camp on the Sumgina glacier we watched a plume of cloud form over Pobeda. For the first time the weather was coming from the east. Perhaps this was ominous, because for the next three days we waited while wet snow fell onto the melting glacier. Running short of food and patience, we trudged back to Base Camp.

Conditions at our moraine camp were still unpleasant, damp and cold. We paced around, shivering, enclosed in a misty world of shattered boulder fields. Finally, the wind changed and the mist cleared. Since our time was running out, we decided to take this chance to start the walk-out, which involved crossing three high passes to the Obruchev glacier on the far side of the range. From there we would have one spare day on which to climb if the weather was good.

We cleared Base Camp and packed all our remaining gear, plus ten days' food and fuel. This was the first real test of load-carrying for the walk-out. Despite our heavy sacks we made good progress up the Shatier and Bukovinskiy (2550m) passes. In the welcome sunshine we continued onto the Kiureterskiy glacier, admiring the peaks around us. The Kiureterskiy pass was a struggle in the heat and soft snow, but from its top Peak Sovetskaya Yakutiya looked temptingly close. Three of us raced up it, positively bounding without the weight of the sacks.

This summit, climbed by the 1977 Moscow team and others since, gave superb views to the surrounding peaks. On the S face of Pobeda several harder rock routes have been climbed, one at Russian 5A (Alpine TD).[3] There was obvious scope for more routes of this type but the rock was still plastered with snow despite the sunshine. Simon and I opted for a couloir leading to the W ridge, while John and Mike were tempted by the clean snowy face of the unclimbed Bieliy Parus ('White Sail Peak').

The following morning a layer of cloud descended, covering the tops. Feeling a sense of urgency I set off energetically. As I gained height on the frozen crust, the sun was reflected off the cloud to impart a strong mauve-pink glow to the surrounding peaks. The upper couloir narrowed and steepened to resemble a long Scottish gully. Simon joined me at its top, cursing the snow conditions as he had been breaking through the crust. Enveloped in mist, the steep rocky ridge above us looked serious but, once on it, I enjoyed the scrambling on snow-covered rocks and soon we stood on the snowy summit.

John and Mike, having made a rapid ascent of Bieliy Parus, had tea ready for us as we returned to the camp. The atmosphere was convivial as we were all highly satisfied with our climbs. The trip had been rounded off nicely, with a total of ten summits of which seven had been first ascents.



53. Simon Inger on the snowed-up rock of the upper East Ridge of Mt Pobeda, 3147m. (*Paul Knott*) (p147)



54. John Kentish passing lakes near the source of the Tirekhtyakh river on the fifth day of the walk-out, with the Ulakhan-Chistai hills behind. (*Paul Knott*) (p147)

Now it was time to leave this land of wet snow and mountain weather for the pleasures of green grass and living things. Early on 9 August we shouldered full 25km packs again for the final glacier pass, the Leningradskiy. Snow conditions were incomprehensibly bad. On the worst section we were standing on crust and falling waist deep on every step: we had to crawl on all fours to make progress. The other side of the pass was more amenable, the dry Ioffe glacier leading quickly down to boulders. We passed an icy lake and soon joined the Kaskadniy valley. Here we had some close calls on precarious slopes, but we reached the main Buordakh river in good time and crossed it without difficulty. It was most civilised to camp amongst grass and shrubs again, despite the inevitable mosquitoes.

From here we faced seven days of serious backpacking. For the first section we had a Russian survey map labelled 'secret', but for the rest of the route we had rejected these on cost grounds in favour of a 1:500 000 air chart. Pavol, in Ust-Nera, had drawn a route for us and advised four or five days' walk from Base Camp, but working on 25km per day we had allowed a total of nine. There was no leeway at the end for catching our flight back to Yakutsk.

The next day was a test of whether we could keep up this schedule. At first we made good progress in the wide, flat valley but mist and rain dampened our spirits and, as we laboured up to the Buordakhskiy pass (1400m), the party became separated. Eventually we regrouped and struggled on into the Darpir valley, but failed to make the required distance.

The following morning was clear and frosty, the temperature as low as it had been even in the mountains. The 'white nights' had ended and autumn was rapidly approaching . We continued down the Darpir, trudging across boggy ground with awkward tussocks. As expected there were no paths, other than the occasional reindeer track. We waded the partly iced-up Chukcha river and passed some lakes complete with noisy seagulls. The landscape was changing in the most surprising ways. After an 11-hour day, we stopped at a beautiful campsite looking out over a wide green expanse back to the Ulakan-Chistai hills.

We were hoping soon to meet the tracks of a 'winter road', a great psychological hurdle. Looking for these caused our only period of disorientation, as we misinterpreted the sketchy details on our map. Spirits were low as we flailed through shrubbery and suffered from hungry mosquitoes. Eventually we found the tracks and made better progress to a campsite in the Erikit hills. On subsequent days the tracks were not always so good, frequently disappearing into bogs and rivers. Fortunately the rivers were all shallow enough to wade, but sometimes they crossed and recrossed the track every few hundred metres. Trainers became the footwear of choice as our plastic boots were sodden. The further we went the smaller the hills became and the richer the vegetation. Some of the scenery was magnificent, but such pleasures were often overwhelmed by the gruelling effort of covering the distance.

Fortunately the weather had been kind to us since the first dreadful day. We had settled into a smooth rhythm, trying to minimise the pounding to our muscles and joints. It was tantalising, on day six, to see a truck driving up the Andygychan river. The same evening we met the only people we had seen on the whole trip – an extremely surprised group of reindeer-herders on horseback. A long trudge up through boggy moorland led to the final pass (*c*1200m) the other side of which was a lush shrubby dell. It was here that we saw the only bear tracks of the trip. Eventually we reached the main Burustakh valley, which led directly to the road and civilisation, still two days' walk away. The stony track crossed the river even more frequently here and we had few clues to our position, but we convinced ourselves we were making more than adequate progress. On what we hoped would be the penultimate day we started to pass through mine workings, adding to the sense that we must be nearly there.

On 16 August we reached the road as planned at 9am and waded the river for the last time. I hitched a lift in a huge ore truck and was ushered in to see the amazed director of the Pobeda goldmine. I needed to contact Pavol in Ust-Nera to get a vehicle sent that afternoon. The phones weren't working, but the director arranged for the others to be picked up and we soon found ourselves in the sick bay being rested and fed.

The following morning we were whisked by high-speed truck to Ust-Nera, picked up our tickets from a surprised Pavol, and caught the Yakutsk flight with just half-an-hour to spare. Gradually it sank in that our adventure was over. Climbing in such a remote place with minimal support had left little margin for potential problems, but our approach had been successful and we had come away with many vivid memories of a great adventure.

Summary: In July/August 1994 Paul Knott (leader), Michael Doyle, Simon Inger and John Kentish visited the Buordakh massif in the Cherskiy mountains, Yakutia. They made seven first ascents, climbed Mt Pobeda (3147m) probably by a new route, and reached two further summits in this compact range overlooking vast Siberian bogs. To regain civilisation from Base Camp they had to walk for two days across the mountains and a further seven across tundra, much of it with the help of only a 1:500 000 scale map.

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