



# THE ALPINE JOURNAL 1997

Volume 102

'The Antarctic continent provided me with everything that I value most – solitude, isolation, commitment, technical difficulty and a magnificent environment ...'

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### Jacket photographs:

*Front* St Elias Range, Yukon Territory, Canada. View SE from Mount Queen Mary, 3928m, over the Hubbard Glacier.

The climber is Ade Miller. (*Paul Knott*)

*Back* Dawn light on the N Face of Koshten-Tau, seen from the SE Ridge of Ullu-Auz-Bashi during the Alpine Club Caucasus meet in July-August 1996. (*Roy Ruddle*)



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ROY RUDDLE

## Foolishly Following A F Mummery

A personal account of the Alpine Club/Alpine Climbing Group  
Greater Ranges Meet to the Caucasus

*(Plates 40–43 and back cover)*

July 18th, 7 am, Heathrow. I am at a loss to describe the menagerie of people who stood around me – *odd* is one word that springs to mind! This was the start of the 1996 Greater Ranges Meet which John Temple had kindly offered to organise. The rest of us had simply said 'Yeah, I'll go'. Once in the mountains, I climbed exclusively with my long-time friend Robert Durran.

We flew into Moscow and were fortunate to visit Red Square at dusk when there were few tourists. The atmosphere and evening light were quite fantastic, not only on the ancient walls of St Basil's and the Kremlin, but also on Stalin's huge modern Gothic buildings, which would look perfect as a Batman set. The next day we caught an internal flight to Mineralnyje-Vody and then travelled by bus to Turskol in the Baksan Valley. I had heard a lot of horror stories about Aeroflot but, to be fair, the food, service and even the plane were pretty good. However, it might have been a different matter if we had flown with the ominously-named 'Touch and Go', another airline with planes on the tarmac!

### **Acclimatising in the Baksan region**

We planned to spend our first few days acclimatising in the Dongusorun Valley. On the first day we trekked for five hours, partly in heavy rain, until we reached the Dongusorun Lakes (c3000m), but then got shot at and escorted at gun-point all the way back down to Turskol. Next day the local Border Guard's commander came to apologise. His troops weren't meant to shoot us; our permit was valid.

On 22 July we changed plans and headed up the Adyl Su Valley to camp at the Green Hotel for five days. Here we found that most Russians have a real attitude problem to rubbish. Little seemed to be removed and the popular camp and bivvy sites were filled with rusty cans, broken glass and plastic bottles. Even more depressing was the pathetic attempt to burn rubbish which had been made by the Russian helpers of one prominent British commercial group. We cleared up their site for them, as there was no way we were going to leave British packaging and trash in such a beautiful place.

The weather was horrendous. There were storms every day and night and during one, which lasted eight hours, thunder shook the ground under us as we tried to sleep. For acclimatisation Robert and I attempted Gumatchi (3810m), but turned back from a col below the summit as the gales and heavy rain seemed likely to give us flu. A large team of novice Ukrainian climbers also retreated, but first their instructors made them shiver miserably on the col for 15 minutes as part of their 'education in suffering'. Their gear, liberally supplemented with polythene sheeting, looked as if it came from the 1950s, but was just as effective as our Gore-Tex shells. However, the Adyl Su's highlight occurred when Phil Woolrich sniffed a lamb kebab and instantly abandoned six years of devout vegetarianism.

### **Epics and successes on Elbrus, Ushba, Sarikol and Kichkidar**

For our second week in Baksan we split into three separate groups. Pamela Holt, Fergus Ungoed-Thomas and Paul Krebs, whom Robert and I christened 'the W team', tackled Elbrus (5642m). Pamela seemed to disappear for days at a time, but came back having conquered mountains such as Ukiu (4330m) and Elbrus. I'm sure Fergus's bivvy food consisted exclusively of Pot Noodles. However, underneath his reserved character was a barrister who gave Robert's mathematical brain a run for its money, embraced the latest communications technology and knew enough about virtual reality to ask me some probing questions about my research at Cardiff University.

The second group was John Temple and Mike Pescod. John was nearly double my age, but possessed levels of energy and eccentric enthusiasm which put 'active' people like me to shame. Mike, by contrast, was wonderfully laid back. They climbed the NE Ridge of the North Peak of Ushba (4696m) and then traversed to the col between Ushba's two summits with the intention of climbing the higher, South Summit the following day. That night, in a violent storm and in imminent danger of succumbing to hypothermia, they made a drastic decision to retreat down the 1500m West Face, somewhere in the region of the Schmaderer/Vörg route. Mike took a 50m fall when an ice screw unscrewed in freak circumstances, but they eventually got down safely and spent the next three days eating kebabs down in the valley.

The rest of us walked into the Adyl Su Valley with food for a week and established a camp on the meadow opposite the Ullutau Alpine Camp (c2200m). The Adyl Su was easily the most impressive and popular of the three valleys we visited in the Baksan region, dominated at its head by the vast wall of Ullutau's North Face, which looked like three North Faces of the Droites arranged side-by-side.

The following day Robert and I climbed Sarikol (4160m) in superb weather. It's 'almost a trekkers peak' (Bender's guidebook), if you call Scottish II and an abseil descent trekking! Moving together up the crux pitches on the West Ridge, we reached the summit rocks and instantly made

the transition from absorption in the localised context of axe and crampon placements to 500m of exposure down the East Face. Add to that, awesome views (our first) of the Bezingi Valley in a cloudless sky and a summit which had room for only one of us at a time and you have a peak that is well worth climbing. Unlike Baksan's mountains, which are Alpine in scale, the Bezingi peaks have a size and stature comparable with many famous Himalayan peaks – and we were heading there in one week's time.

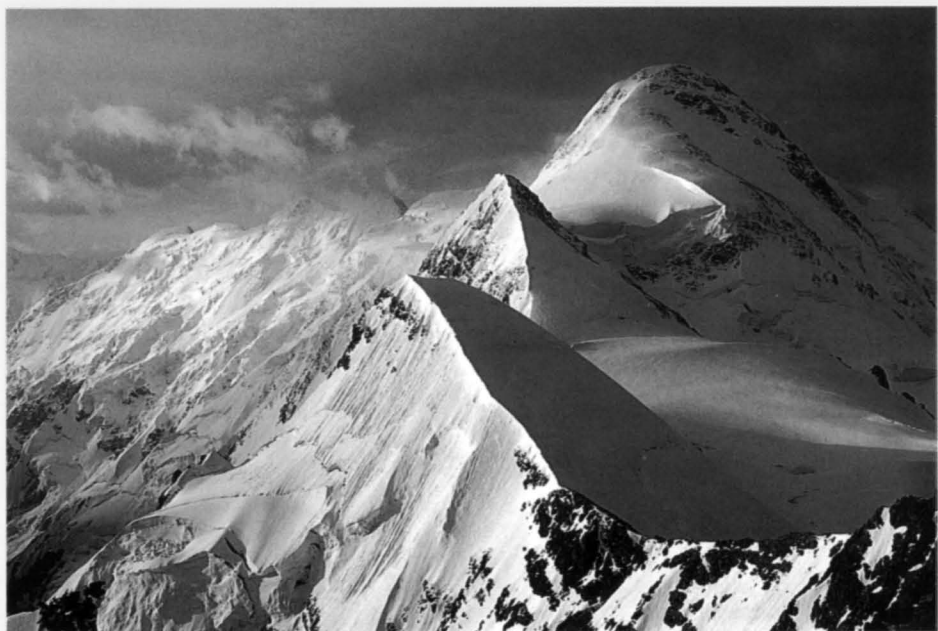
Two days later, while we were trekking up to the Donkin Pass, Robert fell into a powerful river when part of a bridge collapsed. He had tried to save a few seconds by swinging round the outside rather than opening the gate. Fortunately he was able to grab the edge of the bridge as he was being swept downstream, but got very wet, very pumped and very scared as he hand-traversed to a point where I could help pull him and his huge sack out of the water.

On 30 July we climbed the superb-looking granite spire of Kichkidar (4370m) from the Donkin Pass. What we thought was going to be a pleasant stroll became quite committing when I had to squat on a cornice ready to leap towards Bezingi if Robert fell off while traversing a hard ice slope with just one axe. The next pitch was delightful, mixed Scottish III, but, as this was meant to be an easy day out, a baseball cap was my only protection against objective danger. Luckily there was none! After 150m of easy ground we reached the summit and once again were rewarded with spectacular views. Snow conditions during the descent were a nightmare and at one point, just 200m from safety, we seriously thought of waiting (for at least eight hours) for the snow to freeze again. However, after some discussion we decided the snow was OK, unroped and I showed my management potential by delegating to Robert the task of testing it out. The following morning we abandoned our plans for a rapid ascent of Jalik, amid concerns for the snow conditions, threatening weather and general tiredness.

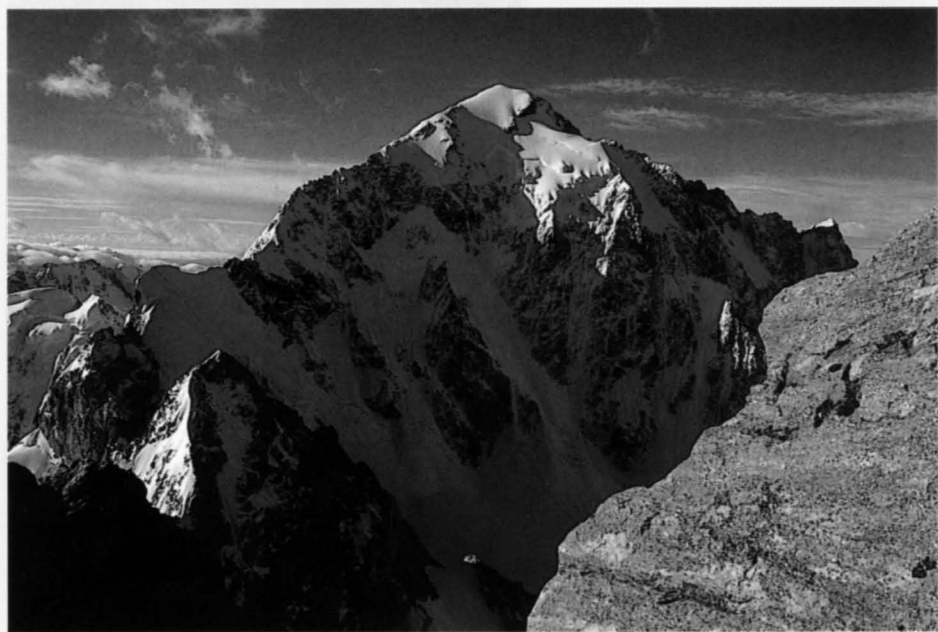
### **Introductions to Bezingi**

On 2 August all three groups transferred to Bezingi Alpine Camp. We had completed our two-week 'warm up' and were now due to start some serious mountaineering. On the way we restocked at Nalchik market and were surprised to find seemingly unlimited quantities of fresh food, provided one had sufficient money. The prices were not cheap, although they were lower than in the UK.

The Alpine Camp, an hour and a half's drive beyond the village of Bezingi, consisted of chalets situated in a meadow near the snout of the Bezingi Glacier. As far as I can tell, we were only the sixth British party to visit the valley since *perestroika*, and the ninth this century. The following afternoon Robert and I trekked up to the Kel Pass (3500m) to attempt the North Ridge of Lyalver (4350m) and then sat out a storm for a day. My lightweight Bibler tent was proving to be a true oasis in the storms; this one dumped around half an inch of rain. We could shelter, communicate, and at the



40. Gestola seen from the summit of Lyalver.  
(*Roy Ruddle*) (p113)



41. The N Face and E Ridge of Koshten-Tau, seen from Ullu-Auz-Bashi.  
(*Roy Ruddle*) (p114)

end of the storm were still dry and prepared to climb. By contrast, Felix Alcock, Ron Cameron, Mike and Phil got soaked in their bivvy bags and had to abandon their attempt on the North Ridge of Dykh-Tau (5198m) before they had even reached the start of the climbing.

On 5 August we climbed Lyalver. We set off at midnight and got lost on the approach. Bender's error-ridden guidebook got the blame, but we should just have admitted to being incompetent. We summited at 6am, just in time to watch the sun rise alongside Dykh-Tau. The dawn light on Tetnuld, Gestola, and the rest of the Bezingi Wall was spectacular, but we couldn't stay long as there were ominous clouds all around us. Seconds after we started the descent Robert screamed at me to get off the ridge; his axe had started to fizz and his hair stood on end. No problem ... we ran away and later that day returned to Bezingi Alpine Camp.

### **Two routes on Ullu-Auz-Bashi: the SE Ridge and the N Face**

On 7 August we ascended the Kunjum-Mishirgi Glacier to the Flat Iron bivvy (3900m). The glacier was barely half-a-mile wide, and with steep 2000m walls on the south side, it resembled a gorge more than a valley. Speaking loudly was enough to send echoes of our voices bouncing back. Oh for the effects of a big storm!

The next day the Russians staying at the Flat Iron were ordered back to camp by radio because a big storm was imminent. We ignored the warning, hoping our tent would allow us sufficient protection to climb the South-East Ridge of Ullu-Auz-Bashi (4670m). We set off at 3.15am, moving together all the way up a glacier and technically easy rock to an icefield at 4400m. At dawn a Strepsil-like sun emerged from the middle of a cloud bank, quite unlike anything I had ever seen before. We rested on opportune rocks as we moved together up the 45° to 50° ice and absorbed views of Koshten-Tau (5150m) – another peak to add to our tick list, preferably by climbing its North Face and descending the North-East Ridge. It was on the East Ridge that Donkin, Fox and their guides Streich and Fisher disappeared in 1888. We paused briefly at the top, having to hold on to the summit rocks in gale-force winds, before racing off down the south gully and reaching our bivvy again in less than two hours.

I'd been having a real problem remembering the names of the peaks around us (shades of my adopted home in Wales, where every mountain name seems to be some combination of Craig, Pen, Fach and Fawr!) so we spent the rest of the day renaming them; Sarikol became 'Trekking's Nightmare', Ullu-Auz-Bashi became 'No Storm Yet Peak' and Khrumkol became 'That Peak Over There Beginning with K'.

On 10 August we descended to the Alpine Camp. A big storm hit, dumping a large amount of snow; but we rested, satisfied that we had synchronised with the few windows of good weather which occurred in the Caucasus this year. Meanwhile, John and Mike had tried to climb the North Face of Ullu-Auz-Bashi. Unsurprisingly, they failed, avalanched off just above the

bergschrund, and returned to the Camp on 11 August looking very wet. A few days later, though, they climbed this superb route in just nine hours, while Ron and Fergus climbed the South-East Ridge.

### **Dykh-Tau via Mummery's Ridge**

We hoped to climb Dykh-Tau by its first-ascent route, the South-West Ridge, climbed in a day by the nineteenth century British superstar A F Mummery and his Swiss guide Heinrich Zurfluh. This route was way ahead of its time and remains hard and committing. Now graded Russian 5a, it is usually done in two or three days.

On 14 August we wandered up from the Austrian Bivvy to the Scree Ridge at 4150m and decided to bivvy there because rocks were beginning to fly down the couloirs above. The next day we started climbing at 3.45am and soloed up snow-and-ice gullies for 2½ hours to a large terrace. There we had a problem choosing the correct line until I realised that Bender simultaneously describes the White Wall as being in two entirely different places. We roped up for five pitches of rock and ice to 4700m, beneath the Tower, where I spotted a perfect site for my Bibler tent. As we weren't going to reach the summit that day we stopped and relaxed, even though it was only 9.30am. Opposite, we admired the world-class lines of Shkhara's 1800m North Spur and North-East Ridge. Hugo Tomaschek and Willi Müller made the spur's first ascent in 1930, descending via Cockin's North-East Ridge, a traverse that was repeated by George Band, Derek Bull, Mike Harris and Anatoli Kustovski in 1958 and attempted by John and Mike after their success on Ullu-Auz-Bashi. Later we compiled a list of 'good mountaineering equipment'. There was very little we considered to be both well designed and well manufactured, but three items led the way; our perfect bivvy consisted of my tent, HobNobs (food) and a Jilly Cooper novel to relieve the boredom.

On 16 August we left at 4.30am. Bender's route description was worse than useless, but we climbed fast until we were on the fourth gendarme. Along the way we had climbed over the Tower, which we recognised, and bypassed the third gendarme, the exact location of which still remains a mystery. I aided a desperate pitch up the fourth gendarme (HVS at close to 5000m in big boots and a sack) which Bender does describe, but then found that we could have avoided it by a simple, hidden traverse to the left! I was exhausted, so Robert took over as we traversed the ridge, and pushed on to the summit block in closing weather. Here we nearly failed. Chimneys and Robert don't go well together and we were confronted with a 'classic'. At the third attempt he made it up over the chockstones and, as the party's thrutching specialist, I was glad I only had to summon the energy to second the pitch. Above, we sheltered from snow flurries in a natural cave, before racing 60 metres to the summit and back as if we were doing a shuttle run in a gym. It was 2.50pm. I had never spent so little time on a summit (less than 15 seconds), but we were really worried about lightning.

For our descent we abseiled the steep parts and climbed together down other sections. A minor disaster struck just after I had crossed a steep ice gully; my ice axe holster shattered in the cold and my only axe accelerated away from me. It was sobering to see how fast things moved under the influence of gravity.

The fifth gendarme crackled with static electricity, and as we had to traverse across its top, we sheltered underneath for some time. We probably weren't safe from a lightning strike, but it was the best we could do. Carrying on, we descended slightly and an hour later were far enough below the ridge line to feel safe again.

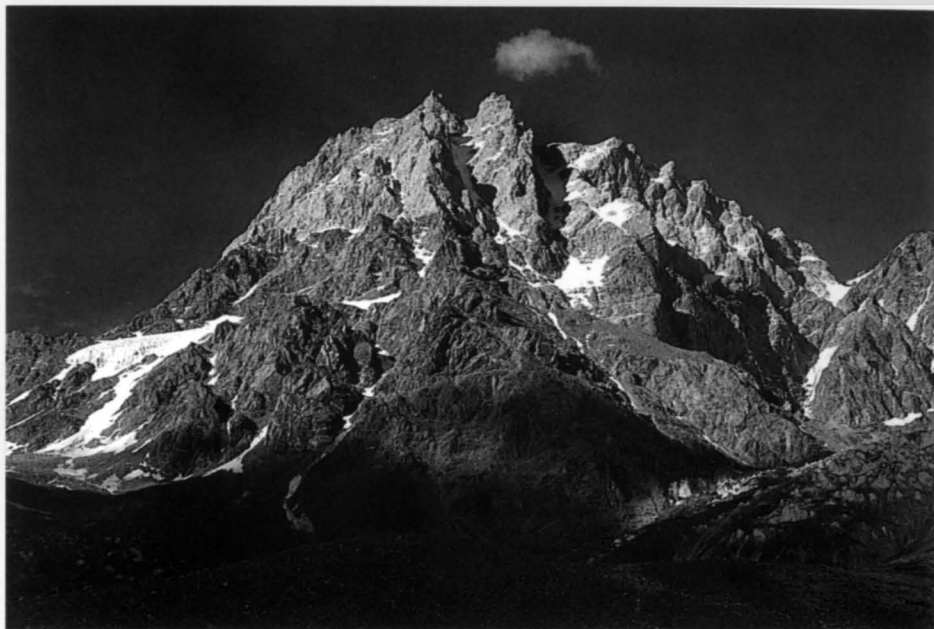
More down climbing and abseiling followed, up over the Tower and down towards our tent on the other side. The abseil rope stuck, luckily in a place where Robert could solo up to free it. 150 metres more and we were at the tent, our bomb-proof shelter against almost anything the weather could produce. 9.30pm. A 17-hour day. We were dehydrated and exhausted, but delighted to have reached the summit and descended back to our tent in a competent style.

The next day we returned to the Austrian Bivvy. We were the first (and only) team to climb Dykh-Tau in 1996 and only the second British team ever to climb Mummery's Ridge, over a hundred years after the first ascent (John Hunt and his party came close in 1958). Despite its classic status, few Russian teams seem to attempt it at the moment. We had been advised to go over the top and to descend either the South Gully (stonefall danger) or the North Ridge (easier than Mummery's route, but a hard route to do on sight in descent). We followed our 30-plus years of combined experience and knew that, by descending our route, we could use a high camp and go lightweight to the summit. The Russians don't seem to like people who use their own mountaineering judgement.

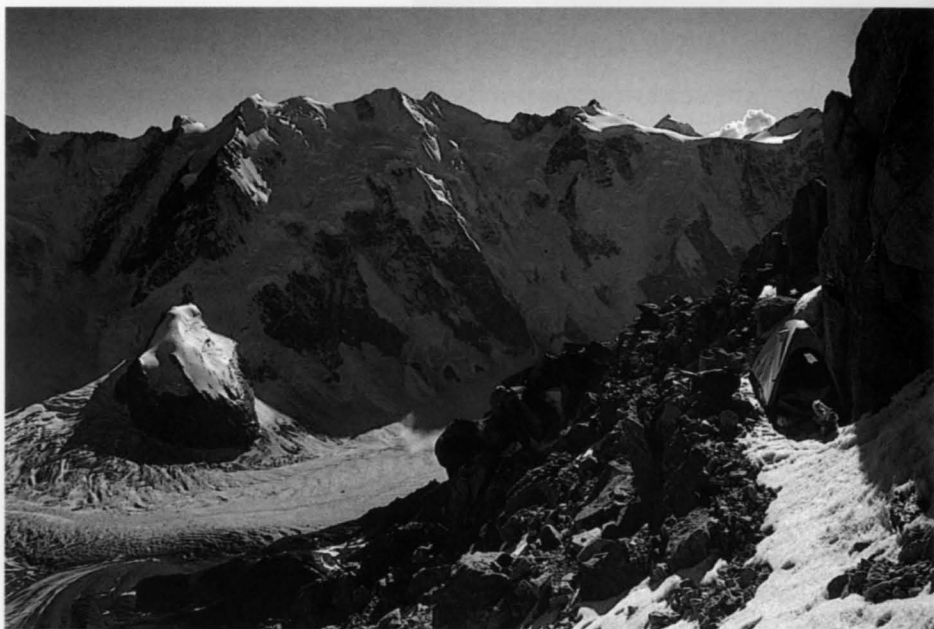
'You are very foolish,' they said, when we told them what we had done. We had descended a known, objectively safe line which was also our line of ascent. Strange people!

**Summary:** In July/August 1996, 11 people took part in an Alpine Club/Alpine Climbing Group Greater Ranges meet, organised by John Temple, which visited the Baksan and Bezingi valleys of the Caucasus. They distinguished themselves by keeping cool under fire and later by being the first AC team to accept money in return for leaving the mountains early. Between them, Felix Alcock, Ron Cameron, Robert Durran, Pamela Holt, John Hudson, Paul Krebs, Mike Pescod, Roy Ruddle, John Temple, Fergus Ungoe-Thomas and Phil Woolrich climbed:

Elbrus, 5642m	Dykh-Tau, 5198m	Ushba North, 4696m
Ullu-Auz-Bashi, 4670m	Kichkidar, 4370m	Sella, 4370m
Lyalver, 4350m	Ukiu, 4330m	Oru-Bashi, 4310m
Sarikol, 4160m	Gumatchi, 3810m	



42. Dykh-Tau from the south, showing the Mummy and Harrison/Band spurs descending from the left and right-hand summits. (*Roy Ruddle*) (p115)



43. Camp 2 on Dykh-Tau, at 4700m, with the Jangi-Tau section of the Bezingi Wall behind. (*Roy Ruddle*) (p115)