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Russia and Central Asia 1996

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The Pamir

A group of 13 climbers (8 from Western Europe and 5 from Russia), organised and led by Andrew Wielochowski, travelled to the E Pamir of Tadjikistan during the summer of 1996 to explore the remote and infrequently visited Muzkol Range. Many unclimbed peaks remain in this range, including several over 6000m, and the expedition made 5 first ascents. The Muzkol region is best accessed by road from Kyrgyzstan. From the road a 5100m pass leads into the Muzkol Valley where the expedition established a base camp close to the Muzkol river. The first ascents made by the expedition included **Snow Leopard Peak (5875m)**, **Gipsvy (5198m)**, **Ximena (5422m)** and **Grud (4937m)**, none harder than Russian 2B (Alpine AD-). More demanding was the first ascent of **Dvuglavny (6148m)**. Wielochowski and Mark Richard climbed the NW Face and then followed the W Ridge to the summit (5A). Descent was by the S Face (2A).

The Pamir Alai

Four significant ascents were made on the N Face of **Rocky Ak-Su** aka **Ak-Su N (5217m)** in the Laylak Valley. A new route up the N Face by Alexander Odintsov and Alexander Ruchkin won first prize in the technical climbing championships. Second prize went to Alexander Klenov's team from Ekaterinburg for climbing the *Dirrettissima* on the pillar of the N Face. Pavel Shabalin and Ilya Tukhvatulin made the fourth ascent of the *Chaplinski Route* (6B), while Yuri Koshelenko and Vasili Kolisnik made the fourth ascent of the *Moshnikov Route*.

The Caucasus

It has recently emerged that a considerable number of routes whose first ascents are credited to Soviet mountaineers had in fact been climbed previously by visiting parties of Czech and Polish mountaineers, particularly on the N faces of **Shkhara (5200m)**, **Nakratau (4451m)** and **Dongusorun (4468m)**. Enthusiasts

for the harder Caucasus N faces will be interested to learn that a line approximating to the 1983 *Kraynov Route* on the N Face of **Shkhara** was climbed in 1965 by J Durane, G Tschunkol and L Zahoransky. On **Dongusorun** the *Czech Direct* (K Carmen, O Kopel and R Kuchef, 1959) takes a line to the R of Misha Kerghiani's 1953 *Original Route*. The *Czech Direct* appears to overlap for much of its length with the route climbed solo in 1983 by A Sheynov. Further R lies another Czech route *Ice Express* (Z Hermann and party, 1982) which takes a direct line at an average angle of 80° through the prominent sérac barrier. On the N Face of **Nakra-Tau** the *N Pillar Czech Route* takes a line up the middle of the obvious triangular buttress L of the classic 1946 *Abalakov Route*. The *Czech Direct* shares a start with the *Right Pillar*, climbed in 1951 by E Zamora and party, and then takes the headwall direct to the summit where Zamora's route trends R to the NW Ridge.

In the 1996 Russian annual mountaineering championships the winning ascent in the winter class was the second winter ascent, by Alexander Pogorelov and Vitaly Polokhov, of the *Kustovski Route* on **Ushba South (4710m)**, graded Russian 6B. Other significant ascents included the NW Face of **Ushba North (4696m)** by another team from Rostov, led by A Moiseev; the *Kherghiani Route* on the central summit of **Shkhelda (4320m)** climbed by Sergey Schepachkov's Moscow team; and the first winter ascent of the E Face of **Sugan-Bashi** made by a group of North Ossetian climbers led by Kazbek Khamitsaev.

John Kentish returned to the Caucasus in March 1996 for a second attempt at the first high-level ski traverse of the highest section of the central part of the range, accompanied on this occasion by Steve Jennings, Phil Wickens (both UK) and Vadim Buslik (Russia). Illness forced them to abandon their original plan of starting from the Balkaria Valley and they set off from the Bezingi Valley further to the west. Buslik turned back after reaching the Zanner Pass, but the other three members continued to the Baksan Valley. They described the winter ski traverse from the Bezingi to the Baksan Valley as technically comparable to the classic Haute Route from Chamonix to Zermatt, although slightly shorter. The scale and remoteness of the high Caucasus in winter, however, makes this a considerably more serious undertaking. (See '*A Ski Traverse of the Caucasus*', pp 117-122.)

In July/August 1996 the Alpine Club Greater Ranges meet took place in the Central Caucasus. (See '*Foolishly Following A F Mummery*', pp 111-116.) The meet began in the Baksan area, where ascents were made of **Gumatchi (3810m)**, **Elbrus (5642m)**, **Sarikol (4160m)**, **Kichkidar (4370m)**, **Oru-Bashi (4310m)** and **Ushba North (4696m)**. Mike Pescod and John Temple made an impressive descent of the W Face of **Ushba** after being caught in a storm on the saddle between the two summits. In the Bezingi Valley, Pescod and Temple made a fast ascent of the N Face of Ullu-Auz-Bashi. Robert Durran and Roy Ruddle climbed Mummery's route on **Dykh-Tau (5198m)**. In common with all recent visitors to the area they found that Friedrich Bender's guidebook *Selected Climbs in the Caucasus* is a very unreliable source, and commented on the considerable disparities in the Russian grading system.

Two interesting routes were climbed on the NW Face of **Erydag (3925m)** in the Eastern Caucasus. Piotr Leonov and Anatoli Goryaev from Dagestan

made the first ascent of a route named *The Cold Corner*, while Konstantin Dorro, Vladimir Velikanov and Shanavaz Shanazov (Moscow) repeated Sergei Efimov's route on the L side of the face. Georgian climbers made a welcome return to form, with new routes on the SE Face of **Shkhara** (Zurab Kuchava, Koba Mamisashvili and Irakli Ugulava) and on the S Face of **Peak Shesti** (Giya Tortladze with five teammates).

The Tien Shan

Access Two types of permit are now required for mountains in Kyrgyzstan, depending on the area. The strip 50–100km from the Chinese border requires a military boundary zone permit which takes two weeks to obtain and costs 10\$. The popular mountain ranges require an 'Alptourzones' permit, which costs 30\$ per person except for the ascent of Khan Tengri, Pobeda and Peak Lenin which are charged at 100\$ per person. These are in addition to the usual visa requirements which require an Invitation and can be obtained at the Kazakh Embassy in London or at the airport at Bishkek. It is also necessary to register with the police department on arrival.

Kyrgyzstan is now being used as an access route for Western China, via the Torugart Pass. In summer 1996 two Dutch expeditions used this means of access to climb **Muztag-Ata** via the W Ridge.

Central Tien Shan During August the third ascent was made of the N Ridge of **Khan Tengri (6995m)**. This was first climbed in 1964 by the team of Kiril Kuzmin, the only repeat ascent being by a team of Kazakh climbers in 1970 led by Ervand Ilyinskiy. The route was climbed in Alpine style by a team led by Vladimir Suviga. The team left base camp on 8 August and climbed, via the shoulder of **Peak Saladina**, sections of avalanche-prone hanging glacier and iced-up rocks to reach the summit on 12 August. They descended via the W Ridge and completed the traverse to the South Inylchek Glacier the following day.

From the **North Inylchek Glacier** the first independent ascent was made of **Peak M Grudtinskovo (6370m)**, via the centre of the N Wall. The team, Dmitryi Grekov, M Mikhailov, A Molotov and D Muraviev, climbed for three days on hard ice at 55° to reach the summit on 30 August. Descent was made via the pass at 5200m between peaks **RGO** and **Przhevalskovo**. In 1974 this peak was included in a traverse from Khan Tengri to Peak Mramornaya Stena ('Marble Wall') by a team led by B Solomatov.

Unclimbed peaks in the lower reaches of the **South Inylchek Glacier** continued to receive attention. The first ascent was made of **Peak 5248m**, near **Peak Nansen** at the head of the Kan-Dzhailoo Glacier. The ascent was made via the N Ridge at 5B, reaching the summit on 26 August. Oleg Tutaev, Oleg Pecheniuk and Olga Lisina, all from Kyrgyzstan, spent a total of four days on the mountain at the end of August. The peak was named **Nezavisimosti (Independence Peak)** in honour of five years of Kyrgyz independence. On 27 July unclimbed **Peak 5462m** received its first ski descent, via the W Face at 30–60° to the Demchenko Glacier. Americans D B Coombs, E B Gladstone and J P Griber, and Kyrgyz Peter Cherhiak, reached the summit by helicopter.

Kyrgyz Range The Ala-Archa area was one of the venues for Russia's winter climbing championships in January-February 1996. A new route was climbed

on **Peak Semyonov Tienshanski (4870m)**, via the R part of the W Face, by a team from Barnaul led by Ivan Plotnikov. Early winter repeats were made of routes on the N Face of **Peak Free Korea (4740m)** and S Face of the 5th tower of **Korona (4860m)**. A route taking a series of icefalls on the NW Face of the First Tower of Korona received its second ascent. This route was first climbed in winter 1995 by Ivan Plotnikov and V Sergeev at 5B.

Siberia and the Russian Far East

Altai In April the Katun Range was visited by a French team of ski mountaineers, who made a ski ascent of **Bielukha (4506m)** from the Ak-Kem valley. The Katun Range was one of the venues for Russia's summer climbing championships. These resulted in several new routes from the Ak-Kem Glacier. The E summit of **Bielukha** was climbed by the R part of its NW Face, and **Peak Delone** via the N Face, by Igor Slobodchikov and Nikolai Zyatkov. **Peak Delone** was also climbed by the L part of its NW Face by Alexei Muralev and Pavel Slepnev from Moscow. **Peak Altai Crown (4167m)**, also known as **20th October Peak**, was climbed by the L rib of its SE Face by Ivan Plotnikov and Vladimir Tumialis from Barnaul. The same pair climbed the W summit of **Bielukha** by a direct route up the N Face.

The less well known Northern Chuiskiy Range was visited by a strong team consisting of Hungarians Leonard and Kalma Zabo and Licity Marton, and Russian Anatoly Balychev. Starting from the Shavla Valley they traversed peaks **Krasavitsa**, **Skazka** and **Mechta**. From Low Shavlinsky Pass they traversed peaks **Maashey (4177m)** and **Karagem**. They then moved to the Abyl-Oyuk Valley from which they climbed a new route on **Maashey** via the L buttress of the S Face at Russian grade 4. The same group, minus Anatoly Balychev, later visited other ranges of the Altai including the South Chuiskiy (ascents of **Iiktu 3942m**, **Metallurg**, **Tavan-Bogda-Ula** and **Dzhazator**).

Tibet

Chris Bonington and Charles Clarke visited the Nyain-Qen-Tanglha Range in Central Tibet, some 400km NE of Lhasa. They set out to reconnoitre the range and identify a feasible route up the highest mountain, **Sepu Kangri, 6950m**. Journeying by jeep, on foot and on horseback, they achieved those aims, and plan to return in 1997 to attempt the peak, known to the locals as 'The Great Snow Mountain with the Sacred Lake'. (See *MEF Report 96/17*.)

(Note: There is insufficient news to warrant a separate section for Tibet, so it is included here, though geographically too far east. For the Tibetan side of Everest see page 272.)