
PAUL KNOTT

Russia and Central Asia 1998

Thanks are due to all those who have contributed information, in particular Liana Darenskaya, Lindsay Griffin, Vladimir Komissarov, Vladimir Kopylov, Vladimir Shataev and Kasbek Valiev. Information on many of these areas can be sporadic, so reports are always gratefully received. These should be sent via the Alpine Club.

The Caucasus

The Caucasus in 1998 saw several innovative trips but also some dramas of a kind not normally part of the mountain scene.

In February a trip arranged by Vladimir Kopylov investigated the potential for frozen waterfall climbing in the Central Caucasus. In the Chegem Valley, immediately east of the popular Baksan Valley, 50m-high icefalls were climbed on a 200m-wide face. In addition, established routes up to 90m in length were climbed on the Tyrnauz waterfall.

Probably the first ski and snowboard descents of the well-known inverted '7' icefalls on the N Face of **Donguz-Orun (4468m)** were made in July. The ski descent was made by Alexander Kopylov and the snowboard descent by Vitalik Mikhaylov. The descents, which were filmed, followed an ascent of the same face and were threatened by avalanche activity.

In July-August an Alpine Club trip organised by John Temple took the bold step of visiting the Svanetia region on the S side of the main Caucasus chain. From a base camp in the Lekzyr Valley probable first British ascents were made of **Dallakora (3753m)**, via the E Ridge and NE Face. Following this, most of the party made a bivouac near the Mestia Pass from which they climbed **Mestiatau (4130m)**. As they prepared to return to the valley they were robbed at gunpoint of money and equipment. Other party members Chris Bedford and Steve Humphries made the first British ascent of **Marigianna (3568m)**, via the exposed NE Ridge at PD+. The same pair, with Derek Buckle and Gary Hill, also made a probable first British ascent of **Chatyn-Tau (4368m)** via the corniced W Ridge at AD+. Following this, the group relocated to the Zanner Valley from where they climbed the SW Ridge of **Tetnuld (4974m)**. They were again victims of an armed robber as they camped near the village of Ushguli on their descent towards Mestia. (See article 'Climbing and Kalashnikovs' in this volume.)

Another drama occurred above the normally somewhat calmer Baksan Valley. On 16 August an incident with a camping stove resulted in the destruction of the Priut Hut by fire. Close to 100 people escaped from the blazing structure, which had been recognised as posing a fire risk as well as being somewhat squalid. It nevertheless performed an important function and is being greatly missed by teams on Elbrus.

The Pamir

Climbers may be interested to note that the highest mountain in this range, **Pik Kommunisma (7495m)**, formerly known as **Pik Stalin**, has been renamed **Pik Ismaila Samaniego** by the government of Tajikistan.

During 1998 there were two noteworthy trips to the Pamir by British climbers. In July the Cambridge team of Rowland Barker, Hamish Downer, James Lassetter and Mark Stevenson visited the Korzhenevskovo Valley immediately E of the better known Achik-Tash Valley. Access was via Osh in Kyrgyzstan. A number of first British ascents were made including **Pik Korzhenevskiy (6088m)** and **Pik 6624m**, both via their N Ridge at a moderate grade. Two of the team also climbed **Pik Lenina (7134m)** via the infrequently climbed E Ridge.

For the third year in succession an EWP-organised trip made first ascents in the Muzkol Range. Access from Osh to a base camp on the Zartosh River was politically more straightforward than in previous years. The main ascent was the c6060m W Summit of **Zartosh (6106m)**, climbed on 23 August by the N Ridge at AD. From this summit, later named **White Pyramid**, an attempt to reach the main top was thwarted by deteriorating weather. Earlier two of the group had attempted the promising icy N Face of Zartosh itself. Other first ascents, also from the vicinity of the Zartosh Glacier, included **Four Nations Peak (5501m)** and **Leopard's Tooth (5520m)**.

The Pamir Alai

This range has once again seen much new route activity as well as some important repeats.

In the Karavshin area unstable weather limited much of the summer activity to single-day routes. In August Italians Eraldo Miraldi, Paolo Vitali and Sonja Brambati first investigated the little-explored Ortochasma Valley between the Karavshin and Laylak. Finding the rock a poor conglomerate they moved to Ak-Su where they climbed several routes on the **Russian Tower (4240m)**. Over three days they put up the 580m *The Missing Mountain* at F6b on the triangular rock formation below the west side of the tower. They also put up the 380m *A Better World* on the slabby walls on right side of the lower W Face of the **Central Pyramid (3850m)** at 6c and the 360m *Take it Easy* up the left side of the same buttress at up to F7a.

In the same area Germans Bettina Bhmer and Robert Lange put up *Fr Matthias* just left of *A Better World* at 6c and made the part finished new route *Vogelfrei* on the E Face of the **Fishtower (c3800m)**. On 23 August Lange teamed up with Canadian Guy Edwards to make a single-day ascent of the NE Pillar of **Pik 1000 Years of Russian Christianity (4507m)**. They completed this significant climb in 9 hours, making a round trip of 22 hours from base camp, and reported difficulties up to 5.10a.

The nearby Laylak Valley was the venue for the CIS Mountaineering Championships. First prize went to Kirov climbers P. Chabaline, A. Mochalov and I. Tukhvatulin who in poor weather from 12-25 August repeated the 1986 *Popov Route* on **Ak-Su (5217m)**. A new route was climbed by the Tatarstan team of A. Zhiltsov, N. Akifiev and A. Akhmadiev on the 800m S Face of

Iskander (5120m). Their line, climbed from 20-25 July, is situated between the 1983 *Grischenko* and *Golubev Routes*.

Later in 1998 the N Face of Ak-Su received its first winter ascents, from two parties climbing independently during the same period. Pavel Shabalin, Alexander Abramov and Ilias Tukhvatulin started the ascent of the 6A *Cold Corner Route* on 8 December. Climbing in capsule style, they completed the last of 45 pitches on the night of 21-22 December and descended on the 23rd. During the ascent there was frequent snowfall and temperatures fell to -20°C with strong winds.

Mikhail Pershin and Igor Nefedov from Ekaterinburg climbed the 6B *Chaplinski Route*, also in full winter conditions. After some preparation they started the route on 13 December. They reached the summit on New Year's Eve after only 11 days of actual climbing, making their climbing time similar to a normal summer ascent. Storm conditions delayed their descent for several days.

In the Asan-Usen region the St Petersburg team of V. Shamalo and K. Korabelnikov made the second ascent of the 6B *Sidorov Route* on the NNE Face of **Gorniak (5013m)**. The only other route on this remote peak is the *Lenivkovoy Route* on the NW Rib at 5B, which has not been repeated. Shamalo and Korabelnikov were the first to summit successfully without a large team and helicopter support, taking a total of 19 days from the Karavshin base camp and climbing from 31 July to 7 August.

In the Fann Mountains repeats were made of several hard routes including the 6B 1972 *Solonnikov Route* on the NW Face of **Chapdara Peak (5050m)**, climbed by the Moscow team of S. Schepachkov, O. Milenin and I. Turchanski from 1-8 August.

The Tien Shan

During the summer season the weather in the Central Tien Shan was reportedly terrible with frequent storms and snowfall.

As a result of this poor weather there were few successful ascents of **Pobeda (7439m)**, and one of these led to a major rescue. A Japanese team from the Hiroshima Mountaineering Association climbed the mountain by the normal *Dikiy Pass Route* after acclimatisation on **Khan Tengri**. Four of the climbers summited on 14 August in visibility so poor that the ascent could only be confirmed by conversations with previous ascensionists. Subsequently they were kept on the main ridge above 7000m for 3 nights, after which one of the climbers, Mr Matsudaira, felt too weak to continue. Low passes by MI-8 MTV-1 helicopter confirmed he was still alive and enabled oxygen to be dropped. After help from Russian rescuers he was able to descend to Camp 2 at 5600m from where all four Japanese were rescued by the helicopter.

On **Khan Tengri (6995m)** an important new route variant was climbed on the N Face by Ekaterinburg climbers Nikolay Zhilin, Yury Ermachek and Dima Pavlenko, all guides for the Khan Tengri Mountain Service. With nine existing routes on the face, this variant, taking the steepest part of the N Face in the centre of the bastion on its left, has been described as a 'last great problem'.

The ascent took from 9 to 20 August involving sustained technical climbing on iced-up rock with a crux involving 200m of near-vertical aid climbing.

The Western Kokshaal-Too saw continued activity in 1998. In July Christian Beckwith returned with a team from USA and Canada, to the valley immediately west of the Kizil Asker area. The team was probably the second to visit this valley, after Kasbek Valiev's 1984 team which made the first ascent of **Kizil Asker (5842m)**. Taking advantage of very small windows of reasonably stable weather, the team climbed ten new routes on eight new mountains. Several of the unclimbed peaks were tackled from a camp on the W Komorova Glacier including a pyramidal peak that was named **Pik Babuchka (c5225m)**. Its N Face was climbed at V AI4 in 23 hours by Beckwith,* Carlos Buhler and Mark Price. Following this, on 14 July the same group was repelled by a storm from the N Ridge of **Kizil Asker** after 800m of climbing. On 25 July Beckwith returned with Guy Edwards and Sean Isaac to the N Face, reaching the col between the N Ridge and the summit before again being forced to retreat.

Pat Littlejohn was active in the Western Kokshaal-Too with an ISM group. The group visited the Kotur Glacier area which is reported to be bristling with unclimbed summits over 5000m. In adverse conditions ascents were made of three virgin peaks including **Lvitsa (4580m)**.

In August the little-known Dzungarskiy Alatau, further north in Kazakhstan, was investigated by a group from Aldenham, Marlborough and Shrewsbury schools led by guide Nick Parks. The group approached via the village of Anambukhta to the central section of the range near the highest summit, **Semyonov Tien Shanski (c4600m)**. The first climbing group to visit this area, they reached nine summits generally around 4000m and rising up to 800m above the glaciers. Semyonov Tien Shanski was attempted. Standards were moderate but with arduous approaches. Other parts of this extensive range offer similar potential as only a few ascents have been recorded.

Siberia and the Russian Far East

In March the father and son team of Dmitri and Matvei Shparo made their third attempt to ski across the Bering Strait. Starting from Dezhnev Cape on 28 February they encountered thin ice and strong Northerly drift. They also had several encounters with polar bears, one of which tore their tent. In almost clear water conditions they successfully reached the Alaskan shore near Cape Sheriot on 21 March.

Kamchatka continues to be very quiet with regard to climbing but offers are emerging of organised heli-skiing and cross-country tours in Central Kamchatka and the Nalychevo Valley.

* Christian Beckwith writes: 'We gave the route a grade V AI4, which means Alpine Ice 4. It's the same as Water Ice ratings, but applied to permanent ice. A thorough explanation of this and all other rating systems may be found in the Appendices of each *American Alpine Journal*.'