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PAUL KNOTT

## Russia & Central Asia 2003

*Correspondents who provided information for this report included Lindsay Griffin, Vadim Khaibullin, Sergei Kurgin and Kazbek Valiev. The author would also like to acknowledge the extensive help provided by Ingrid Crossland in obtaining news from the Kyrgyz Republic. The news reported here owes much to the climbing community in the region, which presents its news articulately and openly on websites including mountain.ru, vvv.ru, alpin.nm.ru and mountains.dgu.ru. These are accessible to non speakers of Russian using Alta Vista's Babelfish translation facility.*

The picture across most of the region is of a healthy level of activity, with climbers from CIS countries continuing to explore new mountain areas and climb new routes of the highest adventure climbing standards. Following the same pattern as in recent years, activity by international climbers was largely concentrated in Kyrgyz Republic.

Where grades are given in these reports, such as 6A VI A2, the first grade (eg. 6A) refers to the overall alpine standard, the second (eg. VI) refers to the free-climbed technical rock standard, and the third (eg. A2) refers to the standard of aid climbing found on the route. Details of these grading scales are given in Appendix C of 1999 *AAJ*. Russian climbers record their routes meticulously, including lengths at each grade, angles of steepness, numbers of protection placements, and full timings.

### The Caucasus

The level of normal climbing activity here was healthy, including club trips to bases such as Dombai, Bezengi and Kazbek. Close to the Bezengi base a number of valley rock climbs have been equipped, varying in length from 20-250m.

During March 2003 an Odessa team led by V Mogila worked on **Central Shkhelda** on the route *Polokhova* (6A), as part of a Ukraine championship. The ascent was abandoned due to a sharp deterioration in the weather. On 9 August the same team, which had just completed an ascent of the *Abalakov Route* (5B) on the NE face of **Dykh-Tau (5204m)**, was caught in a huge 600m-wide avalanche. Three were tragically killed: S V Lebedenko, K V Leontyev and A M Ushchapovskiy.

On 19 August Sergey Gruzdev's expedition reached the E Summit of **Elbrus (5621m)** on a specially made all-wheel-drive motorcycle. The ascent

started from Azau (2300m) on 1 August. In dangerous sections the motorcycle was belayed, but otherwise it was ridden independently. Much time was lost to bad weather during the ascent; the motorcycle was back in Terskol on 20 August. The same summit was reached by 'landrover' in 1997 on a 40-day expedition organised by Alexander Abramov.

Also in the summer season Yuri Koshelenko continued his long-standing Open Caucasus project with a new route on the NW face of **Pik Bzhedukh (Bjeduh, 4270m)**, climbing with Igor Politiko and Andrey Sidorov. The threesome climbed the 800m route in 8 hours on 2 August, finding it in good condition and assigning it Russian grade 5. Following this ascent they attempted a new route on **Pik Shurovski (4259m)**, but were repelled by heavy rain at 3500m.

On the volcano **Mt Kazbek (5033m)**, in January 2003 Georgian mountaineers climbed a high-standard 150-200m route *Dragon's Cliff* on the crater rim at 4700-4800m, comparing its character to the walls of **Kiukiurtliu**. In the lesser-known area east of Kazbek, the Dagestan team of Konstantin Dorro, Anatoliy Goryaev, Shanavaz Shanavazov, Vitaliy Afanasev and Dmitriy Golubev climbed a new route taking the L side of the SE Face of **Gai-Komd (3142m)** in the **Bogosskiy Range**. This peak lies between the Terek and Assa Rivers and is the highest point in this area situated between Ingushetia and North Ossetia. The route was a pure rock climb almost 800m in length and graded 6A VI A2. The ascent took 12 days to 27 June, with the descent to base camp being completed the same day. The team considered there to be potential for further rock routes at up to 6A on the main massif and at easier grades on rock various towers.

### The Crimea (Ukraine)

Several climbs have been reported on the major limestone cliffs of the region. On **Morcheka (980m)** from 12-13 May, Moscow climbers M Komarov and A Yurkin repeated *Machombo* (first ascent details in *AJ107*), taking only 21.5 hours of actual climbing. They found the route outstanding, particularly the first pitch. They spent the night around the fourth pitch and, having taken only 1.5 litres of water, were grateful to find water left on the route by previous ascensionists. On **Zamok (650m)** from 23-24 November Alexander Lavrinenko and S Pugachev from Odessa climbed a new variant on the 350m route *Castle via Cave*, which they named *Direct-2003* and graded 6A VI A3.

The most surprising piece of news is of winter mixed climbing and dry-tooling in the Crimean mountains. Proponent of this activity Alexander Kuzmitskiy reports that conditions are highly changeable over time and location. For example the Angara Wall may be snow-covered whilst the **Paragelmen** massif 20-30km away is almost snow-free. Climbing the

*Right-hand Route* in the Paragelmen, Kuzmitskiy found the dry appearance misleading, as there turned out to be sufficient icing to climb large sections using crampons and ice tools (though at the straightforward grade of 3B). On **Ay-Petri (1232m)** he climbed the 17-pitch *Zubya* (4B) as a mixed route, with the tools and crampons being used only as required.

## The Pamir Alai

A certain amount of activity has taken place in this area; no doubt there would be more in the absence of security concerns. Official reports warn of potential terrorist activity by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the whole region SW of Osh, and specifically mention landmines in the Batken area.

Several climbs from summer 2002 were previously unreported, the first of which was a large Czech expedition climbing in the Karavshin area during July and August. On **Pik 4810m** Petr Balcar, Jan Kreisinger, Jirka Srutek and Mirek Turek climbed the new route *Zlate Pisky* (Golden Sands) L of the *Sakharov Route*, climbing in capsule style over 10 days and giving ratings of VIII and A2. Pavel Jonak, Marek Holecek and Vasek Satava climbed the new route *Otikovy Mokre Sny*, which starts R of the *Sakharov Route* for 15 pitches before joining it. They climbed the whole route free at IX-/IX, in capsule style over 9 days.

On **Zhioltaya Stena (Yellow Wall, 3800m)**, Pavel Kopacek and Tomas Zakora attempted a direct variation on the *Diagonal Route*, approximating to the line from which the USA climbers were forced to descend in 2000 by terrorists from the IMU. After an initial failed attempt by the pair, the 500m route *Meresjev* was soloed by Zakora from 6-11 August at IX-/IX and A3.

In September 2002 Garth Willis (USA) and Irena Mrak (Slovenia) visited the Kara-Su Valley. At the time the border area was heavily guarded by the Kyrgyz military, from whom permission had been obtained. It was a lean snow year, with much black ice in evidence. They climbed the 1100m new route *Russian Roulette* on **Pik Pyramidalniy (5509m)**, giving grades of V+, M3-5 and WI4. The route was threatened by falling ice, which hit the climbers several times during the climb. They reached the summit on the second day and descended through the night, spending 50 hours on the wall in total.

In February 2004 a team from the Krasnoyarsk region climbed the first winter new route on the N Face of **Ak-Su (5217m)**. The 12-person team led by Nikolay Zaharov and Vladimir Balezin approached the area by helicopter via Osh, reaching base camp on 1 February after waiting almost a week for flying weather. Climbing in capsule style, they completed the 36-pitch route on 23 February, reporting temperatures of  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Their

*Krasnoyarsk Route* takes the 'mirror' between the *Kavunenko Route* and the *Popov Route*. Eugeny Novoseltsov, Sergey Kofanov, Nikolay Gutnik and Vitaliy Akimov from Ekaterinburg and Bishkek were also in the area during the same period, descending from the 20th pitch of the *Chaplinsky Route* (1500m 5.10 A3) when Kofanov contracted pneumonia. The first winter ascents of this face were made in December 1998 (see *AJ104*).

The Fann Mountains remained popular, being the venue for a CIS climbing championship that had record attendance in the post-Soviet period. Other alpine camps were also held in the area, including one for Krasnoyarsk youth which took place at Duboga (the area of **Pik Uzbekistan, 5100m**) during August.

### The Pamir

In summer 2003 organised camps resumed on the Moskvina Glacier for ascents of **Pik Kommunizma (Somoni, 7495m)** and **Pik Korzhenevskaya (7105m)**, after several years in which the region was unsafe due to civil war in Tadjikistan. Over seventy people stayed in the camps, resulting in at least nine successful ascents of **Kommunizma** and at least 26 of **Korzhenevskaya**. Similar trips are advertised for 2004, although this upbeat impression contrasts markedly with the comments given in official travel advisories, which warn of potential trouble including land mines in border areas and hostage taking of foreign nationals in Tadjikistan. Helicopter access arguably reduces the risk.

**Pik Lenin (7134m)** was at its most popular since the time of the Soviet Union, with at least 500 people attempting the mountain from many Asian and European countries. In part this popularity was due to celebration of the 75th anniversary of its first ascent. Of those attending one of the organised camps at Onion Glade, fifty-seven reached the summit including 67-year-old Japanese climber Kuzumi. Also in the vicinity Swedish climbers Krister Johnson and Patrik Ölmerud climbed what they believed to be a new peak of 5687m, which they called 'LitePac Peak'.

A winter ascent of **Pik Lenin** was made during January 2004 by a 10-person Kazakhstan team including Nikolai Chervonenko and Denis Urubko, as part of the 'Winter Snow Leopard' project to climb the ex-Soviet 7000m peaks in winter. The team encountered deep snow even on the approach to Onion Glade. At 4400m on the *Lipkin Route* temperatures were  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ , but conditions above were favourably icy. On 1 February the team summited via the *Arkin Route* from a camp at 6000m. Success turned to tragedy when one of the climbers, Daniyar Mynzhysarov, went missing during the descent; his body was found and evacuated by the rest of the team.

## The Kun Lun

The peaks of the Kun Lun (or Chinese Pamir) can now be reached conveniently from Kyrgyzstan, and hence have attracted attention from Russian and other climbers using logistical support based in Bishkek.

In September-October a Finnish team including Kenneth Nordstrom and Antero Vartiainen, with Andrey Ershov from Russia and Nikolai Chetnikov from Kyrgyz Republic, made the first ascent of the W ridge of the remote peak **Ulugh Mustagh (6973m)**. The only two previous ascents had been via the SE ridge, in 1985 by a Sino-American expedition and in 1989 by a Japanese expedition. An attempt to reach the W side of the mountain in 2001, arranged by Johan Heersink, foundered in quicksand 90km from the mountain. The 2003 team took two Ural trucks from Bishkek, driving the last 1200km without roads and over 5000m passes, rivers and quicksand to reach the W side of the mountain. They made the first ascent of **Ulugh Mustagh West (6925m)**, via the W ridge, and ascended six other unclimbed 6000m peaks.

St Petersburg climbers Valery Shamalo, Sergey Kofanov, Kirill Korabelnikov and Alexey Gorbatenkov, together with a French climber, attempted a new route on the N side of the more accessible **Kongur Tagh (7719m)**. Their intended route, just W of the N ridge, would avoid the high altitude traverse of the 1980 *Bonington Route* (this route appears to be unrepeated in spite of numerous attempts). After acclimatising on **Pik Lenin** the team lost time due to visa problems and reached base camp only on 13 August. They camped at 6900m on 24 August, but retreated the next day due to wind and intense cold. Also in the Kongur Massif, previously unreported from 2002 was the first ascent of **Jangmanjar (c7200m)** by Irina Agarkova, Andrey Aleksandrov, Lev Joffe and David Levashenko, who climbed from the S side in July-August.

## The Tien Shan

There is activity to report across much of this range, including in the accessible Ala-Archa area near Bishkek. Winter activity here by local climbers is illustrated by the reported attempt on the 1956 *Aytabaev Route* (4A) on the N face of **Pik Box (4240m)** in March by a group of five from Bishkek. This particular attempt had a tragic ending as two of the group were killed in an avalanche low on the route.

The large organised camps on the Inylchek Glaciers continue to thrive, with fixed ropes being prepared on both N and S sides of **Khan Tengri (6995m)**. Due to bad weather there were no successful ascents of this mountain in July, but around 55 climbers reached the summit during August. Fixed ropes were installed for the first time to 6650m on the 1964

*Kuzmin Route* on the N ridge, but this is more somewhat more serious than the usual route via the shoulder of **Pik Chapaev** and hence remained less popular. A speed climb organised on the *Kuzmin Route* had to be truncated at 6800m. The winner was American Chad Kellogg in 6 hours 11 minutes (to 6800m and back from 4100m), five minutes ahead of Kyrgyz climber Andrey Puchinin.

Some harder routes on the mountain also received ascents. The 1970 *Khudyakov Route* (6A) on the E rib of the N face received its second ascent, by the Sverdlovsk team of Vadim Popovich, Alexander Stolbov and Alexander Shabunin, who climbed from 22-30 August. The 1982 *Sviridenko Route* (6A) on the SSW rib received two ascents during the season. Kemerovo climbers A Foygt, S Zuev, V Stalkovskiy, A Belkin, M Zvyagintsev and Arkadiy Kuvakin summited on 15 August, having set off on 9 August. The Tatarstan team of A Akhmadiev, K Kabanov, R Kashapov and Yu Kruglov made their ascent over a period of seven days from 7-14 August. In addition V. Shabalin and partner attempted the Central N face, but were forced to escape and descend at 6500m.

The most significant new route of the year in the Inylchek region was that on **Pobeda (7439m)** by an 8-person team from Krasnoyarsk and Novosibirsk led by Gleb Sokolov with members Peter Kuznetsov, Vladimir Arhipov, Jack Bakalejnikov, Sergey Cherezov, Alexander Mikhailitsin, Oleg Khvostenko and Sergey Filatov. Their route took the N face of **Pik Armenia (7100m)**, which lies on the ridge between the main summit and **East Pobeda (7048m)** and has previously been reached only by traversing from one of the summits of Pobeda. The route, which has obvious objective danger in the lower part, lies significantly to the L of the 1990 *Zhuravlev Route*, which in turn is to the L of the (also objectively dangerous) *Abalakov Route* N of the main summit. They started climbing on 8 August, reaching the summit of Pik Armenia on 17 August and the main summit two days later. There was a body lying just E of the main summit. They descended the standard route via **Pik Vazha Pshavely (6918m)** and Dikiy Pass. The new route was graded 6B and the ascent awarded second place in the Russian mountaineering championship, behind the ascent of Nuptse East by Valery Babanov and Yuri Koshelenko. On the still very serious standard route during the same period from 14 August, Maria Rey from Spain and Merab Khabazi from Georgia failed to find their tent after returning from the summit and were forced to spend a night out. Unable to descend unaided, they were rescued over the following days.

A new route was also climbed on **Voennykh Topographov (6873m)** from the NE by a team including A Korenev. The route was purely snow and ice at 5A, and would appear to have been the fourth ascent of this impressive but relatively remote peak at the head of the S Inylchek glacier (the previous ascents are described in *AJ105*). On the more readily accessed **Pik Gorky (6050m)**, five Slovenian climbers explored a new route on the Central S face. One climber summited on 16 August.

UK and European teams were active in a number of the lesser-known areas lying to the S of Lake Issyk-Kul. The **Borkoldoy Range** was visited in September by an ISM-organised trip with guides Pat Littlejohn and Adrian Nelhams. Previous UK parties operated in the NE and SW parts of the range (see *AJ100* and *AJ108*), which is otherwise little-explored by mountaineers. First the group made camp in the Kynar Valley in the SE part of the range. Here they were repelled from the rocky N ridge of **Pik 5060m** by a deep brèche, but made ascents of several smaller peaks including **Pik Mars (4905m)** via a traverse of the SE and N ridges at AD. They then moved to the Chon-Tor Valley (two valleys W of that explored by the 1995 British expedition), from which they climbed eight new snowy peaks between 4500m and 5000m at grades between F and AD. Further peaks in the area remain unclimbed.

Eagle Ski Club mountaineers Steve Wright, Mike Sharp, Joost van der Valk and David Wynne-Jones visited the **Ak-Shiirak Range** during the latter half of April, crossing the Barskoon Pass by vehicle using the well-cleared Kumtor Mine road. The Suek Pass beyond was closed by snow, resulting in a change of plan to an exploration of the eastern approaches to the range. They made double carries to the Ak-Bel Pass, finding hard going in breakable crust. From here team members made ski ascents of a number of peaks 4060m-4600m in height and used the frozen Kara-Su river to reach the Kara-Su Glacier in the heart of the range. From here they could see a likely ski route up **Pik Kyrgyzia (4947m)**. The team suggests that a visit in May-June should allow vehicle access to their originally intended Kara-Su Valley and might produce more conducive snow conditions.

Another UK team visited the **Kuilu-Too Valley** in the Issyk-Kul Range. The 14-person group under the stewardship of Robin Gibson climbed seven new peaks from 4100-4780m at mostly straightforward standards.

Finally, in the **W Kokshaal-Too** a nine-person expedition from Florence led by Carlo Barbolini visited the Komarova Glacier in July-August, climbing technical new routes.

## Siberia and the Russian Far East

To the author's knowledge, none of the areas mentioned below other than the Altai and Kamchatka have seen any attention from international climbers.

In the **Altai** there were several attempts at winter ascents of **Bielukha (4506m)**, the team of V Ivanov, B Brakus and D Osipov being successful via the *Berelskoe Route*. Another winter development in this area is modern icefall climbing around Ak-Tash, on the Chuisky Trakt road near the **Northern Chuisky Range**. The climbing is available from February-April on falls up to 200m in height, and is becoming popular with climbers from nearby cities. In the same area ski touring is more popular with visiting

Europeans, who have frequented the areas of Ak-Tru and Karakol Lakes. Returning to the Ak-Kem area, on **Delone (4200m)** Tomsk climbers A Kirikov and A Proskurin climbed a new variant on the NE face from 5-11 May.

Buryatia climbers have been active in exploring and climbing in the **Barguzin Range** near Lake Baikal. Pavel Kolesov, Igor Sherstnev and Sergey Lyagin climbed a 550m new route on **Argada (2340m)** in the Ulzykha Valley, taking the Central E face (mostly to the R of the 5B route climbed in 2002). They named the route *Mirror for Heroes* because of its smooth walls and because the relentless pattern of rain every night and morning was reminiscent of the movie of this name in which the same day kept repeating itself. They assigned the grade 6A VI to the route, which they climbed over 5 days to 20 August. Conditions seemed somewhat challenging, with blind cracks and corners, and grass growing even on vertical sections of cliff. During the same period Nikolai Ryabuzov's team made the first ascent of the rocky NE ridge of **Argada** at 3B/4A.

Buryatia climbers have also been active in the area in winter. In February 2003 Kolesov and Sherstnev climbed with Pavel Tugarin and Sergei Mosovskiy on the new route *Jubilee*, taking the centre of the N face of the summit **Kreyser (Cruiser) Varyag (2430m)**. The 700m mixed route was completed on 21st after taking 12 days, and was provisionally given a winter 6B grade with pitches of VI+ and A4e. Temperatures varied from -37°C to -22°C. Challenges of winter climbing in this area include snow accumulations under rock overhangs, and a tendency for ropes to ice so badly that only the best jumars are able to cope. The climb was awarded second place in the winter class of the Russian championship. Descent from the mountain appears to be very straightforward, the NE ridge being graded 1B.

Climbers from the region returned in January 2004 to reconnoitre new areas of the range, seeking unclimbed summits reached by technical faces of at least 600m, which could form suitable objectives for the technical class of the Russian mountaineering championship. These requirements apparently were met in the area of the Ulyun river valley, including by the highest point in the area **Pik Ulyunskiy (2601m)**. In February 2004 Kolesov returned to the area again, this time completing a new route on **Veymur (2280m)** with Sergey Gavenko. The 700m route took the NE face by the L shoulder at 6A VI, taking 6 days to complete with a summit date of 21 February.

In April-May 2003 an alpine camp was held in the **Tsagan-Shibetu Range** in SW Tuva, 450km from Abakan. Attractions here include **Pik Vostochniy (c3400m)**, which has hard routes at 4B-6A mainly on rock, and more moderate 3A-4A mixed routes. Access to the area is apparently straightforward by bus and four-hour walk.

In the **Kuznetskiy Alatau**, V Stalkovskiy and team from Novokuznetsk made a winter ascent of **Staraya Krepost (2211m)**, climbing the Central

NE face from 21-28 February. Details are lacking, but the ascent was awarded a place in the winter class of the Russian Mountaineering Championship.

**Kamchatka** was the venue for the first time for a 300km Iditarod-style dog-sledding race held in March 2004. The race attracted multinational participation and took a route that included the Koryak Pass (1500m) and the Nalychevskaya Valley.