
HYWEL LLOYD

High Adventure in Mongolia

We plan some mountaineering in the Altai; would you like to come?' ... 'Where?' ... 'Mongolia' ... 'Well – it sounds fun'. This is how Ingram and I joined an expedition being organised by old friends, Jon Mellor and David Hamilton, for the summer of 2008.

The Altai mountains rise in the centre of Asia, starting in Russia and running from north-west to south-east through the western end of Mongolia and finishing in China. The whole range is roughly the height and extent of the Alps with snow summits rising to 4500m. To say that they are unfrequented compared to the Alps is an understatement. Access to both the Russian and Chinese sectors is difficult but access to the Mongolian Altai seemed more practicable. Alpine Club members had been before, notably in 1992 when Lindsay Griffin had had an horrific accident (AJ 1993, 125-9); also a good sketch map by Józef Nyka with additions by Ed Webster became available in 1993. Otherwise maps were difficult to obtain; the best seemed to be 1:100,000 Russian military maps but one had to decipher the Russian text.

David had made contact with a local travel company called 'Nomads'. They were brilliant, providing us with local leaders, vehicles, drivers, and permits into the military border area. Language was a problem, spelling of place names was somewhat random and we were very reliant on our interpreter.

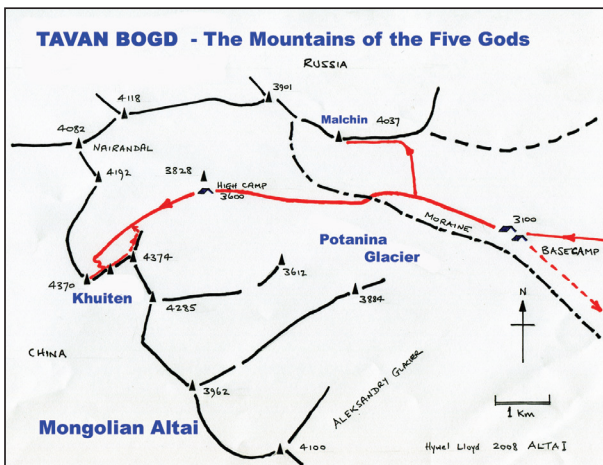


103. The route taken by trucks and then camels from the town of Ölgii at the western end of Mongolia, to base camp in the Tavan Bogd National Park.



104. Snow peaks of the Altai mountains in Mongolia and China to the south-east of Khüiten 4374m. (*Hywel Lloyd*)

The plan was to fly to Ulaanbaatar, the capital in the centre of Mongolia; take a local flight to Ölgii (Ulgii), a town in the western end of Mongolia; drive in jeeps for two days, trek in towards the high Altai for six days (about 120km, and thus get fit); place a base camp by the Potanina glacier at 3160m; scale a couple of lower peaks; place a camp high on the glacier at 3660m; climb the highest peak, Khüiten (Huiten, 4374m); names and heights varied depending on sources and translations. Finally, we trek out by a shorter route back. And this is exactly what we did. It took nearly four weeks; the August weather was broadly good but it did have its moments when the strong north winds from Siberia took over.



105. Location of the 2008 AC party's base camp alongside the Potanina glacier and routes up Khüiten (4374m) and Malchin (4037m). This is in the Tavan Bogd – the Mountains of the Five Gods (or Saints) in the Mongolian Altai mountains.



106. David Hamilton trying out his Bactrian chat-up lines. (*Hywel Lloyd*)



107. Kazakh woman cooking for us on her *ger* stove with mutton drying on the rack. (*Hywel Lloyd*)

108. Young Kazakh nomad girl with elegant toy camel made by her mother. (*John Fairley*)



Mongolia is nearly the size of mainland Europe; population 2.5 million people – 1million in Ulaanbaatar and 1.5 million nomadic herdsmen and coal or mineral miners spread thinly across this vast country. It has more than 36 million head of cattle and sheep. Apparently, there are only 100km of metalled roads outside Ulaanbaatar and town centres. The main roads are dirt and very poorly maintained; 4-wheel drive is necessary; side roads defy trade-descriptions norms. And the history? We had all heard of Chinggis Khaan (Genghis Khan to us) and his Mongolian warriors who conquered an empire from Beijing to northern India in 1206 AD. Later Mongolia was absorbed into Manchu China. In 1924 Outer Mongolia became independent but closely allied to Russia. Inner Mongolia remains Chinese. In 1990 Mongolia cast off Soviet-style communist rule to become a democracy and survive on its own; finances were very tough for 10 years – not helped by droughts and fierce winters taking a toll of the sheep and cattle. So the Mongolians are very tough people.

We arrived in Ulaanbaatar, a party of 14 AC members and friends (all 65 years or more except our youngster, David). We met up with the Nomads organisation and visited the sights, all rather Russian, generally a bit drab. Interestingly, even in town nearly every dwelling had a ger tent outside (like a yurt). Then great fun at the Mongolian Circus where David was enticed into the ring to join the jugglers, and more fun at the Mongolian National Song and Dance Academy, where the performance contained various styles of ornate national dress and typical instruments such as the two-string horse-head fiddle. Both evenings were extremely cheerful and colourful.

Nomads took us into nearby mountains to limberup. These were the Tsetsegun Ulul where we walked to the highest top, Bogd Khaan Uul, 2256m, (this language is impossible!). The lower slopes were very wooded, mainly pines, but the tops were clear and reminded us of the Dartmoor granite tors, except that they were bedecked with prayer flags and blue bunting. As we descended, we were met by the first 'secret weapon' that Nomads produced for us. It was an ex-army command truck built in 1976 by Magirus-Deutz with a Benz 9 litre engine and serious ground-clearance. More importantly, it was kitted out as a mobile cookhouse with an excellent experienced driver, Chuka. The previous summer it had been the cook-truck for the Paris-Peking car rally. Being an engineer, I was given a conducted tour of the underneath of the truck; all very impressive, this machine would prove to be able to go anywhere.

After fireworks at midnight to herald the start of the Beijing Olympics, it was time to move on. A small turbo-prop Fokker flew us 1500km to Ölgii, rather like a wild-west frontier town with the essentials to match. At the small 'supermarket' we stocked up with beer and vodka. Next we fitted ourselves and our gear into three Ütz-Furgon vans. These ubiquitous Chinese/Russian utility vehicles are like a Ford Transit 8-seater body on top of a 4-wheel low-ratio drive Land-Rover chassis, and they too would go almost anywhere.



109. Preparing to set out from camp at 3600m on the Potanina glacier after new snow during the night. (Hywel Lloyd)

With Duré, the local Nomad's leader and interpreter, our convoy of cook-truck and three vans set off across arid, desert-like open country with views of hills and higher snow-clad mountains around. The river valleys were verdant with flowers and trees but the passes were rocky and wind-blown. For two days we travelled with the scenery becoming more like the Lake District. After crossing rickety wooden bridges, visiting a *balbal*, a religious Turkic granite man said to be c600 AD, and checking in at a military post, we gained the shores of Lake Khoton Nuur by the Zagastain river.

Now we trekked on foot along a chain of lakes into the main Altai. In each valley we saw little clusters of three to four *gers* with an extended Kazakh nomad family, tending a herd of perhaps 1000 animals, mainly goats. All were very friendly and we were often invited in and offered the local delicacy, dried yohurt that could break one's teeth. Inside, every *ger* was very neat and colourful with a central stove and chimney for heating and cooking by dung. No electricity, but some *gers* did have a battery-operated satellite dish television. *Gers* are moved three times during the year to find the best pasture. The scenery was magnificent, with lots of flowers and many birds seen including kites and an eagle.

We met Mr Azamat who supplied Nomads' second 'secret weapon' – camels. Mr Azamat owned four Bactrian camels (two humps) and had friends who provided three more. Well trained and brilliantly led, this magnificent seven each carried more than 200kg without problems over terrain that became more steep and rugged as we progressed. We walked 20km per day, equipment on the camel train, and camped by water at night. Food was supplemented with fish (like trout) caught in the rivers. Local children

often visited us; they rode stout Mongolian horses bareback, expert riders from the age of three. Eventually, we left the lakes and valleys and climbed over a high pass (as rugged as the descent from Snowdon down the PYG track) from where we had our first proper view of our goal, the high, snowy summits. Down a valley we were shown probably 100 petroglyph images of deer, hunters and dogs carved on rock slabs, reputedly from 1200 years ago.

Thus we reached another road into the area and entered the new National Park, Tavan Bogd (The Mountains of the Five Gods). Next day we established base camp alongside the Potanina glacier at 3100m. A small foray up to a ridge on the Mongolian-Russian border and we stood at about 3800m with one foot in each country (but no visa).

First big day was to climb Malchin (Malczin), 'The Herdsman' 4037m, also on the border. The route was up the east ridge with flanks of loose boulders and scree. As we gained height the north (Russian) side became a large snow 'Half-dome' partly separated from the main Mongolian summit. This north side descended into a glacier running many km into Russia. The final slope was a couloir to a rocky summit complete with a steel pole and new Mongolian flag.

Next, we set up a camp of four tents high on the Potanina glacier at 3600m to gain access to the highest peak, Khüiten (Huiten), 'The Cold Mountain' (4374m). The night was one of continuous ferocious storms and we feared that we might lose a tent, but all survived. At dawn, after awaiting a break in the weather, we set off to climb Khüiten. Reportedly, the north-east ridge is the usual route but as it appeared loaded with wind-slab we opted for a route near the north west-ridge. With a wind blowing direct from Siberia, conditions felt 'arctic' as we traversed into the north cwm to gain the west side of the north face; fortunately the wind dropped as we climbed the face. Several large séracs and crevasses were skirted and we had sustained steep cramponing on ice but no real difficulties. We considered that this route was probably around PD+ in standard.

I was seconding David and as we emerged at the top of the face I could see three summits along a crest of 500 metres. 'So, which is the highest?' ... 'Don't know. We'll have to climb all three'. So we did. Our GPS gave the heights at around 4400m with only 7m difference between the highest and the lowest summit. The crest was easy and is partly on the border between China and Mongolia – thus eight of us climbed Khüiten and visited China, without a visa. The views were absolutely stunning: Siberia to the north and countless sharp snowy peaks in Mongolia to the south-east and in China to the south.

Our rope descended by the ascent route. The second rope led by John Fairley decided to descend by the north-east ridge but encountered worrying wind-slab on steep ground and then had to negotiate an awkward bergschrund. Khüiten is a worthy alternative to Mont Blanc but, as far as we could tell, probably fewer than 100 climbers gain its summit in a typical year.



110. On top of Khüiten 4374m with north summit (and Siberia) behind; Mike Esten, Ingram Lloyd, Michael Turner-Caine, David Hamilton. (*Hywel Lloyd*)

That night there were more storms and even more snow, so the next day we abandoned our plan to ascend Nairandal (4180m) and descended to base camp, now also very snowy, where the large mess tent had been blown down, but all was well.

Coming out to the roadhead was a novel experience; I had never ridden before but the offer to use a Mongolian horse was too good to miss. The journey took five hours by a magnificent route following a large glacial river with gorges. The Mongolians could not believe that a grown man had never ridden a horse before but I think I acquitted myself well. My sturdy mount had a fine silver-trimmed saddle, a family heirloom, and insisted on trotting a lot so when I dismounted my knees were killing me; but it was definitely well worth it.

For the final evening with the local Tuva nomads a party was laid on in a *ger*. We ate goat that had been cooked in a milk churn converted into a large pressure cooker (but the meat was still pretty tough). It happened to be Ingram's birthday so the celebrations continued into the dusk. Next morning we had to say farewell to the families who had been so welcoming, hospitable and helpful, and start our journey back the world we knew. As we bade the children goodbye, we wondered what changes they will see in their lives.

Summary: An account of a four-week expedition to the Mongolian Altai in summer 2008 with ascents of Malchin (Malczin, 4037m) and Khüiten (Huiten, 4374m). Party: AC members, Stuart Beare, Mike Esten, John and Lizbet Fairley, Barbara Grigor-Taylor, David Hamilton, Hywel and Ingram Lloyd, Jon Mellor. Friends, Sue Esten, Rowena Mellor, Michael Turner-Caine, Anna Vaudrey, Cheryl Wells.