
TOM BELL

Of Ice and Tanks

Climbing in Russia on the Eve of War



Tom and Steve at the hotel in Dargavs. (Andrey)

My downtime at work used to be whiled away flicking through online articles. No more. This is the first time in my life I've not been able to face the news. I have grown up with war. For all my life there has been a war somewhere, with all the destruction and pointless waste of life it brings. Nor is this the first time I've seen white faces in war zones, nor even the first war in Europe, and it wouldn't matter if it were. Logically this war shouldn't feel different to those other times, but war isn't logical. So even though I know I shouldn't be affected more by this particular conflict, I find that I am. We seem to be stumbling ever deeper into global calamity with no clear idea of why and how or any plan to get out of it. The world does not feel a nice place to be right now.

It wasn't like that early in February when our plane touched down in Mineralnye Vody. We had been planning this trip to the Russian ice-climbing venue of Midagrabyn for three years; the ice had thawed and refrozen



Driving the Midagrabin gorge on the way to the icefalls. (Andrey)



Steve on the first pitch of *Duck Stories*. (Tom Bell)

twice in the time it had taken to get here. Covid-19 had derailed everyone's lives but finally my passport had arrived back with a visa in place and the border permit accepted. I had had to copy my application into Cyrillic with the help of our agent Andrey but it had worked, and with everything back on, and international travel finally allowed, I was on a plane bound for the other side of the tattered iron curtain on an ice-climbing trip to Russia.

Steve and I formed the entirety of the Alpine Club contingent on this trip. We landed in the early hours and negotiated a taxi ride to the hostel we had been recommended and grabbed a few hours sleep. Then we stood on a dusty main road contemplating which mystery breakfast meat product was most likely to set us up for the long ride ahead while looking towards North Ossetia and our final destination: the snow-capped mountains we could see rising towards the Caucasus where Russia ends and Georgia begins.

As we sat in the back of a 4WD Lada, our luggage piled high beside us, a column of tanks and troop vehicles passed in the other direction, headed for the Ukrainian border. At the time we assumed it was all just posturing, the alpha displaying his plumage. At random points along the road the police had set checkpoints and we were pulled over and trundled through the Russian bureaucratic system by smiling guards curious to know what bought us to this out-of-the-way corner of Russia. From long experience I have found



Tom Bell on the third pitch of *Duck Stories*. (Andrey)

explaining icefall climbing to friends who know me and speak my language to be fraught with confusion and likely to end in bemused expressions. So our total lack of Russian and the police's minimal English did not make for a fruitful international dialogue. Music is the great leveller however, and once we had clarified I had a shameful ignorance of Russian rap stars we settled on the Beatles, more of an international language than Esperanto ever was. After some badly sung bars we were cheerfully waved through, our axes welcome to hit whatever ice we were lucky enough to find, no further explanation required.

We picked up Andrey, swapped the Lada (much to Steve's delight) for a Land Rover that would be more suited to the roads ahead, and drove on towards the hotel that was to be our base for the coming week. As a

climber I am not used to holidays with any level of appreciable luxury. Quite often the only running water is direct from the glacier. So being presented with a menu was a pleasant change. I've always been flexible with my vegetarian proclivities when in mountain huts, and recognise that sometimes it is not a fight worth having. So this time when I was informed a vegetarian diet would be challenging (in the end it turned out to be no problem at all). So I ordered the fresh trout. It arrived with a subtle, lemon vinaigrette and perfectly cooked, a reminder of all I am choosing to miss out on. That first night we were sharing the hotel with the last evening of a couples' yoga retreat. It wasn't long before Steve was roped in, to an exercise charting the week's meditative journey through the medium of glitter and face paint. As he himself had not been on the journey and was functioning in a foreign language with a total stranger his efforts were only to be commended. This set the tone for a warm and welcoming week in our accommodation.

The ice itself is very reliable. Midagrabin gorge, the mountain valley we climbed in, had been -20°C during the day for the week prior but a more hospitable -5°C for us. The ice is always formed and the only question is how fat it is. Conditions for us were comparatively lean but still excellent. Access to the climbing is via a gradually disintegrating dirt road; you are limited by vehicle and driver. We had the Land Rover and Steve, the perfect blend: design and indestructibility combined with skill and an infectious joy behind the wheel. Our walk-ins therefore were very short.

We had all had several years away from water-ice climbing and were taking it easy on the first day. Rediscovering a rhythm and flow and gaining confidence in your placements meant the whole week was a pleasingly steep learning curve and we were all climbing much harder and more fluidly by the end. The Midagrabin gorge is one of Russia's top ice venues but it still doesn't see the volume of traffic that the big European venues do. There was very little drafting of placements: you had to earn your rope lengths.

We climbed every day, with a day of via ferrata as our only rest day. Much of the climbing is multi-pitch and you would have to be good and moving quickly to reach the top of the longer routes in daylight. On a memorable final day, as the midday sun finally crested the steep valley sides, we found ourselves hanging exposed, a couple of pitches up, below huge ice daggers as the sun hit them and the face we were climbing. Small shivers of ice started to rain down on us and there was, for the first time, a respite from the creaking frozen silence as water started trickling down the face beneath the ice. With one pitch left we debated if we had time to make a dash for the top. But as it turned out physics made the decision for us: the sun disappeared behind the mountains surrounding us, the dripping stopped, silence returned and we were free to carry on. The final pitch was one of the best of the week, as the sun had warmed the ice to one-swing toffee placements and the pitch was transformed from steep and intimidating to a joyous celebration of what had been a wonderful trip.

Andrey specialises in introducing Brits and other Europeans to climbing and skiing in some of the incredible mountain areas of Russia, helping navigate government bureaucracy and the challenges of a language that few Europeans speak or write. Experiences that would have been nigh on impossible without his support were instead an enjoyable, stress-free week's holiday. I spoke to Andrey soon after the war started, wondering how he was affected by events in Ukraine. His hard work in developing trips like ours may well have been in vain. He is worried for his young family and how best to protect them. He loves his country in many ways, but is horrified at what is happening. It goes without saying that Russians face draconian punishment for any sort of protest. It is unsafe for anyone to speak out. A good, gentle and inspiring man has, in the space of a few weeks, had his world turned inside out. There will be many ordinary Russians experiencing the same thing.