

The Tien Shan or Celestial Mountains

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The border between western China and the southern states of the former Soviet Union is marked by the great ranges of the Pamirs and the Tien Shan. The sensitive frontier area has rarely been visited, especially by westerners, so it is no surprise that the mountains are largely unexplored. Maps of the area focus on the passes, which have potential military significance, rather than the hills themselves. To travel to this remote area and try some of the many unclimbed peaks was a rare and exciting opportunity. Pat Littlejohn of the International School of Mountaineering and local climber Vladimir Komissarov have been exploring these parts for several years and were able to set up a three week expedition.

We flew to Alm Aty in Kazakstan and took a coach to Vladimir's base in the Kyrgyzstan capital Bishkek. Kyrgyzstan is a small country trying hard to make its own way forward following independence from the USSR. It seems to have been a fairly friendly split, and although many military buildings are empty and decaying, the basic infrastructure is pretty sound. Some Russian people have stayed on to lead a new and different life. The Soviet occupation only lasted about seventy years, not long in the context of a country where traditions have changed little since Marco Polo traveled on the Great Silk Road. In some respects it's a poor country but it produces plenty of good food from land irrigated by the many rivers that gush from its abundant mountains. The old nomadic traditions are maintained by farmers who live in yurts, wooden-framed buildings covered with felt, during the summer months whilst their animals graze in the higher pastures. Fruit, vegetables, dairy produce, eggs, home-baked bread and a freshly killed sheep were to give us the basis of a reasonable diet, which was complemented by the local beer and vodka.

A couple of days' acclimatisation were spent in the Al Archa range just outside Bishkek. The USSR's most prestigious mountaineering training centre was located here, but it did not survive the loss of funding from the Soviet Union after independence. Vladimir, a former director of the centre, stayed on to establish a climbing and trekking business to exploit the tourist potential of the country's mountains and culture. His climbing and logistics experience were crucial to the success of our expedition. Here we were able to sort out our gear, and get used to the heat, altitude and snow conditions and to climb our first 4000m peak.

After that curtain-raiser we set out into more remote territory. Our truck was loaded with fourteen people, one sheep, food, fuel and camping equipment, so it was not surprising when we brought down an electricity



Constructing the Yurt at Base Camp

cable which was strung a bit too low across the road. Later on the heavy vehicle sank deep into the mud and it took about eight hours of digging to extract it. These setbacks did not prevent us from enjoying a fascinating journey as we moved into progressively more remote and unspoiled country. As the roads got worse and the villages got smaller, we found yurt settlements in the summer grazing areas. We were struck by the wide-open landscapes, clean air and the simple traditional lifestyle. Vladimir acquired a travel permit for the frontier region but returned from the police station in a terrible state. It is the local custom, on signing a document, to shake hands and down a glass of vodka - and there were many documents. When we got to the frontier post all was well, and the guards were delighted to see someone to relieve the boredom of defending an impregnable mountain range.

Two and a half days travelling into the West Kokshaal-Too Range brought us to the terminal moraine of the Kotur glacier, where a grassy terrace provided a perfect campsite. Here we created a substantial base camp, which was both comfortable and safe. We even had our own yurt, complete with wood burning stove, which served as the mess tent. At an altitude of 3900m we had cold nights and a couple of snowfalls, but warm sunshine and the dry air soon cleared the snow. It was a very healthy location, with no contamination other than anything we brought in ourselves. The views down the valley and across to the mountains far

away to the North were fantastic and there was an overwhelming sense of peace and quiet. We were a long way above the tree line and the rolling moorland gave way abruptly to the snow and ice of the mountain range. There was very little wild life, a few insects, a couple of small birds and someone got a distant view of a splendid Marco Polo sheep, but this dry environment offers little food and must have desperately cold winters.

Our first task was to establish an advanced base camp further up the glacier. Although the glacier was flat and looked safe, for the first trip we roped up in case of crevasses. We went further up the glacier than anyone had gone before and all round the untouched mountains were truly impressive. Trudging through the snow with a heavy pack, including tents, was hard work but very necessary. After about five hours we pitched camp at about 4500m and returned to our base. The inevitable storm happened that very night, but we were safely back at base camp where we sat out the next day whilst the fresh snow settled down. Up at advanced base, one of the tents was blown away but was fortunately recovered with only trivial damage and a few lost tent pegs. The second trip up to advanced base was much easier even though the fresh snow had refilled the trail. It turned out to be a comfortable place to sleep, although it was cold and the winds whipped up an awful spindrift, which found its way through every opening in the tent. The main drawback was the need to melt snow for drinking water, which meant that cooking was a very slow process. The great advantage of the high location was proximity to the hills to be climbed, so that early starts and long walk-ins were not required.

For our first day of serious climbing we split into three parties on two separate routes. Because of the altitude and soft snow, uphill progress was slow but as we climbed west out of the steep sided valley we could see immediately that our objective was feasible. It was a combination of mixed rock and snow or simple snow slopes, which was technically undemanding, but in such a remote location there is no margin for error. Three hours' hard work brought us to a splendid peak at about 5150m, which we wanted to call the Peak of the Old Buffaloes in honour of our two cantankerous guides, but subsequent research showed that it had already been climbed. From this vantage point a truly fantastic panorama of mountains unfolded. Almost all of the visible hills were unclimbed but we could see a line of footprints where our other party had walked up the glacier to a hill at its southern end. The main ridge, which marked the border between China and Kyrgyzstan, was clearly visible and included some very challenging peaks up to 6000m. The descent was even gentler with firm snow in an easy gully giving a quick route down.

On the next day my party went for a peak on the east side of the valley, which unfortunately started with a one-hour walk down the glacier. Here a steep snow slope under an imposing serac took us up to an



The Author and Vladimir on their First Summit

impressive ridge, which was only moderately corniced. The climb up the ridge was straightforward until we reached a peak at about 5000m, which I named Pic Oleg in honour of the porter who had broken trail for most of the way. Again there was a spectacular view, both of the hill we had climbed the previous day and also down into the glacier to the west and to the imposing peaks of the frontier ridge. The next peak along the ridge looked feasible but I was finding the altitude very tiring so there was no question of going any further. An easy descent was followed by the walk back up the glacier to advanced base, but as there was plenty of time this walk could be slow and relaxing. I stopped often to enjoy the warm afternoon sunshine to reflect on the peace and quiet of this utterly unspoilt environment where the lack of wind, running water or any wildlife caused an absolute silence.

The next day I returned to base camp to get some rest from the effects of the altitude whilst other members of the party climbed more new peaks. Life at base camp was great fun, with plenty of food and drink and warm sunshine during the day. On a rest day I was able to stroll out of camp on my own and reach the top of a 4300m hill and again appreciate the pleasure of being in the middle of nowhere. My colleagues, who had been forced down by strong winds and heavy snowfall further up the mountain, soon joined me at base camp. Altogether we had climbed five 5000m peaks, including four first ascents, and had a couple of near misses.

The climbing was particularly enjoyable because an advanced base camp on the glacier gave easy access by 500-1000m of moderate snow and ice slopes to spectacular virgin peaks which could easily be climbed in a single day.

Sadly we dismantled our base camp a day early because of the change in the weather and started the long journey home. In the town of Naryn we appreciated sleeping in a hotel rather than camping and enjoyed a leisurely stroll up a deep wooded gorge, or horse riding for some. In the evening brightly dressed local folk singers entertained us with passionate singing accompanied by a type of mandolin, and some biting satire referring to their former communist leaders.

Back to Bishkek, where we stayed in some dachas in the wooded foothills of the Al Archa Mountains rather than in the heat of the city. The dachas turned out to be fairly basic wooden huts, but they were cool and dry and one of them even had a sauna, which gave us the chance to get properly clean for the first time in two weeks. Eating and drinking amongst the apple trees was delightfully relaxing after the rigours of the hills. We still had a spare day to do some rock climbing in the Al Archa range, which gave a stimulating contrast from the snow and ice work of the previous week. There was a little time for shopping in Bishkek but there wasn't very much to buy, it's simply not geared up to the tourist business. So we boarded the bus and said farewell to Kyrgyzstan but there was still a sting in the tail. Somewhere in Kazakstan about an hour and a half from Alm Aty the bus broke down and resisted all attempts to restart it. Fortunately some of our party got a lift into town and ordered a couple of taxis, which enabled us to reach the hotel in time for a few late beers. The flight back to London went smoothly but it was a culture shock to emerge into the scrum of Heathrow after so long in such a wonderfully unspoilt part of the world.