

More than Mountains

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Kazakhstan, in Central Asia! Previously part of the USSR, but now independent, Kazakhstan is the ninth-largest country in the world, stretching from the shores of the Caspian Sea to the distant Chinese border, and can truly be regarded as a bridge between Europe and Asia. Nowhere is this more evident than on the streets of Almaty, the largest city, and until recently the capital, of Kazakhstan. Here a heterogeneous mixture of European Russians and Asian Kazakhs can be seen and heard in this youthful, vibrant 'city of apples', once described as the most beautiful city in the world. Although I wouldn't totally agree, it certainly is attractive, with wide open streets, trees everywhere (especially apple trees), numerous small parks and fountains, and a beautiful backdrop of mountains. From anywhere in the city, the view looking south is dominated by the Tien Shan, the Celestial Mountains, over 5,000m high near to Almaty but rising to more than 7,000m high at Khan Tengri and the Marble Wall, near to the Kyrgyzstan border.

Living and working in Almaty for two years, I was able to make many trips to these remarkable mountains, and I was very fortunate to meet many interesting people, and make many good friends, in the worlds of Russian and Kazakhstan mountaineering. My office, situated in the city centre, provided a wide panorama of mountains, including several 4,000m peaks: all of them steep and impressive-looking, and all easily accessible from Almaty. A twenty-minute bus ride, costing the equivalent of thirty pence, was all that was required to reach Medeo, the largest, and, at over 5,500ft above sea level the highest, outdoor ice rink in the world. The combination of thin air and fast ice, made from glacial melt water, has led to countless ice-skating speed records being set at Medeo, and it is an ideal access point for the mountains. Five miles further along the road is the Shymbulak ski resort, nearly 9,000ft above sea level and, as I soon found out, the gateway to a mountain wilderness extending for hundreds of miles to the Chinese border.

During my time in Almaty I was invited to train and climb with CSKA, the Army Alpinist Club, where I met many interesting and accomplished mountaineers, such as Denis Urubko and Serguey Samoilov, who were twice nominated for the Golden Ice Axe award for daring Himalayan alpine ascents, and I was also able to take part in many interesting mountaineering events.

A favourite activity in the world of Russian mountaineering is speed ascents, and I had great fun in some of these events. Unfortunately I was never able to take part in the annual Christmas race, held in memory of another CSKA member Anatoli Boukreev, the legendary Soviet



*Typical Kazakstan Mountains
Manshuk Manetova and Panfilov Heroes Peaks*

mountaineer who died on the south face of Annapurna on Christmas Day 1997. Starting from the Memorial to Perished Mountaineers, climbing through the Gates of Tuyuk Su to Almageldy Peak (4,000m), the race was won both the years that I was in Almaty by my friend Denis Urubko, wearing cheap Chinese football trainers which were only fit to be thrown away after one wearing on this difficult terrain. Denis considered that he would be able to move faster by not wearing traditional heavy mountaineering boots, and, in the snow and ice, he would benefit from the studded soles on the trainers. It seemed to work, as Denis managed to break the course record previously held by his friend Boukreev, who is generally recognized as having been one of the fittest and fastest high altitude mountaineers of all time. Interestingly, given that day-time temperatures at that time of year were generally in the region of -30°C , Denis chose to sleep in a tent at 3,500m on the night before the race, in

order to sharpen his acclimatization conditioning. Like Denis Urubko, Anatoli Boukreev was actually Russian but the opportunity to live so close to the Celestial Mountains had persuaded them both to live in Almaty and take out Kazakhstan citizenship.

Another popular feature of the Kazakhstan mountaineering world were Alpiniads – mass mountain ascents, where, in true Soviet style, as many people as possible are encouraged to take part in a healthy pastime. Alpiniads were seen as a way of encouraging people to reach the summits of the more technically difficult mountains and were very popular. Experienced mountaineers, many from CSKA, would set up fixed ropes on the steep sections and exposed traverses. My Russian friend Anton and I decided to join in the fun when an Alpiniad was organized for Abai Peak (4,010m) to celebrate the 110th anniversary of the death of Abai Kunanbaev, Kazakhstan's national poet. Although I went to the mountains most weekends with Anton, and we had long admired the striking and distinctive shape of Abai Peak, towering high above the ski resort at Shymbulak, we had delayed climbing the peak as we wanted to take part in, and support, the Alpiniad. Many of our friends would be involved in preparing the route and, as we went to our warm beds the night before the event, we knew that many of those friends would be spending a cold night in tents, high on the mountainside, in readiness for the early morning start.

Pre-dawn, lots of snow, ice crystals shining brightly in the clear bright moonlight. "Anton, it's a bit cold this morning, -17°C." A muffled voice in the dark, "Not too bad, it's -40° at my home in Russia." "Hmm, OK."

We eagerly set off and joined several hundred other people heading in the same direction. Despite the weather, the altitude, and the technical difficulties that lay ahead, we appeared to be the only ones with proper mountaineering gear. The Alpiniads are a great way of encouraging people to go to the mountains, but with an average wage of \$300 US a month, not many people in Kazakhstan can afford the same luxuries that we in the west take for granted. Anton and I joined a long line of cheap trainers, Chinese rucksacks, and heavy Russian jackets moving slowly uphill. Dawn arrived slowly, somewhere above the 3,000m mark, the snow-capped mountains shimmering in the golden rays of the early morning sun. We sat on snow-covered rocks enjoying a Kazakh breakfast of horse meat and green tea. As far as the eye could see, mountains were rising and falling like waves on a great sea.

We knew that in the valley far below, a small group of mountain runners would be preparing for the start of a mountain race, staged in parallel with the Alpiniad – uphill from Shymbulak ski resort to a small high col that we would cross on the way to Abai Peak. I had hoped to be one of the runners and had put in a lot of training for it, but an injury had

changed my plans. Anton and I delayed our journey to Abai long enough to see Svetlana, a friend from CSKA, take the prize for the first lady home. Svetlana was the best female climber in Kazakhstan, strong, fast and daring, but was new to mountain racing. We had thought she would win, but it was still good to watch her run past, effortlessly making her way across a large plateau scattered with debris from one of the area's many glaciers.

We continued on our way, climbing a steep scree slope to the narrow col where the running event had ended. Delayed by our interest in the race, we were now near the back of the Alpiniad, and joined a small crowd of people waiting to clip onto a fixed rope traversing a steep-sided, snow-covered valley. Anton and I were conscious of the time and the distance still to cover to reach Abai Peak. We wanted to speed up, but the protocol was to stay in position on the network of fixed ropes that we now faced – no overtaking and no unclipping from the safety line, so we were surprised and delighted when Svetlana, fresh from her race but now changed into warm mountain clothing, came steaming up to us, moving free of the fixed line. A few people shouted at Svetlana to clip on and join the long queue, but today was her day and she wasn't to be stopped so easily.

We joined a bottleneck at the foot of a band of steep rock. Svetlana carried on toward the summit, climbing over and past people, but Anton and I thought it prudent to wait our turn. A short climb, more fixed ropes, not necessary here so we unclipped: exposed ground but not too technical. We were able to move faster but a band of steeper rocks and another bottleneck soon stopped us. We shared hot drinks with friends from CSKA who had set up a tent in a snow-filled col to monitor events. The summit was close – we could see people waving a large blue Kazakhstan flag, with its golden eagle and rising sun – but I could also see dark clouds brewing and was beginning to regret our earlier delay. After waiting so long to climb Abai Peak, I began to wonder if today would bring success. We were close to the 4,000m level but it was beginning to get cold and dark. Messages began to filter down that the organisers were concerned about the changing weather, and people began talking about retreating back the way we had come. In the end the weather made the decision for us: it began to snow heavily. Anton and I shrugged and turned to descend. Quickly down-climbing the rock bands, and glissading down the snow slopes, we made it in time to catch a chair-lift back to the valley, with a vow to return to Abai Peak.

The snow continued for several weeks. From the city we watched hopefully as each parting of the clouds revealed Abai's towering summit slopes, each time with a little more snow than before. When the weather eventually improved we decided to approach the mountain from a different side, from the Malaya Almatinka Gorge, as it would allow an early start by staying in a hut close to the foot of Abai. Scattered in the trees above the



The Malaya Almatinka Gorge

Shymbulak ski resort was a small collection of climbers' huts. Most of these are old railway goods wagons (the Soviet Union had a very large rail network), fitted out with stoves and sleeping platforms, but the woods and adjacent rocky crags also housed a collection of rudimentary shelters and caves, built by Almaty's colony of climbers.

Anton and I arranged to spend Saturday night in Sergey's hut. We arrived in the early evening. Tramping across the snow, our head torches lighting the way, we could see the lights of other climbers moving silently through the night. The hut was cold and dark, but Sergey soon arrived to light the stove and open the first of the evening's bottles of vodka. We shared drinks and toasts as we waited for Denis and two friends from Siberia to arrive, before setting off to visit friends in another hut. Conditions in the huts are typically cold and basic, in contrast to the warmth of the friendship found inside. Russian hospitality meant there was a lot of vodka being drunk, and the Kazakh tradition was a big pot of Manty – a traditional dish of boiled noodle sacks full of meat and vegetables – freshly cooking on an old-fashioned stove in the corner of the hut.

In anticipation of the following day's effort, Anton and I avoided the vodka, only drinking cheap Georgian wine. My basic Russian prevented me from following all of the conversations, but it was clearly high-spirited

and good-natured, as these sons and daughters of the Soviet Union shared stories and laughter, just as in Muir and probably all around the world.

I was enjoying sitting and soaking in the atmosphere, but when Anton suggested we return to Sergey's hut and get some sleep I reluctantly agreed. The walk back through the woods was a real highlight for me. The ground was covered in a deep layer of frozen snow and an inky black sky was filled with a million stars. The light of a new moon reflected on the white of the snow, making it unnecessary to use our torches as we walked slowly back to Sergey's hut, anticipating the morning's climb. It was a bit of a surprise when Anton suddenly slid on the ice and went clattering to the ground. He uttered a few Russian curses but seemed none the worse for the fall and we continued on our way. The temperature was in the region of -30°C , so I was glad that Sergey had lit the stove before we went out. The sleeping arrangement was a simple wooden platform, similar to alpine huts. Anton and I crawled into our sleeping bags and quickly fell asleep. Some time later I was awoken by the sounds of people entering the hut. In the dim candlelight I could see it was a young couple from CSKA; they spread out sleeping bags and climbed onto the platform next to us, as Anton slept on. Later again I was wakened by the sounds of Sergey returning. It sounded as if he'd had rather a lot of vodka but he managed to find a space and I soon fell asleep again.

In the morning Anton had a badly swollen ankle, from his fall the night before, and it was clear that, once again, he wouldn't be able to climb Abai. Knowing how much this meant to him, I offered to return to the city, but knowing how much it meant to me he stubbornly refused my offer. I could only guess at Anton's disappointment as he stood framed in the doorway of Sergey's hut watching our small group set off in the cold dark morning.

A long, slow walk, feet crunching on hard-packed snow, led us to the foot of Abai Peak. For the next few hours we steadily climbed steep slopes of deep, soft snow, sweating heavily in the sub-zero temperatures. The dry Kazakh air and big snowfalls mean that the snow remains soft, deep and unconsolidated for long periods of time. Arriving at a small col we prepared for the final climb up a steep band of rock. Denis effortlessly led the way, followed by the Siberians who were training for an ascent of Everest. I followed, a little more slowly, feeling the effects of the altitude. In my time in Almaty, I discovered that I am normal up to the 3,500m level, but above that I notice the lack of oxygen and need to adjust accordingly. Sergey told me that he is okay up to the 6,000m mark. Denis, clearly with a better physiological make-up and numerous high altitude trips behind him, including ten 8,000m summits without artificial oxygen, says that he never feels the effects of altitude.

The summit was small and exposed. All around, the horizon was shaped by the grandeur of the mountains. To the south the blades of the

Tien Shan erupted from cushions of cloud, turned pink and harmless by the rays of the climbing sun. I thought of Anton waiting in the valley far below: it was time to descend. On a small, snow-covered ledge we stopped to eat and help the Siberians erect a tent. As part of their acclimatisation training they would spend the night here.

The distant horizon seemed far away as the sun crept slowly towards it, and then quickly slid out of sight, leaving only a soft red glow in the sky as a reminder of its warmth and energy. We continued our long descent. Anton was waiting patiently at the hut and together we returned to the city. I was a little sore and tired... but happy.

Once again Anton and I vowed to return to Abai, but this was never to happen. Several times we looked at Abai's steep slopes, planning to return, but Anton's contract in Almaty ended and he left for his home in Ekaterinburg deep in the heart of his beloved Russian motherland, and I moved on to Azerbaijan on the other side of the Caspian Sea. I hope that some day Anton will be able to obtain a visa and come to visit me in Aberdeenshire, to enjoy Scotland's hills and mountains; but the experiences I had in Kazakhstan, the sights and sounds, and the friendships I made, reminded me that there's more than the mountains.