

Ski Mountaineering in China

The Ascent of Mustagh Ata

John Cleare

The wind sweeps, sharp and mean, across the roof of China. Its buffeting is ceaseless and its icy fingers probe between my ribs and chill the sweat on my back. I shiver involuntarily. I should feel elated up here at 7545m on the summit of Mustagh Ata—but I cannot. As expedition leader—and guide—I know that I cannot relax until my team are home and dry and safe 3600m below.

'Grim' and Colin crouch beside me on the outcropping of black rock that is the top. It is the only rock in a desolation of snow and ice and streaming cloud. 'Grim' is a schoolmaster in New England and Colin is a heart-surgeon in Nevada. Fumbling through 4 pairs of gloves, I break a bar of mint cake, carried 16,000km for just this moment. Colin munches hungrily at his chunk beneath the surgical mask he is wearing—an original protection against facial frostbite. 'This is an old English mountain custom', I explain, 'Hillary and Tenzing ate it on the summit of Everest!' It is certainly colder here than it ever was on Everest when I was there!

Bob arrives. He is shouting ecstatically but his words are whipped away by the wind to be lost in the void behind us. He removes his ski and struggles up awkwardly to join us in his plastic boots. Bob is an anaesthetist in Los Angeles.

Now Johan approaches. He skis in apparent slow-motion, head down as if to avoid the cloud wreaths that scud so close above us. At 57 he is the veteran of the party, another Californian medical man. He is not fast but he is very determined.

Between the snow and the cloud I can see the white ramparts of the Kongur Shan to the north. Clearer, to the south and barely 160km distant, the horizon is rimmed by the saw-teeth of the western Karakoram—the frontier where once the Raj met Afghanistan and the empires of China and the Czar. Here was played the 'Great Game', still played today but by different adversaries . . . the 'Cross-Roads of Asia' . . . 'Bam-i-Dunya'—the Persian 'Roof of the World'.

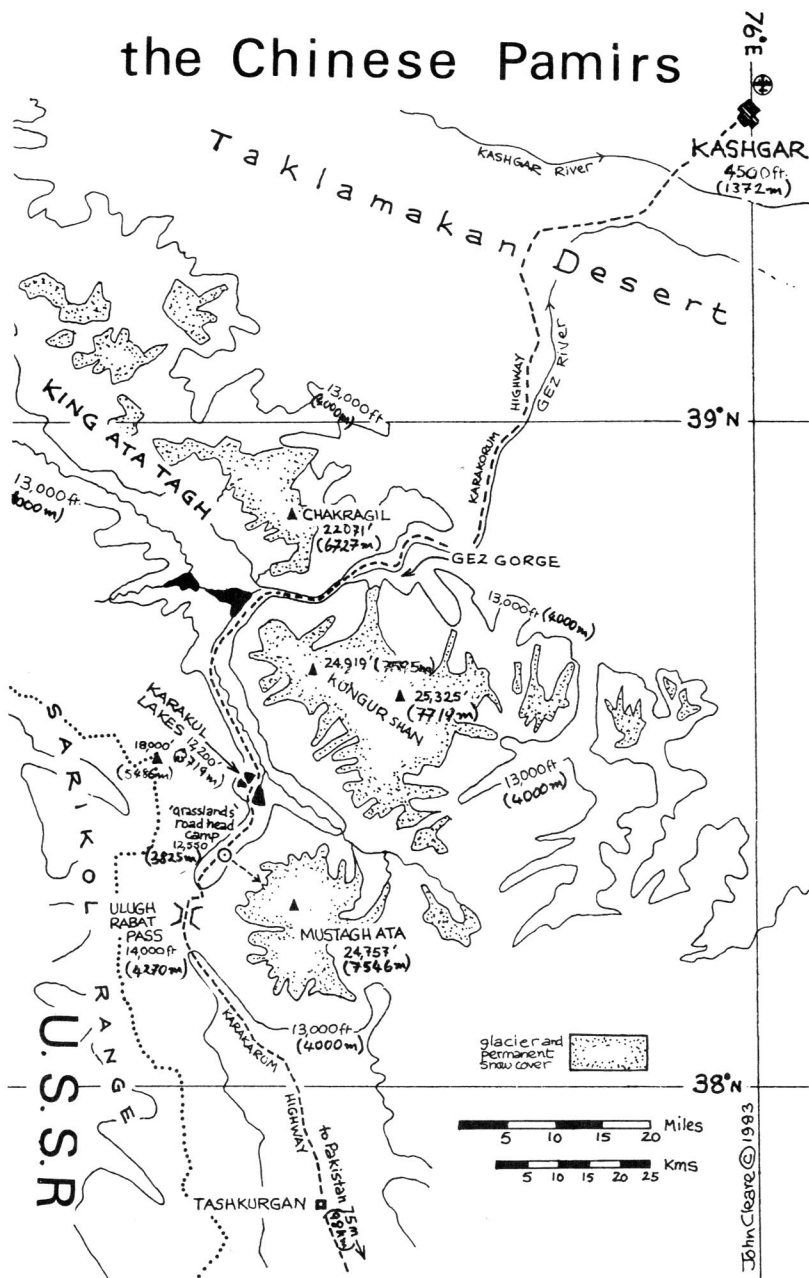
But this is no time for reveries. This is no place to linger. At 2.30pm on 17 August 1982—Beijing Time—we must head down. The summit plateau is plastered with iron-hard sastrugi, plates of wind-blown snow two or three feet thick. Skiing here is a penance, but probably easier than struggling on foot. But a sprained ankle could spell disaster. Tingling with adrenalin, I lead off towards the first of our bamboo marker wands, a black hairline against the white horizon.

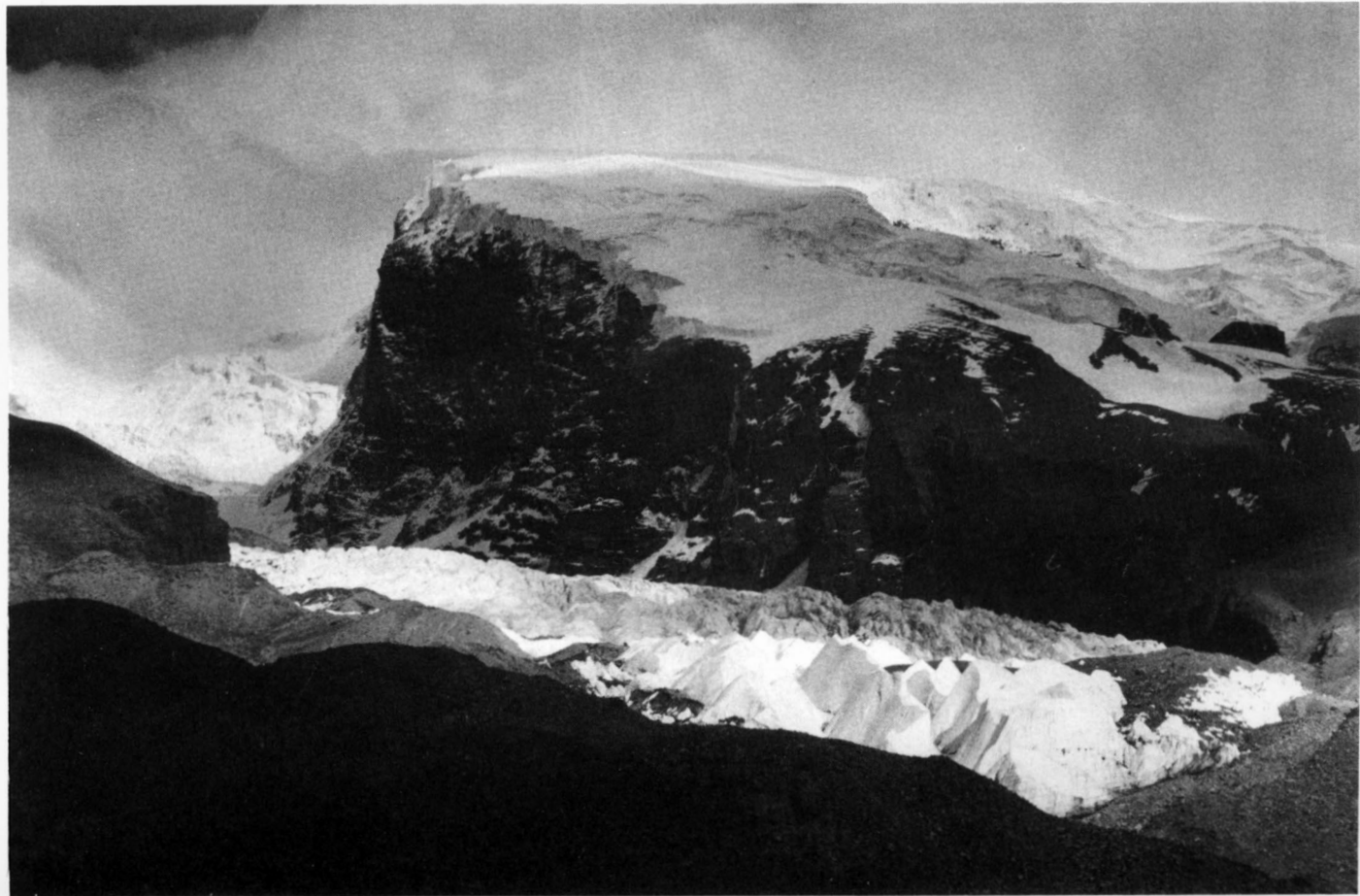


2 Departure from Camp 2 at 5730m on Mustagh Ata

Photo: John Cleare

the Chinese Pamirs





3 *Mustagh Ata seen from the west across the Jam-Bulak glacier*

Photo: John Cleare

This was no ordinary expedition. For 9 of the 11 members it was a holiday. Successful people, too busy with demanding professions to organise their own expeditions, they had bought into a 5 week 'package' organised by Mountain Travel Inc.—the Californian 'adventure travel' firm. Two members were women and there was one other Briton, Norman Croucher, a legless double amputee but nevertheless well known as an experienced mountaineer. For myself, and my Deputy Leader Steve McKinney—a climber and professional ski racer—the expedition was a job-of-work, as one might say.

Mustagh Ata is a huge isolated peak in China's far western province of Sinkiang, or rather 'Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region' as it is now more properly known. Technically it rises in the Pamir Range, exceeding—with its neighbour Kongur—the height of Pik Communism less than 320km distant in the Russian Pamirs. For obvious reasons, however, the Chinese prefer to consider the mountain as a northern outlier of the mysterious Kun Lun Shan.

The Soviet frontier follows the crest of a range of arid hills barely 24km from Mustagh Ata's summit across the open grassy valley of the Sarikol Pamir. Down this valley runs the ancient 'Silk Road' of Marco Polo, now part of the new Karakoram Highway linking Gilgit in Pakistan to Kashgar in China. For centuries this has been sensitive territory, especially since Russian imperial expansion in the 19th century created an actual frontier with the Chinese Empire. The Soviets did nothing to ease the situation and today, with the two Communist giants hardly on speaking terms, that sensitivity is further exacerbated by the Afghan rebellion close-by.

Mustagh Ata presents relatively straightforward-looking flanks of no great steepness to the west and south, broken only by a series of awesome ice-filled chasms from which great ice tongues protrude as low as 4600m into the undulating desert which surrounds the mountain. Flanked by huge black cliffs, the wide ridges between these chasms offer obvious lines upwards—always provided that a route through the ice-falls that cloak them can be found. From the north the mountain appears more intimidating, while the E face, dropping into a wild glacial valley to which foreigners have not yet been admitted, is said to be stupendous.

An interesting—if perhaps apocryphal—story surrounds the origin of the name, which translates to mean 'Ice Mountain Father'. Although the nomadic Kirghiz tribesmen of the surrounding country must have held the mountain in some awe—and indeed have a legend that the summit is graced by a beautiful garden where white-robed saints live in peace and harmony—it seems doubtful if they actually used that name. It is said that Francis Younghusband, as he passed by, during his epic 1887 ride from Peking to Delhi, asked a local herdsman the name of this huge peak. 'Mustagh!' was the reply—meaning 'Ice Mountain' of course, 'Ata'—'Oh Father'—in deference to Younghusband. That, at least, is the tale!



4 *Mustagh Ata seen from the north-west across Karakul lake*

Photo: John Cleare

The first attempt to climb it was in 1894 when Sven Hedin made no less than 4 assaults mounted on a yak! He had a theory that this would obviate the effects of High Altitude Mountain Sickness: needless to say with the snowline in high summer at around 5200m he didn't get very far.

Sir Aurel Stein made a try in 1900 but it was not until 1947 that the summit was actually approached, if not reached. Eric Shipton, while Consul in Kashgar, together with Bill Tilman and Gyalzen Sherpa, was forced back from 7300m by impossible snow conditions and frost-bitten feet.

Finally, in 1956 in the days of Sino-Soviet accord, members of a large joint Russian/Chinese expedition, led by E. A. Beletsky, reached the summit. Three years later they were followed by a large Chinese party which included eight women: this was part of the training programme for the successful Chinese Everest Expedition of the following year.

The responsibilities of leading such an expedition were daunting. Previous ascents had been made by very accomplished mountaineers, while my team of fee-paying clients were an unknown quantity. I had decided early on that my slim chance of success in the all-too-short 21 days I was allowed on the mountain, lay in strict acclimatisation to altitude and careful placing of camps. We would 'climb high—sleep low' placing 5 camps at 600m intervals and spending 3 nights at each, meanwhile carrying loads to the next site. And then only 500m to the top . . . The main dangers would be weather and sickness: the difficulties, logistics and route-finding. There are no sherpas to help you in China.

Early on we met our Liaison Officer, Mr Chu Yin-hua, quite a senior man in the CMA hierarchy and one of the first two Chinese to reach the summit of Everest via the NE ridge in 1960. It was he who had led the steep craglet of the Second Step in stocking feet—an achievement which aroused much western scepticism at the time—and now he has no toes and walks with some difficulty.

'The final 6m were difficult' he explained to me 'and actually slightly overhanging. But I hammered an ice-piton into a crack and got up somehow. I was very young and inexperienced at the time'. He seemed to think that an expert rock-climber such as Mallory was, should have been able to overcome the problem with little serious difficulty in 1924. Mr Chu had also been to the summit of Mustagh Ata in 1959 and had been Gillette's LO on the mountain in 1980. He proved a fine and generous friend, liberal with good advice and none of our problems were too much trouble for him to deal with. Our young interpreter, Mr Su Ker Ren, who had ridden an old bicycle 4800km across China to plead for a job with the CMA, also became a good friend who helped smooth our path and even carried loads to Camp 1 to aid our logistics.

From Beijing we flew first to Urümqi, the capital of Xinjiang. On the let-down to the airport we flew past the northern flank of Bogdo Feng, a truly attractive rock and ice peak in Chamonix style and at 5445m the



5 Peak 5780m (the Gez Matterhorn), a northern outlier of the Kungur massif

Photo: John Cleare

final upthrust of the Tien Shan Range. Surrounded by beautiful alpine country of pine woods and lakes, access from Urümqi apparently is easy. Several expeditions were defeated before the first ascent was made by a Japanese party in September 1981.

Next day we flew onwards over a lower section of the Tien Shan characterised by perfect specimens of matterhorn peaks and cirque glaciers and the most inhospitable-looking Takla Makan Desert to Kashgar, a bustling modern town. We left for the mountain itself at dawn, travelling in a bus and followed by a rickety truck loaded high with gear.

Avenues of poplars, very reminiscent of Baltistan, gave way to gravelly desert until we plunged into the narrow defiles of the Gez Gorge which divides the extensive Kongur massif from Chakragil and the King Ata Tag range. The gorge is profound and one cannot but admire the engineers who pushed the Karakoram Highway through it. At times we could make out the ancient line of the 'Silk Road' clinging to the precipice across the thunderous Gez River. Fine peaks, both rock spires and icy summits like the elegant 'Gez Matterhorn' crowd in on the valley before it eventually debouches into a wide desolate strath at almost 3300m—over 1800m above Kashgar. The road winds beneath the soaring slabs and hanging glaciers of Kongur's north western outlier (c. 6200m) to lead southward into green meadows and our first glimpse of Mustagh Ata rising through boiling cloud ahead.

It was evening when we pulled off the road beside the fast-flowing Subaschi River at 3810m to set up 'Grasslands Camp'—our roadhead. There was a welcome ribbon of green running down a broad pamiir between arid desert hills—we were more than 130km beyond the last tree—but we were beneath our mountain at last. It was still light at 11 pm for all China works on Beijing Time, but by then we were asleep. There was much organising to do and gear to be sorted and repacked into camel loads and I had planned the next day for rest, acclimatisation and logistics. Morale was high . . . at least until late in the evening when an anguished American stumbled into camp. He was the leader of the Colorado Expedition who were on the mountain ahead of us. His 2 summit climbers were missing—presumed dead. With his interpreter he was making for the road hoping to hitch a lift to Kashgar in an attempt to organise an aerial search—a forlorn hope. We gave him hot soup and what help we could but the holiday feeling had evaporated.

Later we learned that one man had eventually returned, badly frost-bitten and alone. We met him when we made a reconnaissance to Base Camp the next day. Their high camp had been a full 1138m below the summit, yet their unacclimatised companions had seemed unable to support them. Lost in white-out conditions, they had endured several unplanned bivouacs before one man had disappeared. It was a grim lesson for, as Tilman wrote 'Big mountains are stern teachers'.

Camels carried our equipment across the desert to Base Camp at

4450m in a sheltered hollow in the moraines. The CMA accepts full responsibility for its guests up to Base Camp—but not above. Our three Chinese staff, the Liaison Officer, the Interpreter and the Cook, set up house to look after us in the style accustomed, while we pushed upwards to establish Camp 1 at 5120m on the snow line high above. The route, a different one from that taken by the previous expeditions, lay straight up a steep ridge covered in loose scree but it presented no problems at all and we soon got used to the steep slog. Just below Camp 1, the massive skull and horns of a Marco Polo sheep—*ovis poli*—lay among the rocks, a bold creature indeed. Above Camp 1 we took to our skis, climbing easily on skins for 300m out of a hanging cwm and over a series of angled snow fields leading to a ramp beneath a large zone of tumbled seracs. Half way up we passed the site of the Colorado Camp 2 and ‘liberated’ a useful quantity of abandoned fuel and food. Now the ice forced us to the left, and round each corner we found we could advance another 100m or so into the maze. We actually crossed few crevasses . . . but we skirted some real whoppers. Eventually we established Camp 2 at 5520m in a safe and somewhat sheltered snowbowl above the worst of that particular icefall. Unloaded, the descent made superb skiing—but not without some danger. Just below the camp the route skirted one of the enormous rock precipices and it was obvious that the prize for a fluffed turn would be the world record ski jump! Lower down, the horizon of each snow-field had to be crossed at exactly the right place to avoid impossible terrain and the snow was too good to hold many tracks.

After the planned 3 carries we occupied Camp 2. A sequence of snowy cwms above, each leading into the bottom of the next, led us upwards into another major crevassed zone and here, in a wide gulch between 2 seracs, we discovered a single tent. It was the Colorado top camp—their Camp 4 at 6370m. The tent was full of goodies, more fuel, a gas stove, and exotic foods such as freeze-dried ice-cream and shrimp cocktails. There was even a small cassette player and tapes! We pitched our Camp 3 alongside and that night Steve and I listened to the inspiring strains of ‘Chariots of Fire’ while we lay in our sleeping bags: it was the last film I had seen before leaving home.

The weather had now deteriorated but I had carefully marked the route with wands, jotting the compass bearing to the previous wand on each scrap of flag while it, or the ski tracks leading from it, were still visible. This proved a worthwhile exercise because, despite continuous white-out conditions, progress was maintained and Camp 3 was occupied on schedule. Americans seem unfamiliar with the compass navigation we take for granted on the British hills, but without it we would have ground to a halt—or worse.

As I had anticipated, the team had thinned out. One man had returned to Kashgar, another was very sick at Base Camp unable to take food of any sort, while the 2 women had decided Camp 2 was far

enough. There were no cases of altitude sickness which pleased me no end: it seemed that my plan was working. Meanwhile the redoubtable Norman Croucher had discovered that his skis were incompatible with his two tin legs and he reached Camp 2 on snow-shoes. His ebullient cheerfulness concealed the prodigious efforts he had made to get there.

Then the storm hit us. Squeezed 3 into each 2-man tent, we huddled in our sleeping bags for 2 unpleasant days, killing time by overhauling the black-smoking fuel-guzzling pressure stoves on which life depended. Without the extra Colorado food we would have been very hungry: as it was we could indulge in tuna salad, cottage cheese and unlimited candy. This is when personalities fray, tempers crack and one learns the true measure of one's companions. Obviously such dangers are inherent on a 'package tour' such as this, with companions previously unknown to one another, and it says much for everyone that when finally the weather eased we were still friends. At dusk on the second day we looked out between the icicles to watch the shadows lengthening over the desert hills far beneath and the red glow lingering behind the Russian Pamirs.

Navigation now was easy: it was straight upwards to the top. Even so it took over 5 hours to ski the next 600m. We had to cut platforms into the steep slope to pitch Camp 4 at 7016m—2 tiny tents lonely on a vast bleak snowslope. Having lost 2 valuable days, time was now running short, and I decided to occupy Camp 4 after only the second carry.

But another problem had reared its ugly head. Some 20 minutes above Camp 3, on our first sortie upwards, I espied a mysterious black object high on the slope ahead. Could it be the missing Coloradan? We put on all speed. A serious emergency loomed.

In a shallow snowhole we found 'T'—the sick man from Base Camp! He was alive. He was able to talk. Apparently he had felt better, evaded our Chinese friends and, spending a night in empty Camp 1 had reached Camp 2 where he had sat out the storm with the 2 women and Norman. As the storm eased on the second afternoon they had been unable to prevent him setting off upwards again, carrying minimal equipment, in an endeavour to locate Camp 3. He missed it. He spent the night in his shallow snow hole. Luckily the weather had been kind. He was far from lucid!

I was very cross and, indeed, rattled. We were short of food, spare clothing and tent space. This was not the sort of emergency for which I had planned. My orders had been flagrantly disobeyed and now the likely success of the entire expedition was in serious jeopardy. To add insult to injury, 'T' issued an ultimatum: either we would take him to the summit or he would go on his own. Clearly, in the light of what had already transpired, this was no idle threat. While I realised that there was no way he could reach the summit alone, I could not risk the expedition becoming a major mountain-rescue exercise because of one man's derangement. Had I the luxury of sherpas, I would have had no compunction in having him bundled down to safety by the 2 strongest.



Photo: John Cleare

6 *Chu Yin-hua, 'Master of Sports', the first Chinese to climb Everest and the liaison officer to the Mustagh Ata expedition*

But here there was just Steve and me. It was a difficult situation.

Luckily Steve McKinney is the late holder of the world's downhill ski speed record at rather over 125 mph: he is among the fastest and strongest skiers in the world. While 'T' was recovering at Camp 3 and absorbing hot soup, for he was still unable to take solid food, Steve would race down to Camp 2, returning laden with fresh supplies and accompanied by Norman Croucher. I would occupy Camp 4 meanwhile with the 4 remaining climbers, as planned. Following in our tracks one day behind us, Steve would lead Norman and 'T' very slowly to Camp 4, and then, if possible, to the summit beyond. Aided by our ability to descend on ski very swiftly, our 2 parties would be mutually supporting. And so it happened.

At Camp 4 another storm hit us. This time we had little food and less fuel. It was far colder. We dozed and worried for a day and a night as the blizzard played weird music through our skis and poles stuck upright in the driving snow outside. But I knew, if the worst came to the worst, I could navigate by compass direct to Camp 3 600m below.

It was hardly dawn when I woke. The wind had died. We were enveloped in thick mist. Visibility was nil. I brewed tea and dozed again. Suddenly it was 9.30 and the cloud was streaming away and the sky above was blue. Now for the top! It took nearly 2 hours to get away, scraping the ice from our ski bindings and digging out the tents, but we all climbed away strongly and I was confident there were no difficulties ahead.

We have already seen that all went well with the summit assault, although the skiing in descent had to be very defensive. We met Steve's little party at Camp 4. They were going well but were very tired. All 3 reached the summit the next day in good style, Norman, of course, on his snow-shoes. On their descent 'T' discarded his snow-goggles and developed snow-blindness. He was forced to abandon his skis and proceed downwards agonisingly slowly on foot, roped up to the ever-patient Norman.

Our own descent was swifter but not easy. Snow-fields had become ice-slopes in the high summer, crevasses had opened and as we dismantled each camp as we passed through it, packs grew larger and larger. At Base Camp my own weighed in at 44kg, the sort of load that makes skiing quite difficult but walking on this sort of terrain impossible. But we cleared the mountain in one go, indeed we had to, for time had now run right out. An epic night camel journey brought us to the roadhead on the appointed day and our Chinese friends kept smiling and were delighted to have been part of our success. It was banquets all the way back to Beijing. Quite a holiday for some!