

The British Caucasus Expedition 1986

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Plates 54–56

Mr Okano had been in the crevasse for eight days and nights when he was found. Although he was most inexpertly rescued, (A786, 191–197, 1981), he remained sufficiently grateful to send each member of the rescuing team a year's subscription to the National Geographical Magazine, and a copy of *Mountains of the World* in Japanese. *Mountains of the World* is a glorious volume, with excellent photographs of just about every mountain anyone has ever heard of. In the kitchen of a north London house my copy was on the table.

Mick Fowler, Bert Symmonds, Maggie Urmston and myself were drooling over the shots of the Caucasian Peaks. Ushba in particular gripped our imagination. The picture showed a fierce double-headed Matterhorn. It looked as if an enormous Dolomite face had been welded to the N face of the Droites. At its highest, the W face rose 1600m above the glacier. Also scattered on the crowded table were Russian tourist pamphlets, information sheets, and two volumes of Naimov's *Central Caucasus* in Russian. After a great deal of confusion, during which several peaks and chains of mountains were wrongfully ascribed to the Ushba area, it transpired that Ushba featured in a third, absent, volume of Naimov. I could see that our relationship with the Cyrillic alphabet was going to be a difficult one.

Why go to Russia? It was Mick's idea. He wanted to go climbing for no more than a month, and yet he wanted somewhere more exploratory and with greater ethnic interest than Chamonix. Few British mountaineers had written about the Soviet Union, though in Tsarist times they had dominated the Caucasian climbing scene.

We experienced the same bureaucratic controls and minor tribulations as our predecessors. For those with an appetite for such things, a full description can be found in John Town's article 'Back in the USSR' (A7 86, 126–132, 1981), David Broadhead's contribution in this issue, and our expedition report which may be found in the AC library. There was only one important difference in 1986: Gorbachov had restricted the production, and therefore the consumption, of alcohol. He had also declared the entire climbing region of the Caucasus to be an alcohol-free 'Sports' zone. Yuri (which is Russian for George) and Viktor, our 'guide' and 'translator', explained the new temperance with some pride, clearly expecting our approval . . . or, at least, understanding.

The hotel at Azau was to be our somewhat sybaritic base. We spent our first couple of days there preparing for the 'training climb'. This was necessary because the peaks are generally over 4000m, with faces in excess of 1000m. Also the Soviets were unhappy, for reasons explained below, for parties of unknown ability to attempt the more serious and difficult routes. Maggie and Bert chose Cheget Kara Tau for their first climb, and they were to be accompanied to the start of the route by Viktor the Translator. Unfortunately Viktor led them to



Photo: Mick Fowler

the lesser-known Pik Germagenov, where they were left to struggle with a long, loose, and justly unpopular route. Coincidentally, he also spoke English less perfectly than Yuri the Guide. Perhaps it was this last characteristic that Maggie and Bert had in mind when they got the description of their next route on Pik Jantugan from a large party of Hungarians, who spoke no English at all. Although they were close to the summit before turning back, they failed to locate any part of the Hungarian route. Strange, isn't it?

Mick and I were directed to the 'Islands' route on Nakra Tau (4277m) for our first efforts. This turned out to be similar in character to the Frendo Spur, but finishing 600m higher, and with what Bill Murray might have referred to as a Sporting Descent. In other words, the descent is considerably more serious than the ascent, though that too has its trying moments.

Choose any great face in the Caucasus: if there is a major rock line, that is the Abalakov route. If the main difficulties are ice, that is where the Khirgiani route goes. The Islands route consists of three great rock buttresses connected by delicate ice-ridges, 1200m in all. It is natural Abalakov ground; he first climbed it in 1947, after a 13-year absence from mountaineering caused by frostbite amputations (see *Mountain 110*, 19, 1986).

In some ways Caucasian climbing must resemble Alpinism before the war. The absence of téléphériques and huts implies the extensive use of bivouac sites beneath routes. These sites have perfectly flat, tent-size platforms, often in small groups. Each platform is the result of considerable skill and labour, of the dry-stone foundation class. We found a colony of platforms by the crashed helicopter mentioned by MacInnes in *Look Behind the Ranges*. The bivouac was impeccable, but the climbing turned out to be considerably less elegant than the line. There was much loose rock (to the evil delight of Fowler), bad ice and, later, poor weather. The lower approaches are, in addition, threatened by séracs. Indeed it was the materialization of that threat that defeated the MacInnes attempt in 1970.

Each party is required to carry a radio and make contact with the base at Azau via the relay at Priut three times a day. We were able to reach a first-class platform beneath the summit slabs in time for our evening call. The weather cleared to give us the usual postcard views of setting suns and Elbrus, (the highest peak in Europe) and excellent radio reception with the silver zeppelin, Priut, which appears to be the only mountain hut in the region. We listened into a one-sided conversation with the Spanish team.

'This is Priut. Please report your position, Madrid.'

'We hear you. Please speak English . . . slowly.'

We knew that our friends spoke not one word of conventional English, but the conversation went on.

'We understand you are under a boulder, Madrid.'

'Where is this boulder, Madrid?'

The clear weather held until the following day. On the summit we passed a fine colony of platforms and received our first view of Ushba, partially visible behind Dongus Orun, Nakra's larger neighbour.

The descent was, as mentioned above, 'sporting', and involved the crossing of two passes and three glaciers as well as the S face of Nakra. But we had

unethically good weather, and were able to plan the route from the summit, before getting lost in its detail. Much time was saved, and we returned to Azau shortly before Maggie and Bert and, of course, Madrid. During the next two days we planned our attempt on Ushba, discovered an excellent East German guide to the area and the mysterious third volume of Naimov. We got to know some of the participants of this international camp. There were about 60 in all, comprising teams from all over Europe and a collection of American youths on an exchange programme. Apart from the teams from Spain and Hungary, there were also climbers from Switzerland (Ticino), Poland, West Germany and, later, one from Canada. This was Pat Morrow, a photographer who came to Azau with the ambition (which he fulfilled) of climbing the main summit of Elbrus and thereby making himself a member of that élite corps who have stood on the highest summit of each continent. (By the way, Mick has now ticked Africa and Europe, and only has the two Americas, Asia and Antarctica to go.) Among our Soviet hosts were veterans of the highly successful 1979 Soviet Everest Expedition, one of whom, Valentine Ivanov, is due to lead their next Himalayan Expedition which will be to Kangchenjunga. There was an atmosphere of the Olympic village about Azau. Everyone spoke the same language . . . mountaineering.

For their next excursion, Maggie and Bert decided to attempt Bzeduk (4272m), followed by an ascent of Pik Kavkas (4000m). The third volume of Naimov was studied at some length, Maggie memorizing whole passages translated from the Cyrillic. The Soviets were against this undertaking which they considered rather bold (the climb, not the translation), but the advice was strongly resisted, and eventually none other than Ivanov himself accompanied them for the first half-mile, directing them towards the Bzeduk glacier. No doubt this magnificent gesture was intended to make up for Viktor The Translator, but it did not take into account the full effects of Naimov. It was not till they were a good way up Pik Kavkas, following Naimov's description of Bzeduk to the letter, that a lifting of the clouds showed them the route they should have been on . . . 'way over there'. For some reason Bert chose this moment to inform Priut that they were one hour from the summit. What followed was little less than a tour-de-force. They decided to climb both summits and the connecting pinnacled ridge. They spent two nights out without stoves, and with little food, and the climbing was considerably harder than they could have guessed. The final gendarme proved to be the crux, and eventually was turned by diagonal abseils. Throughout the whole of the traverse, they continued to tell Priut they were still only one hour from the summit, three times a day.

Meanwhile, Mick and I were on Ushba. During our preparations in Azau the Soviets had been wonderfully enthusiastic about our ambitions, but it transpired that there were two schools of thought about the best approach to the W face. Ivanov favoured an approach starting up the Shkhelda glacier but forking right early towards the Malle Shkhelda col, then traversing behind Malle Shkhelda and Filcoturni, round to another col leading down to the S Shkhelda glacier, and so down to the W face of Ushba. The merits of this route were supposed to be its inherent safety, and the superb views of Ushba given by a



descent down the long Shkhelda glacier. On the other hand, the possibilities for getting lost on this approach seemed to us . . . limitless. We chose the more conventional Ushba ice-fall and Ushba plateau approach, which had the additional advantage of being our obvious line of descent. The Ushba ice-fall has an ugly reputation, the plateau (c 4000m) is no place to be in a storm, and moreover we would never get 'full frontal' views of the W face. These were the main considerations against, and we pondered them as we staggered up the Shkhelda glacier towards the fork of the two approaches. We looked up to where Malle Shkhelda and Filcoturni were supposed to be, but could only make out an indistinguishable array of aiguilles and high combes. We continued our stagger in self-congratulatory mood.

During our entire visit we found hospitality and interest in the western way of life. In the mountains the Soviets were particularly friendly and invariably forced tea and, well . . . delicacies, I suppose, on us. Soon after seeing, or, rather, not seeing the Malle Shkhelda etc, we met a large party of Muskovites who insisted on sharing their 'delicacies' with us. These turned out to be strangely delicious. Little lumps of fat, croutons, chopped raw onions, and the ubiquitous raw garlic were all to be dipped in what appeared to be home-made tomato ketchup. They were all smiles and gestures but seemed unable to speak any language other than Russian, except for a bit of Ukrainian, some Polish, Serbo-Croat, Lithuanian, Georgian and a smattering (no one has more) of Hungarian. This we found out with sign language. As a result we never really discovered what it was that followed this odd little meal. It came in a cup and was grey, sweet and viscous. That was all we could make of it. We were still confused when we said our goodbyes and continued our long stagger into the endless moraines and up the glacier. We met the same party a week later in another valley and although they hugged us like old friends and we gestured wildly, we still could not find out what was in that cup. Still, it must have been good, for we reached our goal two hours later without stopping to rest. The goal was a colony of perfectly flat platforms collectively called the Deutsch bivouac. We chose the nearest and erected a tent, which was to be a base in case of bad weather. The view was dominated by the towering N face of Pik Shchurovsky with prominent rock-ribs on its right (two Abalakov routes) fading to steep ice on the left (one Khirgiani route). All the routes appear to be TD to TD+ standard.

To the right of Shchurovsky was the big bad ice-fall. We started up this the next day. Mist and strong winds had postponed our early start, but the wind dropped by dawn and, because it was still cloudy, we felt it was probably safe to venture up the ice-fall. The lower part was relatively easy crevassed ground but led like a trap to the séracs leering over the top. We were told of perennial fatalities here and, when we returned four days later, our line of ascent had been obliterated by a major sérac fall. After four hours we were wandering around the Ushba plateau looking for a route through the battleship-size crevasses to the Uzbenski Pass. The weather had cleared, and we could see that there were in fact seven passes from the plateau; unfortunately we did not know which one of them was the Uzbenski pass. By a process of elimination we guessed our route to be one of two possibilities between Ushba and Shkhelda,

and we chose the line nearer Shkhelda. We followed a set of tracks for a while until mid-afternoon when, in the burning sun, we found ourselves descending a dangerous broken glacier. We were descending to the foot of the W face of Ushba, and as we descended more of the face came into view. Eventually we were able to see the bottom quarter of the face. The summit pyramid of the W face of the N peak had a beautiful ice-gully which was barred about four or five hundred metres below the summit by a rock-band. This was our intended new route. To the left of the summit-cliffs were the ice-fields climbed in 1982 by a Russian team. Below the rock-band the line followed icy mixed ground and shallow ramps above a double bergschrund. The bad news was that we could now see that the approach to the double bergschrund from the base of the mountain was threatened by unacceptably dangerous séracs. The only answer was to climb back up to the Ushba plateau and traverse into the double bergschrunds, as was recommended in the East German guide. There was absolutely no alternative, and grimly we made our way back up the Uzbenski ice-fall, over slushy snow-bridges and under dripping séracs to the edge of the plateau. From there we descended to a little knoll overlooking the lower part of the face, and to our delight we were rewarded with a large bivouac platform.

The weather during the night was appalling, so we spent the next day on the knoll, drying out our sleeping bags and gear when the sun came out. Mick sunbathed in a hesitant sort of way, and somehow the pricker for the stove broke and the wire could not be found among the stones. Neither of us had any spares, and the stove duly clogged up. The sun was out—there was no water, and, since we had no intention of abandoning the climb, we analysed the problem while watching the face for signs of avalanche or stonefall.

We needed a substitute pricker and, after a number of false starts, we discovered that we could fashion one from a wire strand out of a head-torch. Pleased with our improvisation we settled down for a 1.30am start. The access to the face was straightforward—a single abseil. A couple of hours soloing, in that private world created by the head-torch beam, brought us up against the first difficulties. The light grew stronger, and we soon found ourselves passing the main objective dangers, the huge séracs at the 'weld' of the two faces. The position was superb. The crux, as we guessed from the bivouac, was the spectacular 100m granite wall guarding the entrance to our gully. My main memory of following the cracks and slabs of the hard pitch was admiration that Mick could have led it in only 20 minutes. What a pity he took an hour to find a belay. Another couple of less desperate pitches over partly iced slabs brought us to the final groove, but suddenly we had become exhausted. We slowed down to a crawl. We just about reached the summit in time for our evening call, to hear that Maggie and Bert were one hour from the summit. We settled down on the customary platform, unable to make the stove function at all: the improvised pricker was too thin. The sun set over Elbrus, an island in a sea of clouds. We were on the only other island in the universe that evening.

In weather which continued to be unethically perfect we descended in six hours to the Ushba plateau, where a party of Russian geophysicists from Kiev were camped. We had given up on our stove and had been dehydrated since the previous morning, so we were easily persuaded to join them for tea. We



56 *Shkheda (Elbrus in background L).*

Photo: Mick Fowler

compared our equipment and were impressed to find that they were going to traverse Ushba, (definitely a *Grande Course*), using equipment that was largely homemade and antique. Our plastic boots and supergaiters made us self-conscious as we were reminded how wet leather gets on glaciers. They used hauser-laid ropes and knitted gloves. Their metal work, however, seemed rather superior to ours; particularly the large quantity of titanium ice-screws. Mick and I were not so sure about the titanium meat-hooks which they called ice-fifis. Apparently these are used for direct aid on ice but either the explanation, or our understanding of it, was somewhat confused. Eventually the conversation, which till now had been carried out in Pidgin Franglais/Deutsch, came round to Robbie Burns. Shakespeare is okay—but Burns is actually popular, it seems. One of the physicists quoted stanzas in a heavy Russian accent. We think it might have been . . . 'ha whare ye gaun, ye crowlin' ferlie . . .' etc, but his rendering of the Scottish had obviously been affected by its translation into the Cyrillic. We were detained until our next radio call: Priut had become concerned about our progress. We explained that we were having tea, whereupon we heard them relay this message to Azau.

'Priut to Azau, Priut to Azau . . . London is having tea . . . and Merlin (Maggie and Bert) are one hour below the summit'. Mick said they must be going round the summit in circles.

When we got back to Azau we had been away for six days, and had only been on the actual face for one of those days. This is how the Caucasus differs from the Western Alps; no lifts, no huts, old-fashioned mountaineering, only for the real amateurs.

After Ushba and Bzeduk, Maggie, Mick and I puffed and wheezed our way up Elbrus, though Bert took a more detached view, and did not consider the effort worthwhile. He can be very detached at times.

Back in Azau, most of the spare time was taken up with the different nationalities comparing attitudes and experiences. In the Soviet Union mountaineering is classed as a 'sport' rather than a 'hobby'. It is analogous to the British chess system. Anyone can play, but only those with a suitable grading can take part in the sport. In chess the gradings culminate in the titles of Master and Grand Master; in Soviet mountaineering, the maximum grade is Master (or, more fully, Master of Sport). In order to achieve their grades, candidates are tested in the theory and practice of the sport. They must maintain a logbook and take part in competitions. Obviously, as competitions play a part in the gradings, they are closer to chess tournaments than climbing competitions as we see them in the West. The event we witnessed was a team sport, and it was no part of the aim to find the finest 'individual' athlete. Climbers attempt routes of the difficulty and seriousness appropriate to their grade, having gained a secure foundation in mountaineering. This relates to the rescue system: no helicopters are available, and so the daily radio calls are very important in locating accidents and getting the help of the nearest climbers. It is essential that parties do not overstretch themselves, and the camp organizers are cautious about unknown foreign teams blithely setting off for the harder routes.

It is as well to put the recent British activity in the Caucasus in some sort of historical perspective. It is well known that members of the Alpine Club were

among the pioneers in the area. The extent to which the Club dominated the scene is perhaps less appreciated. Of the ten highest peaks, no fewer than nine were first ascended by Club members. The roll-call is familiar: the names include (in no particular order) H Walker, A W Moore, C Dent, T G Longstaff, A F Mummery, Vittorio Sella and their famous guides P Knubel, F Dévouassoud, A Burgener, H Zurfluh. Harold Raeburn's 1914 expedition was the last British visit before the October Revolution brought this period to a close.

The Soviet style of mountaineering established its character during the interbellum. It officially began in 1923, we are told by E Beletsky, with the mass ascent of Kasbek by 25 Georgian students. Long traverses at consistently high altitudes became fashionable—in 1938 Beletsky himself led an 18-day traverse in the Bezingi massif from Shkara to Lyalvera. Later, in 1956, Ivan Galustov's team completed a traverse of 15 summits, spending 31 days above 4000 metres. A third characteristic feature was that major routes came to be ascended by local farmers and workers, rather than by wealthy Muscovites (the tsarist tradition). So the new leading activists included such provincials as the Abalakov brothers (Siberian) and Khirgiani (Georgian).

The system of International Mountaineering Camps was inaugurated in 1974; before then the problem of access was rarely capable of solution. Only four British expeditions appear to have successfully negotiated the bureaucracy between 1917 and 1974. Jenkins, Taylor, Beaumont and Hodgkin visited the region in 1937, and in a remarkably successful trip climbed new routes on four major peaks: Jailik (4533m), Adyrsu Bashi (4370m), Ushba South (4710m) and Tetnuld (4852m). In 1958 an expedition described in *The Red Snows* was led by John Hunt. In 1962 and 1970 MacInnes completed the arduous traverse of Shkhelda and one of the hard lines on Pik Shchurovski. Since 1974 several British parties have visited the range, but, as far as we can see from the available literature, only Rubens and Broadhead climbed anything of technical merit.

In conclusion, all members of our team felt that, though rather expensive by our standards, the trip had been extremely worthwhile, and we heartily recommend the area. We have plans to return to the Soviet Union in 1988.

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