Svanetia: The Legendary Kingdom of the Caucasus

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(*Plates 61, 62*)

In the late 1980s, partly as a result of the development of *glasnost* but more importantly from a need to obtain hard currency, certain Soviet mountaineering clubs advertised climbing and trekking holidays in various ranges of their vast country. Thus, in 1989, Trisha and I applied for an International Climbing Camp in the Altai range of Siberia but, having received a letter of acceptance, we fell foul of Soviet bureaucracy. Letters, faxes, telexes and phone calls met a brick wall and our visa applications landed on stony ground.

However, in 1990 Karakoram Experience managed to overcome the red tape and obtain permission for a party of eleven to spend two weeks trekking and climbing in the Caucasus. Although, over the last few years, a handful of foreigners had managed to climb in the Caucasus this was the first formal group from Britain to visit the range since John Hunt's expedition in 1958, described in his book *The Red Snows*.[1]

The Caucasus range is the natural boundary between Russia in the north and Georgia in the south and, spanning 500 miles between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, can be said to divide Europe from Asia. Apart from the massive cone of Elbruz, a volcano extinct for two million years rising to 5642m on the N side, the peaks of the Caucasus are dramatic in form, their rock spires rising steeply from deep wooded valleys. The permanent snow level is at a height of between 2500 and 3000m; thus most mountains are festooned with hanging glaciers and glistening ice-fields, while vast boulder-strewn glaciers fill the upper basins. In scale the Caucasus could be placed between the Alps and the Himalaya.

One of the principal joys for us was the wild and unspoilt nature of the range. There is a minimum of development in the valleys, only the most rudimentary paths, no tree felling and virtually no system of mountain huts or refuges apart from the monstrous Priut hut on Elbruz. The grassy alps are seamed by bubbling streams and are ablaze with flowers. We picked wild raspberries and red currants and saw ibex, known locally as *tur*, on the moraines. Wild boar and bears are said to live in the forests.

KE had agreed a programme of trekking and climbing with officials in Moscow. We were to be based at Baksan Camp, but the implementation of the plans in the mountains was another matter. Vitali Medvedev, our guide, interpreter and mentor, managed to secure the help of the leader of Baksan's mountain rescue squad, a huge bull of a man whom we christened Kojak

because he had not a single hair on his head. Kojak was immensely kind and co-operative and, believing us to be incompetent, assigned several of his best henchmen to us for the duration of our stay. Our two leaders from KE, Glenn Rowley and Terry Ralphes, were hardened Himalayan and Alpine climbers and the entire party were fit and committed, but I suspect that Kojak was mindful of the horrific avalanche on Peak Lenin in the Pamirs a week or two earlier which swept 42 climbers, many of them foreign visitors, to their deaths.

Baksan Mountaineering Camp is a cross between a 1950s Outward Bound school and a Butlin's holiday camp. The peace and tranquillity of the pine woods is broken at 7am by the loudspeakers announcing *reveille*. Soon afterwards long streams of extremely fit and lithe young men and women can be seen queuing up at the cold water taps to complete their ablutions before setting out on a run through the trees. At 8am they are summoned to muster parade where they line up in rows for the day's briefing.

As privileged guests we were excused such rigours and at 9am, having rubbed the sleep from our eyes, we reluctantly joined the scrum for breakfast in the canteen. The food was quite awful, but with strenuous days ahead we had to eat what we could of the lukewarm congealed semolina, bread, sweet black tea, prune juice and a watery yoghurt called *kefir*. On special occasions we were offered meat balls of fat and gristle, unripe apples and slices of water melon.

Our kind Russian hosts were apologetic and embarrassed. Very little food was coming into the valley they explained and, with corruption rife, any palatable items disappeared well before they arrived at Baksan.

Emerging, blinking, into the sunshine we were assailed by the most excruciating caterwauling, which went under the name of Soviet pop music, blaring across the campus. This, more than anything, made us impatient to leave for the mountains.

Climbing in the USSR is highly organised. If you are lucky enough to secure a place on one of their climbing courses in the Caucasus you must slowly prove your competence by working through the various grades from I to VI. There is no easy way forward and no place for young tearaways to short-circuit the system and make straight for a grade VI N face. As a result the top Soviet climbers, having served a long apprenticeship, are extremely sound practitioners with a wealth of experience and hard routes behind them.

Trekking seems to be unknown in Russia, and certainly our hosts had no notion of what was involved. However, after a day of negotiation, we left Baksan with two cooks, a guide, interpreter and four stalwart porters for a six-day trek to cross the 3661m Mestia Pass over the spine of the Caucasus into Georgia, and to return over the Betsho Pass. With the complete absence of convenience foods the porters were lugging sacks of fruit and vegetables, including water melons, over snow-bridges, crevasses, glaciers and moraines for up to 13 hours a day. The whole exercise was ludicrous and the state of a sack of ripe pears after being manhandled for two days is best left to the imagination. Vegetable soup and *bortsch* without the seasoning was our staple diet and this was cooked on petrol stoves, the fuel for which was bartered for western goods and then siphoned from vehicles. However, it is not my intention to carp: far from it; the trek was one of the highlights of our lives. The

61. The Caucasus: looking S from the lower slopes of Elbruz towards Ushba. (*Richard Gilbert*) (p137)

62. The monstrous Priut hut on Elbruz. (*Richard Gilbert*) (p137)

mountains were truly magnificent, the surrounding valleys scarcely touched by man, the weather impeccable and the Russians highly entertaining, intelligent, generous and anxious to do all that was humanly possible to make the expedition a success.

There was Igor, agile and strong as an ox with biceps and thighs like tree-trunks, who could have arm wrestled Geoff Capes into submission or taken his place in a troupe of Cossack dancers. Igor was always first into camp, lighting the stoves and putting on the tea. He would only wear his prized plastic boots on the steepest of snow-slopes, otherwise he padded along in old baseball boots.

Sergei was tall and handsome with dark shoulder-length hair; he always seemed to have two or more girls hanging round his neck! When he wasn't climbing Sergei was earning good money in Kiev, either as a professional photographer or by cleaning windows of multi-storey office blocks by abseil.

We hardly noticed Smargiel for the first few days because he covered both his massive load and his head with an unfolded tent to keep off the sun. He was a student at Pyatigorsk who was working during the summer at Baksan and he spoke reasonable English. We shall never forget arriving at a high col, collapsing exhausted on the ground and marvelling at Smargiel who dropped his pack and hurtled back down the screes, like a mountain goat, to relieve the last member of the party of his rucksack. Steve, too, may remember dressing a deep and festering blister on his foot caused by his latest, expensive, multi-coloured Gore-tex boots while Smargiel, smiling broadly, lined his own tatty, split, holed but eminently comfortable boots with a thick layer of *Pravda*.

It was surprising that no one from the large Baksan Mountaineering Camp had ever crossed the Mestia Pass into Georgia, but enquiries by Kojak produced Nikolai, from Ulu Tau Mountain Camp in the neighbouring Adyr Su valley to act as our guide. Nikolai was wiry and fit, a very accomplished mountaineer who happily shouldered a mammoth pack to help with the portering. He reckoned that we were the first Europeans to cross the Mestia Pass since the war. Our descent from the pass would take us into an unknown region of Georgia called Svanetia, an ancient and romantic kingdom completely surrounded by mountains which, until a road was built in 1932, was inaccessible for nine months of the year. This mountain enclave has, for hundreds of years, offered a refuge from warring nations. Svanetia was said to be so isolated as to be little affected by the revolution, and our Russian companions were thrilled to have the opportunity of visiting it.

The approach to the Mestia Pass lay along a high hidden valley, the Adyr Su, which had been closed at its mouth by a landslide. The ingenious Russians had built a 200ft-high ramp at about 45°, up which ran a platform on wheels which could take a vehicle. A winding engine could therefore lift a jeep to the rough road which ran up the Adyr Su for eight miles to the Ulu Tau Mountain Camp.

We ambled along the exquisite valley enjoying the carpet of flowers, a myriad colourful butterflies and tiny, furry, stoat-like creatures called *Laska* scurrying amongst the rocks. A milky glacier torrent roared beside us, the sun shone, fleecy clouds drifted by, we caught glimpses of rock and ice spires towering into a blue sky, the aroma of pine needles filled the air and we passed Russians with baskets collecting mushrooms, raspberries and wild strawberries. On a

platform of boulders in a side valley a rusty 88mm gun, with a long and menacing barrel, pointed skywards, a relic of the German occupation of the Russian Caucasus in 1942.

After a night at the climbing camp we zigzagged up interminable moraines, crossed a glacier tongue and camped on the summit of a rock island. Our tents were poised high above an extensive glacier system at the centre of a huge amphitheatre of stupendous peaks with horrifyingly steep N faces, notably Adyr Su Baschi and Ulu Tau, first climbed, from the south, by Tom Longstaff and L W Rolleston in 1903.[2] In the early evening the valleys filled with mist which rolled around the peaks and we sat, hypnotised, drinking our hot fruit juices, as the sun set diffusing the snowfields with a ruddy glow.

At 5.30am the 45° snow-ramp was firm and we cramponed up with ease, spurning Sergei's rope handrail which he had tied off to a titanium ice screw. These ice screws are tough and light and are the only items of Soviet gear that are prized in the West and can be exchanged for fleece jackets and Gore-tex anoraks. Weaving around the crevasses of the upper névé we gained the Mestia Pass after two hours and sheltered from the icy wind in a snow scoop. Away to the north-west the twin-topped peak of Elbruz rose, bathed in sunshine, far above the sea of cloud.

But our eyes were drawn down to the south, towards Svanetia. The Leksyr glacier, the second largest in the Caucasus, spread out its tentacles below us and then, in a series of icefalls, ran away south-eastwards for many miles until it turned south and spent itself above the woods and pastures of Svanetia.

One of the great frustrations of trekking in Russia is the almost complete lack of any sort of map. Sergei had a small-scale map showing the principal passes across the Caucasus, but only the largest mountains were named and we could only identify the most characteristic peaks such as Elbruz, Shkhelda and graceful Ushba, one of the most beautiful mountains in the world, which points its two horns to the heavens like a crescent moon. It was a strange experience for us to have to relinquish our independence and rely entirely on our guide Nikolai, for without him we would never have been able to work out which way to go.

The Leksyr glacier was overlooked by relentlessly steep mountains with loose rocky sides which posed a threat of stonefall, thus we sped over the ice and across scoured rocks and moraines, skirted the icefalls and, after several hours, reached the wide, grey river of ice. Here we could relax and enjoy the scenery: waterfalls cascading over rocky lips from hanging glaciers, a skyline of black teeth and sheer precipices of yellowish rock towering literally thousands of feet above us.

As the valley narrowed, a deep layer of dusty boulders covered the ice and then we were forced down to the side of the glacier river. Here a chaos of razor-sharp boulders, possibly released from above by a recent earthquake, had to be negotiated by a tortuous route before we could reach the scrub vegetation. Crashing through the undergrowth we ploughed down, at one point crossing a subsidiary torrent by a tree-trunk. At 7pm, with green pastures just below, we camped for the night beside the river. In spite of fatigue we were overjoyed by our first taste of Svanetia; the journey had been through the most wonderfully untamed country we had ever experienced.

Nikolai's son was up at first light picking wild raspberries from the hillside for our breakfast. It was bliss to be sitting in the warm sunshine, feasting on the fresh fruit, with a leisurely exploration of the village of Mestia to look forward to.

Svanetia was distinctly different from Russia. Terraced fields were being scythed and the hay stooked, most houses had potato patches and orchards heavy with fruit; cattle were grazing the steep pastures and hairy pigs roamed at will through the streets and wasteground, rooting at whatever took their fancy. It was refreshing to see some self-sufficiency, for Svanetia did not appear to be suffering from the dead hand of the collective farm's system. Many houses in the village of Mestia were extremely old with stone watch-towers, three or four storeys high, built (at one end) for defensive purposes. In Mestia we could buy sweet Georgian wine, apricot brandy and help ourselves to carbonated mineral water from springs in the ground. We visited the tiny museum at the birthplace of Mikhail Khergiani, the USSR's most famous climber, and saw the frayed rope which caused his death in 1967. The display of his equipment reminded me very much of my own, still being used in 1990!

It is interesting to recount some of the adventures of Douglas Freshfield who visited Svanetia in 1868. In that year Freshfield with three companions, Tucker, Moore and the guide Dévouassoud, made a bold exploratory expedition to the Causasus. At that time the range was unknown to European geographers and its peaks were all unclimbed and many were unmapped and unmeasured.

Having successfully climbed Kasbek, the second highest peak in the Caucasus, Freshfield's party headed west to Elbruz, a difficult and dangerous journey of 120 miles which took nearly a month. Their route led through Svanetia, described as a large basin 40 miles long and 15 wide surrounded by glacier-crowned ridges. The terrain guarding Svanetia was appalling, described by Freshfield as dense uninhabited forest with shoulder-height vegetation, with only bear tracks to help them through the tangled wilderness of swamps, thickets and torrents.

Freshfield was not impressed by the people of Svanetia, describing them as little short of bandits. When threatened by a ruffian he took stern action: 'the application of a revolver barrel to his face made him retire hastily.'[3]

Their path from Svanetia, leading to a 10,800ft pass over to the Baksan valley and Elbruz, again impressed Freshfield: 'It winds under woods of birch, ash, oak and fir, through thickets of rhododendron and azalea; where, at every break in the forest, the eye catches glimpses, on one side, of the green meadows and white-towered villages of the Mushalaliz valley; on the other the deep-wooded ravine of the Ingur, and the snowy heads of the Leila group . . . A climb up the hillside above reveals the double-peaked Ushba, which I can describe only by likening it to several Matterhorns, piled on the top of one another.'[4]

The magnificent weather held for our two-day return journey to Baksan over the 3350m Betsho Pass. It was a long pull-up through dark forests, upland pastures, moraines and glaciers but it was technically easy and a plaque on the summit commemorates the crossing of 230 Russians in 1942, fleeing from the German advance up the Baksan valley. On the first night we were able to buy a pail of fresh milk from an old crone tending a herd of cows, and on the second

day Igor and Smargiel dashed on ahead to prepare tea and potato scones beside a stream running through flower-covered moraines. It had been eight hours since breakfast and we were famished.

Since Elbruz so completely dominates the Caucasus for sheer size and height, it irritates and motivates and makes a necessary target for the climber. It is not a difficult climb but, since few of its would-be assailants are adequately acclimatised, it takes an exiguous effort, and, in addition, the weather is often bad and the exposed slopes are raked by freezing winds. Sadly Elbruz regularly exacts a heavy toll and, in May 1990, 20 climbers died of exposure when a sudden and prolonged storm hit the mountain.

A series of two cable-cars and a chair-lift deposit sightseers on a bleak and soggy snowfield at a height of 3800m. Of course there is no shelter, let alone a warm chalet dispensing coffee and *Glühwein*, yet such a building would have an unrivalled panoramic view of the Caucasus range. Maybe when the free market economy extends south to the Causasus matters will change.

Just 400m higher up Elbruz, perched on a rock band, sits the outrageous Priut hut. This extraordinary incongruity is a three-storey sausage built of concrete in 1939 and covered with a skin of aluminium sheeting. It can sleep 100 people in four-bedded rooms; it is carpeted throughout but it is freezing cold and you are only allowed to cook in the basement. A trickle of meltwater down the rocks appears when the sun gets up in summer, otherwise you must melt snow. Toilets are primitive in the extreme. Nevertheless, in Russia you are thankful for small mercies and we were surprised and delighted at the relative comforts that the Priut offered.

Freshfield's party, in the first ascent of Elbruz in 1868, had to make do with a camp at 11,900ft. They left for the climb at 2.10am; it was bitterly cold as they tramped across the glacier to reach the snow cone above. Freshfield suddenly fell from sight into a crevasse. 'Considerable hauling was necessary before I could get out.' At 16,000ft they seriously considered turning back, since the cold seemed to be threatening their morale and presenting a strong possibility of frost-bitten fingers. However, when two of the porters, in their big sheepskins, indicated that they were willing to carry on, Freshfield said, 'If a porter will go on, I will go on with him.' 'If one goes, all go,' said Moore – and that settled the matter.[5]

From the top Freshfield recounts, 'We saw the mountains of the Turkish frontier between Batonur and Achaltzik, I believe the Black Sea and the great peaks between us and Kazbek, which looked magnificent. The Pennines from Mont Blanc are nothing compared to the east chain seen from Elbruz. The Caucasian groups are finer, and the peaks sharper. We were on the top from 10.40 till about 11.00; before leaving we built a stone man on the first peak, which appeared a trifle the highest.'[6]

One of the more unusual ascents of Elbruz took place in 1942. The German army, their lines of supply seriously stretched, were striving to cross the Caucasus to win control of the oilwells to the south. Alpinists from the 1st and 4th Mountain Division, led by Captain Groth, obtained permission to attempt Elbruz. The Red Army were holding the Priut hut but the garrison of eleven men soon surrendered and the German troops took over. After three days of

acclimatisation the assault party set out for the summit at 3 am on 21 August. The weather was poor, a gale was howling over the icy flank of the ridge, it was bitingly cold and the men's eyes were caked with snow. Visibility was ten metres. But by 11am the climbers had reached the summit and rammed the shaft of the Reich war flag into the snow. Later, the world was told that the swastika was flying from the highest peak in the Caucasus.[7]

Thankfully our experience on Elbruz was much pleasanter than that of the Germans nearly 50 years ago. It was a bright and starry night when we left the hut at 3am, cramponing up the frozen snow. A nagging wind was scouring the open slopes and I was glad of two pairs of Dachstein mitts with overgloves, two balaclavas and three pairs of thick trousers. Many of our party were on Diamox to help their acclimatisation and were forging ahead, but I dropped into a slow and steady rhythm enjoying my own thoughts and the pool of light from my headtorch. Passing through Pastukov's Rocks at 4800m I recoiled at the stink of sulphurous fumes but, at 6am, the sun burst over the horizon and lit up every peak for a hundred miles.

Again it was Ushba which drew my eyes, its sublime shape and air of arrogance will be forever imprinted on my mind. Now that I could look down on it from above I felt a degree of triumph and this helped me progress along the endless and exhausting upward traverse of the eastern peak of Elbruz. At 9am I collapsed on the snow saddle between the east and west peaks and contemplated the final 800ft cone. My companions were ahead and out of sight, my water bottle clinked with lumps of ice and my teeth could make little impression on my rock-hard Mars bar.

At this moment, to my utmost surprise, Sergei appeared from nowhere, and, with an irresistible smile, clapped me on the back saying, 'We go now to the top; it is not far.' With confidence boosted, and energy dredged up from the reserves, we made good speed up the final slopes of mixed snow, ice and rocks, and soon Sergei was proudly unfurling the Ukrainian flag on the arctic plateau of the eastern peak.

To the north brown hills gave way to distant arid plains while, to the south, high mountains rose above mist-filled valleys and rolled on to blue horizons. Behind Ushba and Shkhelda we could make out another range of snowy mountains: the range enclosing the legendary region of Svanetia which it had been our privilege to visit, and had provided the highlight of this unforgettable expedition.

REFERENCES

1 J Hunt and C Brasher, *The Red Snows*. London, Hutchinson, 1960. (Especially J Neill's Appendix.)

2 T Longstaff, *This My Voyage*. London, John Murray, 1950, p56.

3 D W Freshfield, 'Journey in the Caucasus, and Ascent of Kasbek and Elbruz'. *Geographical Journal* 39, 69, 1869.

4 Ibid, 70.

5 Ibid, 72.

6 Ibid, 73.

7 P Carrell, *Hitler's War on Russia*. London, Harrap, 1964.