
Celestial Summits

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(Plates 22–25)

Khan Tengri (7010m) and Pobeda (7439m) lie in the Tien Shan range of mountains on the border between the former USSR and Chinese-occupied Tibet. They are the world's most northerly 7000m summits and are also called the Celestial Peaks. The area has only recently been reopened to Western mountaineers.

Despite the remoteness of the South Inylchek glacier, the journey from London to Base Camp took only four days. Even more significantly it did not involve us shouldering our rucksacks once. We were transported variously by plane, bus and helicopter, with the intermittent stopovers filled with manic bouts of eating, drinking and sightseeing. It would be fair to say that by the time we reached Base Camp we were fit for little but laying down – which we did for two or three days.

Base Camp was a novel and unaccustomed experience. Two enormous mess tents for the kitchen and dining-room and double rows of family tents for staff and visitors. While it seemed a shame to come to such a remote area only to be surrounded by a small village, there were compensations. Helicopter provisions of fresh food and a team of cooks to do it justice was one; a well-appointed sauna of diabolical temperatures was another.

After a few days resting we started a strict regime of strolls up the glacier to look at our objectives. Being sensible types it was decided that first there should be an acclimatisation trip. We picked a nice peak of intermediate height and proceeded to try and climb it. This excursion, even in the kindest terms, could best be described as a shambles – with the team consecutively becoming divided into two parts, ending up on opposing routes and for a time losing each other completely. Given this slight hiccup we decided to shelve acclimatisation trips and get on with the real climbing. Another few days' rest and we turned toward Khan Tengri.

This mountain, although not the highest in the range, immediately draws the eye. Its elegant shape and the striking line of the Marble Rib make it a natural focus for the area. We had initially hoped to attempt this route, but the exposed nature of the approach and climb, combined with unreliable weather, made it an imprudent choice. We settled instead on the W ridge. Mixed climbing of modest difficulty allowed enjoyable and rapid progress. The only blight on this otherwise excellent route, was the final 1000m being almost entirely fixed with rope. This had been placed by the Soviets, presumably to enable many more people to reach the summit and so popularise the area. While this sentiment may be understandable in terms of their desire to promote tourism, it may also

be a source of problems to come – already numerous unsightly piles of rubbish blemish the glaciers and high camps.

Iain Peter and Allen Fyffe reached the summit on their first attempt, whereas Roger and I took a little longer with our acclimatisation. The benefit of the additional preparation meant we were able to make very rapid progress on our ascent. With our better acclimatisation we were able to travel in one push from the South Inylchek glacier (4300m) through the narrow, avalanche-threatened Semenovskiy glacier to the prepared snow-cave camp beneath the W col (5800m). Feeling fit after our first day we decided to spend one night at this camp and then try to reach the summit and return the following day.

Our summit day dawned brilliantly clear, still and sunny, and all signs pointed to an optimum chance to reach the top. Zigzagging on snow ribbons and climbing through rocky steps took us steadily and enjoyably from the col and up the ridge to the last campsite at around 6700m. Traversing rightwards brought us to a steep rock buttress which required care. We exited into a large snow basin at which point cloud cover enveloped us. Climbing this led to a narrow exposed ridge and finally mixed ground and open slopes which we knew from the altimeter must mark the final approach to the summit. Conditions deteriorated, with wind and snow obliterating our tracks. It seemed that we should turn back and start our descent, for without our tracks to guide us we were concerned about becoming disorientated and wandering onto the large cornices we knew overhung the summit margins. Cautiously we kept on climbing, willing the cloud to lift and, as sometimes happens, luck was with us. The cloud base lifted and presented us with a view of the last few metres to the top. It was 5pm and time for our radio call. We reported our position and our interpreter Ilyana relayed our news to Base Camp. Fussing like a mother hen she admonished us to come down straight away and be very careful. Signing off with a mental 'yes mum' we made the last few steps to the top.

It was bitterly cold and the closing rays of the sun cast a cool pink light. Surrounding us we could see many excellent objectives and, most prominently, the huge bulk of Pik Pobeda. The first lights of evening winked at us from Base Camp. We did not linger long and our descent was fast. Darkness caught us at around 6400m but with our headtorches we were confident of reaching the snow-caves easily. Pausing for a brief rest we could suddenly make out voices and, what was more, they were calling our names. Soon we could see that it was two of our Soviet friends from Base Camp, Chufcut and Dimi. They told us in halting English that they were on the mountain with clients and having heard our radio call from the summit had decided to come up to meet us.

We descended together until we came upon their tents. Then we embarked on a very difficult conversation in which they were urging us to stay the night with them, whereas we were keen to get back to the snow-caves and our warm sleeping-bags. They had made us soup and tea and were adamant that we must not go any further. No amount of reasoning otherwise could change their opinions, and finally I felt forced to acquiesce lest we seem utterly ungrateful. We spent a miserable night shivering and shifting on the lumpy ground. The following morning our belongings were flung into bags and we plunged down the slopes to reach the South Inylchek glacier.



22. Julie-Ann Clyma beneath the W col of Khan Tengri.
Pobeda, 7439m, in the background. (*Roger Payne*) (p37)



23. The central Tien Shan. (*Roger Payne*) (p37)

The ascent of the mountain by the whole team delighted our hosts and gave some cause for celebration. We were treated to fresh fruit, salads, and even a special flan for dessert. Then of course there was the vodka and wine. Over our celebrations our Soviet friends informed us of the quiet care they had been exercising throughout our ascent. Unknown to us, the climbers who had 'just happened' to be on the mountain had been reporting on our progress every step of the way. The extent of their 'surveillance' was summed up when one, half joking, half indignant declared, '... and we looked in your cooking pan and all you had to eat before starting your ascent was some semolina!'

While we had been climbing Khan Tengri, Iain and Allen had made an attempt on Pik Pobeda, which was stopped by very bad weather. Hence we found ourselves back together again. This period marked a worsening in the weather pattern and we spent four days debating the finer points of the Scrabble board. We were happy to wait before setting off on Pobeda but our hosts were increasingly anxious that we should resume our efforts.

Eventually a clear morning arrived and to our great good fortune so did the supply helicopter. We were bundled on board and dropped at the Advanced Base Camp in the Zvezdozhka glacier beneath the N face of Pobeda. It was an awesome spot. Strong winds high on the mountain were streaming snow in great plumes off the W ridge and the N face was constantly shifting with the movement of snow. Avalanches poured down at regular intervals. Initially we had hoped to attempt a route on this face, but because of the avalanche danger the W ridge seemed to offer the only hope of reaching the summit. To climb the W ridge of Pobeda it is first necessary to ascend the N ridge of the Vashep Cheval (or W Peak, 6918m). This is followed by a 4km traverse at around 7000m before reaching the final 600m of ascent to the main summit. In addition the return journey from the summit is very demanding, for along the ridge there is an overall loss of height in ascent, which means there is still more altitude to be gained on the way home. Exhaustion, combined with exposure, has been the main cause of the many fatalities on the mountain.

We spent one very short night on the glacier before starting on the climb early the next morning. The first part of the route traversed beneath, and then climbed through, a band of seracs. This was particularly unpleasant and there was no way to do it quickly. We all set out in the dark and, unable to see the worst of the danger, concentrated on moving as fast as possible. Within a couple of hours we were back onto open ground and traversed a glacial basin leading to the Dickey Pass (5200m) which we reached at daybreak.

With the first light we could see our proposed route up the N ridge and at around 5800m a line of snow-holes which we were aiming for as our next camp. As we continued with the ascent the weather and conditions began to deteriorate again and what could have been a reasonable climb turned into an interminable slog. We reached the camp and with great relief squeezed through the entrance to find a team from our camp in residence who, as soon as we arrived, enlarged the snow-hole. Soon we had a palatial home with shelves for cooking and a platform for sleeping. Unfortunately the weather continued to be foul, trapping us there for two nights. Roger and I were happy to use the time to rest, but Iain and Allen were even happier proclaiming their boredom to pester

us and annoy each other. Fortunately, late on the second evening a sudden clearing revealed a glorious sunset and we were spared further moans and groans.

Next morning we were off early and made very enjoyable progress on rocky buttresses. The altitude and the hours ticked by – 6000m, 6200m, 6400m. Communicating by radio, Iain and Allen, slightly in front of us called that we seemed only a short distance from the summit of the Vashep Cheval and from there only metres from another set of snow-caves at 6900m. However, distances were very deceptive and this day turned into a ten-hour marathon, with our bodies objecting to being pushed so hard over such a big height gain. When we arrived at the campsite we found that Iain and Allen had already dug a snow-hole for themselves and were tucked up inside. We went over to the larger snow-hole meant for our camp and found there were already six other climbers from another expedition inside. They welcomed us in and gave us a warm drink which was gratefully received. Unsure what the position was, we had a halting conversation about where we could sleep that night. We were ready to start digging our own shelter but they indicated that we should squeeze in with them. This was just about feasible until the five other Soviet climbers from our camp arrived. They were angry that another team should be using our snow-hole and without much ado instructed them to set about enlarging the hole until we could all fit in. We spent hours sitting up into the night getting colder and more dehydrated while they worked away. Finally 13 people manoeuvred for a space and we lay down to try and sleep.

The following morning dawned grey and overcast and we could see from our sleeping platform that there was a strong wind blowing outside. Nearly everyone was on the move though and preparing to go to the summit. We felt exhausted after the previous long day and poor night's sleep, and decided it would be better to have a rest day. Iain and Allen popped their heads through the entrance and, having had a better night, said they were going to try for the summit along with the Soviet climbers. We wished them all luck and soon they were off. It was such a relief to have room to stretch out and we passed a productive day sleeping, eating and drinking.

Eventually Iain and Allen returned from the summit having been successful, but reporting very bad conditions. We wondered how some of the Soviet climbers had fared with their very basic gear and, not surprisingly, they returned in much poorer condition. Climbers kept arriving until very late into the night, the final party not until 1am. With all the movement, noise and stove fumes we had another terrible night. After such a good day we could not believe our bad luck.

The next morning we woke feeling just as awful as the day before. However the sun was pouring into the snow-cave and it appeared to be very still outside. We knew if we wanted to reach the summit it had to be on this attempt for we were running out of time. I crawled round to set the stove going and doled out the aspirin. After an hour or so we pretended we might be feeling a little better – until, that is, Roger with great aplomb sat up and threw up into the breakfast pan. Terrific. Somehow, though, that lightened the atmosphere considerably and with wry smiles about the 'joys' of high-altitude climbing we took stock of



24. Khan Tengri, 7010m. The W ridge is on the L skyline.
(Roger Payne) (p37)



25. Julie-Ann Clyma on the summit of Khan Tengri. (Roger Payne) (p37)

our situation. It was obvious that the weather was on our side and we were in a perfect position to reach the top. No more hanging around.

Another hour saw us packed up and ready to go. We stepped outside into blinding sunshine, and a few metres took us to the crest of the W ridge to begin the long traverse. We were the only team heading for the summit and had the route to ourselves. The W ridge of Pobeda marks the border between the former Soviet Union and Chinese-occupied Tibet, and the views of the Tien Shan mountains on one side and the vast brown Tibetan Plateau on the other were spectacular. Progress was steady up and over the whale-back humps and a few hours saw us at the Obelisk: a huge tooth of granite-like rock perched at the junction of the W ridge and the foot of the summit pyramid.

The weather remained perfect and, far from the usual concerns about the cold, we wondered if we should leave any equipment or clothing behind as we set off on the last section of the climb. It seemed reasonable to leave the bivouac gear we had been carrying, so we decanted it all into one of the rucksacks and partially buried it in a hollow. Unfortunately it seemed too rash to part with any clothing so someone had to carry the spare. In a regrettable moment of inverse chivalry I offered to take the other rucksack and carry whatever was needed. A quick brew perked us up, and although not feeling one hundred per cent we reasoned that we should keep going for a bit longer and would turn back in the mid-afternoon if we were not close to the summit by then. What a joke. Once we were 100m up the summit ridge there was no question of turning back. The view ahead was of elegant snow arêtes winding through granite blocks and mixed ground. It was enough to make us forget our aches and pains for a while. For quite a few hours the mirage of the summit spurred us on but, like all mirages, it kept receding into the distance. Our enthusiasm, short-lived, gradually subsided into dogged plodding.

By 5pm we knew we must be very close to the summit, but we still could not see the exact point. The angle had levelled off to rounded hummocks, each one obscuring the view ahead. We were due to make a radio call to Base Camp and I knew that they were going to be anxious on hearing our position. Their response was exactly as anticipated: 'Start down immediately and call us again in an hour.' We responded in the affirmative but continued in the negative. After all that effort we were not going to turn back. The summit turned out to be only another 20 minutes away. Anxious to have at least started our descent by the next radio call, we paused for only a few minutes – enough time for a few photographs and a long look at the incredible panorama. The relief to start down and at last be going with gravity instead of fighting against it made for quick progress. In less than two hours we were back at the Obelisk.

The return along the ridge was a nightmare. A bitterly cold wind drew off our body heat and our ascent tracks started to blow in; the cold was intense. We staggered along in the darkness with me gasping for breath, and reached an absolute low when I had to stop to rewarm my freezing feet. Despite the awfulness, I knew from past experience that we could keep on going for hours if we had to. It was a perverse and very small crumb of comfort. The monotony eventually dulled the misery, but we seemed to go on along the ridge for so long that I feared we had missed the camp. Just when I was ready to despair the dip in the ridge appeared and we were there.

In the space of seconds we moved from a 'life and death struggle' to warm cups of tea and welcoming smiles. Our Soviet friends cleared a space for us to sit down, helped us off with our boots, and rubbed our hands and feet while we sat there and grinned like fools, and were thankful it was all over.

The sleep of exhaustion took us to another morning and we set off down without delay; having been six days on the mountain we were keen for the comforts of Base Camp. We left 6900m at 7am and just carried on descending until we reached Base Camp at 1am the following morning where we caught up with Iain and Allen. The next two days were spent in a constant round of congratulations and celebrations; if anything, our hosts seemed even happier at our successes than we were. We swapped addresses, equipment, stories and good wishes with many people, and when the helicopter came for the last time to take us back down I felt very sad to leave. Our last view of Base Camp was in gathering cloud and driven snow – the weather had closed in again and we were lucky to get out.

On the evening of 18 August we flew back from Moscow to London. On the morning of the 19th the coup was announced. It is curious to think of those men plotting inside the Kremlin as we stood outside sightseeing. We shall maintain contact with our friends in Khazakstan and hope to return soon.

Summary: In July–August 1991 peaks Khan Tengri (7010m) and Pobeda (7439m) in the Tien Shan received their first British and New Zealand ascents. Julie-Ann Clyma, Roger Payne, Iain Peter and Allen Fyffe climbed Pobeda by its W ridge having first ascended Khan Tengri (which had also been climbed by Britons Rick Allen, Shaun Smith and Simon Yates).