
LINDSAY GRIFFIN

Mongolian Escape

(Plates 48A, 48B)

It was in 1990 that an exuberant John Blashford-Snell first brought up the prospect of a Raleigh International expedition to North West Mongolia. John, who has all the attributes of the traditional intrepid explorer, not least the characteristic pith helmet which he still insists on wearing to all corners of the globe, seemed to be offering Julian Freeman-Attwood and myself the opportunity to climb in one of the most remote mountain regions of Central Asia. Of course there was a catch! We would spend part of our time acting as guides and instructors to a small group of aspirant mountaineers. 'Well motivated though,' John told us, and then, almost as an afterthought, added that most of the 'students' would be unattached girls in their early twenties! We thought for maybe half a second before giving our answer.

The mystical mountains of the Altai span almost 1500km, yet for most of their length there is little about which to get excited. However, where they pass through the triple border point of Russia, China and Mongolia, only a short distance from the frontiers of Kazakhstan, a compact isolated range rises to over 4000m. This massif – the Tabun Bogdo – lies in the Dead Heart of Asia and was rumoured to hold the most spectacular mountains in the country. Not surprisingly, no information was forthcoming from the Mongolian authorities, and I spent the next two years trying to follow up vague leads in various Eastern Block and Soviet states, always drawing a blank until, two days before our departure, a package arrived from Barcelona containing a sketch map and an incomprehensible report of the 1967 Polish expedition. I packed it in my baggage in the vain hope that we might bump into an itinerant Pole somewhere in Mongolia.

There were to be three 'instructors'. Julian is a wily Shropshire aristocrat with a power-to-weight ratio rivalling an Olympic gymnast. He had come into high standard mountaineering later than most, yet his background, which included almost being blown into several hundred pieces by land mines while making the first crossing of Mauritania's Empty Quarter, stood him in good stead. On the other hand our partner in crime, Ed Webster from Colorado, started climbing when barely out of nappies. This would be his first expedition to the mountains since shortening his digits when climbing to the South Summit of Everest, four years ago.

Now for a few basic statistics: Mongolia has an area equivalent to Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Germany, France, Spain and Portugal all rolled into one – yet with a population of only 2½ million! As half of these are nomads, who live on nothing but mutton and milk and sleep in large circular felt tents called *gers*, the number of permanent settlements is small. Although an

independent country for many years, Mongolia had been heavily reliant on the Soviet Union for its basic needs. After 1990 these quickly disappeared. On our arrival in May 1992 the economy had reached rock-bottom; ration books were being issued in the increasingly foodless capital – Ulaan Baatar – and aviation fuel had become very scarce.

We were forced to wait nearly a week in Hovd, the hub of several Raleigh medical and community programmes, but it would be untrue to say that the time was wasted. Across the far side of the river from our camp lay a 200ft high cliff of decomposing granite which sent Ed, and to a lesser extent Julian, into a frenzy of enthusiasm. Although not so sharp on the open walls, where the use of small finger holds is mandatory, Webster is still a demon when it comes to his old speciality – the crack. On our first day he took this esoteric part of Central Asia into modern times by leading us up the awkward *Amarsana* (E2, 5c), named after a popular folk hero.

Our first stroke of luck came the next afternoon. Two of the staff had just returned from *ger* city, as Hovd was becoming affectionately known. To our surprise they had bumped into another foreigner. 'Well, he spoke to us in English but I think he might have said he was Polish,' said the Yorkshire lass. Our eyes widened in disbelief. 'Anyway, we've invited him along for tea.' I raced to my tent and pulled out the Polish article – surely this was a good omen. With the article even vaguely translated, we might gain our first insight into this enigmatic range. When Ryszard Palczewski stepped inside the *ger* an hour later, and announced in perfect English that he ought to make a reasonable translation as it was he who had written the article nearly 25 years ago, we were – well – simply lost for words. More so when he informed us that he had met his future English wife while working in Afghanistan and that he now lived in Brighton, making regular trips three times a year to attend to his farming project in Eastern Mongolia. It's a perverse world that allows you to spend years making unsuccessful enquiries all over Europe, only to find that the best information lay right at your doorstep!

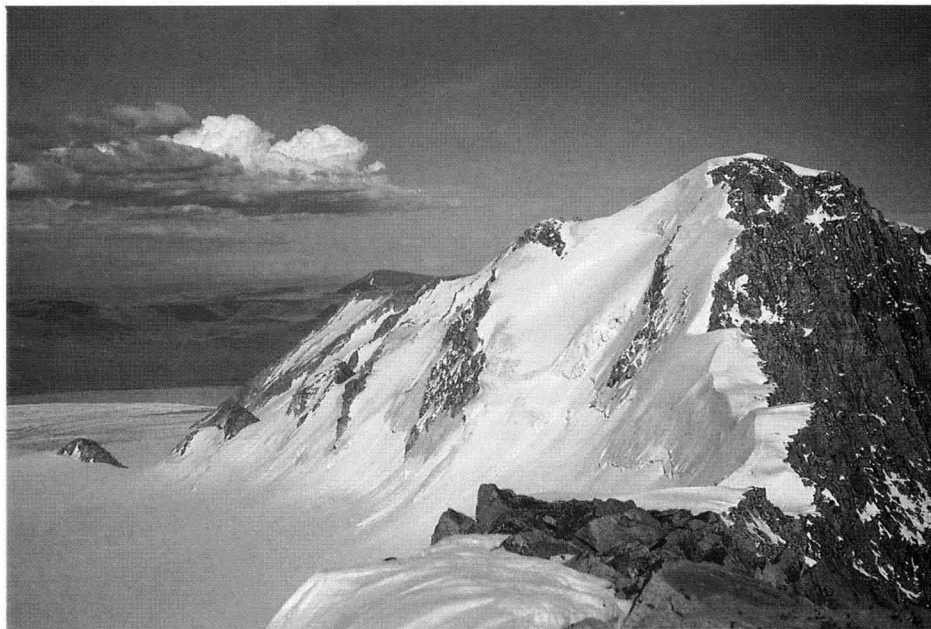
A few more granite gems succumbed to Ed's stumpy hands before we left in a high-wheeled military truck, armed with our newly acquired wealth of knowledge and carrying our imported food, gaz and equipment for the next 1½ months. There are no roads in western Mongolia, only directions, and after three days of travel across a rocky arid wilderness we reached a small Kazakh encampment. A further 20km on foot, with camels carrying the luggage, took us to a base camp site.

During the next five weeks we explored most corners of the range, feeling privileged to be the first western climbers allowed a mountaineering permit. True the scale was not more than the Bernese Oberland, to which there was a close resemblance, but the ambience was distinctly Himalayan! The main peaks had been climbed by their easiest lines, but little, if any, technical climbing had yet been achieved. We were lucky to have students who were talented, and their enthusiasm meant that interesting new routes, rather than straightforward ascents, could be tackled.

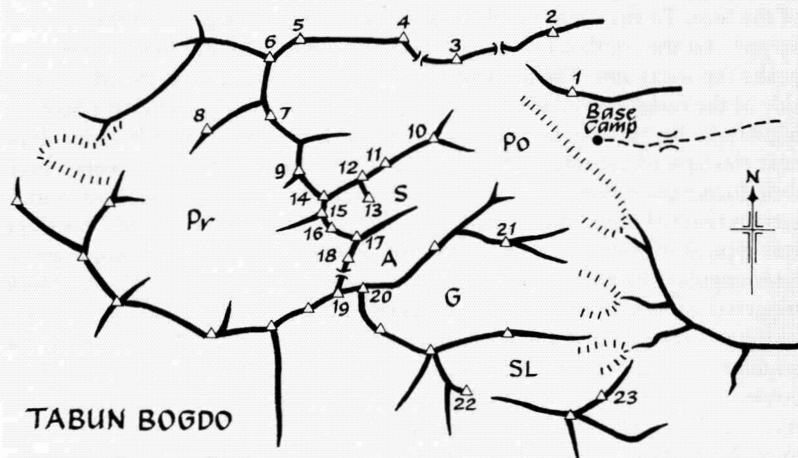
Then there were the tracks – snow leopard, bear and . . . the other! We were crossing the head of the remote Alexandrov glacier, en route to climb a superb



48A. Lindsay Griffin arranging transport in the Mongolian Altai.
(Julian Freeman-Attwood)(p125)



48B. Mongolian Altai: the Tabun Bogdo. *(Lindsay Griffin)* (p125)



TABUN BOGDO

Peaks climbed 1-23

Peaks

- 3 Herdsman
- 4 Shepherdess
- 5 Russian Miner
- 6 Triple Bolder
- 7 Huithen 4356m
- 9 4200 m
- 10 Hadat
- 17 Selenge
- 19 Snow Church

Glaciers

- Po Potanina
 S Selenge
 A Alexandrov
 G Grano
 SL Snow Leopard
 Pr Prjevalski

0 Km 10

diamond-shaped face of blue water-ice on a peak that Ryszard had named Snow Church. A set of curious fresh prints crossed the glacier, heading towards China over a high col. They were large, showed a definite toe-shaped formation, and, inexplicably, were in sets of three. We had a choice: should we follow the tracks over the pass in an attempt to discover the origins of this mysterious triped, or should we climb the face? We climbed the face, convinced that the tracks could only have been those of a yeti carrying a snow leopard under one paw!

Towards the end of our stay, after many memorable climbs with our capable students, the main group returned to Hovd, and there was just enough time to attempt Huithen (4356m) Mongolia's highest peak, by the impressive and unclimbed South Face. Unfortunately it meant a tricky two-day crossing of the range via the Alexandrov glacier, 'yeti' pass, and the remote Prjevalski

glacier. Bad weather pinned us down for a day, but by the following evening the sky was clear and the snow crisp. We reached the summit just after dawn on 12 July, having climbed the prominent 100m ridge bordering the left side of the face. To the north lay the vast uninhabited nothingness of the Siberian Steppe. To the south and west a myriad of unclimbed and mostly unnamed peaks ran away into China, while the long gentle glaciers on the Mongolian side of the range flowed towards wide grassy glens reminiscent of the Scottish highlands. By 2pm we were descending, independently, a vast boulder slope near the base of the ridge. What happened next has, for better or worse, been well documented elsewhere, so I offer the following restricted account, with a certain tinge of regret that it fails to do full justice to all concerned. The slope was typical of those found all over the lower reaches of Asian mountains – large angular blocks that, now and again, wobbled underfoot. Only this block triggered something above! I was knocked rudely forward into a slight hollow, landing with a large granite boulder across my left leg. Miraculously the boulder had trapped my leg in a slot just wide enough to stop the full crushing power, but not, alas, wide enough to prevent a serious double compound fracture. I passed out for a short while. When I came to I realised that my lower leg had lost all circulation and knew immediately that I must relieve the pressure on it before it was too late.

Pushing, heaving or even cursing at the block proved useless. I unsuccessfully tried to cut away the various layers of clothing to reduce the size of the leg; I tried using the axe and hammer to chisel away at the granite constriction below; whatever I did seemed futile. Finally I remembered the rope. After a couple of attempts I managed to lasso another large boulder above my head and set up a pulley system with a few karabiners. It didn't work at first, but after increasing to a six to one mechanical advantage I just succeeded in shifting the block – not enough to withdraw the leg, but enough so that a minute later a tingling sensation reached my toes. I worked at this for five hours until located by Julian and Ed, who took a further three hours to free the leg and construct a makeshift splint. Julian returned to the foot of the face and collected a tent and sleeping-bag, while Ed helped me bum-shuffle down for 14 hours to a flat spot on the moraine. Leaving me to practise my tourniquet techniques, Ed and Julian climbed back over the range (their third consecutive night out) to reach Base Camp, where they made faint radio contact with Hovd. With, officially, no aviation fuel now left in the country, the outlook was bleak.

In the capital, over 1500km distant, the military were unable to help, but the civilian airline offered a 20-years-old cargo helicopter and a pilot who, despite having no experience of operating in mountain terrain, was willing to have a try. After complex negotiations, John Blashford-Snell managed to obtain sufficient fuel for the helicopter to reach Hovd where the last remains of emergency fuel hidden in Western Mongolia were released by the state, as a sort of thank-you for work done by the various Raleigh projects. Unfortunately it was not enough to make the round trip! On the evening of the fourth day after the accident I heard the sound of rotor blades and, pulling back the tent door, saw the unwieldy chopper coming over the range from the

north. If it had turned back at this point I would still have felt elated because I now realised that other people knew!

Twice it tried to land but, operating above its ceiling, almost crashed – then disappeared over the moraine. An hour or so later Ed and two other Raleigh staff, including a doctor, arrived carrying an old army stretcher. They were depressed! Having been dumped lower down on the glacier, with no explanation and no gear, not knowing the reliability of the pilot and realising the shortage of fuel, they had then witnessed the chopper depart, possibly for ever. In fact, Jamaldorj, the pilot, had made a bold move. Flying down-valley, he had landed the craft at a suitable altitude and cut the engines to conserve fuel. Restarting the engines an hour or so later he stripped the chopper of all heavy gear, including the starter batteries, and, hoping that he wouldn't stall, flew in for the pick-up.

After a brief stop to collect the batteries, and another at Base Camp, I was flown 150km to a small aerodrome, barely reaching it before the fuel ran out. Here, on the manager's desk in the local 'hospital', the Raleigh doctor cleaned the wound. They didn't have splints but he improvised with long strips of wood, kindly ripped from the surrounding shelves and cupboards by the manager himself! We were now in an area populated solely by Kazakhs – a nomadic people desperately trying to escape from a country rapidly approaching economic collapse. Next day, by another stroke of luck, there was an unscheduled landing by a plane sent on an evacuation mission from Kazakhstan. After five bottles of Vodka changed hands, fuel syphoned from the airliner gave the chopper just enough flying time to reach Hovd, where a Singapore based Lear jet, the first foreign plane ever legally to enter Western Mongolian airspace, was waiting to fly me to Hong Kong. Again, the remaining fuel had to be transferred from chopper to jet, allowing the latter just to make the distance and the Swiss pilot to perform an emergency night landing at Kaitak airport, just one hour before it was closed by an enormous typhoon. A few hours later, and nearly seven days after the accident, I was lying in the operating theatre.

Six months later I am still on crutches, with further operations pending. But I am happy to report that a Queen's Citation has been awarded to Jamaldorj – a spirited pilot who, against all the odds, was prepared to have a go.

Summary: In May–July 1992 a Raleigh International expedition, led by Lindsay Griffin, Julian Freeman-Attwood and Ed Webster, made 23 ascents of peaks and lesser summits in the Tabun Bogdo massif, Mongolian Altai, including the unclimbed S face of Huithen (4356m), Mongolia's highest peak. Several were previously untrdden and more than half were climbed by new routes of varying standard up to alpine TD-/TD. The main ascents were made in the company of Richard Bruton, Vanessa Carter, Bridget Cowen, Claire Gosney, Tom Nichols and Colonel Tsanjid their Mongolian representative. After a serious rockfall accident, Lindsay Griffin was helicoptered out in a difficult and dangerous rescue operation. There is still much scope for ice/mixed routes of great quality in one of the decreasing number of unspoilt wilderness areas left on the planet.