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## Climbing and Kalashnikovs

The 1998 Alpine Club meet to the Georgian Caucasus

(Plates 40–43)

Obeying the provision list that John Temple had given us made meeting the Austrian Airlines 25kg weight limit only a remote possibility, even if we did as John suggested and packed our pockets full of goodies! Needless to say, most of us had far in excess of our allocation, even clad in full mountaineering attire, when we gathered at Heathrow on 21 July to catch the 6.35am 'plane to Tbilisi via Vienna. Somehow John himself had engineered an earlier flight with two other members of the party, Steve Humphries and John Town, so he was not on hand to contribute to the chaos that was now occurring at the airline desk. Eventually we, being Chris Bedford, Derek Buckle, Gary Hill, Tim Sparrow and Geoff Thomas, were checked in collectively and nobody seemed to notice the colossal excess.

Both flights were uneventful, and on arrival at Tbilisi we were met by our Georgian host, Shota, to be taken by car to his flat. Dressed for the Arctic, it was a relief to remove a few layers of clothing before going for a swim in the local lake. Shota insisted that we experience the thermal baths nearby, which were in sharp contrast to the lake temperature, before sampling the local cuisine later that evening. Of course, the local Kazbeki beer was well received.

### **Mountains Bordering the Lekzir Glacier**

Travelling for 12-14 hours over roads of varying poor quality we eventually arrived at the small town of Mestia in the Svanetian region of Georgia, where we joined up with the other three members of our party. Mestia was the centre from where we planned to make our subsequent forays, and we were fortunate indeed to be based at the home of Nazo Khergiani, a former champion Georgian rock climber. The next day we split into two groups, the two Johns going off to investigate Laila (4010m) while the six of us ascended the Lekzir Valley with Thamas, another of our Georgian hosts. After unsuccessfully trying to negotiate first a car, and then a horse, to reduce the long walk-in – a problem exacerbated by the fact that Thamas spoke German but no English – we eventually set off on foot. Crossing the Tshiek River at its confluence with the dominant outflow, the Mestiachala, caused some excitement, but a Tyrolean traverse came to the rescue of

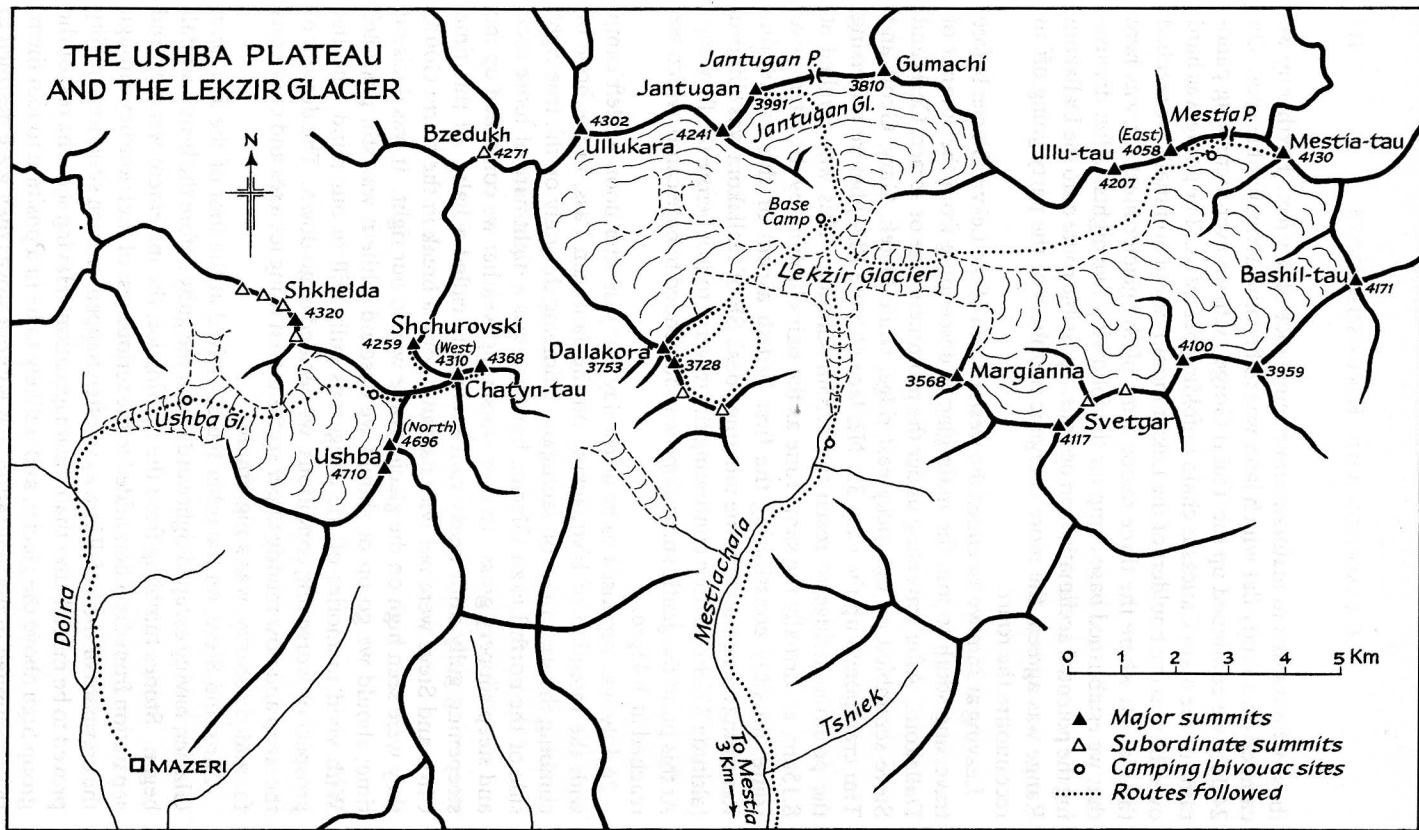
those who wanted to maintain some semblance of dry feet. Further up we camped on a sandy flat which later was to become a memorable spot. On 24 July we continued up the Tiubri Gorge, with an ever-increasing panorama of the main Caucasus chain unfolding before us. The going was hard over the massive boulders of the Lekzir moraines, but eventually we reached the plateau where the three major arms of the glacier meet. It was here that we established base camp for the following five nights. After discussing the potential acclimatisation options, a possible route onto the Dallakora Range was agreed, the more energetic members of the party going off to reconnoitre the route.

Leaving at 3am we ascended the western arm of the Lekzir Glacier before traversing south to join the main glacier descending from the summit of Dallakora. After traversing under the prominent line of séracs, Chris and Steve scrambled up the rocky east ridge, while Derek, Gary, Geoff and Tim cramponed up the easy 35° NE face (Alpine PD-) before traversing the prominent ridge to reach the 3753m summit. This was reached at 8.15am, at virtually the same time as the pair climbing by the alternative route, possibly constituting the first British ascent of this mountain. Returning along the ridge the unnamed peak SE of Dallakora was climbed (altitude 3728m) before continuing the traverse to just before the final top. At this point the gentle snow slope was descended to base camp, which we reached at 1.45pm.

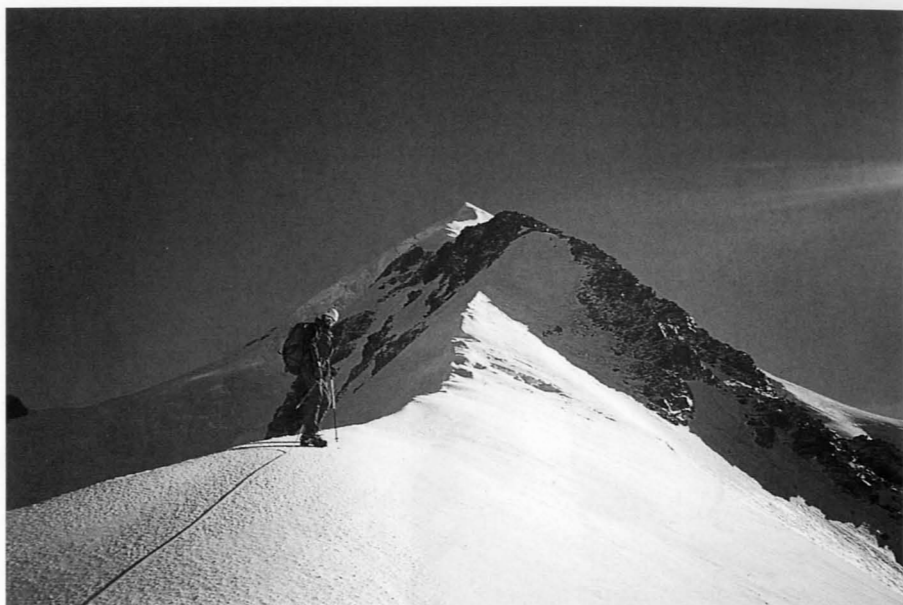
26 July was supposed to be a rest day, but just after noon we left camp with the intention of bivouacking on the Jantugan Pass, in the hope of climbing the west ridge of Jantugan. Climbing the gully on the true right side of the north Lekzir Glacier, however, was a nightmare of loose rock and steep slippery grass. In ever worsening weather we continued up the steepening gully until heavy rain eventually called a halt. At this time Chris and Steve were not with us, but during a break in the storm clouds they were seen high on the glacier some way to our right. It was decision time; should we go on or should we descend while it was still possible? With vivid memories of the dangerous gully still in our mind, and the prospect of worsening conditions, we decided to go down. The descent of the steep and now muddy upper section, even using ice axes and crampons for added security, was a nightmare.

Chris and Steve, on the other hand, arrived at the foot of the Jantugan Glacier, having escaped rightwards from the gully before the heavy rainfall began. Stones tumbling from the melting ice, the inclement weather, and separation from the others added to the seriousness of their journey through the crevasses of the icefall but, as so often happens in such situations, reality proved to be much better than the imagination. Having seen the rest of the group high above the glacier, and unlikely to be in a position to join them, they continued in the realisation that without stoves they were destined to eat their Pot Noodles uncooked, but at least there was enough water for a sporting chance at the west ridge the next morning. However, after making

# THE USHBA PLATEAU AND THE LEKZIR GLACIER



Note: the heights given on this map and in the text are taken from *Classic Climbs in the Caucasus* by Friedrich Bender. Diadem Books, 1992.



40. Derek Buckle on the SW Ridge of Tetnuld, Caucasus. (*Chris Bedford*) (p136)



41. Climbers on the Dallakora summit ridge. (*Chris Bedford*) (p136)

steady progress for about two-thirds of the way up the superbly exposed ridge (Alpine AD+), staying as close to the crest as possible for the best rock, the way ahead looked too loose for comfort, encouraging a hasty retreat in order to descend the icefall before snow conditions deteriorated too much.

Meanwhile back at Base Camp Derek, Gary, Geoff and Tim found that John Temple had arrived. His group had been unsuccessful on Laila and appeared to have spent the last couple of days enjoying the local hospitality. After our failure on Jantugan there was much discussion over what to do next. We discussed the possibilities of Margianna (3568m), an impressive rocky peak much admired during our time at the Lekzir base camp, and Ullu-tau East (4058m), but eventually agreed to ascend the east Lekzir Glacier and bivouac on the Mestia Pass, with a view to climbing either Ullu-tau or Mestia-tau.

Leaving at 8am the next day the five of us plodded up the easy east glacier, gaining excellent views of the north face of Svetgar (4117m) as we went. This is an impressive face and lots of imaginary routes were planned. Significantly, a massive avalanche had swept most of these by the time that we returned the next day! At 3pm we were just below the pass and at a suitable bivouac site beneath a band of overhanging rocks. There was running water also, although the intervening bergschrund made its collection a significant challenge. Surrounded by magnificent views we rehydrated and prepared supper whilst still discussing our options. It was agreed that Ullu-tau East summit (4058m) was to be the main objective. We left at 6.00am and after a relatively easy 1¼ hour climb we were on two rocky tops at an estimated altitude of 4035m. The map was confusing at this point since we should have been on the east summit. Moreover, the next obvious top was over difficult ground, and considerably higher than where we were now; so were we only on the Gherkins, shown on the map as a prominent outcrop on the ridge? Despite the height discrepancies the consensus seemed to be that this was so. With little inclination to go higher on the ridge, we descended, John returning direct to the bivouac site while Derek, Gary, Geoff and Tim continued over to Mestia-tau (4130m). Ascending the long snowy west ridge (Alpine F) was a delight, offering superb views in all directions, and the summit was reached at 9.45am. After a short stay admiring the large number of impressive mountains that can be seen from this vantage-point we descended to our Base Camp, collecting both John and the bivouac gear en route.

On arrival we learned that with limited time left, and some confusion over the exact date we were due back in Mestia, Chris and Steve had decided to attempt Margianna's NE ridge the day after returning from their unsuccessful attempt on Jantugan. After first climbing the loose moraine above the Lekzir Glacier, a rising eastwards traverse up scree and vegetated terraces led to a snow patch, above which a tempting gully cut straight up to the crest of the NE ridge. Choosing this, rather than the longer option of

continuing further east to join the base of the ridge, resulted in a nightmare of loose rock before exiting at a notch in the ridge crest, and reinforced the advisability of avoiding the gullies in this area. With the weather looking distinctly dubious and a shortage of daylight hours, consideration was given to turning back at this point, but eventually they carried on 'just a little further'. As so often happens, the 'little further' proved to be the summit, gained by a long and generally easy ridge (Alpine PD+) with a few steep rock sections (UIAA III) and a spectacular 50m knife-edge section, requiring some *à cheval* moves. Moving together at all times, the summit was reached at 6pm, six hours after leaving the glacier. Already resigned to the idea of getting back to camp after nightfall, the possibility of a bivouac also existed, since an evening mist had rolled up the valley to obscure the way down. Suggestions of a bivouac were quickly abandoned in favour of descending, however. In total darkness the route down the moraine was found, but was followed by a slippery trek over the treacherous glacier and its meltwater streams, while trying to recognise anything familiar. It was just before midnight, and almost twelve hours since leaving, that they arrived back at the tents, having completed what is thought to be the first British ascent of Margianna, and learned of the departure of the main party.

Meanwhile, leaving Thamas to await their return, Derek, Gary, Geoff, John and Tim dismantled the Base Camp so that the return journey to Mestia could be split over two days. Stopping on the sandy flat where we had camped on the way up, we finished the remaining food before collapsing exhausted into our sleeping-bags. The next morning was eventful. Having breakfasted and packed, we were just about ready to leave when what appeared to be two furry animals appeared above a nearby rock. Our first thoughts were that they were marmots, but when the 'marmots' emerged wearing balaclavas, one carrying an AK-47 and the other a rifle, all became very clear. We were about to be robbed – or worse! One bandit circled the camp and the other fired a shot above our heads, just in case we were not convinced. By sign language and the repeated request for 'dollari' it was obvious that they wanted money. The most terrifying moment occurred when all five of the party were made to lie face down in a line in what could be described as a ditch. When Geoff was singled out and taken away some thought the worst. He was finally made to remove his leather boots, which they took together with a collection of watches, cameras, and a sleeping-bag before firing a second warning shot and disappearing back down the valley. Luckily nobody was hurt, but the loss of Geoff's mountaineering boots was a major problem which eventually necessitated him returning home. Fortunately John had a spare pair of trainers that at least allowed Geoff to descend the moraine and get off the mountain.

Back in Mestia our hosts were mortified by our experience. In addition to their personal grief, arising from a family bereavement, we had arrived with our sorry tale. Chris and Steve arrived with Thamas some time later

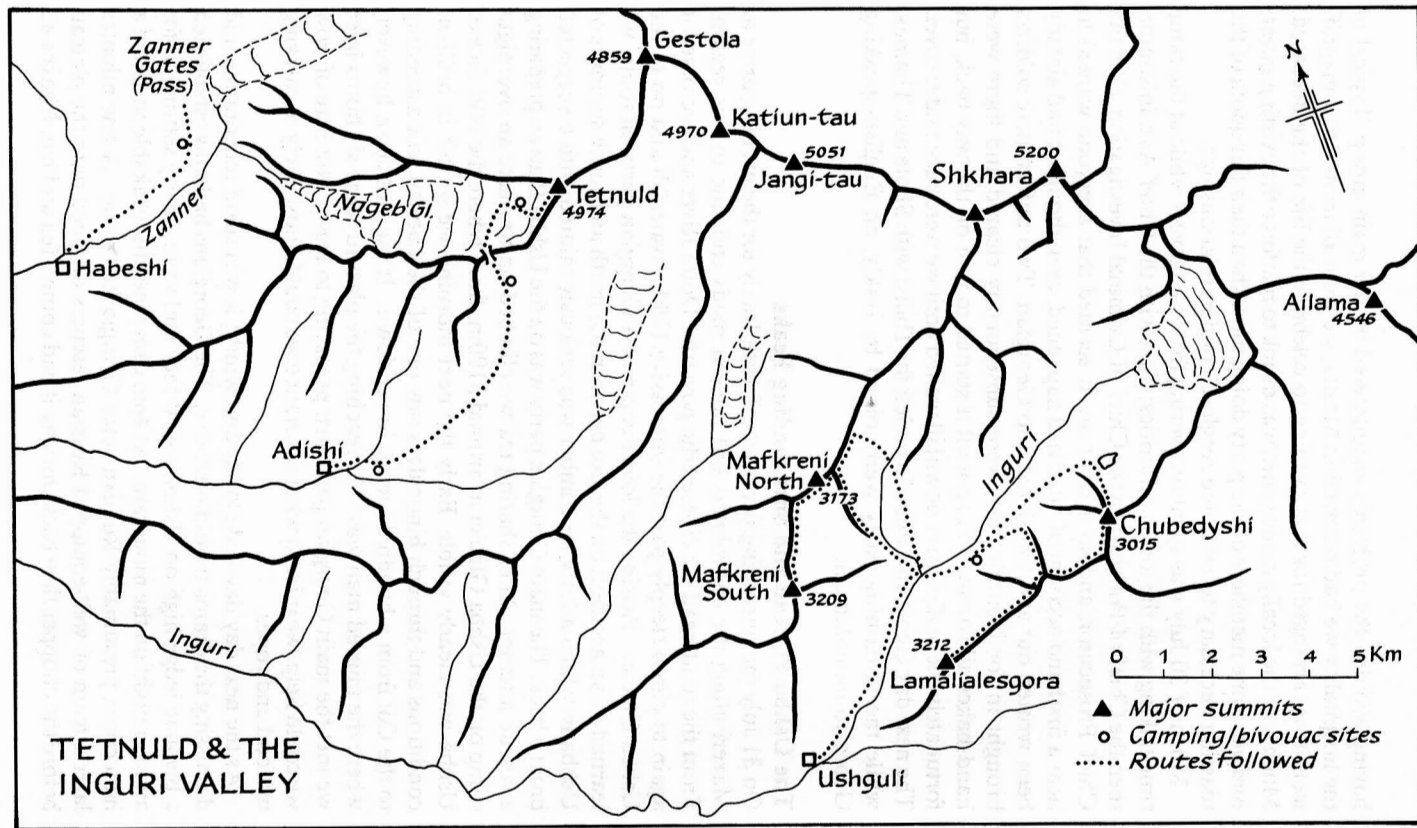
having avoided the problems encountered by the main group. Typical of the hospitality we had received in Mestia, we were all invited to a magnificent feast arranged for that evening to celebrate the life of the deceased. Much *raki*, the locally made spirit, was drunk to reinforce the existing *entente cordiale*, some members of the party doing more than their fair quota of the toasting necessary to reinforce Anglo-Georgian relationships.

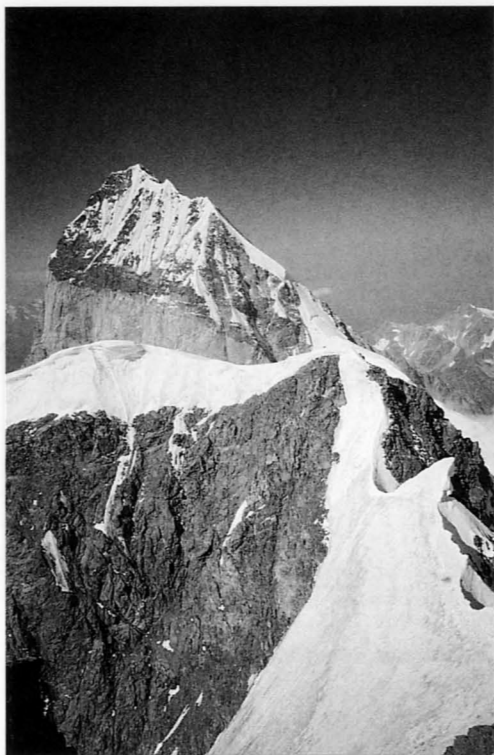
Much of 30 July was spent recovering from hangovers while at the same time talking with the local authorities; first with the Chief Administrator, then the Chief of Police, then the Chief of Criminal Investigation, then the Chief Prosecutor, and so it went on. It seemed that everyone wanted to hear a firsthand account of what had happened, even though it had already been written out and translated into Georgian. Two unfortunate soldiers brought in for identification were subsequently cleared and there were handshakes all round. To cap it all it started to rain on the way back, but fortunately the really heavy downfall waited until we were back under cover. The next day Geoff and John Town left for Tbilisi with Shota and Thamas, while the remaining party were joined by Irakly, an English-speaking Georgian mountaineer.

### **The Ushba Plateau and Surrounding Peaks**

On 31 July the remaining party set off with Irakly for the exciting drive to Mazeri along the convoluted and uneven roads endemic to this region. From the road head we crossed the powerful Dolra River and recrossed it again to climb steeply past the impressive Ushba waterfall and on to the Ushba Glacier. Passing the lower camp of a Georgian party en route, we learned of an accident on the Col between the north and south summits of Ushba in which a Latvian climber was seriously injured with a suspected broken back. The main Georgian party was on the Ushba Plateau preparing a rescue attempt. After sharing tea we climbed on to make an overnight camp on the Ushba Glacier at around 3100m, from where the NW face of Ushba was clearly visible. Early the next morning we set off in brilliant conditions and through binoculars saw one of the Latvian pair ascending to the Col from a hundred metres lower down. It was not clear, however, where the injured man was. On reaching the plateau some six hours later we met the main Georgian party just preparing to leave. Not sure of how we could help, we offered what assistance we could, most likely in carrying up food and ropes.

As the next day dawned cloudy and windy, it was spent rehydrating and discussing the drama unfolding above. The Georgians had now established a bivouac ledge high on Ushba's west face and were clearly settling in for another night on the mountain. At 4pm came the unmistakable sound of a helicopter, presumably Russian since Georgia had none. A few minutes later a team of well-equipped Russian rescuers dropped onto the plateau before the chopper flew back the way it had come. Tea and handshakes all



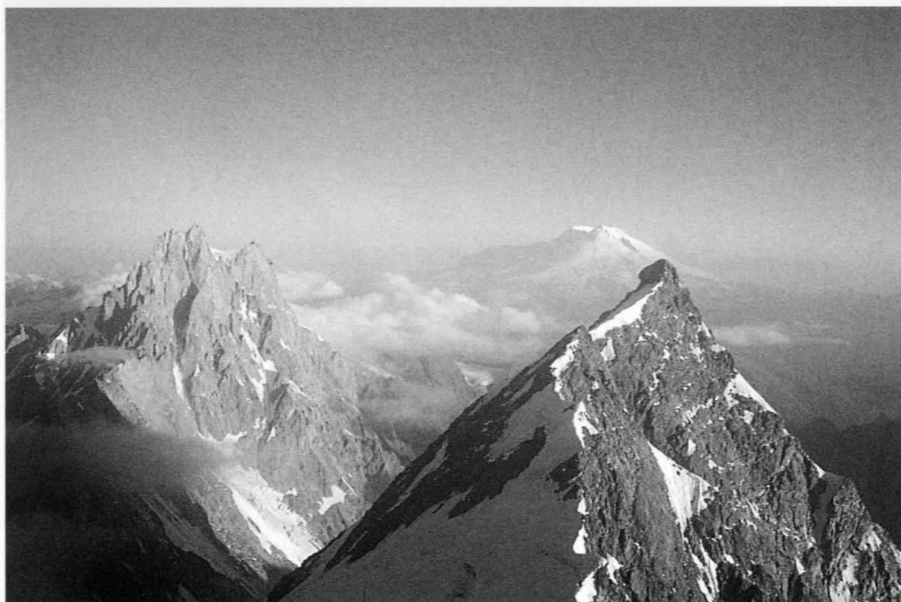


*Left*

43. Ushba from the SW ridge of Tetnuld. (*Chris Bedford*) (p136)

*Below*

42. Pik Shchurovski and Pik Shkhelda, with Elbrus in the distance. (*Derek Buckle*) (p136)



round and the party were off to camp on the Ushba Bolster prior to the rescue attempt. What little information we had was confusing, but we understood that the Georgians had made verbal contact with the uninjured Latvian and that the other was still alive after almost 7 days on the mountain. With so many rescuers involved we now felt redundant and free to climb as we wished, although in order not to get in the way we deliberately avoided Ushba. Later we were pleased to hear that the Russians had been successful in rescuing the injured Latvian by lowering him down the north face nine days after he had broken his back on the mountain.

On 3 August we woke early with the intention of climbing Chatyn-Tau (4368m), but the wind and mist precluded this. With a marked improvement in conditions at 10.30am, however, we rapidly decided to climb Pik Shchurovski (4259m) which was the prominent peak just behind our camp. Ascending via the SE ridge took just under 3½ hours (Alpine PD/PD+) and offered superb views of Shkhelda, Ushba, Chatyn-Tau (especially its tremendous north face) and further out to the Russian Caucasus. This was a good and varied route, taking the obvious line from the Ushba Plateau. Flushed with success, Derek, Chris, Gary, Steve and Tim decided to attempt Chatyn-Tau the following day; John deciding to remain in camp with Irakly. Thus, at 5am we left camp to climb the conspicuous west ridge. Making good progress up the well-defined ridge, we reached the nearer west summit (4310m) at around 7.15am to gaze in amazement over the sharp corniced arête leading towards the higher central summit. From here there were fine views of the Ushba east face, of our route on Pik Shchurovski, and of the twin cones of Elbrus far away in the distance. With regular and well-placed ice screws the excellent and impressive ridge (Alpine AD+) was traversed to gain the main summit (4368m) in a further two hours, completing what we believed could be the first British ascent of Chatyn-Tau. Returning the way that we came afforded continuously good views of Ushba with the little rocky knoll of Little Ushba in the foreground, and got us back to camp at around 1.45pm.

Leaving the Col at 8.30 the next morning we made excellent progress down the Ushba Glacier and within four hours we were back at the Georgian lower camp, just in time for lunch and another example of the local friendliness and hospitality. Eventually we left to complete the return trip down to the valley. Intending to camp just outside Mazeri we erected our tents and prepared the evening meal. As more and more locals came over to us it soon became obvious that this was not a safe place to camp, because of the high risk from bandits. Decamping in record time, we followed the locals into town where safe accommodation was found. Some time later the main team of Georgian mountaineers joined us to sleep on the floor. Early on 6 August we made our way back to our base in Mestia, but our stay there was to be short-lived.

### **Exploration of the Zanner Valley**

With a tight schedule ahead of us we left Mestia at about 4pm and were taken by car to the village of Habeshi, with the intention of traversing Tetnuld (4974m), starting from the Zanner Valley. After we were deposited at the road head the path up to the Zanner Gates was almost immediately steep and demanding through heavy vegetation. As pointed out by Andrew Wielochowski in his guides, many of these tracks are not well used, and this one was no exception. The only consolation in making this arduous climb with heavy packs was the comfort provided by the presence of an armed border guard, but even he turned back when the undergrowth closed in to the extent that a machete would have been an advantage! It also began to rain. Desperate for a bivouac site we disbanded into little hollows and made what space we could. It was dark, and definitely raining, by the time we were protected from the elements. A surprisingly comfortable night was spent and at daybreak we regrouped, appearing like elves from the undergrowth. Finding a 'path' was even more difficult now and we effectively crawled, scrambled, and climbed through the entangled shrubs, often with steep, unstable slopes leading to the river far below, until eventually we reached the Zanner Gates at an altitude of 2400m.

High above the river which coursed below through a narrow, precipitous gorge, we could now look down into the upper Zanner Valley and the glacier still forming it. A few perfunctory forays suggested that descending with heavy sacks would not be easy, and indeed was likely to be dangerous. Decision time again: should we cut our losses now and try Tetnuld by another route, or should we carry on with our ambitious plan to complete the traverse? The desolate landscape ahead, poor visibility on the mountain and the depression brought about by the arduous ascent probably clinched the decision – we agreed to go back. The descent was little better than the way up, but at least it was downhill and there was the prospect of a good campsite by the river near the bottom.

### **The Ascent of Tetnuld from Adishi**

Early on 8 August we broke camp and walked the short distance into Habeshi where transport to the village of Adishi was negotiated. Since the vehicle was not big enough for both luggage and people, most of us took the relatively short cross-country route to Adishi while the sacks were ferried by road. Having had few rest days, however, we were grateful to be picked up and driven the last few miles of the journey. We camped on the outskirts of Adishi in a delightful spot overlooking the village, to which an enterprising farmer even delivered fresh bread, cheese and yoghurt early the next day. John and Shota had decided to explore the adjacent valleys rather than make the long climb up to Tetnuld, so after walking together for a little way, on 9 August we again parted company.

In contrast to the walk up to the Zanner Gates, the route to the Tium-Bashar Col, just below the Amarantov bivouac, was very pleasant. This

time there were no trees, the gradient was easy and the SW ridge of Tetnuld could be seen for much of the way. With space for a number of tents, the Col was in an idyllic position but, unlike the Amaratov bivouac, lacked free running water. Our plan was to rest here until around midday on 10 August and then bivouac high on the Nageb Glacier in readiness for the final ascent. Accompanied by Irakly, we left the camp at around noon to climb the rocky couloir leading to the Amaratov bivouac before traversing the Nageb Glacier to the foot of the steep ramp leading towards the SW ridge. Just below the snow dome we found a suitable crevasse in which to bivouac at around 4240m and were settled just before snow, thunder and lightning set in. Under these conditions it seemed unlikely that we would be able to make the final ascent the next day, but by 7.30am there was a marked improvement and we set off. The route followed the superb SW ridge, heavily corniced on the northern side (Alpine PD+/AD-) and with frequent crevasses, which led inexorably to the summit. Despite the storm on the previous night, the conditions underfoot were ideal and the top was reached in just over three hours. After a lengthy sojourn on the summit we retraced our steps to the bivouac site where we collected our gear before continuing down to our tents. With the clouds now beginning to build up again we seemed to have been fortunate to hit a window of good weather for our summit attempt.

Following a lazy start on 12 August we dismantled our tents and returned to Adishi to camp. The villagers were evidently pleased for us and gave us bread and cheese to celebrate our achievement – the first successful ascent this year. Having given them aspirins in return, we joined John and Shota in the village the next day for a rapid transfer by an ex-military minibus to Ushguli, leaving Irakly to return home to Tbilisi.

### **Exploring the Inguri Valley**

Having been taken as far as possible by minibus up the Inguri Valley we walked the short distance to the large glacial boulders, where we made camp next to a small farmstead in full view of the impressive 2½km-high SW face of Shkhara (5200m). The more energetic among us then went bouldering, while the more sedentary members of the party collected wild raspberries to complement the wild bilberries given to us by the farmer's young children.

Leaving Shota to guard the tents, we made another leisurely start on 14 August to try and get some distant views of our route on Tetnuld. From the Inguri Valley we walked up Chubedyshi (3015m), passing a small lake en route, and then strolled along the superb ridge to reach Lamalialesgora (3212m), the highest point on the outcrop. From here there were excellent views of the main Caucasus chain, including Shkhara and Jangi-tau (5151m), bastions on the Bezingi Wall, and Ailama (4546m) to the NE. Tetnuld and Ushba were also visible further to the west. Descent to our Base Camp was made directly down one of the NW facing ridges.

With one more day available we next went to the north side of the valley, taking a route directly up the spur leading to Mafkreni North (3173m) and then following the ridge to Mafkreni South (3209m). From this vantage-point there were excellent views of Tetnuld, in addition to a different perspective on Shkhara. Taking the direct route down to the valley we then broke camp and moved to the outskirts of Ushguli for our final night out, with the intention of securing transport for our return to Mestia and, more importantly, purchasing some vodka to celebrate Gary's birthday! Although transport was successfully arranged, no vodka was available so Gary had to content himself with a tin of condensed milk, which had become a much sought after treat throughout the trip.

The commotion began to filter through to us just before midnight on Gary's birthday. Loud shouting at first and then a rifle shot at close range. Tim had been hit in the face by a rifle muzzle and parted with some cash, but now the bandit had his gun no more than 15cm from Derek's head, and was clearly agitated. With Shota with us this time we could explain that we had no money and that we had been robbed once already, but the bandit took a lot of convincing. After what seemed an eternity he slinked off into the night, leaving a very frightened party. Fortunately, Tim was not seriously hurt and no sooner had the bandit left than we rapidly decamped and moved into the village; eventually finding a safe floor on which to sleep.

It had been an eventful trip. We had climbed many beautiful mountains and met some extremely warm-hearted people. We had been shown almost unprecedented generosity from the people of a poor country, but given the real risk of being robbed, mountaineering in the Georgian Caucasus cannot be advised at this time. Once back at Mestia we had a final feast to celebrate our trip and to thank our hosts. Again there was much drinking and two suckling pigs had been slaughtered earlier in the day. It was a fitting end before driving back to Tbilisi and then flying back to the UK, although this time the airline clerk discovered our colossal excess and after much protest we were charged an extra \$200.

**Summary** In July/August 1998 eight people took part in an Alpine Club meet, organised by John Temple, to the Svanetian Caucasus. Despite being robbed by armed bandits on two separate occasions, Chris Bedford, Derek Buckle, Gary Hill, Steve Humphries, Tim Sparrow, John Temple and Geoff Thomas between them climbed the following mountains, several of which were believed to be first British ascents:

Dallakora, 3753m

Pik Shchurovski, 4259m

Tetnuld, 4974m

Mestia-tau, 4130m

Chatyn-Tau West, 4310m

Margianna, 3568m

Chatyn-Tau Main, 4368m