
GUY ROBERTSON

Kyzyl Asker

(Plate 26)

Dreams are a bit like sugar. They're a great source of energy. They're an integral part of what makes us 'alive'. They give us endless inspiration and motivation. They say a man without dreams is as well to be dead. From that perspective, failure's easier to swallow, as it helps to keep our dreams alive. This is why climbers have it so easy. Irrespective of where, how hard or with whom we climb, our lifeblood flows readily and our dreams come on tap. And the moment a dream is born can be as exciting and rewarding as living the dream itself.

This summer, on a small expedition to a remote part of the Tien Shan mountains, we unearthed a dream. Hidden amongst the rich climbing treasures of the western Kokshal Too, with an unspoilt view over the vast wilderness that forms the western fringes of China, lies the awesome South-east Face of Kyzyl Asker. I desperately want to climb that face, and so does my friend Es Tressider. It's become our dream.

The 2002 Scottish Kyzyl Asker Expedition was originally put together to attempt the impressive 1300m North-west Face, alpine style. Climbed once previously, on the only recorded ascent of the mountain to date, by a stubborn Russian competition outfit, it used much aid and was rated highly – a worthy objective for our small, free-climbing team. However, heavy rain during the early part of the year put paid to those plans as our truck driver steadfastly refused to attempt the last few miles off road, pointing at large puddles and gesticulating in a decidedly unenthusiastic manner. His wisdom ultimately proved correct, as two neighbouring expeditions lost their trucks to the terrible swamp monster during the following weeks.

There were four of us, myself, Es Tressider, Neal Crampton and Blair Fyffe. I was the 'granddaddy' of the expedition, being the only thirty-something in a team of otherwise young tigers. As well as youth there was talent amongst us, with past exploits on E6 rock, A4 aid and Scottish winter VIII to our credit. The only thing we lacked was high-altitude experience. But that was why we were there.

Base Camp was soon established at the snout of the Komorova Glacier amid a myriad of world-class bouldering. To our immediate south, three huge glaciers sprawled leisurely down from an impressive array of dazzling peaks, most of which sat between the 5000m-5500m level. At over 5800m, Kyzyl Asker dominated the vista, looking huge, the North Face itself a

huge glacial spill falling over 2000m directly from the summit. Left of this, each glacier – east, central and west in turn – presented impressive retaining walls and peaks, all of which we knew sported just a handful of routes.

The impression was one of big sky and much space, a bit like an outsized version of the northern Cairngorms. This feeling was exaggerated by a huge open ‘delta’ that rolled off northwards from the snout of the glaciers next to camp. Our approaches were going to be lengthy affairs, a day at least it seemed, unless we confined ourselves to the smaller routes on the glacier walls. But why doodle in the margins when a vast blank canvas awaits?

We decided to divide into pairs as it was soon apparent we had very different ambitions. Es and I were into something long, hard and free in alpine style – with the emphasis on the hard. Blair and Neal were more relaxed, simply looking to bag some peaks, gain high-altitude experience, and hopefully get some decent climbing into the bargain. (They succeeded, but that’s another story). Having seen a quite literally eye-popping photo in the *American Alpine Journal*, Es and I were intent on having a crack at Kyzyl’s South-east Face.

After two weeks of acclimatisation, including successful forays up to peaks of 4500m-5000m, we went our separate ways. Es and I decided that with only a fortnight and no knowledge of our route, we would have to move an Advanced Base to the foot of the face. This wasn’t easy, necessitating a 15km hike over a 4700m col with more or less every bit of food and gear we possessed. It was three days before we were fully ensconced at the desired location but it was worth the effort.

On first acquaintance the South-east Face of Kyzyl resembles something from a Tolkein fable, a mile-high Gothic cathedral laced with glittering streams of diamonds and pearls. Viewed head-on from the glacier it forms an almost symmetrical triangle of vertical rock, composed on either side of monolithic towers rising up towards the apex at the mountain’s summit. From the summit to the glacier falls a giant arête, one and a half times the size of El Cap, a worthy challenge for those pushing envelopes in the field of aid and suffering. Immediately left of this was our own intended route, an icy gully-cum-groove that also ran the entire height of the face.

Neither of us had ever entertained anything quite like this. It resembled something akin to a giant version of the hardest of Scottish gullies except without a definite crux. It was simply vertical, overhanging or extremely thin and tenuous all the way to the top. It seemed clear that the lower half would be ascended on pure steep ice, whereas the upper section would require the mixed skills of a Jedi. Route-finding high up wasn’t obvious either.

Shortly after relocating Base Camp another storm came in. The air temperature rocketed and plummeted with beguiling speed and frequency, engendering a sense of objective uncertainty that we could have done without. But we had gradually learned to ignore the weather throughout the first part of the trip. Our barometer hadn’t budged despite countless severe weather changes, from baking heat through to electric snowstorms,

and we had long since abandoned any hope of accurate prediction. The only certainty was that the weather wouldn't stay fair, which in reality meant we were likely to be under pressure high up. We had agreed that starting out in a storm wasn't rational behaviour, though in retrospect it may have been, and that as soon as it cleared we'd make our first move. After two days the snow stopped.

We left camp at around three in the afternoon, hoping to rattle up the introductory pitches and find a bivouac before dark while the sun was off the route. This would leave us well placed for an early attack at first light, before the sun had risen on the far side of the glacier and started to wreak havoc on the thin ice above us. On such an inescapable fall line, this was a major concern that proved ultimately to be our nemesis. We took synthetic sleeping-bags, a small home-made bivvy shelter, a stove and enough food for five days. Our estimate was for a maximum of four up and one down. Our rack was minimal, mainly ice screws and pegs, and roughly equating to that suitable for an icy Scottish winter route but with a small sprinkling of aid gear lest an emergency arose. The weather could only be described at best as 'showery'.

After about 300m of straightforward 60° ice and a fruitless pitch searching for a bivouac site out of the firing line, we eventually gave up and simply made one from the ice. It was never going to be comfy but at least in this instance it seemed safe, despite Es very nearly demonstrating the speed of his sleeping-bag on an unplanned descent. Fortunately he had the presence of mind to attach himself first.

The next morning wasn't promising. Around 2.00am, after a few hours of rest but little sleep, we made a brew and talked tactics. Despite the sky clearing to a myriad of stars, the temperature still only hovered around zero, far from ideal with a million tonne guillotine of ice hanging over our heads. But it seemed to be getting colder and much quieter, so we decided to give it a go.

Starting out in the dark and making reasonable progress over Scottish V ground, we soon reached the base of the route's most prominent singular feature, a giant cul-de-sac sporting a 250m ice smear, and crowned by a threatening ring of Damoclesian icicles. At this point the sun slowly started to make its presence felt, the heart-lurching 'whrrrrrr' of falling ice steadily becoming more continuous and rapidly heightening our awareness. I led a particularly nasty and crumbly icy mixed pitch to the right of the gully bed before Es set off very gingerly back onto the main fall. He was hardly three placements from the belay when I suggested we might want to take refuge before our options ran out. He agreed. We cowered uncomfortably under an overhang. And sure enough the deluge began.

We knew that during the night it hadn't been particularly cold, but this was getting genuinely hot, very hot, and it soon became ridiculous. Within two hours of the sun's rays reaching the line of the route the water was flowing. By lunchtime what had been a continuous plume of the most

impeccable, creamy water ice had a veritable river running straight down the middle of it, so that all we could do was sit and wait – and hope. Even if it became colder out of the sun in the afternoon, it was going to take a day at least to refreeze, and that meant another wet, uncomfortable bivvy. There was no choice but to retreat.

Back at camp we assessed the situation. The weather would undoubtedly soon turn and we'd need a day at least to recover, mentally as well as physically. Moreover, by a serious oversight on the planning front, we hadn't bargained on making multiple attempts so our available food supplies were running low. Perhaps most worrying of all was our new-found uncertainty about the route – did that kind of thaw take place every day? If not, what was the extent of a more 'normal' thaw, and could we climb through it, especially higher up?

On the positive side, despite the torrent of water and falling ice we had witnessed, stonefall had been infrequent, which suggested the thaw didn't usually run quite as deep. We rationalised that with a much earlier start, a more typically hard overnight frost and colder air during the day, we were in with a chance of success. With sufficient food, we could also take a more relaxed approach and simply bivouac and wait when the sun came onto the line. If we were really lucky, we reasoned, we'd get cloudy cold weather.

Our food situation required a return journey to Base Camp, 15km back up over the col, which gobbled up more precious time. We were getting fitter though, and had returned in three days. That left nine days until our driver would return to pick us up. Five days at most on the route, a day of rest, a day to walk out, and then a day to pack up – perfect! Of course things didn't work out like that. On such a long, difficult and tactically complex route, we were naïve to think that such a hostile world would simply revolve around us.

Up until this point in the trip the weather had been reasonable. While the changes in temperature had ensured that climbing conditions had changed almost daily on the higher peaks, there had been few storms and not much in the way of snow. But on our return trip to Advanced Base the snow began to fall. It was heavy at first, whiteout conditions, necessitating careful navigation over the col and down through the crevasses on its southern aspect. We pressed on under the assumption that the weather would clear up by the time we had rested.

At Advanced Base the snow continued and continued – and continued. On the morning after it had started I awoke to complete silence. 'At last!', I thought, quickly doing the necessary arithmetic in my head to work out if we had sufficient time left for an attempt. But alas, the tent door was opened to reveal a solid wall of wind-packed snow blocking out all noise and light. We had quite literally been buried. I slumped back into the tent and resigned myself to yet another day of chapati-making fun, with some digging to relieve the boredom.

On the evening of 15 August the snow stopped. We had exactly five full days left. It would take at least a full day to dig the tent out, return to Base, and pack everything up in time to leave, and there was no chance of setting foot on a route until two metres of fresh snow had been given the chance to settle down.

Next morning we sat outside the tent and watched gargantuan avalanches pouring down in all shapes and sizes and on all aspects around us. It certainly knows how to snow in the Kokshal Too. One particular slide, draining the gully immediately to the left of our own intended route, created a snow cloud fully a quarter the height of the face itself, prompting Es to quiver. 'Er – you don't think that's big enough to come over here do you?' Fortunately it wasn't, but we subsequently found the col over which we had approached obliterated by blocks the size of caravans.

If the weather held out, we'd have one last chance. We knew three days wasn't likely to be enough but we had become obsessed. Seeing a photograph of this line is one thing but it's another entirely to live and breathe in its shadow for a week or more. Our tactics had changed slightly, we would now leave camp late evening and climb as far as possible in the dark, aiming at the very least to gain the start of the ice smear in the back of the cul-de-sac. We hoped to clear this just as the sun appeared, leaving what looked like a couple of easier rope lengths to a large snow ledge on the left. From there, we could either fuel up and keep going or, if the sun was again causing problems, take a bivouac and then continue very early the following day.

It went extremely well at first, with conditions near perfect. We literally raced to our previous high point in a mere four hours, being fitter and able to climb directly this time up ice in the gully bed. After a heady cocktail of baby food, Blueberry Soup and Powerbars we launched onto the smear. We were stunned. It was quite unlike anything either of us had experienced, sustained for fully four 60m rope lengths at 80° to 95°. And this was just one feature on a 1400m route. The ice was indescribably user-friendly right up until the point where Es pulled through the icicles adorning the rim of the cul-de-sac. At this point things once again took a turn for the worse. For a long and worrying time he tried desperately to find an anchor on which to bring me up, while I hung below on a brace of screws watching the dreaded sun making its presence felt. I felt strangely helpless and vulnerable as the first tinkles of ice rolled by and Es cursed increasingly loudly from his precarious position in the groove above.

Eventually the usual calls indicated Es was safe and it seemed that all was well. However, as I cranked desperately through the steepest section at the icicles, my head popping up over the lip, I was greeted by a disturbing sight. Es was quite obviously extremely uncomfortable and, judging by the look on his face, most probably unsafe. I couldn't see what he was belayed to but I thought it best not to ask. More worrying still was the heat of the sun. The thaw wasn't as bad as it had been previously but it was sufficient to thaw the ice here, which was now only a few heart-stopping inches thick.

After we had exchanged unpleasantries I traversed out onto a very thinly-iced wall on the right, accepting without choice what was inevitably going to be a soul-searching lead. The next half-an-hour is etched indelibly onto my climbing memory. The wall steepened gradually from 80° through to 90°, the ice itself becoming thinner and progressively more detached from the rock underneath. With no protection whatsoever, 25 metres from a non-existent belay, the final ten feet on detached, inch-thick vertical ice were undoubtedly among the most frightening I have ever climbed. Slumped onto the edge of a little hanging ice slope above the wall, I struggled to cope with a combined wave of nausea, euphoria and overwhelming relief.

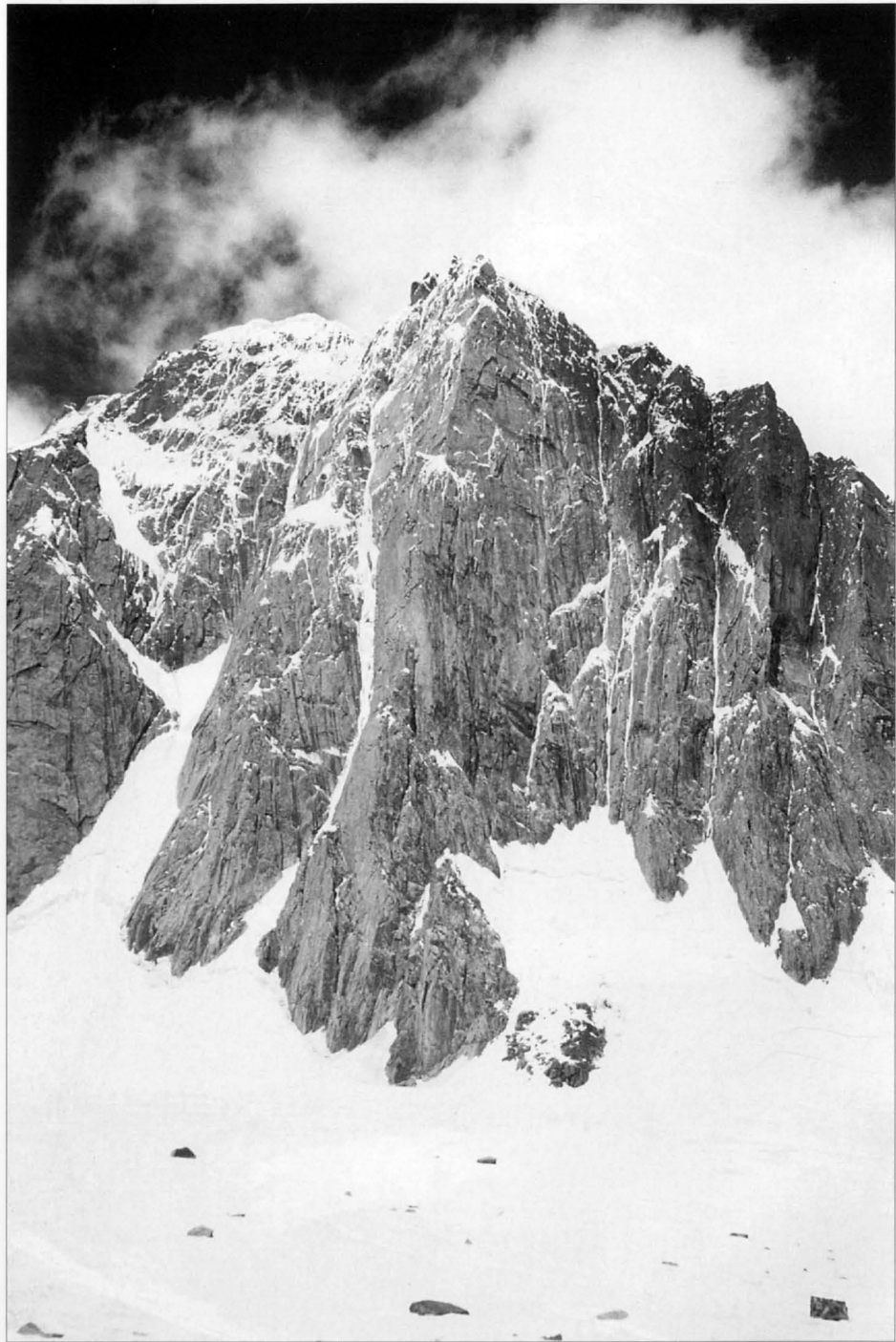
The only feeling missing was hope. The sun had struck again. With the ice on this section of the route much thinner than expected, our progress was halted. After another brew and some food we inspected the options but nothing would yield. We climbed up and down and across, this way and that, but everywhere the ice was thin and melting and simply couldn't justify an attempt. We thought of using aid but this wasn't appropriate on a route that will undoubtedly go free with the right approach.

And so it was, after a long wait for the temperature to fall, we retreated once more, with no time to hang around, limited by the heat of the sun. We were unlucky, perhaps, to be stalled by so much snow, but then it's easy to make excuses. It's more likely that this is simply a route that needs a bit of perseverance, understanding and a lot of climbing hard at night, all of which can be programmed into memory banks for next time round. And there will be a next time.

As we trudged snail-like back over the col at the start of the long haul back to Base Camp, the sun belting down, our gigantic rucksacks cutting grooves in our shoulders, I felt no disappointment. I had enjoyed some of the most challenging and spectacular ice climbing of my life, I was fit and well and I was sharing a laugh with new-found friends. But most important of all I was inspired and motivated. A new dream had been born and I'd never felt more alive.

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26. The stupendous SE Face of Kyzyl Asker (5878m) with the curved gully climbed by Robertson and Tressider clearly seen reaching towards the summit. (*Guy Robertson*) (p43)