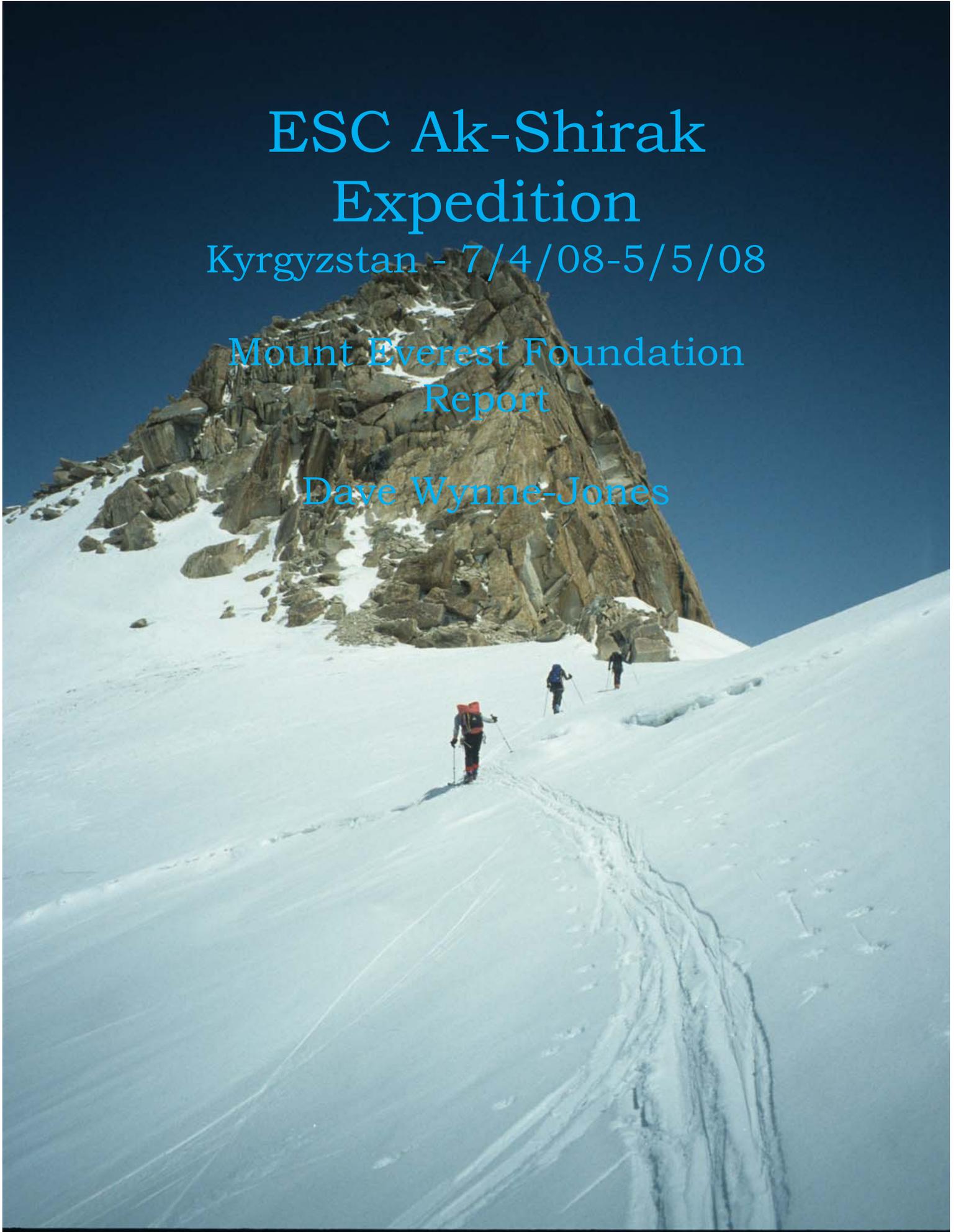


ESC Ak-Shirak Expedition

Kyrgyzstan - 7/4/08-5/5/08

Mount Everest Foundation
Report

Dave Wynne-Jones



Aims of the Expedition.

To make a west-east traverse of the range then strike north to make a circuit of the largely unexplored glacier systems of the North-eastern Ak-Shirak range on ski.

To make first ascents of peaks adjacent to the route on ski and on foot.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the generous financial support of the Alpine Club, and the Mount Everest Foundation.

The compiler of this report & the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.

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Introduction.

Until the mid 19th century Kyrgyzstan had been an ill-defined region populated by a number of nomadic tribes, occasionally involved with larger migratory movements that impacted upon China, the Middle East or Europe, the most famous being that led by Genghis Khan. As the Russian empire under the Czars drove east and Britain strove to defend the northern borders of its Indian imperial possessions, the intrigues of the Great Game were played out in Central Asia. One of the consequences of this was that one by one the Kyrgyz tribes turned to Russia to seek protection. In 1863 Kyrgyzstan became a province of the Russian empire that was subsequently secured as a Soviet republic after the Russian revolution and went on to develop a sense of its own nationhood. To the east it borders China, with Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west and Tajikistan to the south.

Kyrgyzstan became more accessible to western mountaineers with the collapse of the Soviet Union. UN studies of economic development, necessary as a result of the withdrawal of Russian investment in the country, advised the encouragement of mountain tourism; "...the average altitude of its territory is 2750m while maximum elevation is 7439m. More than 94% of its territory are (sic) mountains and mountain valleys situated above 1000m."(TopAsia fact sheet)

The Tien Shan mountains sweep south-west in an arc from the highest peaks, Khan Tengri 6995m. and Pobedy 7439m, along the border between China and Kyrgyzstan. In part of the Tien Shan lying to the south of Lake Yssyk-kol is the Ak-Shirak range. This was identified as a potential ski-mountaineering area by Chris Watkins, an Eagle Ski Club member who had been working in Kyrgyzstan. As long ago as 1998 she proposed an expedition to the range, but was unable to secure the numbers necessary to make helicopter access financially acceptable.

In 2003 an ESC team led by Steve Wright and including Dave Wynne-Jones & Mike Sharp attempted to access the range from the south via the Kara Say valley. Unfortunately getting to Kara Say by road was prevented by heavy snowfall and avalanches that blocked the 4000m Suek pass. The expedition then turned to explore the western flanks of the range from the north, eventually reaching the Kara Say valley via the Ak-Bel pass but without any hope of penetrating the range further than the snout of the Kara Say glacier. However, the feasibility of using the valley to access the range was confirmed along with the potential for ski-mountaineering. (see MEF report 2003)

In 2006 Dave Wynne-Jones led another expedition that arrived later in the season, at the end of April, and secured access over the Suek pass. Details are available in the MEF report on that expedition, but one outcome was sufficient reconnaissance to return to explore the north-eastern mountains of the range. These looked to be well suited to ski-mountaineering and they had been only skirted in 2006. Unfortunately the winter of 2007 proved to be a warm one and the resulting snow conditions limited the extent to which these N.E. glaciers could be explored although the 2007 team did succeed in making 5 significant first ascents. One of the mountains was named "Pik of the 150th anniversary of the British Alpine Club," a suitable commemoration of both the club and the expedition.

In 2008 a planned Eagle ski Club expedition to Tibet was cancelled after rioting in Lhasa led to the borders being closed within just a couple of weeks of departure. With time off work booked the team was desperate to find an alternative and rapidly reached the conclusion that only a return to Ak-Shirak would offer the kind of exploratory ski – mountaineering that could be organised in the time available.

The Team

Dave Wynne-Jones, 55, British, Retired: 28 year Alpine experience including ascents of all of the 4000m peaks & routes such as the Frendo Spur; expeditions to Alaska, Ecuador, Kyrgyzstan, Peru, Pakistan, Nepal, India, China; 1st ascents of Nevado Padrecaca, S. Face of Pokharkan, Dhanesh Parbat, AC 150, N. Ridge of Dangchezhengla; ascents of Denali, Illiniza, Cotopaxi, Cayambe, Pik Lenin, Ticlla (3rd), Pisco, Huascarán Norte; Ski expeditions to Mt. Logan, Caucasus, Damavand, Mustagh Ata (7546m. solo ascent), Ak-Shirak 2003, 2006 (7 first ascents), 2007 (4 first ascents).

Mike Sharp, 56, British; Operations Manager for Antarctic Logistics and Expeditions: 1966 Hardanger; 1969 Lyngen Peninsula, 300 miles N. of the Arctic Circle; 1971 Ascents of Stetind near Narvik; 1972 Cilo Dag in Turkish Kurdistan; 1973 Romsdal and the Trollwall area; 1974 Haute Route; 1975 Oberland Haute Route. 1976 BAS field assistant - 6 summer seasons and one winter based out of Rothera on the Antarctic Peninsula; 1977 first British ascent of the Lotus Flower Tower; 1979 climbed thirteen peaks over 18,000 feet in the Cordillera Real of Bolivia and Cordillera Blanca of Peru, including Huandoy and Alpamayo. 1981 winter ascent Exum ridge on the Grand Teton; 1983 2nd ascent East ridge of Saint Elias, from the sea; 1987 guided the first commercial ski trip to the South Pole; 1987 South ridge of Denali; Guided 4 ascents of Mt Vinson and in the Ellesworth Mountains Antarctica; 1990 93-day complete ski traverse of the length of Ellesmere Island; 1994 170-day traverse of the length of Baffin Island (1000 miles of skiing pulling sleds & 1000km in Kayaks); 1998 solo kayak trip in the southern fjords of Greenland; 1999 guided Greenland ice-cap with Greenlanders and dogs; 2003 & 2006 two expeditions to the Ak Shirak region of Kyrgyzstan climbing 7 unclimbed peaks; 2006 Winter ascent Mt Ararat. 20 Antarctic seasons.

Derek Buckle, 63, British, Consultant Research Chemist- Alpine Club Member. Expeditions to *Peru*: (Ascent of Rurec Sur, Pisco & Chopicalqui, 2007); *Tibet*, {1st ascents of Dobzebo (6429m, 2005); Nganglong Kangri I, 6,720m and Nganglong Kangri II 6,591m, (2004); Beu-tse (6,270m, 2003), and Machag (6,020m, 1999)}, Exploration of Wortse Chu area, Upper Kongpo (2001); *Greenland*: (Six 1st ascents in the Lemon and Lindbergh mountains 2002); 1st British ascent of Chatyn Tau, Caucasus (1998). Extensive mountaineering experience in the Alps, Caucasus, Ecuador, Kenya, Nepal, Pamirs, Southern Alps, Tetons, and the Canadian Rockies. Ice climbing experience in the Canadian Rockies, Norway and Alps and numerous ski tours in the Alps, Greenland, Tien Shan (Ak-Shirak 2006) and the Tatra Mountains.

Jerry Seager, 37, British, Climate Change Consultant, member of Eagle Ski Club and London Mountaineering Club. Expeditions to India - attempt on Kedar Dome (6940m) 1993 (Reached c6000m); Pakistan - 1st ascent of Letty Sar, 6260m, plus Shifkitten Sar c5800m; 1995); Peru (Huascarán 6768m, plus Pisco, Ishinca, Urus; 1995, 1997); Greenland - exploratory ski touring trip to Liverpool Land, 2004. Further mountaineering & ski touring experience in Alps, Pyrenees, Scotland. Plus trekking trips to Chile, Borneo, Tanzania, Nepal, Japan and cycled the length of South America.

Robert West, 67, British, Academic; extensive climbing and ski-mountaineering experience in the Alps on routes such as Pennine Alps 4000ers & Haute Route; 1 year alpine climbing in New Zealand; Ski mountaineering expeditions: 1981 S.-N. crossing of Gt. Himalaya, 2004 W.-E. Karakoram traverse.

The Area

Kyrgyzstan has a number of independent tourist agencies that can provide trekking and climbing holidays with a set itinerary or “tailor-made” packages of transport and accommodation to support exploratory expeditions. Costs are reasonable because of the intense competition between the agencies for the relatively small numbers of visitors. The expected “goldrush” of mountain tourists has never materialised. One reason is the high cost of flights to Bishkek: the Kyrgyz range might be higher than the Pyrenees or the Alps but can never compete with them while BA flights to Bishkek cost £750 and Easyjet flights to Barcelona or Geneva cost £50. A second reason is the deteriorating infrastructure within the country. For example, the shells of bus stations still exist but there are no public toilets to be found in them since the plumbing was torn out to be sold as scrap after the Soviet withdrawal. Bus timetables are non-existent. A third reason is the difficulty of communicating where Russian is the lingua franca of the region (even the Cyrillic alphabet is different!). Few local people speak English, though numbers are increasing.

The Ak-Shirak range is found between Lake Issy-kul and the southern border with China. It forms part of the Tien Shan or “Celestial Mountains” but is unique in that it has an opencast gold mine on its northern flank. The Kumtor mine is served by a good road that takes heavy trucks bound for the mine and is kept open all year round as far as possible. This means that access to the range is exceptionally good in winter when other mountain roads are buried beneath metres of snow.

The previous expeditions in 2003, 2006 & 2007 confirmed that the 600+ square kilometres of the Ak-Shirak range are alpine in character with glaciation producing pyramidal peaks of varying “sharpness.” Many are over 4000m with the highest over 5000m. Glacial approaches to high cols and the more gently angled faces and ridges offer considerable scope for ski-mountaineering. The competitiveness of Soviet mountaineering meant that many of the “easier” mountains and lines were left untouched whilst ski-mountaineering was of little interest. The 2003 report details the 3 occasions that visits were made to the fringes of the range prior to that expedition and agencies and local people reported that no one had penetrated the range since then. Kyrgyz Travel, the company that provided accommodation in Tamga near Barskoon, is run by 2 former masters of sport in mountaineering with ascents of the country’s 7000m peaks to their credit. They informed us that to their knowledge no one had climbed in the range and all the major peaks remained unclimbed.

In 2006 we made some impression upon that by making 7 first ascents of peaks including Kyrgysia, at 4954m the highest in the north-west of the range. However, access had been problematic. The Suek pass had been negotiable but there was precious little snow in the valley of the Kara Say river in early May. This necessitated a 2-day walk before skis could be used on the frozen river and several portages over extensive frozen gravel banks in the next 2 days to the glacier snout. On the way out Lake Petrov was insufficiently frozen to act as a thoroughfare leaving a tough traverse of the unstable moraine shore as the only option.

In 2007 the approach across Lake Petrov proved to be well-frozen at the beginning of April and remained sufficiently frozen for our return, but in 2008 the new Nature Reserve authorities tried to impose entry fees of \$750 to enter this way. ITMC was of the opinion that this was illegal but with no time for a legal challenge we opted to access the range via the Ak-Bel pass, outside the limits of the Nature Reserve, relying on the extra time available to ensure completion of our proposed journey.

Logistics

Travel

1. Flights

BA flies direct to Bishkek, Aeroflot via Moscow. It is possible to fly to Almaty and take a shuttle bus overland to Bishkek, but would need checking with local agencies & the airline used.

Check charges for excess baggage!

Aeroflot had a baggage allowance of 30kg including hand luggage, but would carry an additional ski bag for only 3kg of assessed excess baggage providing the weight of the ski bag did not exceed 15kg. The cost per kilo to Bishkek was a reasonable £15, so our ski bags cost £45 excess on the way out.

BA used to have a punitive charge of £30 per kilo and ignored any attempts at negotiation, but has recently introduced a charge of £70 for an additional bag that could hold up to 30kg.

2. Road travel.

There are local buses but it saves hassle to arrange transport in advance with an agency.

Permits.

A visa obtainable from the Kyrgyz embassy is necessary to enter the country:

Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic to the United Kingdom

Ascot House,

119 Crawford Street

London, W1U 6BJ

Telephone: **020 7935 1462**

Fax: **020 7935 7449**

e-mail: mail@kyrgyz-embassy.org.uk

The agency must have negotiated access to Lake Petrov with the Kumtor mining company that controls the area with its own security force and the new Nature Reserve administrators who liaise closely with Kumtor.

Communications.

We took a satellite phone. Standard mobile phones were not reliable in Kyrgyzstan: some worked, others didn't.

ITMC gave us contact numbers to use in an emergency.

Food.

It is difficult to obtain lightweight dehydrated food in Kyrgyzstan so we brought our own supplied by www.expeditionfoods.com

Hard cheese, smoked sausage, muesli and various chocolate bars can be obtained at supermarkets in Bishkek, more limited supplies from shops en route to the mountains.

Medical arrangements.

Derek Buckle, who has taken responsibility for medical supplies on other expeditions, organised the medical supplies (See Appendix 2 for a checklist). It was essentially a sophisticated first aid package. Little was used other than basic antibiotics, and low dosage painkillers to deal with stomach upsets and aches and pains en route.

Specialist equipment

Pulks were necessary to transport the weight of supplies for a planned 24 days in the mountains. For cheapness and lightness we adapted standard “kiddies’ sledges” supplied by:

Mailbox International ltd
Bayley St
Stalybridge
Cheshire
SK15 1QQ
Tel 0161 330 5577

See 2006 report for design. This year all the pulk poles were built with heavier gauge plastic plumbing pipes and associated plastic compression joints that were found on the 2006 expedition to be tough enough to withstand the considerable stresses involved in skiing with a pulk.

Insurance

Medical and rescue insurance was provided by the Austrian Alpine Club Weltweit scheme.

Maps

Digital maps of the area are available from East View Cartographic – www.cartographic.com - sheet K-44-73 (1:100,000 scale)

Agency:

ITMC Tien-Shan
Kyrgyzstan
Tel: +996-312-651404,
Fax: +996-312-650747
E-mail: itmc@elcat.kg
www.itmc.centralasia.kg

Expedition Log.

Mon. 7/4 – Tues. 8/4

The team met at Heathrow and flew to Bishkek via Moscow with Aeroflot, driving on to Tamga after shopping in Bishkek.

Weds. 9/4

Leaving Tamga we drove up the Barskoon gorge and on along the good dirt road to the turn off for the Ak-Bel Pass. There were signs that mine vehicles had already been that way & our 6WD vehicle made short work of the decidedly off-road conditions until we reached a bridge that our driver deemed too risky. Fortunately there were sufficient snow patches to link so that we did not have to carry skis & pulks. It is worth noting that we had been told Kyrgyzstan had had a hard winter yet there was less snow here than had been the case at the end of April in 2003. Global warming seems to be proceeding at an accelerated rate in Kyrgyzstan.

After a windy 2 hours skinning through occasional snow showers we camped on grass by a frozen stream that had a small channel of running water.

Thurs 10/4

A very cold night was succeeded by a brilliantly clear morning. We packed up camp & continued along the frozen streambed then up left over alternating banks of snow & thin winter grass. The heavily laden pulks tended to roll on the rough terrain.

At about 4pm we suddenly crested a rise to come upon a mobile mining camp that explained some bulldozed tracks we had encountered. We gave the camp a wide berth, pushing on to an iron tripod marker, where we camped near the site of our 2003 camp. It was strange to think that we had seen our first snow leopard tracks near here in 2003.



Fri. 11/4

Cloud had built up during the previous day with all the signs of approaching bad weather & after a warm night we woke to snowfall. No one was very frisky as headaches and deteriorating visibility kept us tentbound. We discussed options regarding the route ahead & by the afternoon the others had decided to carry a cache to the head of the pass to scout the terrain while I stayed to guard the camp from marauding miners & melt huge amounts of snow for water. They returned with a pessimistic assessment of our chances of getting over the planned high, steep pass with heavy pulks so we decided to traverse the Ak-Bel pass to the Kara Say valley.

Sat. 12/4

There was more snow overnight but by morning the sun was breaking through as we packed up and followed the faint traces of yesterday's tracks. Repacking cached gear at 3833m at the head of the pass we saw a lone Kyrgyz horseman driving other horses through the snow heading over the pass so we followed his tracks down towards an emerging river valley.

Where the horses went over a spur to avoid deep snow we skated down the frozen watercourse rounding a bend into the Kara Say. The south facing slopes were virtually bare of snow but the map told us our frozen waterway went a long way down the valley parallel to the main river before joining it, whereas we could cross open grassland to reach it by a much shorter passage. We camped for the night with the prospect of a double carry in the morning.

Sun. 13/4

The portages turned out to be only about a km before we reached another tributary of ice where we could set up sledges and skis for a rapid descent to the main river. A lammergeyer sailed overhead as we passed the derelict buildings where we had had lunch in 2006 and water bubbled up from under the ice at the junction with the main river, explaining the tracks of wolf & snow leopard printed into patches of soft snow.

The broad river of ice offered good going & we covered another 9 km before camping for the night on a gravel spit. This early in the year there was none of the portaging over gravel banks that we had struggled with in 2006.

Mon. 14/4

We pulked relentlessly upriver to the major confluence of ice before taking the right hand branch through shoals & behind a breached moraine dam to reach the snout of the easternmost glacier at the foot of the Kyondy pass. The glacier appeared to have retreated about 0.5 km in length compared with the last map revision in 1972, but its volume was much more reduced: one tributary glacier had been converted to a hanging icefall.



We camped between a moraine bank and the retreating ice snout amidst flurries of snow. Derek & I were both surprised at how the altitude was continuing to affect us.

Tues. 15/4

Snow. An enforced rest day was spent tackling group equipment problems and planning for the glacier travel ahead. Jerry & Mike both scouted separate ways up onto the glacier.

Weds. 16/4

A snowy morning with poor visibility delayed departure until around 11 am when we set off up the snow-covered ablation valley to mount the glacier via a steepish spur of ice: Jerry's route. As we climbed it became clear that the glacier was actually separating out into its tributaries with marked ice valleys between. We climbed one to the north-east to find a relatively sheltered campsite at 4321m amongst some moraine deposits and ice hollows west of the head of the pass. The wind increased with the promise of bad weather, but the mountains to the south looked savagely beautiful with sharp summit crests and broken icefalls.

Thurs. 17/4

The storm arrived so we spent the day reading, sorting out & conferencing over "cowboy coffee."

Fri. 18/4

Another enforced rest day of storm.

Sat. 19/4



A very cold night brought sun and a bitter wind by morning.

We skinned up the glacier to the north then swung around crevasses to the north-east to reach a col and, shortly after, a sheltered bay at the foot of the south ridge of our target peak where we left our skis. Derek broke trail up snow and rock trending right to take several short steep steps rising towards the summit ridge. I caught up with him & took over breaking trail to the summit 4790m N.41° 47.301' (subsequently named

Stepped Peak or Pik Step.) There were fine views of Piks Kyrgysia and Koyon, which we had climbed in 2006, to the north-west but the cold wind was soon numbing our fingers and driving us down to the skis.

We skied back to camp down the line of ascent through a mixture of ice, crust and hardpack. Needless to say it wasn't very elegant at times!

Sun. 20/4

Good weather confirmed our decision to go for a major peak to the south-east of camp, over the pass. Descending the Kyondy pass to the south-east, we spotted a steep traverse line around an icy buttress that came out above an icefall so avoiding the descent and subsequent climb up a broad chute between the buttress & the icefall. Crossing that chute to gain the upper glacier we were somewhat threatened by serac fall but it was so cold that nothing was moving and we safely gained the snow bowl below the north-west face of Pik 4983m, hung with seracs.

At the far end of the bowl a serac-free slope rose steeply to a col on the east ridge. Derek, Jerry and I climbed it on ski with one pole and one ice axe ready to arrest a fall, while Mike & Robert made a cramponed ascent. Unfortunately they had left their rucksacks as well as their skis so had to descend while the remaining 3 stashed skis and roped up for the ridge. We traversed steepish ice above the seracs, turning the subsidiary top on the east ridge, to arrive at a level section of wind-ridged snow seamed with half-hidden crevasses.



Crossing the level section we came to a steep snow slope rising directly towards the summit. To the left hung the huge old cornice of the south ridge and to the right an ice cliff above the north face. Between them the snow slope narrowed to a short ridge breaching a snowed up bergschrund that barred access to the summit dome.

The slope whumped worryingly once and it was tricky getting over the upper lip of the bergschrund, but despite reeling with altitude we were struck by the stunning summit views: a vista of Chinese snow peaks to the south and Khan Tengri and Pobedy far away to the north-east, while still more Ak-Shirak peaks waited to the north. At 4980m N. 41° 45.332' we later decided to name the peak Pik Volk or Wolf peak since Jerry had found more wolf paw prints in the snow on the approach to the glacier.

We reversed the route quickly to regain our skis and ski the steep icy slope back into the snow bowl. There the lateness of the hour and strength of the sun had produced difficult snow conditions and there were several spectacular falls before we learnt to recognise and link the still-frozen patches of densely wind-packed snow. We climbed awkwardly back around the traverse line, then up a little to the head of the pass before coasting back to camp at the end of a long day.

Mon. 21/4

Needing an easier day we headed north again to climb the peak with a triangular rock



face in the middle of the huge glacier bay. After initially following our earlier tracks we broke left to gain a rising snow ramp leading to a col to the north of the peak. We skirted the fall zone of a massive "cream roll" cornice and crossed a half-hidden crevasse to gain the col, a large icy wind scoop, where we had lunch. Then I broke trail up the easy angled north ridge to the broad corniced summit of "Prospekt Pik," 4767m N. 41°47.123' E78°15, 726', a superb viewpoint. We lingered on rocks

enjoying the sunshine and rediscovering the peaks and passes of previous visits from a new perspective as they gradually blurred into the haze. The Kara Say glacier looked more of a snow dunescape than ever.

Reversing the route to the skis, we were soon skiing back to camp on delightful spring snow or well-frozen crust although we all fell victims to breakable crust or suddenly heavy mush sooner or later.

Back at camp it was warm enough to sunbathe with shirts off as we sorted kit out for departure in the morning.

Tues. 22/4

We packed up & skied out of camp, immediately encountering difficulties in the narrowings of gullies between the ice ridges & moraine banks that had the pulks rolling. Once out of the gullies we skied pleasantly back along the line of our ascent though the descent into the ablation valley caught most of us travelling faster than was wise into soft snow. Robert disliked the prospect so much that he preferred to tackle the steep ice snout of the glacier, no less risky as it turned out.

From the old campsite we free-heeled down the ice river, through the gap in the moraine dam, then turned right to ascend the frozen river leading to the Kara Say glacier. Through the day, the snow conditions deteriorated as we weaved along half-frozen waterways between moraine islands, flats & ridges. At times the trail breakers sank 2 feet into the mush and had to fight to free their skis.

Finally we reached the glacier and camped on a level area just above the snout. All day it had been incredibly hazy with a yellow-brown tinge to the air. Mike guessed that there might be sandstorms in the deserts to the east or south-west.

Weds. 23/4

Morning brought a full realisation of just how beautiful the campsite was on the brink of emerging glacial lakes bearing mini ice floes and with the frozen Kara Say River stretching away towards China. But we turned our backs on that view and began threading our way through the scalloped snow-cliffs and meltwater hollows of the glacier. Each snow-dome kept us in suspense as to whether we would find ourselves on a drop-off or could wind our way down a slope or ridge to the next dome.

Crossing medial moraine ridges & steep ice slopes that required the setting up of pulley systems with ice screws for the pulks, all in increasingly deteriorating snow conditions, we nonetheless reached the site of the first high climbing camp the 2006 expedition occupied. It was snowing as we arrived but we were able to dig down to find running water under the snow/ice.

Thurs. 24/4

A snowy night gave way to a clear morning so we packed up camp and headed north. There was some talk about crossing the glacier directly to the northeast branch, but each attempt ran into an impasse so eventually we took the line that had seemed most clear of obstacles when seen from Prospekt Pik, traversing north-west under the south-east face of Point Anna before swinging east. A steep sided ice valley at the confluence of the 2 branches of glacier barred the way to our planned campsite but yielded to some determined ski-traversing in descent and a tough climb out up a boulder-studded slope.

The peak that divides the glacier into two branches is granite but there was plenty of evidence of instability around a great stone chute so we camped out of range up on the glacier. The boulders there stretched in a band back up the glacier to a higher point of origin from which they had fallen over the



years. Again we were lucky to find water under the snow at the glacier margin.

Fri. 25/4

To the SSE of camp lay a glacier bay dominated by an impressive mountain, its NW face hung with seracs, but a route seemed feasible gaining the north ridge where a rocky ridge fell from a neighbouring summit to a small col. Gaining the bay we were tempted by a direct ascent on crampons to the ridge but this was soon foiled by deep snow & a large hidden crevasse. Back on skis, we climbed deeper into the glacier bay and on up the headwall. We didn't quite make the col however as hard ice forced us over to a rock & snow spur where skis were left.

A quick snack & we were off soloing along the snow-ice flank of the north ridge, descending a little to turn a rock rognon. Hard ice came close to the surface there so we front-pointed crabwise to a small stance at the foot of the rock then steeply up around it. A lack of confidence in Robert's crampons led him to return to the col and at a further ice slope Mike found his combination of flexible telemark boots & strap-on crampons was sufficiently worrying for him to wait out the continuing ascent by the remaining party.

At the top of the ice-slope Derek remarked that he normally used two ice tools on that sort of pitch, but it eased and we crossed to an ice bay beneath the final ice wave-crest rising steeply above us. Derek led up the face to a crack splitting the crest and while he belayed Jerry, I scrambled into the crack, ascertaining that we could traverse diagonally rightwards thus avoiding the cornice & gaining the summit. This we did, reaching the triangular summit platform surrounded on virtually all sides by cornices, 4856m at N 41°48.086' E 078°



16.2' We subsequently decided on the name Pik Volna or Wave Peak and estimated the route at a grade of D-.



The going was softer & faster in descent after the initial technicalities of the summit ice face, so we soon reached Mike and roped him into the party as we returned to the skis. The steep snow ice down from the col proved delightful but we soon found ourselves submarining waist-deep in soft snow sumps in the glacier bay. This undermined our confidence in the often surprisingly enjoyable spring snow of much of the descent. Back at camp, we relaxed in the warmth of a beautiful evening.

Sat. 26/4

Another fine morning so we headed north to scout the possible pass to the north & mountains to the northeast. Skirting crevassed slopes we gained the pass to find a steep drop of at least 100m but we hoped to get better views from the peaks. A peak that dominated the cirque looked reasonable so we skinned up to a notch-like col with a rocky subsidiary peak on the left and a rocky ridge bounding the snowy west face of the main peak on the right. There we left skis and climbed in crampons out onto the west face. Scratching precariously around on hard ice I opted for the ridge & climbed ice close to the rocks to its top while the others either followed my line or took to the rocks. A broad ridge led to the snowy summit &, keeping well clear of its corniced northeast edge, Derek & I were soon climbing the final steepening to the rocks of the summit. To our surprise we found a neat small cairn at 4966m N41° 49.237' E 78° 17.682' We gave the route a grade of PD.

Whilst waiting for the others, our eyes were drawn to a mountain to the east that was clearly higher, beyond a fine alpine ridge. We gave in to temptation and climbed down and along the fine snow crest turning a rock tower by chimneys and ledges mid-way to reach a broader section leading to Pik 5004m N 41° 49.087' E 78° 17.928' (West Ridge AD). Despite exactly reversing the tracks of our ascent, we were unfortunate in having a close encounter or two with crevasses that opened under our feet.



Back at the first summit, we joined Mike, Jerry and Robert for the descent to the skis. A pleasant ski down to the pass reminded us that we had not confirmed its viability as an exit so I was belayed to the brink for a thorough survey. It was far too steep at all points to be skied with pulks, but we did find another cairn, almost identical to the one found on the summit, near the belay point.

All this had taken time and our anxieties about the snow conditions were confirmed when Mike fell into a slot on the ski descent to camp. He was pulled out easily but we roped up for a tricky section before regaining our tracks of the morning and a little more confidence. That confidence was soon dispelled when Jerry went in right on our tracks. Fortunately both incidents involved relatively narrow slots from which the victims could be easily extricated but it was a timely reminder of the state of the glacier in late afternoon. We skied a convex slope and icy runoff back to camp without further incident.

Sun. 27/4

We had no option but to exit over Prospect Pass as we had in 2006.

Reversing our route onto the main Kara Say glacier led immediately to difficulties as the steep boulder-studded slope was no less tough in descent than it had been in ascent. Our route through the band of meltwater sumps involved steep little climbs up slopes that we had slid down easily previously, until we regained the clear glacier shelf beyond. Once there we slogged up the glacier in increasingly cloudy weather to reach the head of the pass. We camped under the marvellously marbled granite of the west faces of the Twin Peaks that dominate the pass.

Mon. 28/4

A day of snow, high winds & thick cloud, occasionally broken by surprising sunshine. We read, talked & took “cowboy coffee.”

Tues. 29/4



Time would not permit an ascent of the Twin Peaks so we packed up to ski over the pass & down to the Petrov Glacier.

The descent from the pass had been easy in 2006 but this time the pulks proved more problematic, rolling on the steps before gentler slopes improved their behaviour. Regrouping at the foot of the pass there was a loud crack and a huge serac broke off from the ice cliff high up on the pass on the flank of the more northerly of the Twin Peaks. A moment's anxiety was quickly

dispelled as the serac ground to a halt in the soft snow of the glacial shelf beneath it.

We skied down the glacier until Jerry came to a halt and a crevasse opened up in front of him. There were more ahead so we roped up and bore left around them. Gentle snow-ploughing led down to the main glacier where some stepping took us past the medial moraine. We slid sedately past the impressive granite walls bounding the glacier beneath Pik 4837m and on down to "The Dark Tower" in the centre of the glacier that Mike reckoned was a Pingo. We could cross the substantial medial moraine there at the junction of these 2 big glaciers, so had lunch & before putting skins on for the afternoon climb up to Moraine Camp.

We had to keep right for a while until we found a crossing point for the glacial canyon that blocked our way beyond the moraine. Once across, we plodded over to the moraine opposite through interminable collapsing snow that wore out one leader after another. Finding the campsite was very welcome & whilst the day had often been cloudy, the evening proved gloriously sunny with fine views of the surrounding peaks lifting our spirits.



Weds. 30/4

A quiet night & fine morning encouraged us to go for an ascent of Pik 4837m to the south, dominating the Petrov glacier, but soon clouds were being driven in by a strong westerly wind. Fortunately the glacial ramp of our proposed route was sheltered from this wind by the rocky north buttress of the mountain.

We crossed the glacier, now well-frozen, and roped up in a sheltered hollow of the medial moraine before climbing up left around crevasses to swing back right & gain the ramp. A granite knoll stood in the middle of a steep rock/moraine band across the ramp. We climbed steeply up beneath the knoll to reach a higher glacial shelf on the left. There the rock band was less steep so we picked the likeliest line and scrambled up carrying our skis.

Above the rocks we traversed left below steep ice to gain an easier line leading back right & eventually arrived at the rocky flank of the north ridge that rose to a snow col below the summit. Cloud had increased and snow showers were blowing in as we ate lunch & debated the pros & cons of continuing. All we could decide was to go on & see how it went.



Reaching the col we were struck by the full force of the westerly. The mixed ridge leading from there to the summit looked icy. Robert returned to the shelter of our lunch stop. After crossing a couple of crevasses we reached hard ice by the rocks of the ridge & Mike also turned back, belayed back across the crevasses. The remaining trio continued on steepish hard ice to the right of the rocks to reach the top of the rocky section where we could follow easier angled snow-ice to the summit

4837m N 41° 692' E 78° 538'. On a small rocky shelf was another neat cairn. We took 1 or 2 desperate photos, braced against the wind, before reversing our route to the col and our skis.

Skiing down on largely breakable crust was a bit tense but we made it back to the rock band quite quickly. Scrambling down carrying skis was precarious enough for me to take a

short slide but below we skied more pleasantly back to the moraine as the weather deteriorated. We recrossed the glacier in high winds and driven snow with the cloud base down to the level of the tents. At camp a slight lull enabled us to sort out water and cooking before the night's tempest hit us.

Thurs. 1/5

We slept in and took a leisurely breakfast...& lunch...& tea as the storm continued. There was the occasional opportunity to sort out kit for departure during lulls in the storm but pressure continued to fall.

Fri. 2/5

We packed up on a glorious morning and skied easily back to the Dark Tower before bearing right for a gentle glide down to the lakeshore at the far right end of the ice cliffs. The ice of Lake Petrov was sound but there was much evidence of collapsing ice cliffs & the subsequent pressure ridges in the surface. We skated over to the beach campsite where stones used to weight tent pegs in 2007 were still outlining the tent positions. It was strange & welcome to be off snow after so long. We spent a lazy afternoon enjoying the sunshine & phoning confirmation of our pick-up time next day as the wind rose. By nightfall another storm was developing.



Sat. 3/5

We packed up and crossed the Lake to the roadhead in wild conditions, then waited for our transport in the shelter offered by the pump station workers in their "portacabin." Kumtor security welcomed us with food & drink before we drove back to Tamga . En route we visited the Gagarin monument & were invited to share yoghurt, bread & jam in the Yurt of a local shepherd's family. At Tamga, Julia was very happy to receive donations of bamboo canes for the garden.



Sun 4/5

The drive to Bishkek was punctuated by occasional mechanical problems that were always overcome by the driver but did rather worry us about the danger of missing flights. After settling accounts & leaving sleds at ITMC offices we decamped to the hotel where showers preceded a good meal at a Turkish restaurant.

Mon. 5/5

An early Aeroflot flight to Moscow & thence to London went smoothly with no problems over small excesses of baggage.

Conclusions

The expedition encountered difficult snow conditions that increased the technical level of peaks climbed and the risks of glacier travel. ITMC informed us that it had been a cold winter but our experiences indicated that high winds were often blowing the mountains clear of new-fallen snow leaving much more ice on faces and ridges than might otherwise have been expected. On clear days the sun had been intense and sandstorms may well account for increased haze and yellowish dustings to the snow during the journey. All these factors contributed to the higher continuous snowline than we had experienced in 2003 and necessitated route changes that limited our exploration of the north-eastern glacier systems of the range.

On the flight to Bishkek we struck up a conversation with a Kyrgyz climate scientist returning from a conference. He informed us that whilst the world temperature increase was about 0.8 of a degree, the local Kyrgyzstan increase was 1.6 degrees. He was currently involved in research to establish why this was the case and possible reasons included the drying up of the Aral Sea, salination of surrounding areas & increased desertification. Crucial for mountaineers, if the temperature increase for Kyrgyzstan reaches 2 degrees none of the glaciers of the region will survive!

Whilst this may add a measure of urgency to further ski-mountaineering exploration of the Kyrgyz ranges, we were fortunate to make a superb trip through spectacular scenery. We made the first crossing on ski of the Kyondy Pass & 5 ascents of previously unclimbed peaks between 4767m & 5004m together with 2 first British ascents of peaks of 4837m & 4966m. None of our sources revealed any record of previous ascents that would account for the cairns on those summits and in the absence of any such a record we would suggest the names of Pik Petrov for the former, dominating, as it does, the Petrov Glacier, and Pik Cirque for the latter owing to its position. It is possible that the Dutch party of 2 that the 2007 expedition encountered on entering the range were responsible for the cairns: conversation with them revealed that they did not write reports of their expeditions but did leave cairns to surprise those who unwittingly followed in their footsteps. If they happen to read this & wish to get in touch to amend this record they are very welcome to do so.

It remains clear that there are many more potential ski peaks in the area as well as some mountains offering challenging lines for alpine ascents in summer conditions.

Appendix 1

Peaks climbed in Ak-Shirak Range April 2008:

Pik Step or Stepped Peak 4790m N.41° 47.301' South Ridge PD

Pik Volk or Wolf peak 4980m N. 41° 45.332' North-west Ridge AD

Prospekt Pik 4767m N. 41°47.123' E78°15,726' South glacier & north-west ridge PD

Pik Volna or Wave Peak 4856m at N 41°48.086' E 078° 16.2' We subsequently decided on the name and estimated the route at a grade of D-.

“Pik Cirque” 4966m N41° 49.237' E 78° 17.682' East glacier & North Ridge PD.

Pik 5004m N 41° 49.087' E 78° 17.928' West Ridge AD.

“Pik Petrov” 4837m N 41° 692' E 78° 538' North Face (Ramp) & NW Ridge

Medical Kit List

Injectables

- 1 x diclofenac 75mg
- 1 x domperidone 10mg
- 1 x ceftazimide 1g
- 1 x chlorpheniramine 10mg
- 2 x adrenaline 1mg (1ml of 1:1000)
- 1 x hydrocortisone 100mg
- 2 x tramadol 100mg

Antibiotics

- 1 x 20 erythromecin 500mg
- 2x 24 flucloxacillin 250mg
- 3 x 18 amoxycillin 500mg
- 4 x 10 ciprofloxacin 250mg
- 5x 21 metronidazole 400mg

Analgesics

- 10 x 500mg paracetamol
- 20 x ibuprofen 400mg
- 10 x diclofenac 50mg
- 5 x tramadol 50mg

Other tabs:

- 24 x domperidone 10mg (antiemetic)
- 10 x loratidine 10mg/ranitidine 300mg
- 10 x buscopan 10mg (antispasmodic)
- 8 x loperamide (immodium) 2mg
- 1 x Levonell-2 packet (morning-after pill)
- 20 x 5mg prednisolone
- 10 x Chlorpheniramine (Piriton) 4mg

Ears & Eyes:

- 2 x cotton buds
- 1 x chloramphenicol 1% ointment
- 2 x amethocaine drops
- 2 eye pads
- 1 otosporin ear drops

Suture equipment

- 1 x vicryl suture (various size)
- 1 x 4.0 non-absorbable polyfilament (ethilon or prolene)
- 1 x 5.0 or 6.0 non-absorbable polyfilament (ethilon or prolene)
- 3 packets steristrips
- 1 x scissors
- 1 x needle holder
- 1 x scalpel
- 1 x forceps
- 4 x 5ml 2% lignocaine

Dressings

- 5 non-adhesive dressings (eg melolin)
- 2 x zinc oxide tape
- 2 jelonet dressings
- 5 packets x 5 gauze swabs
- 2 crepe bandages (medium and large)
- 1 x triangular bandage
- assorted plasters
- 2 latex gloves
- 2 sterile gloves
- 5 x alcowipes
- iodine tincture

Creams

- 1 x 1% hydrocortisone cream
- 1 x flamazine cream
- 2 x clotrimazole (canestan) 1% cream
- 1 x antifungal foot powder
- 1 x emolient (moisturiser) cream

Miscellaneous

- 1 x salbutamol inhaler
- safety pins
- 1 thermometer
- 1 x iodine tincture
- 10 oral rehydration sachets
- micropore tape
- zinc oxide tape
- glucose tablets