

'So many virgins, so little time.....'

Such was the mantra of ISM's 1999 expedition to the Tien Shan. For the third year running we were back in the West Kokshaal-Too, the most remote and least explored of the Tien Shan's major ranges.

Forming the border between Kyrgyzstan and China, the Kokshaal-Too range extends for more than 400 kilometres and reaches 7439 metres at Pobeda Peak. The section which draws us back time and time again is the West Kokshaal-Too, 60 kilometres of wonderful peaks up to 6000m, large numbers of which are unclimbed.

The region has a climbing history which is very curious for westerners yet fairly typical for the mountains of the former Soviet Union. Competitive mountaineering events were staged here around the two dominant peaks - Dankov (5982m) and Kizil Asker (5842m). For those not familiar with the system, carefully picked and highly trained teams would attempt the routes which were likely to gain them the most points, i.e. the hardest lines they thought they could climb. The results in Western Kokshaal, as in many other parts of the Tien Shan and Pamir, were areas where the most forbidding faces became laced with awesomely difficult routes (very few of which have had ascents by western teams) while nearby peaks of lesser difficulty were left untouched. The Soviet approach seemed pernicious to western mountaineers at the time but it has resulted in unique opportunities for mountaineers today, i.e. fantastic virgin summits and new routes to explore with relatively few access problems.

The Dankov region was the venue for ISM's first expedition in 1997. The awe-inspiring ramparts of Dankov and Alpiniste Peak tower over the glacier above base camp, but these were way too hard for us so we pressed on up the glacier laden with tents and several days food to the peaks on the Chinese border. Here we had several magical days in perfect weather, climbing beautiful snow and ice pyramids from a high camp. Meanwhile, some 40 kms to the west, an Anglo-American team led by Lindsay Griffin and Christian Beckwith were climbing in the Kizil Asker group. They ran into problems when one member developed serious altitude problems and failed to improve at base camp (around 3900m). A feature of this area is that there is no low land anywhere (you have to travel 60 km to lose 300m) so eventually a rescue helicopter was summoned. By chance it touched down at our base camp first and a fortunate few of us were treated to a swift tour of the virtually unexplored central section of the range. Cameras clicked furiously as we soared over this wonderland of innumerable virgin summits and pristine glaciers. I instantly decided to return the following year.

In 1998 the weather did the dirty on us. Normally September is the most settled month in the Tien Shan, too cold for giants like Khan Tengri (6995m) and Pobeda Peak (7439m) but ideal for climbing in the 5-6000m range. This year however, after we set up base camp on a perfect grassy spot below the Kotur glacier, Asia was hit by a massive cyclone which dumped close to a metre of snow on the Kokshaal peaks and swept on southwards through much of the Himalaya, scuppering countless expeditions. Avalanche risk was high and even the minor peaks above base camp became major challenges involving trail-breaking through occasionally waist-deep snow. Cold weather and high winds persisted and we could only gaze in frustration at the ranks of magnificent 5000m peaks which were beyond our reach in such impossible conditions. Even getting out of the area proved problematic, with our vehicles getting bogged down in the snow as well as ground softened by snowmelt.

The mountain gods often seem to reward persistence, and this year (Sept '99) the Kotur Glacier was a completely different place. The approach was becoming familiar to me and went relatively smoothly (for Central Asia). Two days driving southwards from Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek, with surfaced roads gradually giving way to rough tracks, leads to the frontier lands along the Chinese border, a near-deserted region of windswept, high-altitude 'Steppes'. In Soviet times a well-maintained track with a high electrified fence ran the length of the border alongside the West Kokshaal range (whether to keep the Chinese out or the Kyrgyz is a matter for speculation). Now the fence has been mostly wrecked by the elements and whole sections of the track washed away. We were travelling in a 6-wheel drive, ex-Soviet military vehicle which seemed to cope better when there was no track at all (except when we ploughed into a swamp - see picture). The last 12 km were totally off-road, mainly following the stony river course which led directly to the snout of the Kotur Glacier. Base camp was scarcely recognisable from the previous year, and it was bizarre to spot a nest of cooking pots we had searched for fruitlessly in the snows of last September.

The '99 team was relatively small but with a wide spread of experience. Jane Whitmore our doctor was making her third trip to Kyrgyzstan and second to Kokshaal. Her climbing career is unusual in that apart from a smattering of Welsh VS's it has consisted entirely of expeditions. Scotland-based Alan Dunworth had several alpine seasons behind him and experience of altitude on Himalayan treks. Best acclimatised was Ingrid Crossland who joined us straight from an expedition to Khan Tengri. Her alpine experience and a climbing grade of HVS on rock combined with formidable enthusiasm to make her a strong member of the group. Richard Smith (who designs and tests Land Rovers - useful skills for this trip) is a keen alpine and UK climber and took well to higher mountains. His good friend Chris Clarke was less experienced and decided he was having a big enough adventure without going to the summits. Most technically proficient was Jo da Silva - leading up to E2 on rock and grade IV ice, she had also been to the Alps several times. Leading the ropes were myself, Swiss guide and photo-journalist Alan Delizee and local Kyrgyzstan guide Vladimir Komissarov, whose company ITMC Tien Shan has handled ground arrangements for ISM expeditions to the Tien Shan and Pamir.

Driving to base camp has distinct advantages. You can take luxuries with you and live remarkably well. Our dining tent was a Kyrgyz 'Yurt' made of thick woollen felt and with a wood-burning stove inside to keep it warm and cosy. (All wood has to be brought in of course - there are no trees for 100 miles.) A good supply of vodka also helped keep out the cold. Despite the attractions of base camp life we mainly had to operate from an Advanced Base Camp at 4550m, some 4-5 hours walk up the Kotur glacier. From here we were perfectly placed to attempt the ring of 5000m peaks at the head of the glacier, and even to cross the Kotur Pass to other glacier systems should we run out of objectives.

After some snowfall the weather became stunning and we began by tackling two very attractive but reasonable-looking peaks, each around alpine PD and 5150m high. Pik Pyramida is the fine snow pyramid left of the Kotur Pass and was climbed by the NW Ridge. Obzhornay (5156m) was climbed by the shallow spur directly above ABC and was particularly satisfying as we had attempted it by a different route in '98 and failed at 4850m due to deep snow and blizzard conditions. Richard, Jo and I were the first on top, with Vladimir

and Alan soon joining us. Seeing the joy on peoples' faces at being on top of their highest-ever peak gave me one of those moments when I reflect on the great privilege of working as a mountain guide. From the top of Obzhornay the other peaks could be perfectly viewed. It appeared that the highest and most challenging in the immediate area was the icy spire to the right (N) of the Kotur Pass. Jo immediately declared that this was the peak she wanted to climb. It looked like a straightforward slog to the col on its north side then some intriguing mixed ground led to a forepeak. Beyond this a dramatically corniced crest, instantly dubbed the 'fantasy ridge' formed a final icy spire.

The first day involved bashing a trail up to the col through deep snow, with a savagely powerful sun beating down. It took a full day to make a perfect staircase to the col (which was just above 5000m). The steps would hopefully freeze hard overnight rather than fill in again with blown snow. We were in luck - a clear still night and a perfect dawn as Jo, Ingrid and I set off. From the col two pitches of 50-degree ice led to a delicate section where the ice thinned over granite slabs. After this a shallow couloir line gave superb climbing at around Scottish IV, then further mixed climbing led to the snowy forepeak. The ridge ahead was narrow, exposed and corniced. Time was pressing but stable weather and our collective urge to summit was such that we kept on moving. At first I tried bashing the crest off the ridge to make firm steps, but this soon proved too exhausting and we were forced to front point along the flank of the ridge in pitches. Finally after a steep rise the crest curved over and dropped away towards China. I kicked away the cornice, hammered my axe straight down for a belay, and sat astride the summit of the best peak I'd climbed in five years of coming to Kyrgyzstan. We named it Volshebnitsa, the White Witch. At 5285m it was the highest summit above the Kotur Glacier and the most difficult, with an alpine grade of about D+. Twelve hours after departure we were back at ABC enjoying the traditional Russian mountaineers 'snack' of pork fat, onion, bread and vodka. Before discovering Kyrgyzstan I would never have believed anyone would eat such a combination let alone relish it.

Vladimir and Alan had also been busy with their teams. Overlooking ABC was an interesting peak with a huge leaning gendarme blocking its most attractive-looking ridge. Alan and Richard climbed the gendarme, abseiled its overhanging side and continued to the summit. The gendarme was too difficult to reascend so they were forced down steep ice on the north flank - a tricky excursion at AD+ (Pic Judith-Brian). The series of pointed peaks enclosing the west side of the glacier had been named Trezubets (Three Teeth) by an early Russian expedition which climbed one of the summits, probably by the easiest-looking line up a big snow couloir. Vladimir and his superfit assistant Oleg took a narrow snow ramp to another of the main summits, and the third is now Kotur's last major virgin.

All too soon the clouds rolled in from China and the wind picked up. Alan and Richard made an attempt on another peak but drifting snow forced a retreat and obliterated all the trails we had worked so hard to establish on the glacier. It was time to strike ABC and return to base camp.

We split the journey back near Naryn, staying in a bizarre ex-Soviet health camp from which some of the team went climbing on nearby crags while others took off on horses. Climbing and riding - the two great attractions of Kyrgyzstan (which is 90% mountainous and has a horse-

based culture similar to the early days of the American West). I toyed with the idea of combining the two in a future expedition. Next year we'll be having a break from Kokshaal - there is another 'tucked away' range in the Tien Shan which is more extensive than the Mont Blanc massif and where just one peak has been climbed - but I suspect that it won't be long before the lure of those central glacier systems of the West Kokshaal-Too once again proves irresistible.

[For details of forthcoming ISM expeditions please contact the UK Office on 01766 890441. On all expeditions the climbing is 'alpine style' with no fixed ropes, so that although climbing in teams led by a guide responsible for safety matters, members have the satisfaction of climbing peaks by their own efforts.]