



Altai 2012: The 1st British Expedition to the South Chuyski Range

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9th – 28th August 2012

MEF: 12/22

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Acknowledgements

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Finally, thanks to Tim Moss for the initial idea and excellent weather reports and Jim Dawson and Douglas Cave who acted as emergency contacts back in the UK.



Introduction

Four British climbers (George Cave, Eleri Dawson, Clay Conlon, Greg Annandale) travelled to the South Chuyski Range of the Russian Altai between 9th-28th August 2012. In two weeks of remarkably stable weather we attempted six routes, five of which we completed successfully on mountains of 3,600-4000m in altitude and routes between alpine F and AD in difficulty.

We believe that all five routes saw their first British ascent on our expedition. Furthermore, we have strong reason to believe that our ascent of Dzhaniktu (3942m) by the precarious rocky N ridge and northern slopes was the first ascent by this route. Additionally, we understand that the airy N ridge to Irbistu (3967m) had seen only one previous traverse, in 2009, making ours the second traverse.

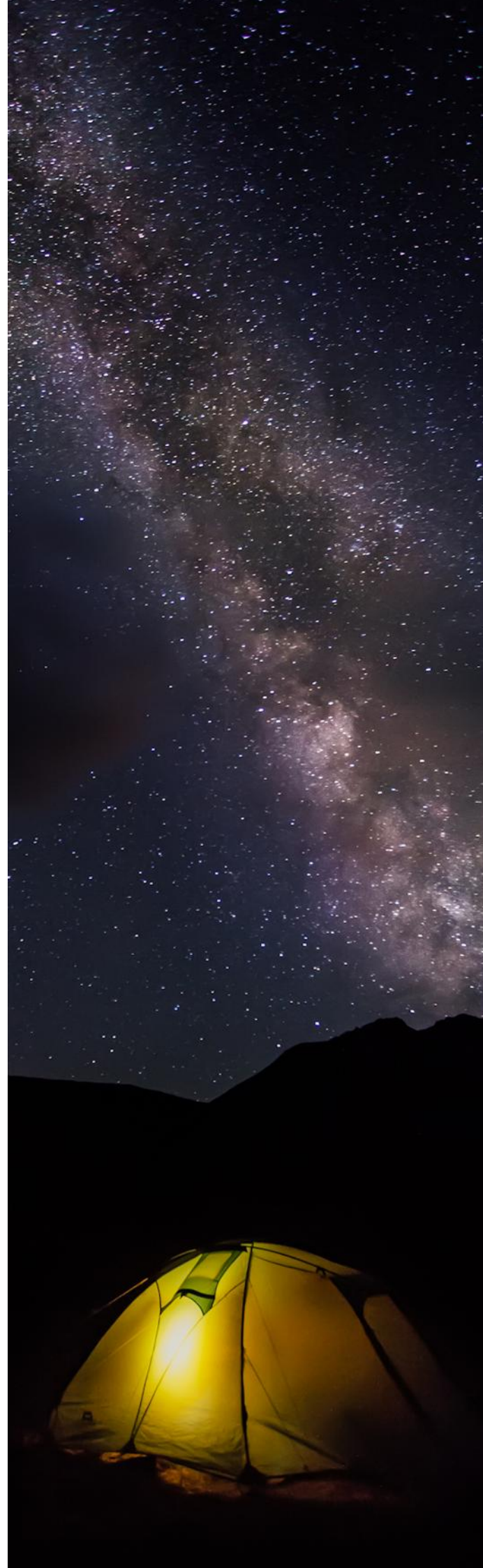
The area holds potential for future exploration, but we would recommend future visits to take place earlier in the season. A distinct lack of snow gave us a number of arduous approaches and descents across moraine. Those Russians who have visited the region appear to favour visits in late spring or early summer.

Right: The Milky Way looms across the sky over our basecamp tent.

Expedition Objectives

The primary objective of the trip was to conduct exploratory mountaineering within the South Chuyski Range of the Altai Mountains in southern Siberia, with the view to achieving some first ascents.

We also wanted to document our findings and promote future travel and exploration in the area if possible. We struggled to find any English language information about the region prior to our visit, so we have documented as much information as we could on our website at <http://www.thealtai.co.uk/>.



Description of Area

The Altai Mountains straddle the border between the countries of Russia, Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan. In many ways they are similar to the European Alps, the highest summit is Belukha Mountain at 4506m and their geography and climate is broadly similar. There are many thousands of glaciers although many have receded vastly from their former size, and an abundance of wildlife from the ever elusive snow leopard to the herds of roaming yak and argali.

The whole region is sub-divided into a series of relatively distinct ranges. The border region itself contains a long string of mountains with Belukha sitting on the westerly triple-point (Russia, China, Kazakhstan) and the Tent on the easterly (Russia, Mongolia, China). Some 30km to the North into Russia lies the South Chuyski Range, approached most easily from the North. Most commonly, climbers visit either the North Chuyski Range (it is more accessible) or the Belukha area (it is more famous). Even in the South Chuyski which we visited, trips are more commonly made to the western end, despite Irbistu to the East being the highest mountain in the chain, a fact we only discovered after establishing a basecamp at its base(!).

Access to any of the ranges is by the M-52, a very long road starting in Barnaul and winding its way down into Mongolia and beyond. Gorno-Altaysk is the last major settlement reached before the Altai begin, and if you wish to proceed further than Kosh-Agach then a border permit will be needed. However, access to much of the Altai can be made before this point.

Basecamp

Further details of how we reached the South Chuyski range are discussed in the Logistics section. For reference we were dropped by our 4x4 at 49.82560°N, 88.03753°E, and our basecamp was situated at 49.74361°N, 88.05276°E.

Below: A rough map showing the location of the range within the Altai. Belukha Mountain is marked to the West, and the two triple-points on the border can be seen to the South.





Above: The team with some Russian hikers. From L > R: 3 Russians, Eleri, George, Clay & Greg.

Team Members

All four members of the expedition met and climbed together at Bristol University. Before the trip, we had never gone on expedition together before. Luckily, we didn't fall out too badly.



George (24)

George had been running amok in the mountains for years and his infectious enthusiasm and limitless energy was nearly always welcome on a long day out. Past mountaineering highlights included alpine climbing in Saas Fee, les Ecrins and Chamonix along with other trips to the Pyrenees, Norway, Corsica & the Swedish Kungsleden. George had climbed Scottish Winter IV, trad HVS and was ML qualified.



Eleri (23)

The group's token female, but don't let her blond hair and love of hair products fool you. Eleri would out-walk & climb anyone who tried to tell her she couldn't. Previous experience included high altitude climbing and trekking in Peru plus trips to Saas Fee, Skye and the Julian Alps. Eleri climbed Scottish Winter to V,5, trad to E2 and sport to 7a.



Clay (22)

When we first met Clay, we used to make endless jokes about his youthful looks getting him ID'd at the pub. Four years later, nothing much has changed. Always on the hunt for a kit bargain, he's been seen sporting a Tesco Down sleeping bag at more than one alpine bivy. Clay had climbed Scottish winter IV, trad E1, alpine D and had two trips to Chamonix besides visits to Norway and Skye.



Greg (26)

Amateur cyclist, scuba diver, adventurer and photographer, Greg was a freelance web developer by night and general adventurer by day. Most of the decent photos in this report are his work, you can see more at <http://www.gregannandale.com>. Much of Greg's experience came from ski touring and ski mountaineering around La Grave (Ecrins) and in Sweden, but Greg had also climbed HVS trad and Alpine PD.

The Russian hikers

The three other individuals in the picture on the previous page were Russian hikers who joined us at basecamp for a couple of days on a several week trek across the whole of the Altai. They summited Irbistu in spectacularly non-Alpine fashion the following day, carrying with them a giant wooden cross and 6kg of concrete. To see a little more of them and their old school hand-made rack please see: <http://vimeo.com/51164306>.



Below: The team back up the bivy site at 2:30am before heading up the ridge towards the summit of Dzhaniktu (3942m)





Expedition Summary

“Do you want to come climbing in Russia? There's this range called the Altai, it's near the border in the South somewhere. I think it's a bit like the Alps”

We first heard of the Russian Altai in November 2011 at the RGS Explore conference. They sounded quite exciting - a whole region of mountains including many that even Russian climbers rarely visit, not too hard to access from the UK, and about the same height, climate and atmosphere as the European Alps.

So on 9th August 2012, the four of us set off to spend just under 3 weeks in Russia, on our first self-supported remote expedition, exploring the peaks surrounding one of the valleys of the South Chuyski Range. Flights from London Heathrow to Barnaul in the Altai Republic took around 12 hours (including a stopover in Moscow), and with Clay and Greg acting as the advance party to purchase food and fuel we hit the ground running at 6am on the morning of Sunday 12th August.

Our fixer, Igor at K2 Adventures, had arranged transport from Barnaul airport to Kurai (12 hours in a big yellow van), followed by a 4x4 the next day for the trip up to basecamp. Due to recent local flooding, the rivers were far more swollen than expected and we were forced to stop 10km shy of our proposed camp. With around 50kg of food, fuel and equipment each to carry in we lost a day from our schedule simply trying to get to our preferred basecamp site. However, once there we found ourselves in a magnificent amphitheatre of rocky slopes and ridges complete with a chilly lake for bathing. When storms arrived, the water on the surface was whipped around in a turbulent frenzy of ever-changing directions and we came to think of the area as lying at the centre of the world.



We had 9 days available to explore as much of our end of the South Chuyski Range as we could. Climbing in pairs, we undertook a series of Alpine style attempts on the different peaks, starting either from basecamp or a bivy site depending upon the route. We were fortunate to have brought a large pile of 1:50k maps, printed out the night before departure using files sent through from the Alpine Club. They proved very useful, despite huge discrepancies between the edges of glaciers on the map and on the ground. Irbistu, meaning Snow Leopard Peak, stands 3967m tall and was summited both from the SW slopes and the much more challenging N ridge. The glacially capped dome of Dzhaniktu (3942m) was climbed in a 12 hour traverse N > S. Two further 3700m peaks provided additional routes, giving us a total of 5 Alpine routes and 8 summits.

On the whole, the snow and ice was of reasonable quality, however the same could not be said for the rock. We were promised by a local Russian climber before arrival to expect "a rain of rocks all around you" and we were not disappointed. Many approach ridges were no more steep and sheer than the hardest UK scrambles, but the lack of integrity in the bedrock presented a constant danger of the collapse of both hand and foot holds. Leader placed protection was effectively impossible to arrange and all major difficulties on rock were soloed. We also beat a hasty retreat from an approach glacier at 4am due to the ominous groaning and cracking spreading out under our feet. Despite these adventures, we returned having suffered no major injuries or illnesses.

To conclude, the area holds great potential for future exploration, but we would recommend a visit a little earlier in the season. A distinct lack of snow cover might have made life easier for the herds of Yak who roamed the valley but we could have benefited from less arduous moraine on some of the approaches and descents. Those Russians who have visited the region appear to favour visits in late spring or early summer.

We wish to acknowledge the support of the MEF, BMC & Alpine Club for providing funds which made the expenses of such a trip much more bearable. Furthermore, we were most grateful for the gift and/or loan of kit from Berghaus, Alpkite & Buffwear.

Equipment

As might be expected, we took a fairly standard set of expedition equipment with us to Russia. All food and fuel were purchased in Barnaul upon arrival, but we flew out with all other kit we needed for our two week stay.

Satellite Phone

We took an IsatPhone Pro on the Inmarsat network with us, taken on loan from www.globaltelesat.co.uk.

It worked fine in testing on the travels out, but we were surprised to get no reception at all when we turned it on at basecamp. Fortunately, we found full signal strength on the summit of Irbistu, and eventually discovered a spot a little closer at a 45 minute round trip away from the campsite.

In the end it became obvious that the only satellite we could connect to was very close to the horizon and so was blocked by mountains when down in the valleys. We weren't expecting this particularly, so take care if travelling in the region with an IsatPhone.

This wasn't the end of our problems though - we were receiving daily weather forecasts which were sent through the sat phone provider's website. For some reason the messages were being queued up and multiple messages couldn't be received at the same time. Added to this was the fact that we could get no signal at all as soon as there was any cloud in the sky, although luckily for us this was fairly rare. This often led to a few daily trips up the hill to get signal for the one forecast we needed, which wasn't ideal.

We took three batteries in total, and only got through about 1½ on the whole trip.



Walkie-Talkies

We picked up a pair of £50 Terrain 750 2-way radios from Argos the day before flying out as we needed to be able to communicate when climbing as separate pairs during the day. Not wanting to leave them on all the time to conserve battery life, we agreed set times during the day to turn them on for periods of 15 minutes which worked well for us. They had a stated maximum range of 8km, which we actually achieved quite clearly between the summit of Dzhaniktu and basecamp one morning. In short – a great bit of gear that allowed us to communicate when climbing separately.

SPOT Satellite GPS Messenger

As well as carrying a standard E-Trex GPS device, we had Greg's SPOT Satellite GPS Messenger with us (<http://www.findmespot.eu/en/index.php?cid=102>). It allows the user to send a choice of two pre-composed messages via satellite as an e-mail to let your contacts know you are safe. We had it programmed with our emergency contacts (and parents!) and pushed the button at least once a day. There is also an SOS button which when pressed would alert the relevant rescue services with our location, although we thankfully didn't have to test this so we have no idea how effective it would actually be, especially in a remote region.

It worked flawlessly for us and we used the API provided to embed the data into our website and plot the messages onto Google Maps. One thing we would note is that with no opportunity to relay further information once on expedition, it is vital to make it clear to emergency contacts exactly what each message means and any action that should be taken on the receipt of the messages. Apart from this, it was a useful back up for when our sat phone wasn't working, and having two forms of communication meant each climbing pair could take one in case of an emergency.

Rack

With weight in mind and no real knowledge of the types of route we would be climbing, we took two stripped down racks consisting of both rock and ice gear. As it turned out, the rock gear was almost redundant on the mountaineering routes we did. The rock quality was generally terrible and so most of the time roping up and placing protection wasn't the best option. It did however get used when we did a bit of cragging near basecamp on a rest day, so it wasn't a complete waste. Ice screws were needed for travelling on glaciers and we also placed them all on the ascent of Dzhaniktu.

Ropes

We took two 50m half ropes and one 60m single with us, but in the end we climbed with just one 50m half rope on all the routes we did. This is a personal choice - half ropes aren't recommended to be used on their own - but given the types of route we climbed and amount of time we spent actually roped up this seemed like a sensible choice. The single rope was taken in case we lost or damaged one of the half ropes, or in case one pair went to try a route that required two half ropes but neither of these occurred so the 60m single wasn't used at all.

Tents

Alpkit provided us with a 3-4 person Zhota which we used as a basecamp tent. For an expedition of four people it was a great size for using as a communal mess tent. We took two further 2 man tents for sleeping in and with no advance basecamps needed, all three tents remained pitched in the same spot for 2 weeks.

Below: Tasty treats for hungry climbers, a selection of Barnaul's finest culinary delights.



First aid & Injuries

We took a standard expedition first aid kit, supplemented with some stronger painkillers and antibiotics sourced from abroad. For reference, these are listed here, but this is by no means a recommendation of what to carry or an endorsement of their usefulness: Cocodamol, Tramadol, Diclofenac, Cifran (Ciprofloxacin), Metronizadole, T-bact (Mupriocin), Flucloxin.

We had concerns about tick-borne encephalitis but further research showed that we were planning to be at a high enough altitude to avoid them so we took no vaccination precautions.

We suffered no major illnesses or injuries on the expedition. Greg injured his leg during a scree descent from one of the peaks which meant that he sat out the planned team-ascent of Dzhaniktu, but he was well enough to walk out three days later.

Weather

We had arranged with a contact (Tim Moss) in the UK to provide a daily weather forecast via text to the satphone, which was free for him to do via the ISatPhone website. The forecast was an extraction from a combination of a Kosh-Agach forecast from <http://www.gismeteo.com/city/daily/5197/> as recommended by Igor, and a Gorno-Altaysk forecast from <http://www.intermeteo.com/russia/gorno-altaysk/> which was in theory much closer to basecamp. Tim text us daily at 11am UK time so that we would receive a 3 day outlook every evening by around 7/8pm.

The forecasts were remarkably accurate, with the Gorno-Altaysk information in particular being very useful. On the whole, the weather was quite stable with only a couple of storms which we could see coming with plenty of warning both by text and in the sky.

Below: Eleri looks out towards Dzhaniktu in the far distance on another calm Altai morning.



Day-by-day Itinerary

The location column refers to where we spent the evening of that day:

Date	Activity	Location	Weather
Thu 9th	CC + GA fly out	Barnaul	-
Fri 10th	Shopping	Barnaul	Foggy
Sat 11th	Shopping. GC + ED fly out	Barnaul	Hot & sunny
Sun 12th	Drive Barnaul > Kurai	Kurai	Hot & clear
Mon 13th	Drive Kurai > basecamp valley. Walk in 6km	Valley	Hot & clear
Tue 14th	Walk in final 4km. Establish basecamp	Basecamp	Hot, rain pm
Wed 15th	GC+ED route on un-named 3608m peak CC+GA route on un-named 3706m peak	Basecamp	Hail & rain pm, storm overnight
Thu 16th	Rest day. CC+GC walk in to bivy site	Basecamp	Clear
Fri 17th	CC+GC abandon route on glacier approach ED+GA summit Irbistu (3967m)	Basecamp	Clear, rain pm
Sat 18th	Rest day	Basecamp	Rain, sleet, snow
Sun 19th	GC+CC N ridge of Irbistu (3967m) GA+ED explore valley and summit un-named 3495m peak	Basecamp	Clear
Mon 20th	All walk in to bivy site	Basecamp	Clear
Tue 21st	CC, GC+ED summit Dzhaniktu (3942m) GA returns to basecamp alone	Basecamp	Clear & warm
Wed 22nd	Cragging near basecamp	Basecamp	Windy, heavy wind & rain overnight
Thu 23rd	CC+GC traverse of valley ridge. ED+GA accompany to start of ridge only.	Basecamp	Sunny & clear
Fri 24th	Pack up camp	Basecamp	Overcast
Sat 25th	Walk out to pick-up, drive to Kurai	Kurai	Heavy rain am
Sun 26th	Drive Kurai > Barnaul	Barnaul	Hot & sunny
Mon 27th	Flights Barnaul > Moscow	Moscow	Rain
Tue 28th	Flights Moscow > Heathrow	UK	Rain

Routes Climbed

We attempted six Alpine routes, and successfully completed all but one of them.

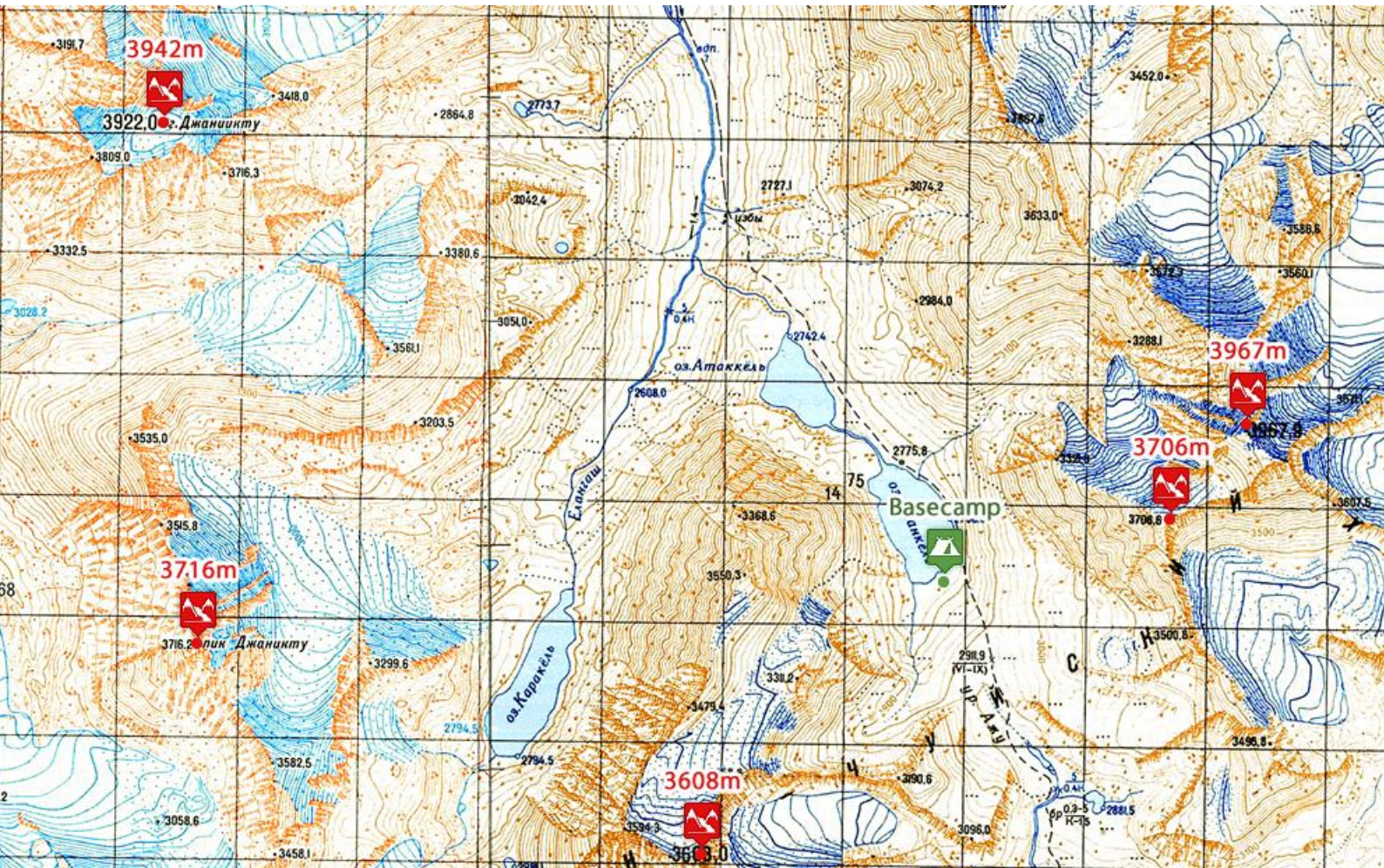
Route	Grade	Route taken	Date	Climbers
Un-named 3706m peak	F+	N > S traverse of ridge	15th August	GA, CC
Un-named 3608m peak	PD	via E ridge	15th August	GC, ED
N face to 3716m peak	<i>(not completed)</i>		17th August	GC, CC
Irbistu (3967m)	F	via SW slopes	17th August	GA, ED
Irbistu (3967m)	AD (III)	via N ridge	19th August	GC, CC
Dzhaniktu (3942m)	PD+	via N ridge	21st August	GC, CC, ED

All routes have been graded as best as we can. However, all rock routes presented **significant** and **continuous** objective dangers in the form of loose and crumbling rock under hand and foot. All major difficulties on rock were soloed without leader placed protection.

We completed two other routes which were more like easy scrambles/hikes and have not been included here. These were a traverse of the entire rocky ridge leading North from Irbistu (from point 3633m to point 3721m), and an ascent of an un-named 3495m peak to the SE of basecamp.

Finally, we also climbed three new (short) single pitch trad routes at a crag a short walk from the campsite. A Rockfax-style guidebook page for these has been included as an appendix on the final page.

Below: Map of the locations of all of the summits, relative to basecamp. Maps of each route are shown on the following pages.





1) Un-named 3708m Peak

Date: 15th August 2012

Climbers: G. Annandale, C. Conlon

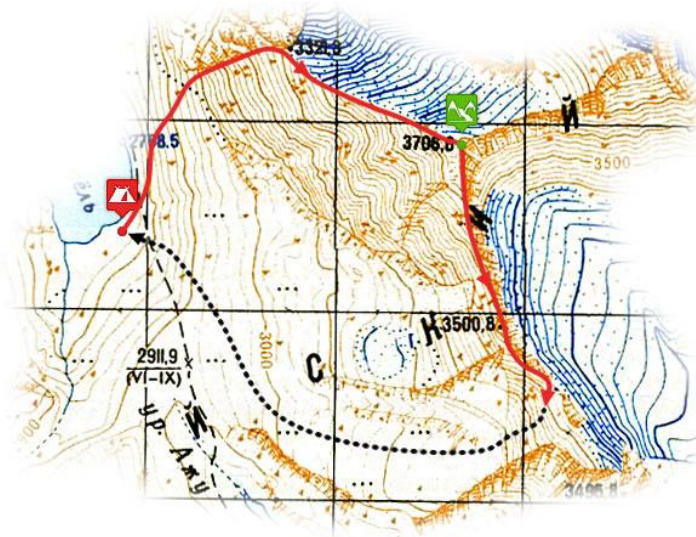
Location: 49.7521°N, 88.0774°E

Duration: 8-9 hours

Grade: F+

Route Description

From the basecamp, ascend the NW ridge (easy scrambling) to the summit at 3706m. Descent is down the S ridge (harder scrambling with more loose rock) until a suitable point to cut down to the ridge can be found to return to the valley.



Comments

This was just a short acclimatisation route for Greg and Clay. The second half of the ridge is definitely harder than the first, although on the ascent stick close to the ridge line to avoid the worst of the scree.



2) Un-named 3608m Peak

Date: 15th August 2012

Climbers: G. Cave, E. Dawson

Location: [49.7269°N, 88.0229°E](#)

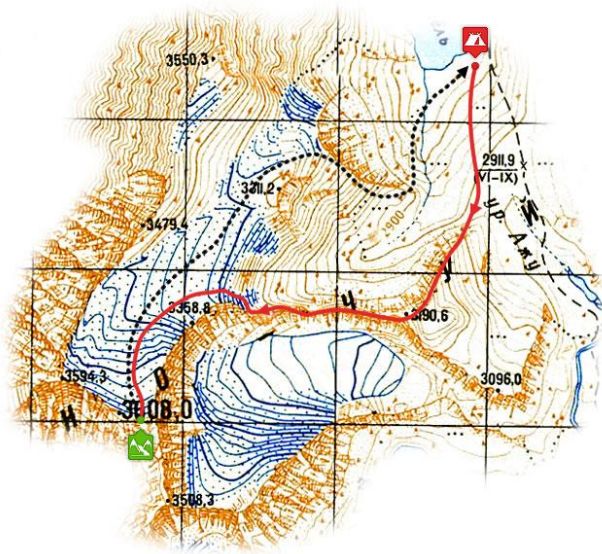
Duration: 8-9 hours

Grade: PD+

Route Description

From the col in the valley, climb the NE spur of the East ridge (easy scrambling) to the summit at 3190m. From here, continue along the exposed and very loose East ridge until it steepens dramatically to the summit glacier.

Route finding is never complex, but the rock is in significant danger of collapse in many places. The glacier can be gained by traversing right slightly around the large rocky face at the end of the ridge. On the glacier, curve around to the South to the summit. Descent is easily found from the end of glacier down the scree laden slopes to the valley floor.



Comments

The route was one of the obvious targets from our basecamp next to the lake. The ridge presented exciting but easy scrambling, although the final rocky buttress near the end could have provided a more significant challenge had the escape around to the right not been present. The most dangerous crevasses on the glacier were fairly easy to avoid by careful route choice. The summit itself wasn't cleared marked, a small cairn marked the spot between two possible summit points but we were unsure where the final spot lay.

The map suggested that a crumbling, overhanging block to our left was the true top. However, with a storm approaching in the distance and the hour approaching 2pm, we thought better of it and headed off down the glacier and scree slopes back to camp.



3) N Face to 3716m Peak

Date: 17th August 2012
Climbers: G. Cave, C. Conlon
Location: 49.7358°N, 87.9756°E
Duration: (did not complete)

Route Description

From a bivy overlooking the face, climb down onto the glacier and head up towards the face. The plan was to proceed up the North face to the summit and then either make the traverse to the North or escape down to the South. The route was abandoned 100m onto the glacier.

Comments

We left the bivy site at around 3am, and reached the glacier not long afterwards. The end of the glacier tapered out under the moraine and we were around 100m onto the glacier properly before we decided to pause and gear up.

On the approach, we heard the noises of the glacier creaking and groaning. However, on reaching the gearing up site, the noises became far more persistent with loud cracking sounds running straight past our feet, and echoing booms from nearby. Quite spooked, and not used to standing on such a noisy, dynamic glacier, we beat a hasty retreat to safety.

Had we continued, we aimed to summit and then if time allowed to complete the traverse N across the dramatic looking ridge line and return past our bivy site. The 3716m summit lies half way along this ridge. We know of only one previous traverse of the ridge, and almost certainly there have been no ascents of the face. It may prove considerably safer in cooler, winter conditions, but we wouldn't like to say any more than this.





4) Irbistu SW Ridge – 3967m

Date: 17th August 2012

Climbers: G. Annandale, E. Dawson

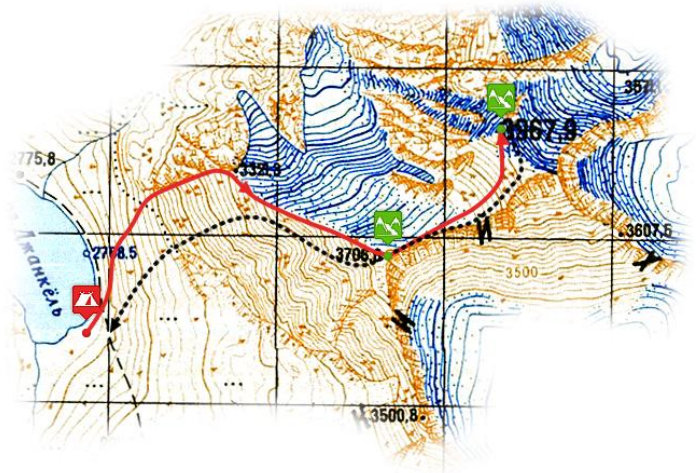
Location: 49.7587°N, 88.0859°E

Duration: 10 hours

Grade: F

Route Description

From the basecamp, ascend the NW ridge (easy scrambling) to the summit at 3706m. Cross the top edge of the glacier and then continue up the SW slopes to the summit at 3967m. Descent is most easily made by the same route.



Comments

Irbistu is the highest summit in the whole of the South Chuyski range and stands just shy of 4000m. It is an easy route and we understand it has been summited many times. Indeed, the top featured a modern metal plaque (meaning unknown) and a (sadly empty) bottle of Champagne.



5) Irbistu N Ridge - 3967m

Date: 19th August 2012

Climbers: G. Cave, C. Conlon

Location: 49.7638°N, 88.0857°E

Duration: 7 hours to summit, 5 hours return

Grade: AD (III)

Route Description

Starting from the summit at 3633m to the NW of Irbistu, traverse the ridge SE on rock and ice to the subsidiary peak at 3879m. From here, head S along the ridge to the summit of Irbistu. Major difficulties lie in this final section, some short sections of Scottish III on the climb up to the final snow slope. Significant loose rock.



Comments

This climb was one of the most interesting routes of the trip. The ridge crescendos well, getting gradually more sheer and harder as you near the final summit.

The major unknown for us was the significant break in the final section of the route, clearly visible from inspection in the basecamp valley but very unclear on the map. The descent into this was steep, with rock significantly fractured and prone to collapse, but the ascent was more dicey still with soft snow over steep loose rock presenting a couple of hairy moments.

We are very confident that our traverse was the first British crossing of this ridge. Since returning we have been in contact with a Russian climber Max Luchko, who believes he made the first traverse of this route in May 2009. We suspect there have been few, if any, other ascents since this time. A report is available at http://turizm.lib.ru/l/luchko_m_i/irbistu.shtml.



6) Dzhaniktu - 3942m

Date: 21st August 2012

Climbers: G. Cave, C. Conlon & E. Dawson

Location: 49.7796°N, 87.9605°E

Duration: 7hr to summit, 5hr return

Grade: PD+

Route Description

From a bivy high up on the north side of the corrie, climb the N ridge along the left hand side of the glacier, following it round to traverse across the top of the glacier heading west. Continue on rock past the high point at 3581m to reach the snow. Continue south up the glacier (3 pitches of 40-50° ice, 50m+ each) to the summit plateau. Summit at 3942m is located on the far side (SE). Descent via SE ridge on rock over 3716m point.



Comments

The bivy site is easily reached from the valley floor by climbing into the hanging valley and heading around to the right (5hr walk from basecamp). We were fortunate that a lack of rainfall in the preceding week had made the river low enough to ford easily.

We left the bivy at around 3:30am. The approach ridge was a little awkward to find in the dark, but easy enough to follow. The ridge becomes progressively harder, steeper and looser as it continues, the section around the 3581m spot height being the worst in terms of rock quality. The glacier, by contrast, gave three fantastic pitches, which we moved together up as a 3 placing ice screws for protection (rock ridge was soloed).

The summit plateau was very large and reminiscent of the Cairngorms. GPS measured the height 20m higher than that marked on the map, giving 3942m. The descent is an arduous scree slope, gained by first dropping off the back of the glacier towards the 3716m peak marked on the map. Much of the walkout valley is filled with moraine.

The original plan to climb as two pairs was changed as Greg had a minor injury to his knee picked up earlier in the trip on a scree descent and he did not accompany us.

We considered that our line up the mountain offered the most interesting line which did not cross the imposing NE face. The face has huge hanging seracs across both the top and bottom edges, however, we are aware of a Russian party who made an ascent of the left hand side of this face in May 2001 (when the approach to these is banked out with snow). Our Russian climbing contact Max Luchko is not aware of any other parties who have ever taken the same line as us. We know that the very top of our route was used as a descent (by abseil) by a Russian party, but they then continued to descend down a gully avoiding our approach ridge. Thus we claim the first ascent via this route.

Below: Posing for a summit photo with the flag shamefully upside down.





Above: Being dropped at the start of the valley by Igor and the driver.

Logistics

Access to the South Chuyski range required four days of travel from Heathrow to basecamp. Flights were taken via Moscow to Barnaul (day 1), followed by travel on road to Kurai (day 2). After an overnight stop, 4x4 transport via Belty'r took us to the head of the valley (day 3) and then the rest of the day plus the following day was required to walk in to our basecamp site (day 4).

Flights

The flights were taken in two legs, Heathrow to Moscow (around 3hrs 40mins) and then Moscow to Barnaul (around 4hrs). Because of the time differences, this meant arriving at Heathrow at 8am, landing in Moscow at around 6pm local time, leaving Moscow at 11pm and landing in Barnaul at 6am local time the following day. This made for roughly a 24hr journey when you factor in the time differences.

Clay & Greg flew out to Barnaul two days earlier than Eleri & George in order to buy food and other supplies for the expedition. We flew with Russian airline Aeroflot, and booked our tickets through their website <http://www.aeroflot.ru/cms/en> as they allow you to stagger your change over, rather than take the next available flight. This allowed us to stop over for 36hrs in Moscow to take a look at Lenin's dead body and buy some Soviet fur hats on our way back to England.

Despite our fears (Aeroflot have a Wikipedia entry for each decade of crashes they have had) we found the whole process smooth and hassle-free. All of our bags tipped the scales at 23kg.

Internal Travel

Our internal travel was organised by K2 Adventures, for which our contact was Igor Fedyaev. In fact, as far as we could tell they were one and the same; he came with a good reputation from previous expeditions to the area and we weren't let down.



We had arranged for Igor to pick up Clay and Greg from their hotel in Barnaul with all the supplies, and then meet George and Eleri at the airport. He arrived on time, along with our driver for this leg who spoke no English at all, so Igor accompanied as a translator although he also acted as a tour guide for the food, viewpoints, spring fountains and ancient stone carvings en route. We drove straight down the M-52 road which led eventually to Mongolia, but turned off at Kurai after around 12 hours to spend the night in a traditional wooden hut. After meeting our next driver for the final leg, we were encouraged to “make party” with Igor, a Russia expression for sitting around

drinking vodka and talking about politics.

In advance by e-mail we had submitted a selection of our preferred basecamp options and Igor had provided an indication of where we may or may not be able to access by 4x4. However, we couldn't actually decide on a final target without consultation with our driver who we met that night. They optimistically proposed that access to the far end of the valley might be possible in his truck.

Driver number 2, a local of Beltyr, took us, Igor (and his son!) via the ruined Beltyr village up into the mountains for around 3 hours. Unfortunately due to the high water levels we were dropped 12km short of where we had agreed the previous night – the local driver wasn't happy to go any further so we didn't have much choice. With a wave and agreement on collection date and GPS location, they were off.

Return journey

Huddled in a hastily pitched tent outer, in driving rain, we absent-mindedly wondered how many weeks we might be spending walking back across swollen rivers to Kurai. However, just 45 minutes late a familiar Altai face arrived to collect us. We had agreed that we didn't require the expensive translation services of Igor's presence for the return and he was confident that we could manage our return ourselves.

The result was an incredibly smooth return journey, considering neither of our two drivers spoke a single word of English. Our passports and visa registration forms were waiting for us in Kurai, and all our pre-arranged meeting times were met. Good job.



The verdict on Igor

He knew a lot about logistics (every lift, journey, driver etc happened exactly as he had said it would), a little about the valleys (he wasn't too sure about what might be accessible and what might not) and almost nothing about the mountains (he incorrectly pointed to a probable "unclimbed peak" which was the easiest and highest mountain of the region, first summited in c.1930).

If you wish to visit the Altai, definitely make use of his services, but go elsewhere for your mountaineering advice.

Igor Fedyaev

Managing Director
Expedition and trekking leader

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Basecamp

After being dropped at the start of the valley, we hiked in the first 8km that afternoon in two trips with around 50kg of kit and food each (leaving Eleri to scare off any Yaks whilst walking leg 1). After an overnight stop (photo below) we walked the final 4km the next day.

Our basecamp was situated at the head of a lake in a hanging valley off of the main valley. From here we could access a number of possible peaks, with the adjoining valleys no more than a single night's bivy away. Being grassy and below the (non-existent) snowline, it was a fairly comfortable spot.

Below: Looking down towards where basecamp would eventually be, after our first night in the Altai.



Accounts

Expenditure

Transport	£2462.00
George	£651.00
Eleri	£651.00
Greg	£580.00
Clay	£580.00
Visas	£624.40
Cost per visa (x4)	£156.10
Insurance	£1046.36
George	£259.90
Eleri	£259.90
Greg	£263.06
Clay	£263.50
Accommodation in Barnaul	£37.38
2x people for 2x nights	
Communications	£316.67
SPOT Messenger Live tracking	£27.67
Satellite Phone Rental	£126.00
Satphone SMS/Call costs	£13.00
Weather forecast service	£150.00
Food, petrol & gas	£301.84
Food in Barnaul	£258.94
Petrol for stoves (600RUR ¹)	£11.84
Food on journeys out/back (1574RUR ¹)	£31.06
K2 Adventures	£2504.28
Advance payment (\$1925+bank fees)	£1284.82
Balance on arrival (61800RUR ²)	£1219.46
Miscellaneous ²	£190.98
Travel to interviews / competitions	£148.90
Stickers ³	£27.18
RGS Reports	£3.00
Domain name	£5.90
Total	£7483.91

Income

MEF Grant	£850.00
BMC Grant	£400.00
Berghaus Live for Adventure Competition	£1000.00
Alpine Club Grant	£500.00
Personal contributions	£4733.91
each	£1183.48
Total	£7483.91

Notes

¹ Exchange rate at time of calculation
£1 = 50.7RUR

² Whilst not costs incurred directly on the trip, they were all necessary for it to succeed, so have been included here.

³ We bought a few hundred stickers with our domain name and some mountains on them and gave them out at the Keswick Mountain Festival (amongst other things). They got us a lot of interest, and some free accommodation at Borrowdale Youth Hostel so were well worth the investment!

Further Information

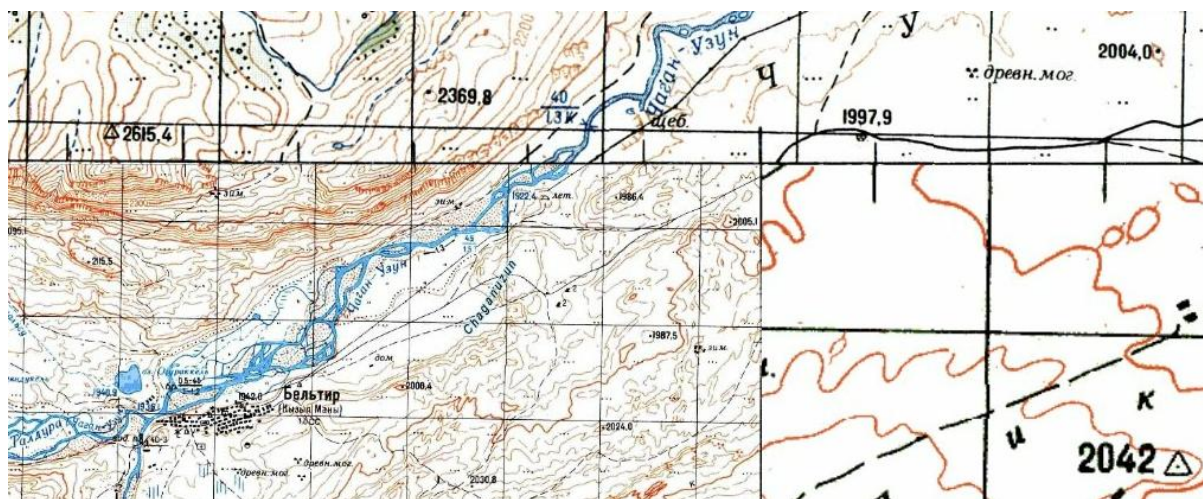
A few notes from some of our planning and research before the trip.

Maps

We initially made extensive use of Google Earth and the 1:100k mapping available to view at Topomapper (<http://www.topomapper.com/>). We were fortunate that satellite imagery of the area existed at quite a high resolution.

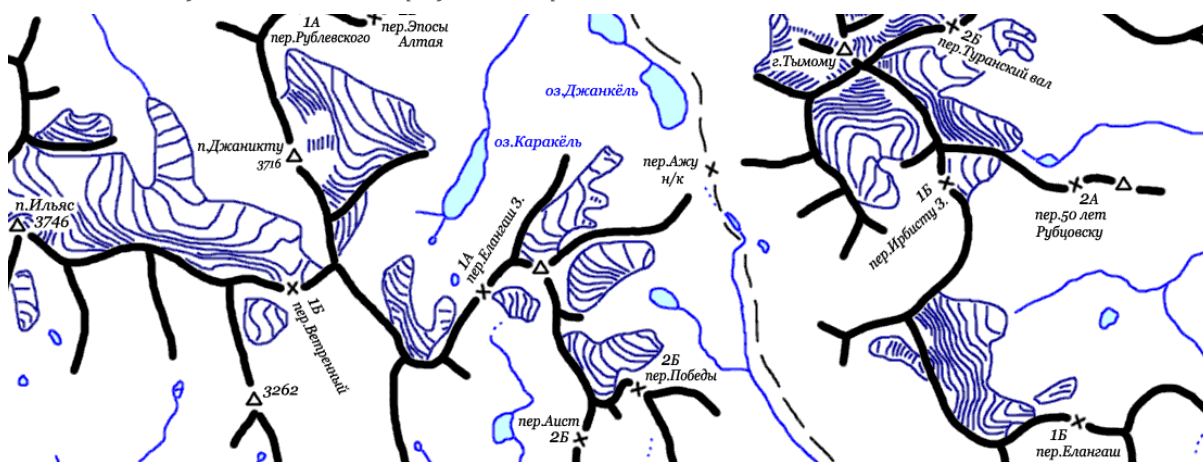
The Alpine Club, and in particular Derek Buckle, were able to provide 1:50k maps of our planned areas as GIF images. These date back to Soviet surveys from sometime in the 20th Century, so whilst glacial boundaries varied dramatically the contours and spot heights were for the most part very accurate. Please contact the AC, or ourselves, if you would like a copy for a future expedition.

Below: Comparison of contour resolution on AC maps verses Topomapper data



We also had a sketch map (shown below) which Clay had sourced from a Russian language website. It featured some Russian grades for various routes and passes but was of little help for the area we finally found ourselves climbing in.

Below: Extract of Russian sketch map of basecamp area



Border Permits

Several years ago, groups encountered problems gaining access to the border region peaks. However, Igor Fedyayev gave us the following information regarding access these days:

Border permits require a lot of Russian forms, but it is now possible to get them for small parties wanting to climb for a few weeks with little trouble at all. In short, the main concerns of the authorities are with regard to drug trafficking and Muslim insurgents from China so you are very unlikely to be refused unless there is suspicion that you may fall into one of these categories!

Igor can apply on your behalf to handle the paperwork and language translation if needed. Collection is upon arrival from either FSB headquarters (on M-52 just outside Kurai) or from the Rescue Rangers themselves based in Gorno-Altaysk. Allow a few weeks to a couple of months to process them.

Researching the Expedition

As far as we know, there have been no previous British expeditions to the South Chuyksi Range. In fact, we couldn't find a single English language trip report of any climbers ever having been to the region.

Our main contacts for research on the Altai were Michal Kleslo (kleslo@pamir7000.cz) from the 2012 expedition listed below and Max Luchko from Novosibirsk Mountaineering Club. Michal replied to e-mails in reasonably good English, but for the latter we spoke to his friend Anton Scherbakov anton.scherbakov@gmail.com in the end as Max could only reply in Russian. Max appeared to be regarded by many others as an authority on climbing in the Altai, and we spoke with him several times to gather details of first ascents in the area.

Expedition Reports

The major expeditions to other areas of the Altai which we discovered during our research are as follows:

- **First British Ascent of Mt Belukha**
Reference: The Alpine Journal - AJ 1985 Vol 90 Pg 47
Main Contact: John Town
Base Camp: Ak-Kem Lake
Notable Ascents: Mt Belukha (first British Ascent)
http://www.alpinejournal.org.uk/Contents/Contents_1985_files/AJ%201985%2047-53%20Town%20Altai.pdf
- **The 1988 British Altai Expedition**
Reference: The Alpine Journal - AJ 1989 109-113
Main Contact: Duncan Tunstall / Mick Fowler.
Base Camp: Ak-Kem lake at 2000m.
Notable Ascents: Mt Belukha and Tomsk ridge on Delone.
http://www.alpinejournal.org.uk/Contents/Contents_1989-90_files/AJ%201989%20109-113%20Tunstall%20Altai.pdf
- **High Altai Expedition 1990**
Reference: Mount Everest Foundation - MEF 21/09
Main Contact: Paul Knott
Base Camp: Ak-Kem Valley
Notable Ascents: First British Ascents of five routes around the Ak-Kem Valley. NE Ridge of the South summit of 20th October Peak (4067m), Traverse of Heroic Korea and Sapozhnikov (3950m), S-N Traverse of Razoruzheniye (3825m), E Ridge of Roerich's Peak, descent of N face (3500m) and W ridge of Tomsk Students' Peak (3579m)

- **Northern Chuisky Expedition 1997**
 Reference: Mount Everest Foundation - MEF 97/39
 Main Contact: Paul Knott
 Base Camp: Maashey Valley, Northern Chuisky Range
 Climbs: First (British/American) ascents were made on: N and NE ridges of Maashey (both new routes), Burevestnik (3700m), Tamma (3800m) - both on the eastern end of the 'Maashey Wall', Ak-Tru (4044m) and Kurkurek (3989m). MEF 97/39
- **Adventures in the Maashey Valley**
 Reference: The Alpine Journal - AJ 2002 Vol 107 Pg 95
 Main Contact: Michael Doyle
 Base Camp: Maashey Valley, Northern Chuisky Range
- **21st Century Altai**
 Reference: Mount Everest Foundation - MEF 09/22
 Main Contact: Tim Moss
 Base Camp: South Kurai Range
 Notable Ascents: Five routes within the South Kurai Range. All first British ascents,
<http://thenextchallenge.org/portfolio/altai/>
- **2010: Altai, Taban Bogdo Range, Ak Alakha**
 Main Contact: Michal Kleslo
 Base Camp: Near to the Ukok Plateau
 Notable Ascents: Taban Bogdo Range, Russian Tent (4,117m), NE couloir; Ak Alakha Range, Ak Alakha (3,650m), E ridge.
<http://aai.americanalpineclub.org/climbs-and-expeditions/asia/russia/2010-altai-taban-bogdo-range-by/>

Contact Details

If you would like further information on the contents of this trip report or on this expedition, please contact:

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Below: George heads up the final corniced slope to the summit of Irbistu



1 South Chuyski Range, Altai Republic

	No star	1	2	3
Mod to S	0	0	1	0
HS to HVS	1	1	0	0
E1 to E3	0	0	0	0
E4 and up	0	0	0	0

One of the most under-developed ranges in the Altai Mountains, it is nonetheless currently rated as one of Siberia's premier single-pitch climbing venues.

Access

No known access issues, although take care if local Yak population are mating.

Approach

From Barnaul, drive south for c.12 hours along the M-52. After an overnight stop in Kurai, a further 4 hours in a 4x4 will bring you to the valley floor. Parking is rarely a problem here. A 10km walk in reaches the lake, turn left and the crag is on the slopes of Irbistu.

Conditions

Best climbing is during the middle of the summer when the crag and valley are not filled with deep snow. Sun from early morning to mid-afternoon, although if the day turns sour the journey home is long and hard, so pick a nice day!

Central Earth

1 Karashah Corner HS 4b

10m. Climb the dirty corner, moving out onto the left hand face before finishing up the narrowing crack above. Named after the Russian word for OK, because it probably deserves little more praise than that.

FA. George Cave 22.08.2012

2 Karohshi Corner S 4a

8m. Bask in the enjoyment of your first taste of solid rock in the Altai. A lovely corner with plenty of solid gear, Karohshi is a literal translation of the Russian word for good.

FA. Clay Conlon 22.08.2012

3 Brunel's Choss VS 4c

8m. Despite the name, a remarkably choss free route. Pull through the overhanging on a mixture of solid and dubious holds. Sustained whilst it lasts, but soon over.

FA. George Cave 22.08.2012

Central Earth

The crag is so called as it lies almost as far from the coast in all directions as it possible to be on the planet. The routes are well protected once you have learnt to negotiate the extensive piles of loose rock. Limited options in the higher grades.



Karashah Corner

Brunel's Choss



Clay Conlon praying the rock won't crumble around him on Karohshi Corner (S) - page 1 - at Central Earth. Photo: Greg Annandale