

University College London

Expedition to the Central Tien-Shan

2003



Ben Trinder



Tim Moss



Thom Allen

CONTENTS PAGE

INTRODUCTION
THE TEAM
THE AREA
THE OBJECTIVES

DIARY
GETTING THERE
WALK IN
BASE CAMP
GORKY 1
GORKY 2
WALK OUT
GETTING HOME

REVIEW
THE GEAR AWARDS
HIGHS AND LOWS
OUR FINANCES
SPONSORS AND THANKS

CONTACT DETAILS

Hello and welcome to the report of the 'University College London Expedition to the Central Tien-Shan'.

Our expedition took place between July 14th and August 12th of the year 2003. The team comprised three young climbers, two of which were undergrads at University College London (UCL) and were awarded a grant by the 'UCL Expedition Committee'.

This report contains details of our team's attempts to climb Maksima Gor'Kogo Peak (Peak Gorky, 6050m) via its southern ridge. There are also detailed notes on our trek into the Central Tien-Shan, where Peak Gorky is to be found, our equipment and our accounts.

Although we were unsuccessful in summiting we feel that our efforts weren't without merit, and we all had a grand adventure. We hope you enjoy this report.



Above: Coffee break on the Engilchek Glacier.



THE TEAM

Thom Allen - Team Leader

AGE: 19

OCCUPATION: GEOLOGY UGRAD AT UCL

'Thom's been climbing for 5 years and is the most experienced ice climber in the team. It was his drive that fuelled the expedition'



Tim Moss - Team Accountant

AGE: 21

OCCUPATION: PSYCOLOGY UGRAD AT UCL

'Tim's been climbing for just two years, but already pulls with the best of them. He is the most experienced hiker out of the three and the only one with any money sense. It was his visa card the financed the expedition'



Ben Trinder - Team Chef

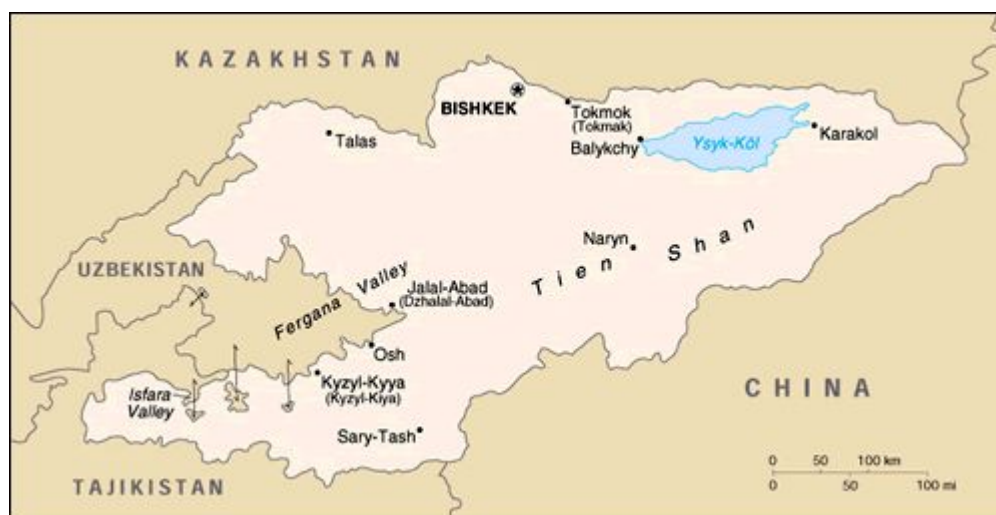
AGE: 19

OCCUPATION: BOAT BUILDER

“The famous English man with big hands” Ben's been climbing for over 10 years and is the most experienced rock climber of the group. He also has a passion for food and it was his cooking that powered the expedition'

THE AREA

The Tien-Shan mountain-range is found in the eastern most point of Kyrgyzstan (the Kyrgyz-Republic). Kyrgyzstan itself is located in Central Asia and borders Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. It is a small country, covering only 200 km² of land, with an average altitude of 2,500m.



We flew to Bishkek (Frunze airport) and made our way across the north of the country, to Karakol. We were then driven into the mountains in a hired 4x4 to the end of the last road. At this point we had to start trekking, up a huge glacial valley and onto the mammoth South Engilchek Glacier, for 5 days. Our destination was an organised base camp at the base of the Tengri-Too Range in the heart of the Central Tien-Shan. For more information on our journey see 'The Diary' below.

TOWNS

Bishkek:

Kyrgyzstan's capital city is Soviet built with grid like roads lined with trees and groups of gouching men. The infrastructure is developed yet run down: being a small country, Kyrgyzstan was actually better off (financially) before its independence in 1991, and as such the Kyrgyz people seem proud of there history with statues of Lenin still standing. The atmosphere of the city however is much more capitalist with Coca-Cola (but no Mc D's), West cigarette girls (this maybe a Muslim country, but don't expect the women to be covered from head to toe), internet cafes, a department store and even (wait for it...) a Manchester United FC social club (yeah way)! The people on the streets are cosmopolitan, casually dressed but look depressed, especially the many men crouching (well its more of a curious squat) in the shade at the sides of the road (both unemployment and suicide are high). However, we never had any trouble, nor were we pestered by beggars. In fact, everyone we met was helpful and friendly. There is also the sense that the

government is making an effort to brighten up the city with modern sculptures dotted round the centre of the city, new play grounds and curious inflatable arches? Finally, here are a few hints and tips:

- Don't expect people to speak English.
- Don't expect places to be where they should be.
- Don't order a steak, there's no such thing in Kyrgyzstan.
- And Don't, under any circumstances, use the public toilets.
- Do expect to be the only westerners there.
- Do go to the indoor bazaars.
- Do take a waterproof, even if it's sunny.
- Do try the 30p kebab burgers (they are as good as it gets).



Bishkek

Karakol:

The rest of Kyrgyzstan, from what we saw, is very different from Bishkek. Karakol, a large town rather than a city, has a very different feel. The houses are more shack like, not much in the way of shops or restaurants, even less people spoke English and if we thought the roads were bad in Bishkek, we hadn't seen anything yet. What Karakol did have, was a huge open air bazaar with everything we needed; food, the legendary expedition alarm clock (that only tells the right time once every lunar cycle), the indestructible Mickey Mouse expedition mug and the biggest pile of watermelons I have ever seen in my life. All dirt, dirt cheap. Karakol is a pleasant town and once again we had no trouble despite sticking out like sore thumbs as affluent westerners.

MOUNTAINS

Our base camp was at 3995m on the lateral moraine on the North side of the Southern Engilchek Glacier in the heart of the Tien-Shan, some 80km from our drop off point. Our situation on the edge of the glacier was surrounded by staggering amphitheatre of mountains.

To the south was the confluence of the Engilchek and the Zvyozdochka Glacier, extending down from the highest mountain in the area; Pobedy Peak (7439m). To the north was the Tengri-Too range topped by a marble pyramid called Khan-Tengri (6995m/7010m), the second highest mountain. And to the east was the Engilchek Glacier's source in the Meridional'nyy Range; a string of 6000m peak that forms the border with China.

The mountains all had a heavy dump of snow and ice, and the rock outcropping was metamorphic rocks with many schists. The geology of the region seems to be that of a closed up ocean basin.



Looking south over the glacier towards Pobeda

PEAK GORKY 6050m

A stunning pyramidal peak with steep slopes rising just over two thousand metres from the northern edge of the South Engilchek Glacier. It is part of the 'Tengri-Too' range and the second summit due west of Khan-Tengri. Its southern face is split by a steep ridge that forms an obvious line to the summit. As soon as we saw peak Gorky we knew it would become our objective.



The southern ridge of Peak Gorky, from the SE

A Russian team we met at the base camp had a printed table of peaks in the area and the grades of various routes. The southern ridge was given the Russian grade **5b**, which is roughly TD in alpine grading. It was within our grade so that was that. We knew nothing more about the route and neither did the Russians.

On our return, a search of the Alpine Club's Himalayan Index, the Britain's most comprehensive index of mountains over 6000m, confirmed our suspicions. We had been within 400m of making a first British ascent! Through further research we have only been able to find 3 other recorded ascents, 2 by the south ridge. The third and most recent being a highly technical ascent via the north-west face.

- 1962 – The 1st ascent via the southern ridge, by the 'Trud' team led by Vladimir Krilov.
- 1970 – The 2nd ascent via southern ridge (variant), by a Ukrainian team led by Naugolny.
- 2001 – Ascent via north-west face, by a Russian team led by Yuri Ermachek.

THE OBJECTIVES

Explore remote regions:-

Trekking in Central Tien Shan provides a prime opportunity for experiencing the remote feeling of isolation so rarely felt anywhere besides the mountains. Similar destinations such as the Alps are very popular tourist destinations and even the Himalayas are becoming overcrowded with long queues commonplace on the slopes of Mount Everest. Tien Shan has only been accessible to foreigners since 1989 and has yet to properly establish itself as a full-scale mountaineering destination. Those that do visit the area are primarily concerned with the big peaks (Peak Pobeda and Khan Tengri) almost to the point of exclusivity. As such, the vast numbers of surrounding peaks remain largely uninhabited by mountaineers.

Possible first British ascents:-

The summit bagging culture has led to large crowds queuing for places on the major peaks and to the neglect of the lesser peaks. Coupled with the fact that the mountains have only been open to foreign mountaineers for short period of time, there remain a lot of peaks that have never been climbed, let alone climbed by British parties. This leaves the possibility open to achieving first British ascents of peaks in the area.

Mountaineering experience:-

The trip in itself was a huge achievement but has also provided us all with invaluable skills and experience for later life. This will hopefully be the first of many excursions to remote areas, serving not only to educate us in the ways of mountaineering but also to fuel our desire further and inspire us to continue.

Experience different culture first hand:-

Although the primary goal was that of a mountaineering perspective, the opportunity to experience the cultural differences of the small Central Asian country of the former Soviet Union was not be ignored. In addition to the Soviet cultural remains, there is the underlying nomadic Kirghiz culture, such as the belief in Shamanism and the distinctive 'Kalpak' Kirghiz hat.

Getting There



Thom's credit card being eaten at Heathrow simply served to reaffirm Tim's position as Trip Accountant. He was the only member with any money. Feeling a little cheated at the check-in staff not even glancing at the baggage weight after spending hours minimising our equipment, our spirits were lifted by our first sighting of the traditional Kyrgyz "Kalpak" hat, already infamous within our group.

Successfully claiming the Fire Exit seats for the journey, in-flight entertainment was provided in the form of Bullet Proof Monk and Shanghai Knights, more than enough excitement for a 9-hour flight. Breaks came only in the form of airline food, refuelling in Baku and Tim feeling the need to list his vitamins on the drug declaration form.

Our amusement at the elaborate hats of the Kyrgyz police force was soon replaced with fear upon encountering our chauffeur that spoke no English and had no form of identification besides a piece of card saying 'Thom Allen' but was all too keen to load us into his death trap of a van. The 'Passion Wagon' got us to the Hotel Asia Mountains on the small sections of road between potholes and we watched Cable TV until passing out at 5am.



The Passion Wagon

After a refreshing hour's sleep and the Kyrgyz take on a Full English Breakfast, we ventured out into Bishkek; the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Asking directions to the ITMC office (International Tien-Shan Mountaineering Company - the company in charge of our transport to and from the mountains) led us straight to their rival company who tried in vein to get us on board. The Cartographic Office, our only option for maps, was a needle in a haystack and we struggled to find any hay. It was eventually tracked down after the third consecutive building informed us that it was "next door". Our search for the ITMC inadvertently enlisted the help of a nearby building's entire quota of over-helpful staff. The enthusiasm proved futile since the only phrases Tim could find in the guidebook were "I'm a vegetarian" and "I need a doctor" but we found the ITMC shortly afterwards.

The man responsible for co-ordinating our trip was "on holiday" so a young lady with a penchant for agreeing with everything we said was delegated the responsibility. ("Have you arranged the helicopter for our luggage?" "Yes", "Where do meet it?" "Yes").

Our serious driver took us to the bus stop the following morning and transferred us from the Passion Wagon to the equally disturbing van that was to take us to Karakol, a major town 250km east of Bishkek. Our new vehicle featured a rag for a fuel cap and a Marlboro Lights poster for a window (conveniently located next to Tim's head). Our driver insisted on maintaining a load of 17 people in blatant abuse of the 13-person capacity so our journey was littered with stops. Most notably was the stop at which we were instructed to disembark the van by border control militia and watched as it drove into Kazakhstan with our luggage.



Our death trap transport for 7 hours from Bishkek to Karakol

Thankfully our driver was just filling his tank with cheap Kazak petrol and so it was, with only a few near head-on collisions, that we arrived in Karakol. Greeted with the privilege of three large rooms at our hotel, we had to put our feet down as the hotel staff attempt to sell us a fourth.



Hotel Karakol's prime location in the mountains allows fresh mineral water on tap

We travelled to the local bazaar in a taxi with a cracked windscreen and a screwdriver holding up the driver's window. The effort was clearly appreciated as the man from whom we bought a month's supply of chocolate from appeared to pack up shop and retire. Back at the hotel, we "enjoyed" some Kyrgyz cuisine with an odd group of French travellers, organised our rations for the trip and received multiple copies of the same fax from the ITMC (in Russian).



Enough food for a month (?)

Our new driver, Anatouli, was to pick us up from Hotel Issyk-Kul at 8am and drive us in a 4x4 jeep to the end of the road. Minor confusion over time differences saw us waking up five minutes before he arrived, making for a hurried get away. In some doubt as to whether or not our driver realised the importance of getting petrol for our stove, we held on tight as the rickety jeep weaved in and out of potholes and dodged avalanche debris. Once out of the town, the journey is a non-stop visual treat with plush mountains, valleys and rivers as far as the eye can see in every direction.



Our 4x4 transport and one of many impressive views en-route

Upon arrival at Maidadyr, fully aware of our situation, Anatouli took out a large straw and began to siphon petrol from (one of) his fuel tanks. Two guards met us at the border to check our documentation and request that Tim photograph some kids or have his film removed. We arranged to meet Anatouli in 3 weeks' time, waved goodbye and began the long walk to base camp.

The Walk In



Glorious sunshine, an arid landscape and long stretching view greeted us at the start of our walk to base camp. We were eased into the journey with a flat terrain, a blessing since Thom was struggling under his new and rather large rucksack and Tim developed blisters within an hour and a half. Our afternoon's progress was mildly overestimated not least due to the small-scale maps (1:200,000).

Our first Wayfayrers were enjoyed around a campfire in the evening but the mood soon turned sour (as our tea would for the rest of the journey) upon the realisation that our "sugar" was in fact powdered milk.

Not long after starting our second day's walking a river blocked our path. Thom drew the short straw and crossed first, only for a local Kyrgyz horseback rider to appear out of nowhere and ferry Tim and Ben across. A number of smaller rivers resulted in Thom getting wet feet and contributed to the continuing deterioration of Tim's.



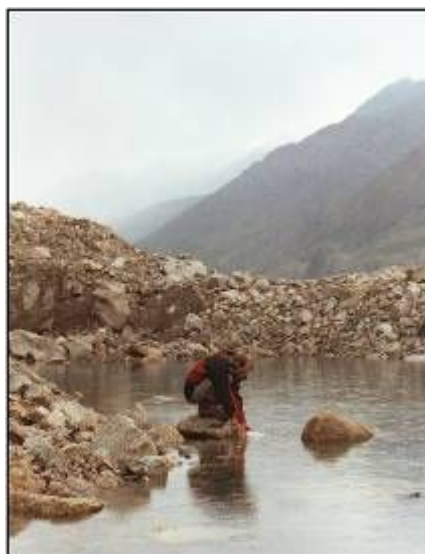
Kyrgyz Cowboy to the rescue!

A waterfall provided Thom with his last shower for a long time before we rested beneath a make shift shelter and watched a group of trekkers on their way back to Maidadyr. The glacier came into sight shortly before another gushing river did. This one involved two waist high crossings. The glacier wasn't quite the ice field we'd anticipated and bore more resemblance to a 40km-long rubbish heap.



The treacherous river crossing

After a windy night sleeping out atop boulders we persevered over the undulating terrain and Tim successfully created a large rip in the seat of his trousers. The weather turned a little in the afternoon but a large boulder field relieved the monotony. During a mid-afternoon doze, the food deprivation got too much for Tim and he awoke the group by declaring: "I just want a f***ing cake!".



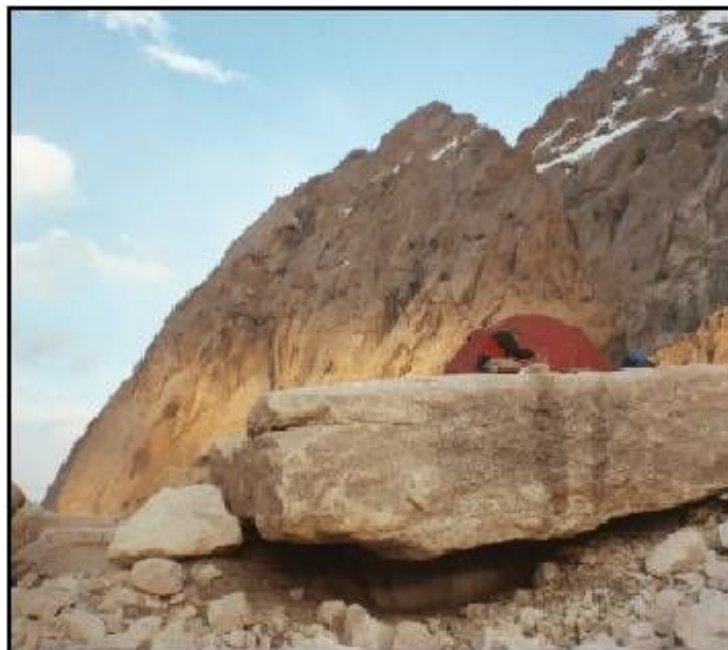
One of the cleaner looking water sources on the glacier

We cut across to the north side of the valley the following morning and Ben and Thom decided to take Diamox whilst Tim sticks with his multivitamins. Our path then crossed a hut owned by funny little man called Victor who seemed to spend his days talking to a mouse.



An easy moment stolen in the afternoon sun

A group of trekkers sporting huge rucksacks, trainers and even a guitar, walked past as we sunbathed in the afternoon sun. Our first two Platypus' to bite the dust did so as we pitched our tent atop a huge boulder.



Our impressive pitch for the night

A breakfast of weak tea kick started our day after we once again failed to set the alarm. We finally reached some ice and our crampons came out of their bags for the first time. It wasn't long before the axes were on display too. A number of rivers were crossed and Thom resourcefully dislodged a large boulder to provide a steppingstone for us all.

Basecamp shouldn't have been been far but our food supplies were running precariously low. Tim selflessly sacrificed his last chocolate bar to provide lunch

for the team and after a precarious unroped snow ridge traverse, our last Wayfayers were ceremoniously consumed.

Ben commented on the lack of “mojo” in the team but Thom displayed some impressive reserves and led the team at high speed, desperate to make base camp before nightfall. After dividing Tim’s last boiled sweets between the three of us with the aid of a penknife, we reached a deserted base camp. Tired, wet, cold and hungry the site of several derelict buildings did not amuse us. Thankfully, it wasn’t long before we reached the actual base camp in a weary state.



Ben takes an exposed line on a sharp snow ridge

We introduce ourselves to Alex the base camp manager, who had apparently expected us about a week ago. Seeing our fatigued condition and the weather, he offered us the use of a hut for the night and prepared us a feast. We ate everything he could throw at us then hit the sack, worn out but deeply relieved to have arrived.



Exhausted and relieved - We finally arrive at Base Camp

Base Camp



Sleeping and eating were the priorities for the first day at camp. We shared a tent with an Australian guy also staying at base camp and got a Khan-Tengri picture show from a Russian team just returning from the mountain. The emergence of a guitar saw the evening whiled away singing Yellow Submarine and acclimatising Russian style (through the use of Vodka).

We ventured across to the north side of the glacier the following morning to retrieve the equipment we had flown in. After a small amount of confusion and a large amount of biscuits, our bags turned up and we headed back to base camp stopping only long enough for Tim to fall on his arse and cut his thumb open with an axe.



Base Camp on the North side

Gear was organised for our first mountain attempt, Peak Diki (4832m), and we set off after dinner, taking a "short cut" across the glacier. The new route saw us jumping numerous rivers and crevasses but it wasn't long before the Kyrgyz food got the better of Thom and Ben who found themselves suffering from food poisoning. Our progress was slowing and darkness was approaching. Persevering nonetheless, and in an attempt to get to safer ground, Ben embarked on a daring solo descent but had to back off a later ridge and we were forced to pitch on the glacier for the night.



Peak Gorky (6050m)

Diki was abandoned in the morning due to Ben and Thom's condition so we headed back to base camp where we found new arrivals from Taiwan. The rest of the day was spent resting. On the next day, Tim and Thom reconnoitred Peak Gorky (6050m), on which we'd now set our sights, with a quick scramble and packing began for the actual ascent.

Gorky I



A mix of skree, rock and frozen snow underfoot soon became monotonous as we plodded up the slopes of Maksima Gor'Kogo ("Gorky" to his friends). The seemingly good progress came to a slow grinding halt as we reached the inevitable powder snow. Tim started to suffer from the altitude and struggled to maintain the already slow pace. Darkness was upon us rather quicker than planned and we had yet to find anywhere to pitch the tent on the incessant 45° slope.

The decision was reached to dig 'bucket seats' in the snow and spend the night in the open air. An earlier debate saw Tim using Thom's bivvy bag and the other two going without. Once we'd dug our seats, we tried to light the stove but it failed to operate. Thom then dropped his Therm-a-Rest sleeping mat down the mountainside and we settled down for a good night's sleep.



A pleasant night out in the open on the slopes of Gorky

Spindrift and the fear of death made for a fairly sleepless night but we pressed on after reluctantly removing ourselves from our sleeping bags at first light. The slow progress was not helped by the repeated changing of crampons as we moved from snow to rock and back again. We stopped below the main ridge to warm our feet and found that our stove was still not functioning and, being as melting snow was our only source of water, the ascent was abandoned.

The arduous downward snow climb was broken up by a short pitch of steep ice and Ben sending a high speed rock plummeting into Thom. We stumbled back into base camp with headaches and low morale. Nothing some of Alex's cooking and a few games of chess didn't sort out.

Gorky II



A day's rest left us long enough to dry out kit and recuperate for a second attempt on Gorky. An alternative skree route was adopted for the rematch and we started in the early afternoon. After three hours' slogging uphill we constructed a platform for the tent. Leaving at 5:30 the following morning we got our first instance of roped climbing. Stopping for water, Thom dropped a Platypus down the mountain having painstakingly filled it with melted snow. The ice screws came out for a tricky overhung ice wall. Thom led the route which entailed jumping off a snowy cornice and traversing the snow before we were stopped by powder-snow blockade.



Thom poses moments before the ice beneath him collapses

Taking an alternative line to avoid the deep snow, Thom took a short fall, dropping his hat and showering Tim with ice in the process. Backing down to where Ben was belaying, Tim took his own fall and has his life saved by Ben's

well-placed screw. Concluding the snow to be too soft, we ceased climbing and dug a ledge for our tent.



Ben and Tim plodding through the snow

Ben dropped a pole in the process of pitching (our fourth loss to the mountain after earlier losing his sleeping bag stuff sack) and the tent hung precariously over the edge of its podium. Thom and Tim finally managed to melt snow after three attempts at cleaning the highly temperamental stove. Not feeling entirely safe about the thousand metre drop beneath them, Tim and Thom opted to sleep with the legs crossed over one another to avoid any unnecessary weight being placed on the overhanging side of the tent.



How not to pitch a tent

The sound of the weather was enough to keep the three of us bed bound long enough to miss any kind of early 'Alpine start'. Thom mustered the willpower to investigate the situation and confidently concluded that it was indeed very cold outside. We resolved to sit out the weather until the next day and so, aside from digging a bigger ledge for the tent, the day was spent cooped up in the tent eating cold chilli.

Thom acted as our alarm following another failure of the Expedition Alarm Clock. Our food and fuel were low and we were not feeling confident about continuing the climb. We decided to descend and, after a lengthy packing session, we took the tent down and went on our way. We opted for a slightly different line on our way down and found ourselves on a very steep pitch of hard ice. Ben was not amused when he unwittingly gained responsibility for the whole team as a slight slip on Thom's part saw himself and Tim dangling on the rope, held only by Ben's firm axe placements. The sight of the sloppy ice screw placements didn't help to appease Ben's mood.

Back on non-vertical ground, the scary ice is replaced with the worryingly brittle Kyrgyz rock that causes Tim to fall flat on his face and slide dangerously close to a long drop. A Slovakian climber encountered on a descent informed us that the mountain has apparently only been climbed thrice. An adrenalin fuelled skree ride took us back to base camp where Alex provided us with some much needed beers.



Celebratory (?) drinks back at Base Camp

With the climbing over, all that was left was to arrange helicopter transport for our equipment at the north base camp. With our time off, we took it in turns to use the base camp's 'sauna'; our first proper wash in a long time. Ben and Thom plotted a last ditch lightweight ascent of Gorky in the dying days before we have to leave but quickly call it off due to the bad weather.

With only a couple of days left at base camp, we had no mountains on the agenda and so spent our penultimate day ice climbing on the glacier with our new friends from 'Team Taiwan': Jane and James. Ben and Thom set up a number of climbs and ended the session climbing a pitch through continuous shower of skree. Back at camp we filled the evening drinking vodka with our favourite 'chemical juice' as a mixer and singing the blues with Hank from Team Taiwan.

Lugging the equipment across the glacier to the northern base camp on our last day at camp, James continued to take photographs of our every movement. A uniformed member of the Kyrgyz army requested that we display our passports but since we didn't have them on us, Ben's tactful "no" seemed to close the matter.



Thom climbs out of the death trap

Before we set off back to Maidadyr, Alex donated some bread and fish to our cause, a generous contribution with irrefutable Biblical connotations. After several group photos with the remaining members of Team Taiwan, we headed back out the valley.



'Team Taiwan' member James posing with us before leaving Base Camp

The Walk Out



Now familiar with the route across the glacier, we followed the decrepit orange flags that marked the line of least resistance. Leading us past the infamous crashed helicopter, a river jump resulted in another burst Platypus. That left only one water bottle between us.



Another one bites the dust - our water bottles are falling like flies

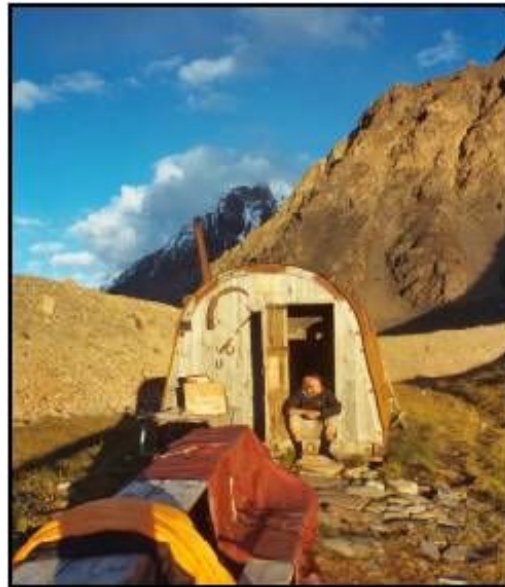
We bumped into two Germans and an American who stopped to say hello on their way to the Tien-Shan Travel Base and then came across some snow stakes and a Coke bottle filled with rice. Our first portion of Haribo was rationed out and we kept ourselves occupied by discussing our favourite cheeses for the remainder of the afternoon. Food had become an increasingly frequent topic of debate in our malnourished state. Snow started coming in so we sought shelter in our tent behind a large rock.



Another bright and sunny morning on the glacier

The snowstorm hampered our motivation to get going in the morning but, after cooking up in the porch, we timed our emergence perfectly with the precipitation's end. We soon left the icy contours and returned to the all too familiar glacial moraine to stop for a civilised coffee break. The ever-reliable stove failed to light once more leaving us with bread and fish for lunch.

In the distance, we spied what we believed to be the grassy verge on which Victor's hut was found but it slowly dawned on us that we had some more ground to cover. Haribo rations kept us going as we crossed the glacier and its contours. Three o'clock was renamed 'Haribo o'clock'. A plethora of Cairns guided us to Victor's hut that we found, to our jubilation, was both empty and open.



Victor's Hut

After a chilli-con-carne feast, we settled down for the night in our bunks. Thom had a close encounter with Victor's pet mouse in the middle of the night. In the morning, we tucked into some of our special homemade rice pudding and got on our way. A series of cairns continued to highlight the path whose whereabouts had eluded us on the way in. Expedition Chef Ben cooked up some rice and fish at our lunchtime stop beside an almighty boulder and then we pressed on until a well-deserved rest at Haribo o'clock.



The large rock poses an entertaining bouldering puzzle

Our markers got progressively sparser as we began to leave the path and descend progressively closer to the glacier itself. Our fear of returning to the undulating glacial moraine was alleviated quickly. We spent only a few minutes off the path before dry land came into sight. Hopes of getting off the glacier that evening are dashed by the onset of rain and we settled down to enjoy the much-anticipated Spotted Dick and Custard desserts.

Our path crossed that of a group of Czech trekkers who explained the long route that they've taken to get to base camp the following morning. Our anxiety was increasing as we approached the raging river that marked the boundary between the glacier and terra firma. But the river that had previously caused us much grief (and nearly frost bite) was no more. Nothing but dry ground.



Confused by the lack of raging river

The flat valley terrain came just in time. Malnutrition had sapped any energy we once had. We aimed to take a quick break at a pleasant spot we had passed on the way in but a brief rest soon turned into a stop for the night. But it was no ordinary night... Rather, it was the long awaited 'Curry Night'!

Our hopes of survival were pinned on one of the upcoming encampments taking pity on us and supplying us with some food. We came across the same Kyrgyz horseman that aided us on the walk in and he quickly hoisted all of our bags onto his horse and ferried across the very same river that he transported us across before. The Kyrgyz Cowboy then invited us to follow him back to his house and, when we arrived, he served up a veritable feast. The full extent of our appreciation for the food was hard to convey but we offered a small quantity of currency that we had left and a length of rope we no longer needed.



Our generous hosts

Reluctantly, we left the family's hospitalities after some group photos and set about finding our next food supply. Eggs were the order of the day but the only method we could think of to put the message across to the man running a nearby campsite was to do the funky chicken. To our amazement (and theirs) our flapping and clucking was successful.

Progress was good, morale was at an all time high and so are our energy levels, and after lazing in the sun we found an abandoned hut to stop at for the night. Ben set up an impressive barbecue-style open fire to cook our dinner on and we spent our last night sleeping out under the stars.



Taking it easy with the knowledge that we're almost home

Fried egg sandwiches got us off to a good start and we managed to reach Maidadyr within an hour. Despite our early arrival our intrepid driver was there waiting for us. We picked up our airlifted luggage along with some Cokes and hopped into the jeep for the bumpy journey back. As Anatouli put his foot down we simultaneously knocked back our Cokes and settled down for the ride.



Happy faces - the hardship's over

Getting Home



Shortly after arriving back at Hotel Issyk-Kul we were in a taxi heading to the bazaar. Our need for satiation far outweighed our fatigue and the fifteen pence bags of biscuits were too good to miss. Kalpaks, bread, beer and more biscuits were all purchased before leaving. We gorged ourselves on biscuits to the extent that we had to pass on the hotel dinner. Phone calls home were made and then beds were hit.

Finding ourselves once again in the hands of dodgy Kyrgyz public transport, we were slightly more prepared this time. The eight and a half hour journey was broken up only by the coach stopping for more passengers, refuelling, the odd breakdown and the occasional bout of police bribery. Arriving in the now familiar Bishkek we asked for directions to "Shaslik", our priority is food once more. Crowded by a mob of taxi drivers quoting extortionate prices we eventually got a reasonable fare and made it back to the Hotel Asia Mountains in all its Westernised glory.

We tracked down the pink biscuits we had coveted since base camp in a local bazaar the next day and drop in on the ITMC to let them know that we're still alive (despite Alex's best attempts with cooking). With little left to do we opted to blow the budget on burgers, cakes and beers in a local café.



Enjoying Kyrgyzstan's cheap cuisine

A three thirty alarm sounds the start to a very long day but aside from the disappointment of not being transported in the Passion Wagon by our favourite

driver, the journey home is uneventful and nine hours later we're back on British turf.

Epilogue

The expedition was a trip of a life time. Writing this section many years after the event and having been on several adventures since, I can say that with confidence. Reading through the report with the benefit of hindsight, the mistakes we made and close calls we encountered are even clearer now. I think we all learnt a lot from it and, whilst we enjoyed ourselves immensely, there were a lot of dangerous moments that I would not like to repeat again. If you're planning a trip of your own then please do get in touch and I'll gladly list the many mistakes we made...

Tim (tim@thenextchallenge.org)

Awards

GEAR	AWARD	DESCRIPTION
Terra Nova Quasar Tents	<i>Purple Heart</i>	
Therm-a-Rest ¾ Ultralite	<i>TS Award</i>	For bailing out at the first sign of trouble
Ben's Gloves	<i>The Master Chef Award</i>	
Wayfayrer Meals	<i>Flatulence Award</i>	
Platypus	<i>Wooden Spoon</i>	Generally quite crap
MSR XGK Expedition Stove	<i>Amateur Dramatics Award</i>	Failure at the most critical times (and most other times too)

HONOURABLE MENTION	DISHONOURABLE MENTION
"Spotted Dick" Wayfayrers	Cold "Meatballs & Pasta"
Alex's Pink Biscuits	Wayfayrers
The Ultimate Rice Pudding	Expedition Mug (Mk I)
Nestle "Nuts" Bars	Expedition Clock
Expedition Mug (Mk II)	

PERSONAL AWARDS	
Ben	<i>Imodium Award</i>
Thom	<i>Decorators Award</i>
Tim	<i>Indecent Exposure Award</i>
Kyrgyz Cowboy	<i>Golden Heart</i>

EXPEDITION ROLES	
Thom	Team Leader
Ben	Expedition Chef
Tim	Trip Accountant

Expedition Theme Tune: The White Stripes - Seven Nation Army

Unnecessary Gear: Rock Protection and Down Mittens

Classic Quotes

<i>"Tim, Thom, Tim... breakfast!"</i>	Alex - every morning at base camp
<i>"Watch out it's slippery"</i>	Ben - moments before Tim fell on his arse
<i>"I just want a f***** cake!"</i>	Tim - when the starvation got too much
<i>"Kancha?"</i>	"How much?" in Kyrgyz - the only word we ever learnt
<i>"Suck my fat one Mother Nature!"</i>	Tim - when the weather looked to be the final straw
<i>"Maybe... photo??"</i>	James (Team Taiwan) - every thirty seconds
<i>"Sorry... who is this!?"</i>	Thom - having listened to a complete stranger on the phone for five minutes

Highlights

SCARIEST MOMENTS
Ben's pitch-black down-climb without crampons and whilst suffering from food poisoning
Alex's cooking (and the inevitable toilet visit afterwards)
Ordering the fourth bottle of Vodka at Base Camp
Ben seeing Tim and Thom's ice screw placements
The sudden gust of wind that caused the tent to levitate on the slopes of Gorky
Waking up on the death slide
The bus ride from Karakol to Bishkek (swerving to avoid potholes and oncoming cars)
The first step into the Love Wagon
The colour of the water at the Hotel Issyk-Kul
Any food served at the Hotel Issyk-Kul
Discovering what we believed to be the shattered remains of our Base Camp

BEST MOMENTS
The Kyrgyz Cowboy serving up watermelon and scrambled eggs
The feast Alex served upon our arrival at Base Camp
Reaching Victor's Hut on our return journey
Egg sandwiches at the abandoned hut
The Spotted Dick Moment
The mere idea of ascending Gorky with 20 litre rucksacks
Cooking up the ultimate rice pudding
Finally finding the ITMC office
Stepping off the glacier (after 3 weeks)

OUR FINANCES

FLIGHTS – booked through STA Travel

14/07/2003 British Airways: London Heathrow to Frunze	
12/08/2003 British Airways: Frunze to London Heathrow	
Return flights (each)	£498.97
Total (X3)	£1489.91

ACCOMMODATION – booked through ITMC Tien-Shan

15/07/2003 Bishkek 'Asia Mountains' Guest house (one night)	70 euro
10-11/08/2003 Bishkek 'Asia Mountains' Guest house (two nights)	140 euro
16/07/2003 Karakol 'Issyk-Kul' Hotel (one night)	75 euro
09/08/2003 Karakol 'Issyk-Kul' Hotel (one night)	75 euro
Total (euros)	360 euro
Total (sterling)	£240

TRANSPORT – mostly booked through ITMC Tien-Shan

15/07/2003 Airport to Bishkek (passion wagon)	28 euro
16/07/2003 Asia Mountain to bus station (passion wagon)	\$10
16/07/2003 Bishkek to Karakol (private van/death wagon)	\$12
17/07/2003 Karakol to Maida-Adyr (4x4 ex-soviet military)	115 euro
09/08/2003 Maida-Adyr to Karakol (good old Anatoli again)	115 euro
12/08/2003 Bishkek to Airport (not the passion wagon!)	28 euro
15/07-11/08 Taxis ~10 trips, on average 40som each	\$10
Total (euro)	286 euro
+ (USD)	\$32
Total (sterling)	£212

BASE CAMP – run by the ITMC Tien-Shan

13 days accommodation in own tents (two tents)	39 euro
9 days full board (for 3 persons)	616 euro
Total (euro)	655 euro
Total (sterling)	£437

FOOD – bought in UK only (Kyrgyz food is very cheap) Wayfayrer x90

£135

OTHER

Visas (£40 each) and border passes (\$10 each)	£160
31 days BMC expedition insurance (£160 each)	£480
Total (sterling)	£640

GRAND TOTAL
£3153.91

(Each £1051.3)

Finances are worked out using a rough conversion rate of 1.5 euros/USD to £1.

The grand total does not include equipment brought for the expedition, roughly £1000 each.

SPONSORS AND THANKS

GRANTS

University College London Expedition Grant - £1200

We would like to thank everyone on the committee for believing in us and awarding this grant. It made everything possible.

SPONSORS

RAB CARRINGTON
DMM ENGINEERING
WAYFAYRER FOODS
NIKWAX WATERPROOFING

We would like to thank these companies for their generosity in supporting our expedition. We used, ate and slept in your product with pride.

THANKS

We would like to thank, in no particular order; Marget Ecclestone from the Alpine Club's library, Dess Rhule from Ellis Brigham, the Royal Geographical Society, UCL, everyone at the ITMC, the Kyrgyz cowboy, Lindsay Griffin, Tim 'Ted' Saunders - sorry you couldn't be there man, matey from the last UCL expedition to the Tien-Shan, the BMC, the FCO, the Kyrgyz Embassy, mother nature, the Alpine Club and our parents for accepting our death defying antics.

A special thanks to Alan Abramson, Ruth Siddle and Helen Holt from the committee for all your support.

CONTACT DETAILS

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Home sweet home