

## Travel and Mountaineering in the Caucasus

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IT is only within the last seventy years that foreigners have gone to the Caucasus to see the region, explore its valleys and climb its mountains. At first conditions of travel were very bad and some sections were quite unsafe. However, toward the end of the last century, this improved and the mountain people became sufficiently law-abiding to make it possible for mountaineers and travelers to visit the region. This state of things continued until the revolution of 1917 when all forms of organized central authority came to an end. A period of chaos ensued which lasted until the Georgian Rebellion of 1924 when the Reds finally emerged victorious and proceeded at once to restore law and order and to improve political, social, and economic conditions. During these years few outsiders came to the mountains, for the whole of Russia was in a terrific state of unrest and the Government refused admission to almost all foreigners unless they were on a special mission. By 1927 these conditions had sufficiently improved so that a few travelers and tourists were able to come to Russia and thus began what has now become a regular and ever-increasing tourist traffic.

Today there is no serious obstacle in the way of almost any person entering the U. S. S. R. Once again the Caucasus district is open to foreign tourists and mountaineers; more so in fact, than it has ever been before. And yet, strangely enough, during the last three years no British or American mountaineers, and only a few travelers, have visited this very interesting section of the world.

One may ask just what the Caucasus Mountains have to offer the traveler or mountaineer that he would not find in the Alps with a great deal less trouble. To answer this briefly is a rather difficult task, but we may enumerate some of the reasons which are likely to appeal to most lovers of mountain regions.

In the first place, let us glance at the mountains themselves. These, as we know, are of great size, culminating in the tremendous extinct volcano of Elbruz (18,470 ft.). No less than ten peaks rise to greater heights than Mont Blanc (15,781 ft.), the monarch of the Alps, and the list of those exceeding 14,000 ft. is a long one. This in itself means very little, unless we add that the actual peaks, in general, rise from about the same altitudes as those in the Alps, and

that at present they are more heavily glaciated. Although there is no ice-stream in the Caucasus as large as the Aletsch Glacier of Switzerland, this is not due to a lesser amount of snow and ice, but to the fact that the higher valleys of the Caucasus fall away so steeply from the névé fields as to make it impossible for glacier tongues to extend very far before reaching an altitude too low for their existence. Among the higher peaks there is much finer ice scenery and far more of it than can be found in the Alps. Elbruz alone supports on its vast slopes snowfields with a total area of about 83 sq. miles. Neither must one think that in grandeur of outline these peaks need bow to the Alps, for almost every Alpine peak has its counterpart in the Caucasus, usually on a far grander scale. Indeed, in many ways, the mighty peak of Ushba rivals and in some respects even surpasses the Matterhorn.

In the second place, the Caucasus Mountains have much to offer of beauty and interest among their deep and sombre valleys. Nearly each one is inhabited by a group of people totally different from those in the next valley as to language, customs, and history. All have peculiarities and qualities of unusual interest to Europeans and Americans. So, instead of the charm of the Swiss or Tyrolean peasants, the Caucasian traveler has before him a people more primitive, but far more varied and more stimulating intellectually.

In the third place, contrary to the general opinion of those who have never been to Russia, travel in that country for the average person is quite as agreeable and safe as in the rest of Europe. True, the distances are longer, but the ordinary sleeping accommodations are as a rule more comfortable and far less expensive. Thus the Caucasus may be reached easily and pleasantly. Within the mountains the traveling conditions are varied, for in many places there are as yet only horse trails. However, these can be easily negotiated and after all, to a true mountaineer, is not the approach to a glorious peak far more thrilling and satisfying up a lonely mountain trail than in a puffing railroad train or a crowded motor-bus?

In this region may be found a great variety of climbing. Some of the peaks have been scaled enough times so that a fairly definite route of ascent has been worked out. However, there are few of these, and in general, climbing in that region may be classed as exploratory. It is true that most of the big peaks have been climbed once or twice, but there is still a great deal to learn about them and many new routes to be found on their slopes. Then, in the more remote sections

of the mountains, one can still find virtually unmapped territory with some splendid unnamed and unclimbed peaks.

The section of the Caucasus which contains the highest mountains and where nearly all the real Alpine climbing is to be found is about 200 miles long, and twenty to thirty miles broad. This area has many mountain groups, some of which can be reached very easily. For instance, the foot of Elbruz (18,470 ft.), or Kasbek (16,546 ft.), the highest and sixth highest summits, respectively, may be reached by automobiles and the ascent made with but one night's stay in a shelter high up on the mountain. In fact, so easy is it to get to these peaks, that given perfect weather conditions, either of their summits can be attained on the fourth day after leaving Moscow.

Other peaks, such as Ushba (15,409 ft.), Tetnuld (15,918 ft.), Sh'hara (17,038 ft.), Dykhtau (17,052 ft.), Koshtantau (16,880 ft.), or the Adai Khokh and Klukhor groups would require anywhere from three to six days on horseback to reach their bases. Each year, however, sees more automobile roads being built or projected, so that even now we need look forward but two or three years to see a highway extending to within a day's journey of several of them.

As may be expected, the larger peaks present varying problems, depending usually upon the snow conditions which in the Caucasus are unusually hard to determine. Elbruz is a snow-covered volcanic cone which offers no great technical climbing difficulties. Its great altitude, however, is always a factor to be considered, because at 18,000 ft., the air is extremely rarified, the temperatures are likely to be very low, and on such an immense isolated and heavily glaciated mountain, storms are liable to be frequent. The other great extinct volcano, Kasbek, also affords a climb devoid of any serious mountaineering obstacles. But with the exception of these two peaks, the highest summits are fairly hard to attain. Judging by the accounts of the previous ascents, Dykhtau, Sh'hara, Koshtantau, and the summits of the Adai Khokh all seem to be unusually formidable, whereas such peaks as Tetnuld and Gestola, although presenting a number of interesting problems, appear to be somewhat easier.

A few peaks are exceptionally arduous, of which Ushba is the most prominent. This great peak, about which a whole book might be written, is one of the world's most striking mountains. Its two summits have both been reached; the North Peak twice; the South Peak, which is probably slightly higher, three times; while forty or fifty other attempts have failed. The climb is up a series of cliffs

or steep knife-edge ridges, both so long and exacting that one or more bivouacs are required on the upper reaches of the mountain. Other peaks in the region afford as difficult climbs, some of which have been done, others not even attempted.

None but a fully equipped and strong well-organized party should attempt the ascent of any of the big peaks. Its members should be prepared for any ordinary contingency and quite able to take care of themselves on unfamiliar ground under bad weather conditions, or when overtaken by darkness. In general, the natives should not be depended upon for any real mountaineering, for although some of them are experienced hunters, and fairly good climbers, they are apt to be careless and a poor addition for any serious or dangerous climb. However, as porters and local guides, they can be most valuable and dependable.

In the early days of mountaineering in that region, many of the big peaks were climbed by parties led by Swiss guides, but in more recent years, the climbing for the most part has been done guideless. Nevertheless, the Swiss guide is still a most valuable asset to any climbing expedition, and should be employed by any mountaineers who are not of first-class calibre, if they wish to attempt any of the higher peaks. With such a guide, many of the finest summits may be reached by even mediocre climbers with all the safety that would attend their efforts in the Alps. The problem of bringing a Swiss guide into Russia should not be a difficult one, and I was assured in Moscow that there was nothing to prevent such an arrangement being made.

The climbing equipment needed in this region depends a good deal on the type of work which is to be attempted. In general, one should have the minimum of a light camping equipment for use in high bivouacs, which in the Caucasus have to take the place of the Alpine hut. This does not require a very extensive outfit, and its purchase should not be a difficult or expensive task. In other cases where a party wishes to roam about extensively and to be entirely independent of native hospitality, a complete camp outfit, which can be transported on pack-horses, or by native porters is required. Ordinary food can be procured from the local inhabitants in most districts, but this is not suitable for high mountain work, where bulk and weight must be avoided. For this, a supply of tinned meat and dried vegetables is needed. These and other provisions or equipment of a specialized nature should be bought outside of Russia, as in most

cases they cannot be procured there even in the Moscow stores.

A climbing trip to the Caucasus seems a complicated one to plan, for there are many problems that one feels can only be answered by experience, and it seems rather risky to undertake such a bold adventure. However, I do feel that this uncertainty and these anticipated difficulties are over-emphasized and really not as great as one might imagine. As I have intimated, two of the highest peaks, Elbruz and Kasbek, may be ascended by two or three climbers with only their personal equipment and without any highly organized expedition or intricate preliminary arrangements. Several other mountain groups may be reached with only the added trouble of having to hire a few horses, and perhaps porters, both of which can be procured at a cost so low that daily expenses should not greatly exceed those of a season in the Alps.

As usual, in the case of such a mountain range, it is unwise to make any dogmatic statement regarding the weather. On the whole, I should say that one could expect it to be at least fairly good, and unless one were after an especially "temperamental" peak, like Ushba, there should be little danger of weather being so consistently bad that no climbing could be accomplished over a period of several weeks. My experience has been that during forty days spent in the Caucasus, or within sight of its peaks on two trips, only five of them were stormy, and the rest almost all suitable for high mountain work. Other people, of course, have had sadder experiences, but in general, fear of bad weather should not be allowed to influence anybody to stay away from that region.

A word should be added in regard to the lesser peaks, many of which afford quite easy climbs with, in some cases, finer views than can be had from the highest peaks. These lower summits, some of which rise to altitudes of over 13,000 ft., are well worth climbing, and can be negotiated by mountaineers who are unprepared to attempt any major ascents. Therefore, let no keen mountaineer or traveler stay away because of lack of climbing skill or inability to organize a strong party. A visit to the high valleys is in itself a worthwhile undertaking.

The Caucasus may be approached from any direction, but for the convenience of the traveler, I should suggest going first to Moscow, then southward to the mountains. In Moscow, all preliminary arrangements can be made, and much useful information obtained. Also, in that city, are a group of enthusiastic mountaineers forming

an Alpine Section of the 'Tsekubu', the Soviet Society of Scientists. These men can be of the greatest help and would be found most obliging.

One of the most interesting localities to visit is the little district of Swanetia on the southern slope of the Central Caucasus. In the immediate neighborhood are most of the highest peaks; Elbruz is but a few miles off; Ushba, Tetruld, Gestola, Sh'hara, and their neighbors rise directly above the upper valleys; while just beyond, a day's journey away, stand Dykhtau and Koshtantau. Only the Adai Khokh Group and Kasbek, of the big peaks, are too far removed to be reached in two days from these Swanetian valleys. In one section, called the Central Group, there rises within an area ten miles square, over twenty distinct peaks exceeding 14,000 ft. in altitude.

In addition to these magnificent mountains, we find in Swanetia one of the most interesting groups of people in all the Caucasus. Foremost among their picturesque qualities are the little fortifications in which each family lives. These date from sometime previous to the twelfth century, when a clan organization was developed in which each family group was forced to fortify itself against hostile neighbors. These enemies were not only greedy princes with their conquering armies, but also near neighbors with whom blood feuds and vendettas were frequent. The latter raged through this country unchecked until the latter half of the nineteenth century; then they sprang up again between 1917 and 1924. However, within the last few years, the feuds have been suppressed and a responsible government set up. But the outward aspect of the country has changed little and the towers and castles remain dotted about the landscape, sometimes singly, and sometimes in groups and clusters of fifty or sixty.

In spite of the fact that no English and American mountaineers have gone to the Caucasus during the past few years, there has nevertheless been considerable climbing done there. German, Italian, and Russian parties have accomplished some very fine mountaineering, culminating in the first ascent of the imposing peak, Giulchi (14,680 ft.), the third ascent of the great south tower of Ushba, and several other noteworthy feats.

Thus, in 1930, we find the Caucasus a very excellent and quite easily accessible climbing ground, still possessing many untrodden summits and unscaled ridges. It can truthfully be said that never

before has mountaineering in that region been more within the reach of the average person than it is today. And certainly American climbers would find a warm welcome there, as well as in other parts of the Soviet Union.

## REFERENCES

The reader who wishes to study more about the Caucasus, especially the mountaineering aspect, should refer to the following: "The Exploration of the Caucasus" by Douglas Freshfield, 2 vols. 1896. Beautifully illustrated by V. Sella, and altogether the most interesting and complete account of the early period of Caucasian mountaineering. The "Alpine Journal," Vols. 17 to 30. Here may be found a record of almost all subsequent ascents in the Caucasus until 1915. For information concerning climbs made since the War, the reader should refer to German mountaineering publications.