

# Mountaineering in Mongolia

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IT'S A COMBINATION OF MONT Blanc and Scotland with the remoteness of the Himalaya," mused Julian Freeman-Attwood upon our first sighting of Mongolia's Taban Bogdo mountains. After five plane rides, two spine-destroying days bouncing in the back of a truck along endless dirt roads and a one-day approach by camel, horse and foot, on June 6 we arrived in a snowstorm at our 3100-meter Base Camp beside the Potanina Glacier, Mongolia's longest *muson gol* or "ice river."

Mongolia is the essence of remoteness. Western culture has considered Mongolia as the literal and figurative end of the world since Jenghiz Khan's marauding reign marked the beginning of the Mongolian Empire in 1206. For centuries since, Mongolia, like Tibet, has remained a land of myth and mystery. In 1921, it presaged Tibetan history by falling under communist domination, Russian in this case. Since Mongolia gained full independence in 1990 from the then USSR, its economy crumbled, leaving it one of Asia's most distant and obscure backwaters, reachable only with difficulty by plane (sometimes) or train from Moscow or Beijing.

I never imagined Mongolia would offer such mountaineering. The sub-ranges of the Altai, particularly the Taban Bogdo Range ("the Mountains of the Five Gods") on the Mongolian-Russian-Chinese border in the country's north-western corner and the Monke Chajrchan Range ("His Eternal Grace") further south, contain many 3000- and 4000-meter-high glaciated peaks. While the major summits were climbed by joint Mongolian-Communist Block expeditions in the 1960s and 1970s, there remain many unclimbed, technically hard mountains, especially in the more rugged Taban Bogdo, home of Mongolia's highest peak, Huiten (4374 meters).

Our summer-long expedition was part of a larger effort, the Mongolia Amarasanaa Expedition, led by Colonel John Blashford-Snell and organized by Operation Raleigh in London, England. It usually runs six trips a year to various exotic countries. It aims to give an international, but mostly British, group of young adults the opportunity to visit the world's untraveled regions. In combining the best of the Peace Corps and Outward Bound, each "venturer" undertakes two projects, one medical or civic and one adventure. Julian Freeman-Attwood,



PLATE 17

*Photo by Ed Webster*

**“Almas” or “Yeti” tracks on  
Aleksandrov Glacier, Mongolia.**

Tilman's modern reincarnation, Lindsay Griffin, another British expedition veteran and I headed up the mountaineering group. I was the sole American among the 40 British staff members.

We had several free days exploring the Taban Bogdo before the first venturers arrived. Our warm-up climb, just west of Base Camp across the Potanina, was Hadat Chajrchan (Rocky Peak; 3884 meters). We romped up the east-face icefield, found good conditions, roped up for one pitch and were on the summit five hours after leaving camp.

Our next goal was a new route up the range's most striking peak, 4073-meter Mosun Sum (Snow Church), which was first climbed by the 1967 Polish-Mongolian Friendship Expedition. Lindsay, our thorough researcher, had somehow discovered an article about Taban Bogdo in a 1967 Polish mountaineering journal, *Taternik*. The Poles had achieved the first ascents of several major summits and appeared to be the only group to have pioneered any hard technical ascents. Their Taban Bogdo map became our Bible. On June 10, we made the five-hour approach to Snow Church, crossing the Potanina and hiking up the Aleksandrov Glacier to its head. We doubted that anyone had visited this sanctuary since the Poles climbed Sniezna Cerkiew. (The map was, of course, all in Polish!) Late that afternoon, we visited two cols behind camp where we looked down at the Przhevalski Glacier, which perhaps no humans had ever trodden. It was named for the Russian explorer, Colonel N.M. Przhevalski, who in 1878 discovered the world's only surviving species of wild horse, subsequently named *Equus Przhevalski* in his honor.

Unsettled weather kept us tentbound until June 12 when we started across the glacier as the sun's first rays illuminated Snow Church's sharp, icy fang. Quite curiously, Lindsay, who was leading, stopped dead in his tracks. "Did I give either of you permission to go out last night?" he finally shouted. What was he talking about? Then we saw them, a line of unmistakable footprints coming up the glacier for several miles. They passed in front of us, then disappeared over the left of the two cols we had investigated two days before—into China onto the Przhevalski Glacier. "I can't imagine who, besides ourselves, would want to go there," quipped Lindsay. Like excited schoolboys, we nearly ran across the glacier to investigate the mysterious footprints.

The prints were approximately eight inches long, slightly curved and primate-looking, showing five toes with evidence of claw or nail marks. They were about two or three inches deep, frozen in the fresh, crisp snow, in excellent condition and less than a day old, we speculated. The odd thing was that they appeared to be made in sets of three: left, right, right, or right, left, left. Had we discovered the world's first tripod, or were we looking at prints left by a primate who walked with one hand on the ground like a chimpanzee?

According to Britain's Scientific Exploration Society, there are more Yeti sightings in Mongolia than in any other part of Asia. Mongolians believe that the *Almas*, their word for Yeti or Abominable Snowman, is a primitive human rather than an animal. Male Almas are six to eight feet in height. The females, five or six feet tall, have pendulous breasts. Their bodies are covered with

reddish-grey fur and their heads are somewhat pointed. They eat almost anything. They don't appear to speak but emit a high-pitched squeak or a shrill cry. There are countless stories of Almas falling asleep in Mongolian yurts. Another story describes the female Almas' habit of carrying off male hunters! Had we found the footprints of the Almas? It seemed so.

We continued our climb up the "Ice Diamond," the north face of Snow Church. Lindsay, the ice machine, led us left over the bergschrund. Then we angled back right, forging a line up the center of the prominent 1500-foot polished face. It was magnificent ice climbing, sustained at 50° increasing to 60°, and quite exposed. I asked Lindsay for the lead at one point, but he was a man possessed and so he led the entire ten pitches. After angling left onto the summit ridge, just when we thought success was ours, Lindsay discovered bad windslab, suspect layers of snow, ice and air. We traversed left but sank hopelessly into thigh-deep depth hoar clogging an avalanche-prone gully. Unable to afford an accident this far from home, with black clouds massing overhead, prudence was the wisest counsel. We regained the tents at nine P.M., having descended the mountain's east ridge to conclude our 15-hour day.

It was an interesting concept, teaching students to be mountaineers in a place so isolated and unknown as Mongolia's Taban Bogdo. Our first group of ten venturers, young men and women, were English and Scottish, plus one Mongolian woman, Bolormaa, from the capitol Ulaan Baatar. Assisting us were Andrew Herrod, a British Army paramedic, and Colonel Jantsan Tsangid, a veteran of five previous Tabana Bogdo expeditions, one of Mongolia's few Masters of Sport in Mountaineering.

We climbed a host of peaks with the venturers, nearly all by new routes. In four days of perfect weather, we had our most productive spell, climbing the north face and east ridge of Selenge Chajrchan (3922 meters), the lengthy frontier ridge on the Mongolian-Chinese border, a rock route, Midas Ridge, (IV, 5.9), unclimbed Midas Peak (unsurveyed) and Sunset Peak (3790 meters), and the snowy south ridge of P 4152, a sub-peak of Huiten, where we found more suspicious tracks, this time melted.

Our final climbs with this group included the icy east face of P 3763, a sub-peak of Burget Chajrchan (4068 meters), the first ascent of Independence Day Peak (unsurveyed), a sub-peak of Tsoorchon Chajrchan Ola (3786 meters) or Dappled Mountain—where we found upon our return across the glacier snow leopard tracks that hadn't been there in the morning—and Irves Chajrchan or Snow Leopard Peak (3805 meters)—where we discovered an even bigger set of tracks and recently molted tufts of snow leopard fur.

Between instructing our two groups, Julian, Lindsay and I decided to explore the Przhevalski Glacier. We had been told by radio from our main Base Camp in Hovd that our departure date was advanced to August 1. Because there was no aviation fuel in Mongolia, we would have to drive back to Ulaan Baatar on a thousand miles of dirt road. If we were to climb Huiten, it was now or never.

We hiked to Snow Church on July 9, camped and then climbed a small snow peak beside Yeti Col (3794 meters), which Lindsay had soloed before Julian or

**Near the top of the South Ridge of  
Mount Huiten, Mongolia.**



I stumbled out of bed. Next, we frontpointed down the west side of Yeti Col and wallowed in horribly mushy snow to our advance camp below the south face of Huiten. We decided to attempt the 1300-meter-high south ridge, which began as rock, but ended in a lovely snow-and-ice arête. Following a day of bad weather, we left camp at midnight on July 12, crossed a small glacier and ascended an endless talus slope to a prominent rocky shoulder. Mindful of loose blocks, we traversed along a horizontal ridge. Lindsay and I roped up at the base of the first icefield, while Julian continued soloing.

At dawn, we reached the elegant upper ridge, which Lindsay led, frontpointing left just below the fragile, slightly corniced ridgeline. Surrounding us was completely uninhabited mountainous terrain, with unclimbed 4000-meter peaks to the south and west, and to the north the green plain of southern Siberia. In short, it was the grandest alpine view one could ask for, all the better because so much of it was an honest-to-god blank on the map. When the difficulties eased, we unroped and hiked to Huiten's summit (4374 meters), which we reached at 8:30 A.M. The weather was glorious. We admired the views of Mongolia, China, Russia and distant Kazakhstan. We climbed a subsidiary summit further southeast but determined the northwestern summit was the higher of the two by four meters.

We reversed the route, roped, reaching the horizontal rock ridge at 1:30 P.M. Taking fate into our own hands, we split up and continued down the mountain by which ever route we preferred. Julian reversed our original ascent. I glissaded a 2000-foot snow gully to the west, then circled around on moraines and met him at the tents at 3:30. We were exhilarated and completely knackered. Unfortunately, by six P.M., Lindsay had not returned. Alarmed, we suspected an accident and left to look for him.

As we had parted, Lindsay said he intended to follow the path of least resistance down the rocky shoulder. We hiked to the shoulder's base and began to shout. Seconds later, we heard an agonized scream, yelling for help, 2000 feet higher. We ran uphill, completely out of breath, periodically shouting his name. Julian found him first. While Lindsay was descending the talus, several rocks had given way. An 800-pound boulder landed on his left leg, breaking it in two places and trapping him. It was now eight P.M. He had been alone and expecting death for five hours.

In excruciating pain, Lindsay had fought off passing out. Taking the climbing rope and knotting it, he threw the knotted strands above him. They wedged between other boulders. He passed another loop under the boulder and constructed a 6:1 pulley, taking some of the rock's tremendous weight off his broken leg. Utilizing Lindsay's two ice axes, Julian and I managed slowly to lever up the boulder, chocking it in place with smaller rocks, then made our own 6:1 pulley with the rope to hoist the huge rock a few inches more. At 11:30 P.M., Lindsay's leg was free!

We now had to get him to the base of the mountain, to a level spot where — here in Mongolia? — we hoped a helicopter could land. While Julian descended to get a tent and other provisions, Lindsay and I began the long crawl down the

PLATE 19

*Photo by Ed Webster*

**North Face of Mosun Sum or  
"Snow Church."**



mountainside in the dark. Luckily, I had a headlamp. While he slid forward on his buttocks, propped up by his arms and hands, I crept backwards blindly, holding his splinted leg in a “comfortable” position. When I slipped on loose stones and twisted the leg, Lindsay screamed in bloodcurdling agony. Blood slowly dripped from the top of his left boot. Worried that he might bleed to death, I dared not stop. We crawled all night down the 2000-foot rock-strewn slope, only reaching the tentsite at four P.M. the next day. Leaving Lindsay stabilized and with plenty of supplies, Julian and I climbed over an unclimbed col and reached Base Camp at 2:30 A.M. on July 14, concluding a sleepless 50-hour marathon climb and rescue.

At 5:40 P.M. on July 15, a Mongolian-piloted, Russian-made helicopter arrived at Base Camp, having flown a thousand miles one way from Ulaan Baatar! I went in the helicopter with Dr. Jan Kennis and George Baber, the expedition deputy leader, while Julian manned Base Camp. The helicopter was running perilously low on fuel. The Hovd province had released fuel from their national reserves just to get the helicopter this far! We flew up the Potanina Glacier, circled the back side of Huiten and by my hand gestures, the Mongolian pilot, Byamaaglin Jambadorj, located Lindsay in his tiny tent.

The helicopter couldn't land by the tent but let us out instead on the Przhevalski Glacier. Thirty minutes later, we reached Lindsay, who was extremely relieved to see us. We respainted his leg and prayed the helicopter could land to pick us up. After a thunderstorm passed, it did, settling into a snowbank 600 feet away. Slipping on wet boulders and plunging into the snow, George, Jan and I stretchered Lindsay to the waiting 'copter. Lindsay screamed with pain as we inadvertently twisted his broken leg. The roar of the whirring blades was deafening, and George, an RAF pilot, shouted, “Don't stop! Keep going! Don't stop!” as we staggered forward in a scene reminiscent of Vietnam. Finally, we raised the stretcher to the helicopter doorway, slid Lindsay inside and all jumped in. We lifted off, and everyone was immediately in tears, sobbing and hugging each other.

After dropping me at Base Camp, the helicopter continued to the nearest airport at Bayan Olgei, where it arrived with three minutes of fuel remaining. The dashboard light had been flashing for 20 minutes. The next morning, the pilot traded five bottles of vodka to some Russian pilots for enough fuel to fly to Hovd. From there, an SOS Learjet evacuated Lindsay to Hong Kong for surgery — making an emergency landing at the airport which had been closed due to an imminent typhoon!

Following the accident and rescue, Julian and I climbed with our second group of venturers. Our energy was spent after the trauma of the rescue, the weather was much less cooperative, and we managed only three peaks, including the Triple Border Peak, Taban Bogdo Ola (4104 meters), which marks where the borders of Mongolia, Russia and China converge. We had enjoyed a memorable expedition, the Mongolians were hospitable to us, Lindsay was safe in the hospital, and it was time for steak and chips and pints of bitter.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Taban Bogdo Range, Altai Mountains, Mongolia.

FIRST ASCENTS AND NEW ROUTES: Hadat Chajrchan (Rocky Peak), 3884 meters, 12,783 feet, via east-face icefield, June 8, 1992 (Lindsay Griffin, Julian Freeman-Attwood, Ed Webster).

Mosun Sum (Snow Church), 4073 meters, 13,363 feet, via ice diamond on north face, June 12, 1992 (Griffin, Freeman-Attwood, Webster).

Selenge Chajrchan, 3922 meters, 12,867 feet, via north face, June 26, 1992 (Griffin, Bridget Cowan, Richard Bruton).

Frontier Ridge, including several previously unclimbed summits, June 26, 1992 (Freeman-Attwood, Claire Gosney, Colonel Jantsan Tsangid).

Midas Peak, Unsurveyed, and Sunset Peak, 3790 meters, 12,435 feet, June 26, 1992 (Webster, Vanessa Carter, Tom Nichols).

Selenge Chajrchan, via east ridge, June 27, 1992 (Webster, Carter, Tsangid).

P 4152, 13,622 feet, sub-peak of Huiten, via south ridge, June 28, 1992 (whole group).

P 3763, 12,346 feet, sub-peak of Burget Chajrchan (Eagle Peak), via east face icefield, July 4, 1992 (Freeman-Attwood, Gosney, Tsangid).

Independence Day Peak, Unsurveyed, sub-peak of Tsoorchon Chajrchan Ola, via east ridge (Griffin, Andrew Herrod, Joanne Grant) and via north ridge (Webster, Bolormaa, Katie Allen) both on July 4, 1992.

Irves Chajrchan (Snow Leopard Peak), 3805 meters, 12,483 feet, July 5, 1992 (Griffin, Herrod, Webster, Allen, Grant).

Lindsay's Lump, 3794 meters, 12,382 feet, July 10, 1992 (Freeman-Attwood, Griffin, Webster).

Huiten, 4374 meters, 14,350 feet, via south ridge, July 12, 1992 (Freeman-Attwood, Griffin, Webster). The Chinese name is Najramdal.

Malcin Chajrchan (Herdsman Peak), 4027 meters, 13,212 feet via east-face icefield, July 28, 1992 (whole group).