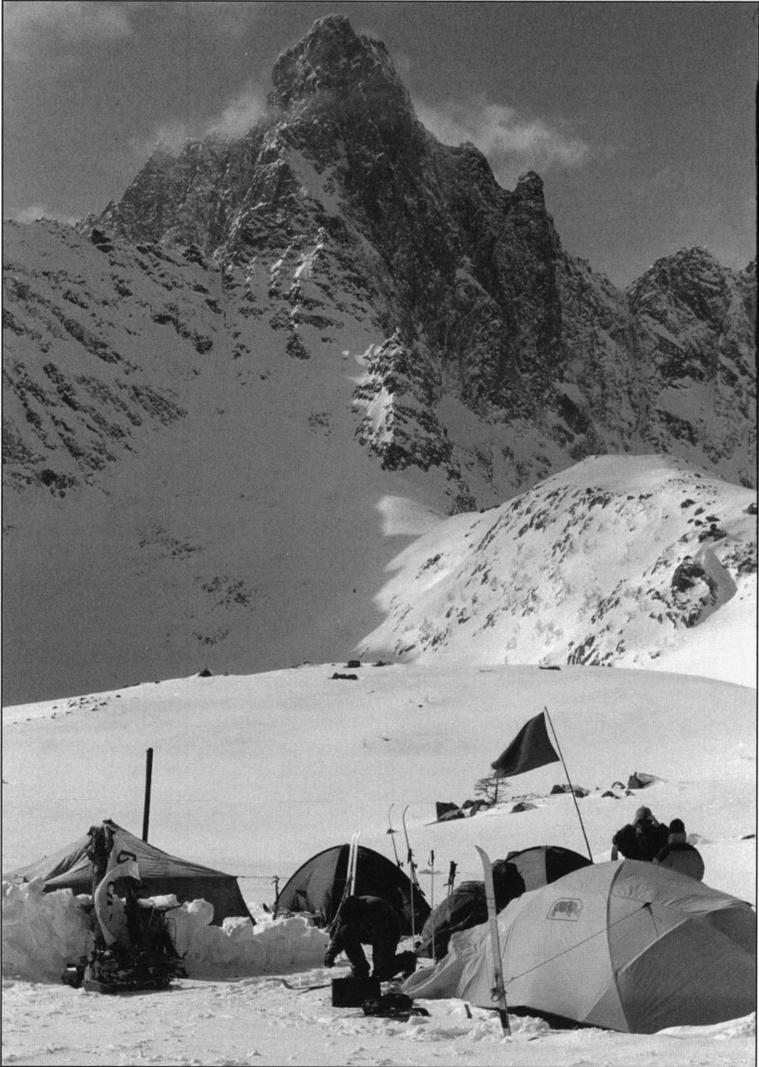


THE SABER

A pitch a day and bone-numbing cold define the first two routes on the north face of Gora Sablya, the biggest wall in the northern Urals, Russia.

BY KONSTANTIN BEKETOV



Base camp under the east flank of the Saber. Konstantin Beketov

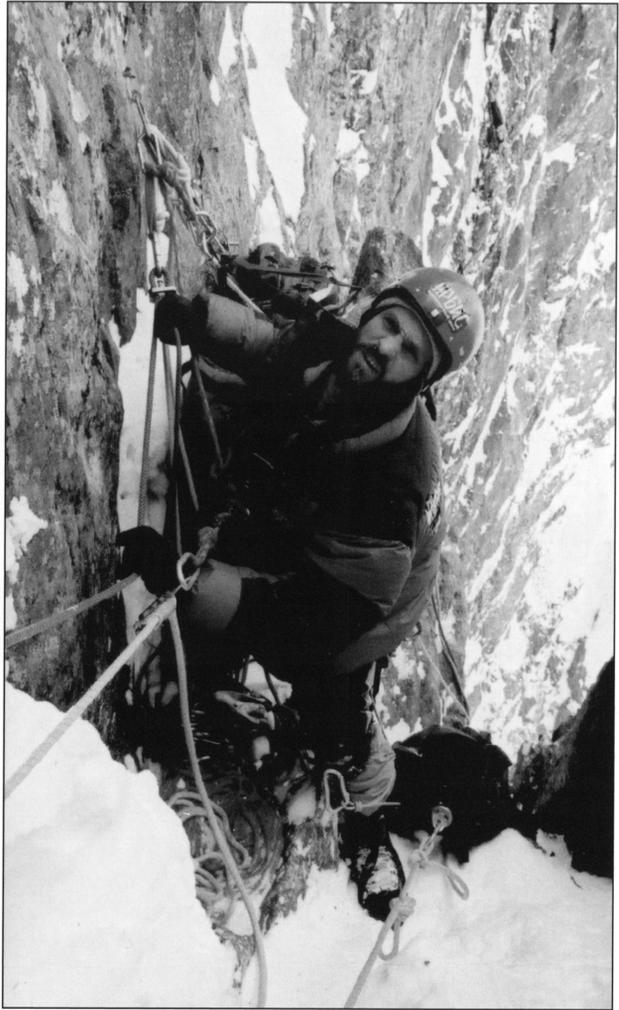
Nowhere is the frontier of Europe more clearly expressed than in the east, where the Ural mountain range separates Europe from the Siberian expanses. The narrow range stretches south to north across 2,400 kilometers, extending from the steppes to the shores of the Arctic Ocean.

In general the Urals are low, gently sloping mountains, and only near the Arctic Circle does the range become interesting for alpinists. This is where the highest part of the entire mountain system is located, including its highest elevation, Gora Narodnaya (the People's Peak), at 1,894 meters (6,214'). Regardless of their moderate altitudes, the mountains have a stern appearance because they are subject to polar weather. The valley bottoms certainly are low, but the peaks themselves rise more than a kilometer.

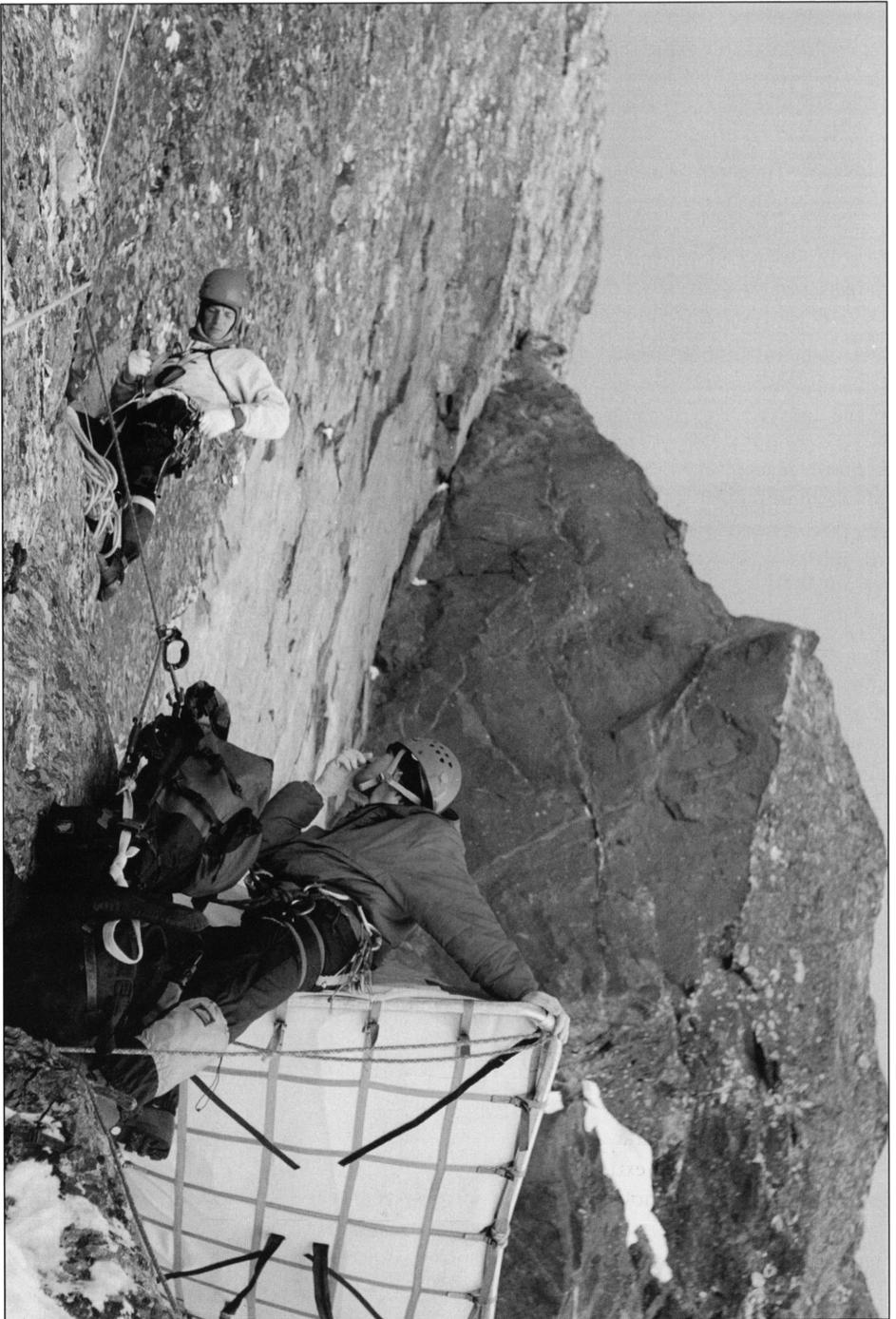
Several peaks of the far-northern Urals end abruptly with real walls, sharply contrasting with the general appearance of these ancient, eroded mountains. For the

climber, the most interesting target of these peaks is Gora Sablya (The Saber), located on the European side of the range. At 1,497 meters, its eastern side is characterized by steep walls. Precisely because of its terrifying appearance, this mountain has earned its name (for indeed, Sablya has the look of sharp, cold steel).

The far-northern Urals began to attract the attention of travelers and sportsmen in the 1960s. Now each year several dozen groups and individual adventure-seekers undertake journeys on skis, on foot, or by traveling along the rivers. One can get to these mountains from the cities and villages that are strung out along the railway line connecting Vorkuta with the cities of central Russia. Pechora, which has an airport, is the most convenient place to begin one's travels. From Pechora to the mountains there still lie about 70 kilometers of taiga and swamps, which can be avoided by helicopter, in the winter on snowmobiles, or by going under one's own steam.



The team leader Kirill Korabel'nikov on belay low on the wall.
Tatyana Parfishina



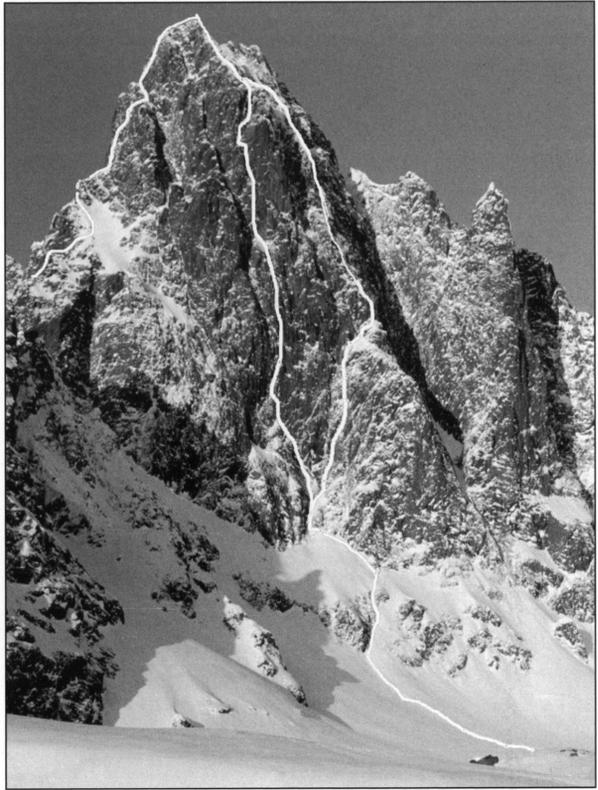
The Ekaterinburg team with Blinov, Kofanov, and their tent platform in the upper part of the wall.
Kirill Korabel'nikov

The climate of the far-northern Urals is severe: protracted, snowy winters and hot summers with an abundance of mosquitoes. The weather is unstable; snow may fall in the mountains during any summer month, and in the winter occasional warm winds increase the danger of avalanches. The coldest month is January, when frosts can reach -55°C (-67°F). And in July the temperature can climb to 35°C (95°F).

The sub-range in which Sablya is located stretches south to north some 25 kilometers (15 mi.). The western slopes of the range rise above a swampy plain and foothills covered with larches. From this side the approach to Sablya is relatively uncomplicated and can be accomplished without special equipment, especially during the summer. The eastern escarpment is the precise opposite, however; along its entire length it is sliced by glacial cirques with sheer walls, small emerald lakes, and a chaos of moraines. Below and northeast of the peak sprawls the Hoffman Glacier. On its eastern side Sablya has two interesting walls, a southeastern face and a northeastern face; both rise more than 800 meters.

The history of taming Sablya's walls is short but fascinating. It is not known for certain who was the first to reach the summit, but many ascents, including winter ascents, have been successfully completed over the last 40 years. Until recently, however, no one had attempted an ascent from the eastern side.

On August 7-8, 1992, alpinists from Perm climbed the southeastern wall via its central chimney, estimating the difficulty at 5A-5B on the Russian scale. Eight years later, Valery Shamalo, famous in Russia for his extreme routes, and I tried to solve the problem of the northeastern wall. Not wanting (and not having the financial means) to use an airplane, we adhered to the style of real exploratory expeditions. But ahead of us lay a long approach on foot through rough terrain with a massive amount of equipment. It would be a complicated ascent without any support whatsoever; and then we would have to float back on a river to the railway. We had to conserve our funds in every way possible, and on the wall we felt the lack of equipment. Consequently we had to abandon the northeastern wall and switch over to an eastern buttress.



The Saber's routes from the east, from left to right: east buttress (Beketov-Shamalo, 2000); Ladoga, leader Korabel'nikov, 2002 (center of the northeast wall); leader V. Puchnin, 2002. Tatyana Parfishina



Vladimir Baranov juggling above the first tent platform. Konstantin Beketov

On July 9, 2000, we climbed the buttress and rated it as 4B. But the most challenging wall of the Urals remained unconquered.

In April 2002, alpinists from St. Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, and Perm decided to pool their resources in order to definitively solve the “northeast problem.” This time we availed ourselves of a helicopter, especially because the winter conditions demanded a great deal of equipment.

Our two teams (St. Petersburg and Ekaterinburg had joined forces) established base camp on the shore of a lake below the tongue of the Hoffman Glacier. We had to surround our tents with snow walls because of the frequent strong winds. In the background, Sablya rose like a terrifying black obelisk (one of the Perm alpinists confessed that when he first saw the wall, he wanted to leap back into the helicopter). We decided that both expeditions would work from the same common base camp: the Petersburg team would attempt the center of the wall, while the Perm group would go to the right.

The first five pitches of our route ascended a steep slope with outcroppings of rock, and then the line went straight upward, without compromise. Our progress wasn't great—about one pitch a day—because of the continuous aid climbing. There was very little definition in the middle part of the wall; the cracks were filled with ice or frozen soil. The snow sticking to the underside of overhangs took its toll on our nerves—such conditions apparently occur when the wind blows upward. Sections of shattered rock in the middle part of the wall posed a great danger, and although we were trying to climb carefully, now and then rocks fell. Clearly showing the steepness of the wall, the rocks did not touch the cliff face before hitting the glacier. One other problem was routefinding. From a distance the route had been obvious, especially when viewed through binoculars, but once we were on the climb, we lost our orientation. Therefore we adopted the tactic of constant communication via walkie-talkie. But even this



After the climb came the snowmobiles. But the temperature rose, the snow turned to mush, and the machines frequently failed.
Tatyana Parfishina



The game warden of Grigory Batula National Park, who helped considerably in the climbers' escape from the rapidly melting snowpack. Tatyana Parfishina

that there were but five rope-lengths to go. It was now clear that our St. Petersburg team would reach the summit the next day, about the same time as the Perm team would.

On April 19, we met on the summit of the Saber after having climbed the two most complex routes in the Urals. But from here we again split off in different directions: our group began to descend our ascent route, while the Perm climbers decided to head back by an easier route on the other side of the range.

After our descent we had to hurry: we were supposed to head back to civilization on snowmobiles by April 19, by agreement with the national park rangers. Spring had arrived, and

did not save us from several mistakes.

It usually took about an hour to reach the wall from base camp, so we placed an advanced camp closer, on a snowslope right below the wall. There, in a tent, we kept much of our gear for the first section of our climb.

Working on the wall had little romantic appeal. This was especially clear in the evenings at base, when, after the standard radio message—"We are coming home; hope dinner is ready"—the climbers arrived in camp the same way as factory workers returning from their shift. Only foul weather and visits to neighboring tents brought diversity to the dull routine.

When we had fixed about a dozen ropes, we felt it was time to "take off." Wonderful weather had set in, rather astonishing for the northern region, but in the shadows the temperature hovered around the freezing point. Yet the sun was glaring brightly. The upper part of the wall, which during the winter is usually covered with a layer of hoarfrost, thawed out, and the speed of the team abruptly increased. Free climbing became possible.

On April 18, during our usual radio session, we estimated

on the plains the rain began falling. The snow quickly soaked up the moisture, and the snowmobiles lost traction. The ice on the rivers began to break up and we had difficulty getting across them. That 70-kilometer route—which just a week before our snowmobiles, fully loaded with all our equipment, could have traveled in three hours—took us three days to negotiate.

Translation by Henry Pickford, with additions by Otto Chketiani

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Russia, northern Urals

ASCENTS: The Ladoga route on Sablya (The Saber) (820m, Russian grade VI). 10 days for the climb. Kirill Korabel'nikov (team leader), Gennady Blinov (died in the Caucasus, summer 2002), Sergey Kofanov, Vladimir Baranov, Alexey Gorbatenkov, Konstantin Beketov. Auxiliary group: Tatyana Parfishina (photographer), Julia Terpugova (radio communication).

Structure of the Perm command: Vyacheslav Puchnin (leader), Vladimir Malofeev, Juryi Zaitsev

The joint Petersburg-Ekaterinburg “command” took second place in the Russian 2002 mountain climbing championship for this climb, while the Perm team took third place.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Born in 1971 in Saint Petersburg, Konstantin Beketov has a degree in geography from Saint Petersburg University. He has been traveling since 1983, and made his first trip to the mountains in 1986. He feels his greatest achievements were as a leader and organizer of several difficult ski expeditions: Sayany (Siberia), Russian-Mongolian Altay (reported in this year's Climbs And Expeditions), Touva-Eastern Altay. He is the Russian ski-mountaineering champion (2003). Single, he works as a web editor.