

From Russia, With Luck

RICK SYLVESTER

IT WAS the best of trips and the worst of trips. Mountains were climbed, wondrous sights viewed, unique experiences had and new acquaintances made. But that was only one side of it. For there were exasperations, setbacks and misunderstandings, hardships and fear for life and limb.

For the past five years, one of the more unusual offshoots of détente has been a series of mountaineering exchanges between the USSR and the USA. Three times American mountaineers have been invited by the Soviet Mountaineering Federation to climb in the USSR and twice thus far the American Alpine Club has reciprocated the courtesy. The results have been fruitful on at least two levels: on the larger stage of international understanding and cooperation, and on the more personal scale whereby individual climbers are afforded the opportunity to practice their art and joy in new exotic settings, with partners they would never otherwise have known.

I was overjoyed at having been selected for the team, but my enthusiasm was muted by certain realities. I was less than reassured by knowing that the Pamir, the mountains which would be the primary setting for our climbing, enjoyed a reputation for brittle rock and bad snow conditions, not to mention the fact that they lie in an earthquake zone far from inactive. The British had lost two of their finest climbers in this very area during their 1962 expedition. During the USSR-American exchange of 1974 an American was the victim of an avalanche and several other climbers, including an entire eight-woman team on Pik Lenin, had died. In the minds of many Americans the Soviet Union has assumed the position of Number One Villain, the arch enemy, the ultimate heavy. The idea of visiting such a place with climbing as the objective, an essentially risky business, seemed to be daring the devil a bit too much. As the countdown to departure drew near, I suffered anxieties.

Despite a last-minute scare over missing the flight, we all made it to Moscow—even Ben Read.

“Rick, do you have my visa?” Of the group I lived the closest to San Francisco, where there was a Soviet consulate. Hence, I had the job of securing visas.

“What are you talking about? You told me you were taking care of your own yourself.” Ben was the exception. He planned to arrive in

France two or three weeks earlier than the rest to get into shape climbing around Chamonix. And he also intended to remain longer in the USSR after the exchange ended to ride the Trans-Siberian Railroad from Lake Baikal eastward.

"I got a visa only for my extra time in Russia after the exchange."

So Ben made history, attempting what perhaps no other modern-day traveler has tried: entering the Soviet Union with no visa. Our reception committee was more aghast than amused. It was but the first of a seemingly endless number of Jobian frustrations Vitaly Medredev, our translator and liaison, would be faced with. The border authorities at the airport saw even less humor in the situation. Ben was led away to a "special hotel." He rejoined us a few days later.

Besides Ben Read and me, the team consisted of Chuck Kroger, leader, Steve Hackett, Carlos Buhler and Reilly Moss. The members comprised a strong team. Steven is well known for his first ascents in Alaska, Chuck for his Heart Route on El Capitan, among other climbs. Carlos is a very strong young climber and conqueror of numerous vertical waterfalls. Besides his climbing ability, Reilly was our one Russian linguist, though Carlos had done a week of intensive Berlitz. Ben's résumé included not just rocks and mountains but trimming trees, far more formidable according to his tales. And I'm known for my variations on classical alpinism, and other absurdities. Yes, it was quite a team, and I looked forward to climbing with everyone. Unfortunately, I still do.

This group, minus Ben of course, had but one brief day to absorb Moscow. We were duly impressed by Red Square, St. Basil's Cathedral, the Kremlin, the giant G.U.M. department store and Russia's famous rich ice cream, not necessarily in that order. Then it was 2500 miles south by plane to Duchanbe, a "new" city of around 400,000 dating from its creation in the 1930s. Duchanbe lies in the most southerly Soviet republic, Tadjikistan. The awesome size of this giant land began to become apparent. As wide as the United States is long, it spans eleven—yes, eleven—time zones! And its people speak 42 different languages!

A small bi-winged prop plane, in appearance vintage World War I, carried us, including Ben, to Dzhirgatal, an agricultural village in the mountains at 6000 feet. There we transferred to a giant Aeroflot helicopter for the final leg of the journey into the Pamir, the USSR's highest range. Touchdown was on a glacial moraine, from where we humped loads a kilometer further to set up Base Camp just below 13,000 feet.

Base Camp lay by a small, shallow lake, a gaggle of tents scattered about on grass and gravel. No trees at all. A mess table was set up (priorities!), cursory examinations performed by Vadim Zeitsev, the doctor, who was also a climbing aficionado, and then we began to attend to the business of getting to know one another. With a few exceptions, we Americans had to get acquainted not only with the Soviets but with each other. In what can perhaps be termed true capitalistic individualistic

fashion, we had neglected to get together prior to the actual exchange for training. Moscow had been where we had first all met.

Just as the familiarization process was getting underway, illness beset our group. Carlos Buhler, Reilly Moss and Steve Hackett were the most severely struck. The potential diagnosis was pneumonia. I felt bad to a lesser degree; my condition had not been helped by the hour's run I had done the day after arrival at the high Base Camp. The cause of the illness was never fully ascertained. It is known that a too rapid elevation rise, especially with no effort exerted (i.e. the plane and helicopter approach), can play havoc with the body. But why was it only the Americans who succumbed? Why no Soviet sickness? They flew in too. Was it perhaps aggravated by other factors, the traveling, time-zone changes, even the unfamiliar, however hearty, diet? On this last point Ben and Chuck were the only two of us totally unaffected. Interestingly Ben had spent the prior three weeks in France, and Chuck, a goodly portion of his last three years in Mexico building a shrimp plant. If anyone's stomach could withstand new microbe pools, it was theirs.

Carlos, Reilly and Steve were flown back to a hospital in Duchanbe. The rest of us would not enjoy their presence again until the final two weeks of the exchange. Their summer in the USSR would be entirely different from ours; their memories would consist of such delights as several antibiotic injections daily, frequent X-rays, rubdowns. The Soviet physicians were taking no chances.

The next day Chuck, Ben and I, with two Soviets, Sergei Epimov and Slava Larrukhin, approached our first objective, Peak of the Revolutionaries, a nearby 19,500-foot mountain, which would serve as an acclimatization route. We five wished to attempt a new line; the main Soviet contingent would climb the *voie normale*. Up to now, and even a bit longer, we Americans had been somewhat in the dark about the scheme or itinerary of the 1978 exchange. The Soviet invitation had specified an ascent of Pik Kommunizma, at 7482 meters (24,548 feet) the highest point in the Soviet Union. This interested us, despite our reservations about the Pamir, but in addition we hoped, and had requested, to climb and tour in other parts of the country. Only later did things become clear. If Kommunizma was to be the main objective, a quick alpine ascent of Kommunizma that is, then to the Soviet way of thinking this meant a long stay in the Pamir, essentially the lion's share of our six weeks' stay in the USSR. Acclimatization climbs must be done, certainly a defensible line of reasoning. We were interested in Kommunizma. It had a charisma, being the highest. But we never ceased to regret not visiting the ranges we didn't set foot in.

There were other regrets too. Barely on the toe of our first mountain, Ben was struck. A falling rock scored a hit on the side of his head near the temple. His ear filled with blood from internal bleeding. An ominous sign. All we had heard of the Pamir seemed to be coming true. After a



PLATE 27

Photo by Rick Sylvester

**Approaching the summit of PIK
KOMMUNIZMA.**

brief halt and a change in plans, Ben continued. Sergei and Slava would continue up the new line. (Already we three Americans had set out on a different "new" line from theirs.) We elected to climb the regular route. Our line had seemed unappealing, even without the rockfall.

At a bivouac site around 17,000 feet the other Soviet climbers joined us. It was oppressively hot. The air seemed stale without a trace of breeze. My weakened state worsened, eventually turning into a fever during an uncomfortable night. *Turista*, too, as my bowels ran faster than urine. The next morning the doctor and I returned to camp. A day later Ben and Chuck returned victorious, along with most of the Soviets, if a bit somber at the quality of the mountain and wild-eyed at recollection of the rockfall. A day later, Slava and Sergei returned, likewise victorious, and respectful of their climb.

Now the exchange gained momentum and became more enjoyable as we began to know and differentiate among our various hosts and co-climbers. Ben delighted in political discussions with Vadim; no matter how far Ben would bend, admitting faults of our system, he could never get the good doctor to cite a single undesirable trait of life in the USSR, not even the infamous long queues. In general, yes, the doctor would admit problems, but never a specific example.

After a couple of days of recuperation and feasting, we set off on another "acclimatization route," Argenikitsun. I was still weak and apprehensive. Again it was three gringos, this time accompanied by Mischa Ovehenekov and Valera Almazov. Mischa is a gentleman and climber of the finest character. Every climb I did in the Soviet Union was in his company and one could not ask for a finer companion. Valera also proved among the most agreeable of comrades.

The climb turned out to be a three-day ascent up an unclimbed low-angle ridge. The summit was about 200 feet higher than our Mount McKinley. The rock was appallingly bad, low angle but potentially lethal. In true individualistic fashion, Ben and Chuck never roped up, but I joined Mischa and Valera on their rope at a couple of steepish sections where I feared holds might break off and my pack's weight prevent recovery. This difference in technique really was not a Soviet-American difference along nationalistic lines, but more according to personal preference.

One bivouac was on the rocky ridge and another in the snow zone. Weakness and headaches plagued me on the way up, and I was nearly worthless at the camp chores: flattening the bivy sites, erecting tents, cooking. The others climbed strongly. The summit came after a brief wait for an obscuring fog to dissipate. Again, the main contingent of climbers from our camp reached the top via the usual more direct route, arriving just before we did, despite setting out a day later.

Back in camp we recuperated, regaining the weight we had lost. More discussions, political and other. More opportunity to grow close to people

from the other side of the globe. One afternoon a strange spectacle unfolded: the "Pamir Olympics" or "Pamir Sextathlon" for want of any official title. This informal competition consisted of such unlikely events as the backward run holding a stick to a circle which had been traced in the dust; holding your breath with your face submerged in the bowl of water (no mean feat at that elevation); standing on an empty gas cylinder and tossing a large stone backwards (disqualification for falling off the cylinder if the feet touch the ground before the stone lands); the standing backwards broadjump. The American team, by the way, came in second. Of course we were not up to full strength.

Then it was departure time for the main objective, Pik Kommunizma. Formerly called Pik Stalin, just as Duchanbe had previously been known as Stalinabad, this mountain had never been far off our minds. After my fear and loathing on the rocky section of the previous climb, I had resolved to climb no more in the Pamir. But then it came time to depart!

At the first evening's camp after starting the two-day approach, we learned by the omnipresent radio that the other half of our contingent had at last returned. But after their stay in the hospital and having missed the acclimatization climbs, they were clearly out of the running. To attempt Kommunizma would probably not only be unwise and absurd, but was of potential jeopardy to everyone's chances. Carlos and Reilly accepted the reality of the situation gracefully, but Steve went down fighting. I sympathized. It's easy to place a group's welfare over the individual's desires when you are part of the group.

The climb took four days. Alpine tactics rather than siege. No yoyoing, no relaying of loads, no establishing of camps higher and higher on the mountain. We were self-contained, even if it meant hefty pack loads. Food consisted of a mixture of our American freeze-dried food and their Russian canned goods, cheese, ham and even caviar. Ours was lighter but theirs tasted better. Chuck and I joined the larger part of the Soviet climbers on the Pioneer route, the original way the mountain was scaled in 1932. Ben teamed with Sergei Efimov, who had climbed in Alaska the year before as a part of the Soviet exchange team, Viktor Baibara and Ivan Dousharin to climb a slightly more direct ridge, the Varunia Arête. It was necessary to cover the first 3000 feet, mostly fourth-class scrambling, as quickly as possible to be free of avalanche danger. The routes joined around 22,000 feet.

We were the first Americans to climb this side of Pik Kommunizma. Only two other Americans had been to the summit previously. I had been on the top of McKinley the summer before and relished the symmetry of the situation: the highest mountains of the two super powers in successive summers.

On the first two rock steps, large stones whizzed down dangerously close. The second presented some difficult moves. On the harder sections hung frayed fixed ropes dating from Abalakov's first ascent of the peak.

Care had to be taken. Yet Chuck's diary records this as "our finest day of climbing all summer—steep rock and snow, short sections of ice." Camp II was perched on a spectacularly narrow arête. Headaches tormented me in this and the next bivouac. From the highest one we made the summit via a several-kilometer-long traversing climb.

On top I unfurled a small improvised banner, covering all the key issues. "Free Soviet Dissident Jewish Whales," it read. I couldn't let go unchallenged the Soviets' invitation to a group of card-carrying capitalistic Americans to climb a peak called "Communism." After all, we never invited them to climb our highest mountain, which as everyone knows is called "Peak Capitalism."

Descent: more fear and loathing, and harder on the mind and knees than ascending. Another, and final, traverse of the Bivachni Glacier maze. These glacial crossings again and again brought to mind a photo caption from Slessor's *Red Peak*: "The foulest ground imaginable." Our group, so recently on the summit, now resembled zombies in a final death march.

Everyone managed to salvage at least one Pamir climb. Carlos and Steve made an historic ascent of Argenikitsun: without a radio. Through illness, but even more so due to the master stroke, the loss of his trunk containing all his climbing gear, boots, etc. in Moscow, Reilly had cunningly avoided climbing in such treacherous terrain. He now ascended the Peak of the Cosmonauts with Soviets from a neighboring camp, in running shoes.

Now, with just nine days remaining, intense discussion ensued about how best to spend the rest of the time. So little time, such a huge land, so much to see and do. The debate became academic as the next six days were lost waiting for the chopper that wouldn't arrive.

After the chopper finally rescued us (not so much from the glacier as from *Kasha*, just about our only remaining foodstuff), there was just time for a brief sampling of things and places other than the Pamir. A visit to a climbing instructional camp. And near this camp a brief climb, as we Americans joined our hosts for three first ascents on fine granite in a beautiful setting, an alpine-type valley. A day in Samarkand, a 2500-year-old city, once conquered by Genghiz Khan; Samarkand, with its Islamic culture, mosques and open-air markets piled high with honeydew and watermelon. Then it was a round of banquets complete with wine, sweet Georgian champagne and of course vodka.

* * * * *

Back home now at Lake Tahoe it is time to sort out impressions and memories of a unique summer. Caviar at 21,000 feet. Glacial labyrinths. Fear and loathing. The vintage climbing gear of our hosts. Bulging rucksacks lacking our refinements, having none of the advantages to which we soft Americans have grown accustomed. Nails and tricounis, which I actually envied on the glaciers. The glaciers were covered with

so much debris that crampons were impractical, yet slippery enough so that tricounis and nails were ideal; that is until their horrible crabbing—scraping on slabs reminded me of the cause for their demise.

But best of all are the memories: our Soviet companions; their strength and goodwill; their warmth, hospitality and fellowship—surely this camaraderie was the highlight of the exchange—swapping reading material with Vitaly and Mischa; finding out that Tanya, our “cook,” was a nuclear physicist; bouldering with Sergei; listening to his saxophone humming *The Shadow of Your Smile*; cutting up with Viktor; facing danger and living in the most intimate conditions with people whom all your life you had pictured as the vile, less-than-human arch enemy. That was perhaps the most valuable thing. The rare opportunity to smash through all the clichés, all the propaganda, all the preconceived notions formed through indirect experience. Without things like an exchange, one’s knowledge of this vast and varied land and its peoples is what filters through the rhetoric of negatively-slanted journalism. Now when I think of the USSR, concrete images so alien to the common stereotypes come to mind. Positive images. Terrain. Rushing torrents. Glaciers. Rocks and peaks. Cities. Moscow. Duchanbe. Samarkand. Amenities. Breaking bread. Sipping tea. Toasting with stronger stuff. Squeezing into tents together. And faces: Danius, Slava, Lev, Mischa, Viktor, Sergei, Vitaly, Anatoly, Vanya, Valera, Vadim, Ludmilla, Tanya. And of course Chuck, Steve, Carlos, Reilly and Ben. Things and places and people far more complex and wonderful—and unpigeonholeable—than any gross reductions by political ideology would have you believe.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Pamir Mountains, USSR.

ASCENTS: Peak of the Revolutionaries, 19,480 feet, Regular Route (Ben Read, Chuck Kroger, and five Soviets); New Route (Sergei Efimov, Slava Larrukhin).

Pik Argenikitsun, 20,500 feet, New Ridge (Ben Read, Chuck Kroger, Mischa Ovehenekov, Valera Almazov); Regular Route (all the other Soviet climbers in our camp); Regular Route (Steve Hackett, Carlos Buhler).

Pik Kommunizma, 24,548 feet, Pioneer Ridge (Chuck Kroger, Rick Sylvester, Anatoly Bychkov, Valera Almazov, Slava Larrukhin, Danius Makauskaus, Mischa Ovehenekov, Lev Pavlechenko); Varunia Arête (Ben Read, Sergei Epimov, Viktor Baibara, Ivan Dousharin).

PERSONNEL: Anatoly Bychkov, Sergei Efimov, Vitaly Medredev, Vadim Zeitsev, Valera Almazov, Viktor Baibara, Ivan Dousharin, Slava Larrukhin, Danius Mokauskas, Mischa Ovehenekov, Lev Pavlechenko, Tanya Almazov (Base-camp manager), *Soviets*; Chuck Kroger, Rick Sylvester, Reilly Moss, Steve Hackett, Carlos Buhler, Ben Read, *Americans*.