



**UCL**

**Expedition:**

**The Altai Mountains**





THE JOURNAL OF THE EXPEDITION  
TO  
THE ALTAI MOUNTAINS IN SIBERIA.

*From July 20<sup>th</sup> to September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007*

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*Who would like to thank our sponsors for making this possible:*

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Map 1. Map of Russia showing the Altai Mountain Range on the southern border. Courtesy of the Russian Forestry Research Centre, <http://www.whrc.org/russia/>

# 1. Summary of Plans & Objectives

## 1.1 Introduction to the Expedition

### 1.1.1 Area:

The Altai Republic is situated in southern Siberia at the junction between the borders of Russia, Kazakhstan, China and Mongolia. As one of the great meeting points of the world, the Siberian taiga collides with the Kazakh steppe and Mongolian desert, resulting in a hugely ecologically varied mountain range some 1,000km long. The Altai Mountains are characterised by high peaks and deep valleys and contain Siberia's highest peak, Mount Belukha at 4,506m. The 1992 UNESCO World Heritage Sites application states:

*"the region represents the most complete sequence of altitudinal vegetation zones in central Siberia, from steppe, forest-steppe, mixed forest, subalpine vegetation to alpine vegetation."*

On this basis alone, the region was very suitable for a University Expedition.

### 1.1.2 People:

Such a geographically varied region was bound to be at least as varied socio-culturally. Despite years of Russian settlement, starting with the earliest construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad and peaking during Stalin's earliest five year plan, the Altai republic is still one of the most diverse parts of Russia with over 40 percent of the population members of various indigenous ethnic tribes.

### 1.1.3 History:

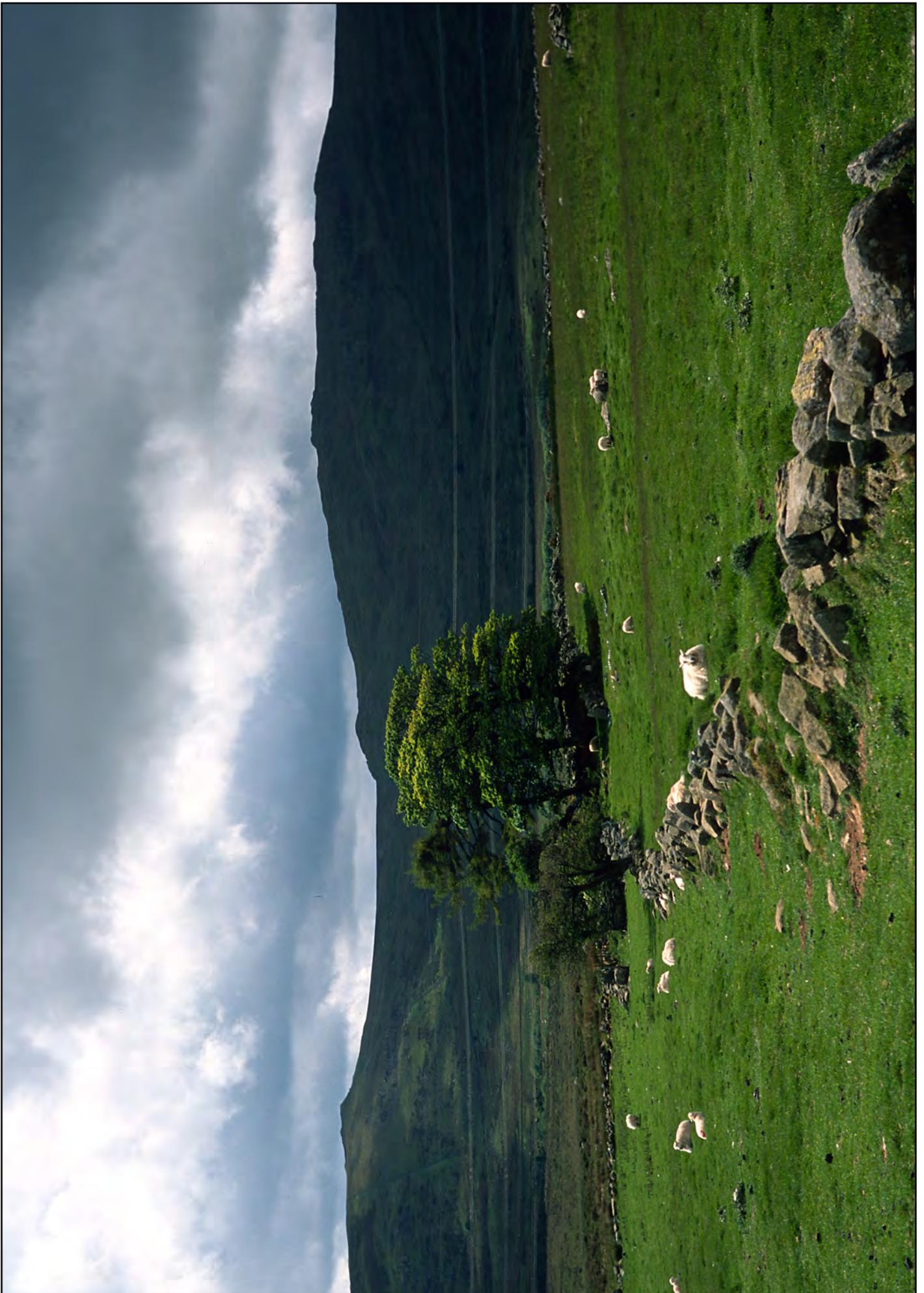
The Altai people are descended from a Turkik nomadic tribe that have inhabited the land since at least the 2nd Millennium BC, and are responsible for the host of archaeological material in the region. Unlike the lands to the south, the Mongol Invasion of the 12th Century had less impact on the prehistoric remains and fine metal objects have been found throughout the region. In the 18th Century the Altai came into contact with Tsarist Russia and subsequently vodka, which had a devastating effect on the people. The Altai Republic was less of a destination for Tsars prisoners than neighbouring Altai Krai. Following the accusation that the Altai were supporting the Japanese during WW2, their autonomy was lost and the region became a target of Soviet industrialisation and immigration.

## 1.2 Original Summary of Objectives

1. Complete at least a 20 day independent trek in the Altai Mountain Range,
2. Involve both the use of horses and water craft as a method of transport in addition to our legs,
3. To end the trek at Lake Teletskoye, Altai Republic,
4. To return to Tomsk via the Tuva Republic and the Sayan Mountains,
5. Complete a photographic exploration and journal of the area and expedition,
6. Trek environmentally responsibly and,
7. Make our routes and travel information available for future expeditions through a detailed expedition report and photographic exploration.

Possible additions:

- a. Climb to the summit of Mount Belukha
- b. Travel back via Kazakhstan or Mongolia
- c. Travel as far East as Lake Baikal



*Photo 1. Sheep telling us about the oncoming rain in North Wales. Photo by Tim Osborne*

### 1.2.1 Time Frame

The period from July through September is the best time to go to this part of the world. July through August present the best trekking conditions in the Altai, with stable and comfortable weather conditions albeit quite wet and cold at night. May to June is noted as being bad for tick borne encephalitis. Therefore we proposed to leave London towards the end of July heading to Tomsk. Our projected date of departure was the 16th July, returning on the 26th of August. Our main objectives would take four weeks to accomplish and we gave ourselves another week to explore the surrounding area afterwards.

### 1.2.2 Sources of Funding

In addition to the gracious grant given to us by UCL, we were all prepared to put forward up to £1,000 each for a successful and challenging expedition. We hoped to reduce the overall expenditure by applying for sponsorship from the numerous companies involved, which was partially successful.

## 1.3 Changes to Objectives

Quickly into the post application planning stage, a number of doubts arose as to many of the objectives. There was very little information on the internet or in guide books, so many decisions had to be made based on what we imagined would be the case. Here Stefan and Richard's trekking and travel experience proved invaluable as many of the decisions made were based on what we had found to be the case in Kyrgyzstan.

Despite the length of our stay in Russia increasing by a week, we were forced to rule out the horse riding objective. We simply had neither the experience, money or time to be able to safely go any reasonable distance. It was an uncertainty we were not terribly sorry to lose, and the time allocated to that part was quickly replaced by travelling out there via the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

In addition, the more we learnt about the rivers of the Altai, the more we realised that it was in no way suitable for either canoeing or kayaking at our level of proficiency. That part of the trip therefore turned into a rafting section, which we organised through a highly reputable company: Team Gorky. Finally, constraints on both time and funds meant that returning home via Tuva, Saya, or Lake Baikal were all but ruled out.

## 2. Preparations

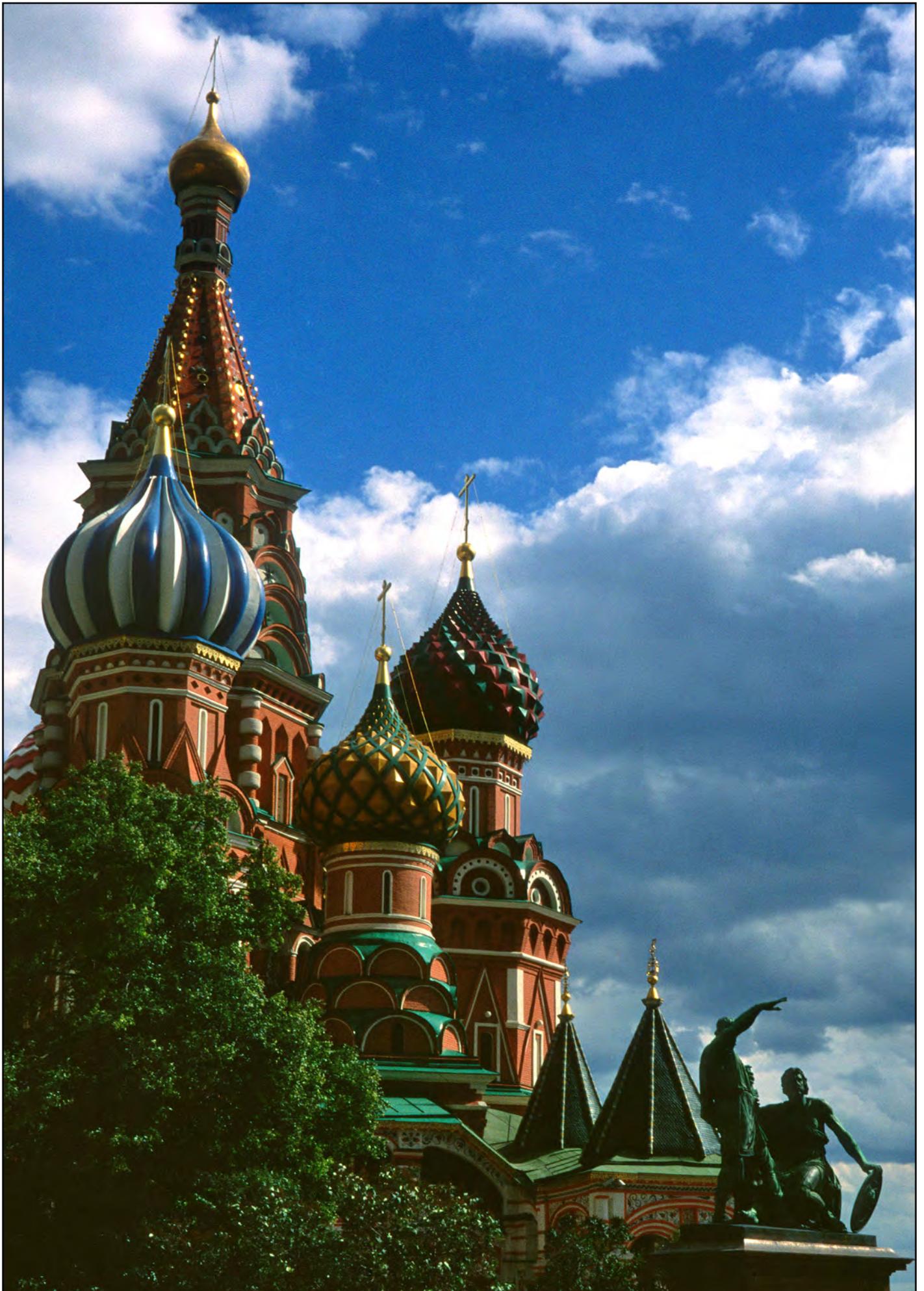
### 2.1 Pre-Departure Training

The team traveled to Northern Wales and the Snowdonia National Park for a 5 day training trip. This was meant to do the following things: gauge fitness levels; bond the team together; provide practice of the skills we would be putting into practice day-to-day and relying on for self-sufficiency; refine processes and cut out surplus equipment and find out what we really needed. We did all this and after 5 days of variable Welsh weather (fog, rain, storms and sun) and some serious mileage the team returned to the civilization of Portmadog, only to be delayed for 4 hours on the train home. Sadly, Richard was unavailable for the training trip as he was taking part in an armoured infantry exercise in Canada with the 1 Bn. Scots Guards.

With a successful trip behind us and some valuable experience gained, we were now much more keen and focused for what was ahead of us.

### 2.2 Equipment and Provisions

As soon as our application was accepted we immediately began collating an equipment and supplies list for everything that we needed. As our objectives and travel itinerary become more concrete we finalised a list and moved on to deciding where we would purchase the kit. A number of



*Photo 2. St. Basil's Cathedral shining after its renovation. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

letters were written to adventure sports companies asking for reductions on their products and we spoke in person to the managers of Snow and Rock in Covent Garden, London.

Richard and Stefan drew heavily from their previous contacts from the 2005 Tien Shan expedition and we managed to obtain similar discounts from Cascade Designs. In addition, AMG Group offered factory outlet prices on their goods to us. These two companies provided the bulk of our equipment and we are indebted to their generosity.

## 2.3 Visas

Since moving between the countries bordering the Altai Republic is notoriously difficult and two or more visas would dramatically increase the cost of the trip, our plans therefore only involved travel within Russia, although this was not a problem as it seemed to contain everything that we needed from the area. Obtaining a Russian visa required sending our passports care of a travel agent a month before departure.

## 2.4 Team Specialisations

In order for a successful trip, it was decided that each team member would be assigned an individual role. Already Richard had taken over the duty of leader, as Nick was too busy with his degree. Nick therefore specialised in expedition medicine and became qualified in remote first aid and rescue. Sam was responsible for photography, Tim for language and culture, whilst Adam oversaw all the rafting as that was his area of expertise. This allotment of responsibility was a vital way to share the preparation work for the trip.

## 2.5 Sources of Information

Despite the relative absence of any useful information in readily available guidebooks or the english speaking internet, a few very useful sources of information were discovered. The first was a full database of Soviet era maps of the region at various large and small scales (<http://maps.poehali.org/en/>). The next was an Irishman by the name of Mark Sugre ([http://www.seabhcan.com/travel\\_stories/altai.html](http://www.seabhcan.com/travel_stories/altai.html)) who had been to the Altai Mountains in 1999 and answered many of the questions we had. Finally the *Trekking in Russia and Central Asia* by Frith Maier (ISBN-10: 0898863554), contained treks overlapping our planned route and, despite its age, gave us an idea of what was possible.

# 3. Getting there

## 3.1 Moscow

Richard returned from Canada on Monday 16th July. We left on the Friday evening for Moscow. During those four days our anticipation slowly grew along with the great worry that precedes any large trip. It was a great relief to board the plane and forget all of our worries, from then on we would have to take things in our stride. Richard often told the group how much more prepared they were than for Kyrgyzstan two years ago, it was a great relief to know.

Arriving at four o'clock in the morning anywhere is not much fun, but I am sure Moscow ranks pretty low. Regardless of one's knowledge of recent Russian history, it is impossible to shake from the back of your mind the prospect of a security agent around the next corner who will take issue with your visa or bags. In retrospect the fear was totally inflated, there is far more difficulty getting into the USA nowadays. Nonetheless we were all quite relieved to be standing on the platform for the express train to central Moscow with all our bags.

There is something odd about the way Russia feels, the national character. All around you are well made, carefully designed machinery and buildings, which have been left to rot over the past two



*Photo 3. The Trans Siberian disappearing to vanishing point. We never did work out how long it was.  
Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

decades of political turmoil. The train into Moscow was a case in point, from the outside a streamlined express train with a design to match the earlier bullet trains, on the inside an interior that seemed neither to have changed, nor been cleaned, since Brezhnev.

We never really thought a great deal about what we would do in Moscow, but since we would be waiting there for over 12 hours we placed our bags in the left luggage store and visited the Kremlin and St. Basil's Cathedral. Here the renovated central buildings, interspersed with collapsing debris, demonstrated Russia's new found prosperity under Putin. Some of the group had been to Moscow before, those who had not were surprised at how European everything looked. We had all read that the collapse of the Soviet Union had pushed Russia closer to the West culturally, but to such an extent was not expected. Not greatly wishing to engage with Russia's tourist trade, we found ourselves a small corner in a park to brush up on some local phrases and try to remember the Cyrillic alphabet.

### *3.2 The Trans-Siberian Railroad*

At 11pm we were back with our bags at the Yaroslavyky Railway Station. At least a couple of hours had been spent making totally sure that this was the right spot as the announcement board only had enough room for the next four trains. But by this time we were just playing cards on the station floor, sitting on our bags bulging not only with twenty days worth of expedition food, but also the three days of snacks, beer and vodka for the train journey.

After the rather scornful greeting by the *provodnitsa* of "nye, turista" we scrambled our way onto the train, crouching in order to fit our bags under the door. We had reserved a four berth room for ourselves, which we somehow managed to fit our bags into, whilst one person had to sleep next door. Tim was therefore quickly introduced to his room mates, two very friendly Russian sailors on their way to Vladivostok. Before long we had thrown sheets over the beds and laid out our feast for the next few days. The clanking of carriages could be heard slowly working its way down the long train and after a slight groan of the joints we were off. For a while it was exhilarating. You could put your head all the way out the window and try to guess how long the train was, or sip vodka with some of our neighbours, but soon we all realised how tired we were and settled down for bed.

For such a backpacker focal point, there really is not much to it. Most of Russia is quite flat and very thickly forested, so you can rarely see over a few hundred metres from the carriage. There was all kinds of food to be eaten from either the *provodnitsa* or one of the hawkers at the stations and there was a *samovar* which provided boiling water on demand, a perfect accompaniment to a long train journey for a group of Englishmen. The constant stream of birch flying past the window combined with the motion had quite a mesmerising effect and so most of the day was spent sleeping, whilst the evening was spent playing cards or trying to converse with our fellow passengers.

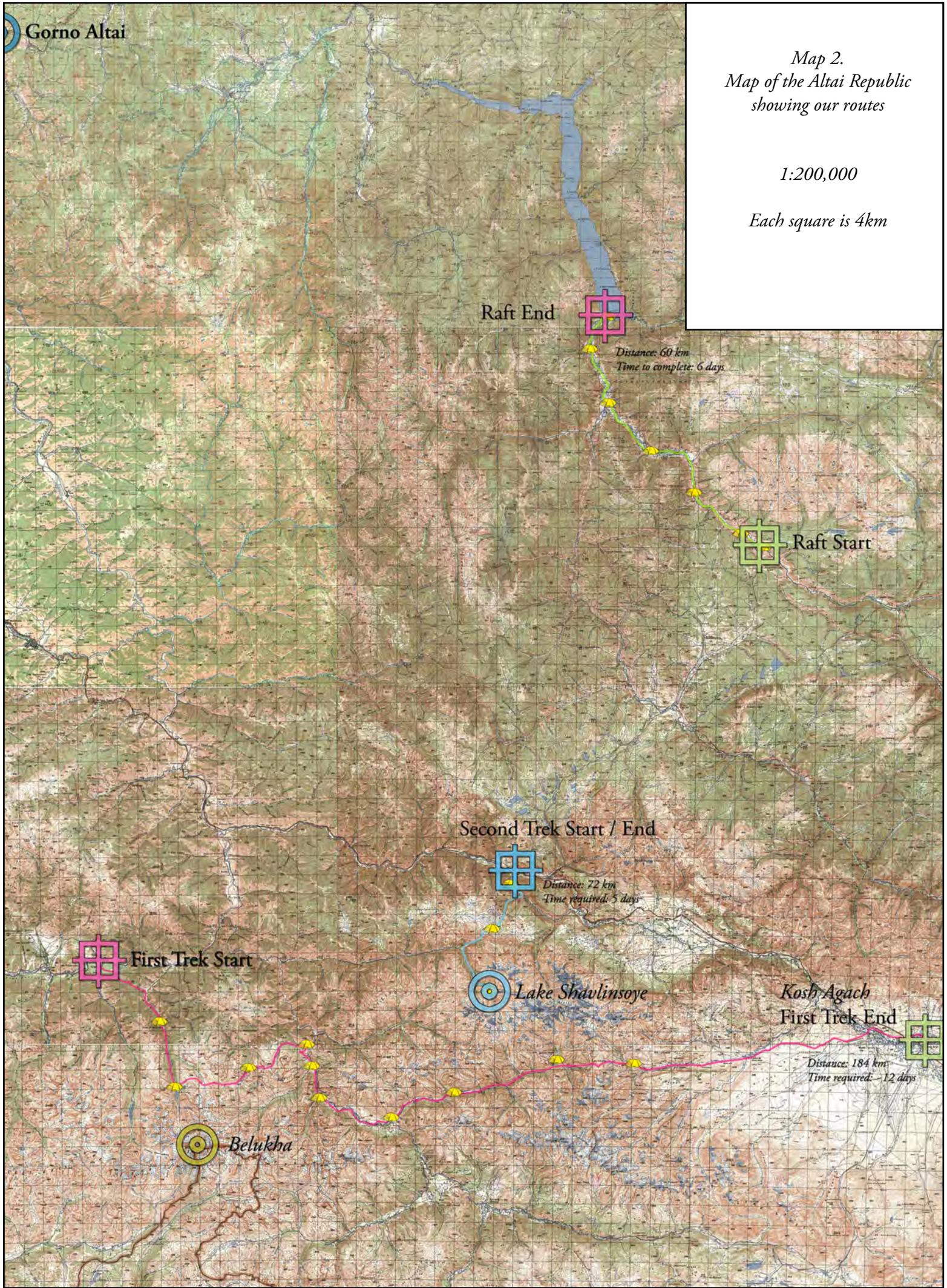
### *3.3 Overland to Tyungur*

After two and a half days on a train we had grown rather accustomed to it, stepping off with our enormous bags in Novosibirsk was painful. We successfully attracted every undesirable character in the station forecourt in our search for a taxi to the bus station, for some reason it seemed much easier to get a taxi to Tyungur, over 24 hours away! At last someone worked out where we wanted to go, or at least realised we were not that stupid, and tried to load us into his classic Lada four door saloon. The Lada, being barely capacious enough for six *people* let alone six people and five ninety litre bags, was filled to the brim. Only two of the doors were properly shut. Three of the bags were sitting on top of each other in the boot, the door extending upwards to its limit. Richard consoled the team that by their sheer weight alone they would not be going far even if they were to fall off.

Map 2.  
Map of the Altai Republic  
showing our routes

1:200,000

Each square is 4km



It should have been nerve-racking, if any of those bags had been lost it would have spelt the end of the expedition. But in truth it was not as the vehicle was so full no one was able even to turn their heads to keep an eye on them whilst going over a bump. During such times, it is simply easier to have faith in your hosts and everything will work itself out.

This policy was continued throughout our brief period of stay in Russian civilisation. None of our Russian was sufficient to really understand any questions, so blind faith that the person knew what was best for you seemed the only option. Surprisingly, everything worked out fine and within two days we had our passports stamped and were on our way from Gorno-Altai to Tyungur to begin the first trek.

## 4. Journal Entries

### *4.1 The First Trek by Nicholas Skipper*

THURSDAY 26TH JULY

After the six hour bus journey through countless security checkpoints, the team unpacked the minibus and erected camp for the first time. After a restless night full of anticipation and terribly burnt food we awoke to a wonderfully sunny day on the banks of the Katun river just outside Tyungur. Slowly we set off on what was to be a 3 day trek to lake Akkem, situated in the valley to the North of Mount Belukha.

These first few days were intended to get us accustomed to trekking at moderate altitude with our large backpacks (~40kg) and to decrease pack weight, going through the food stores and fuel before attempting the more challenging routes intended later in the trip. Having said this the Yarluch high pass on day one was not to be scoffed at, being an 850m ascent, and deliberately chosen in order to 'get us into the spirit of things'.

Having crossed the river and passed through Tyungur we began the ascent up a large track, well worn by vehicles, with forests on either side. It was a sweltering day and before long we were all finding the going tough. Periodically we would see other trekkers coming in the opposite direction and were generally greeted with smiles though some were followed by inquisitive glances at our large backpacks.

It took three hours to reach the top where the trees were distributed more sparsely and the heat from the sun became almost unbearable. Each of us went through six litres of our water by midday and yet we were all still thirsty. We had our lunch in some shade and recouped. The decent was much more pleasant as it was steep and rapid and had extended sections in the shade.

It was early evening when Adam, Sam and myself heard the rumble of the Akkem river and radioed Tim and Rich who had started the decent before us, to find them just around the corner setting up their tent on a beautiful spot next to the river. The river was ferocious and littered with large rocks and my mind wandered forward in time to the rafting section of the trip. Our first day was over and spirits were high.

FRIDAY 27TH JULY

All that was left to do was a 'jaunt' along the bank of the Akkem river and we expected to make it to the lake by nightfall, but this was not to be. There were many more uphill sections than expected and the going was tough, through dense forests with even more dense undergrowth. It actually felt



*Photo 4. Lake Akkem with Mount Belukha in the background. To the right is the boat used to cross the lake.  
Photo by Richard Luckyn-Malone*

very much like a series of high passes because the banks of the river often became too sheer and the track would cut away high up into the forest. In addition to this the rain, for which the region is known, had come and was showing no signs of letting up. The place we decided to camp was lovely but required a scramble across treacherous rocks to get to and was still far from Belukha - we had only covered about 11km.

#### SATURDAY 28TH JULY

The weather was again atrocious and we only set off at midday when the rain had died down somewhat. Today saw a slight widening of the Akkem river but much of the same with regard to the walking. Large portions were still up and down but we were now mainly travelling along the banks of the river. During an afternoon break, we bumped into a group of Russian mountaineers who had passed by us as we ate lunch the previous day. They had set up camp by the river and offered us food and vodka. There was no saying no, we sat with them for half an hour during which time multiple stiff measures of vodka were downed by all, this unsurprisingly seems to be the evening custom here, though this was still mid afternoon. So far the people had been friendly and very generous which along with the landscape seems ashamedly alien to us. Things just do not work like this in England.

The lake was not too much further and within a couple more hours we were erecting the tents in the rain. We camped at the northern most end with a misty view out across the lake to the far side where mount Belukha stood, dominating the view with its formidable snow covered peaks. Our tents were pitched near to the meteorological station and Tim and Richard again having made it to the camp site earlier than the rest were able to buy some fried bread, which went down very well with the curry that we cooked later that evening.

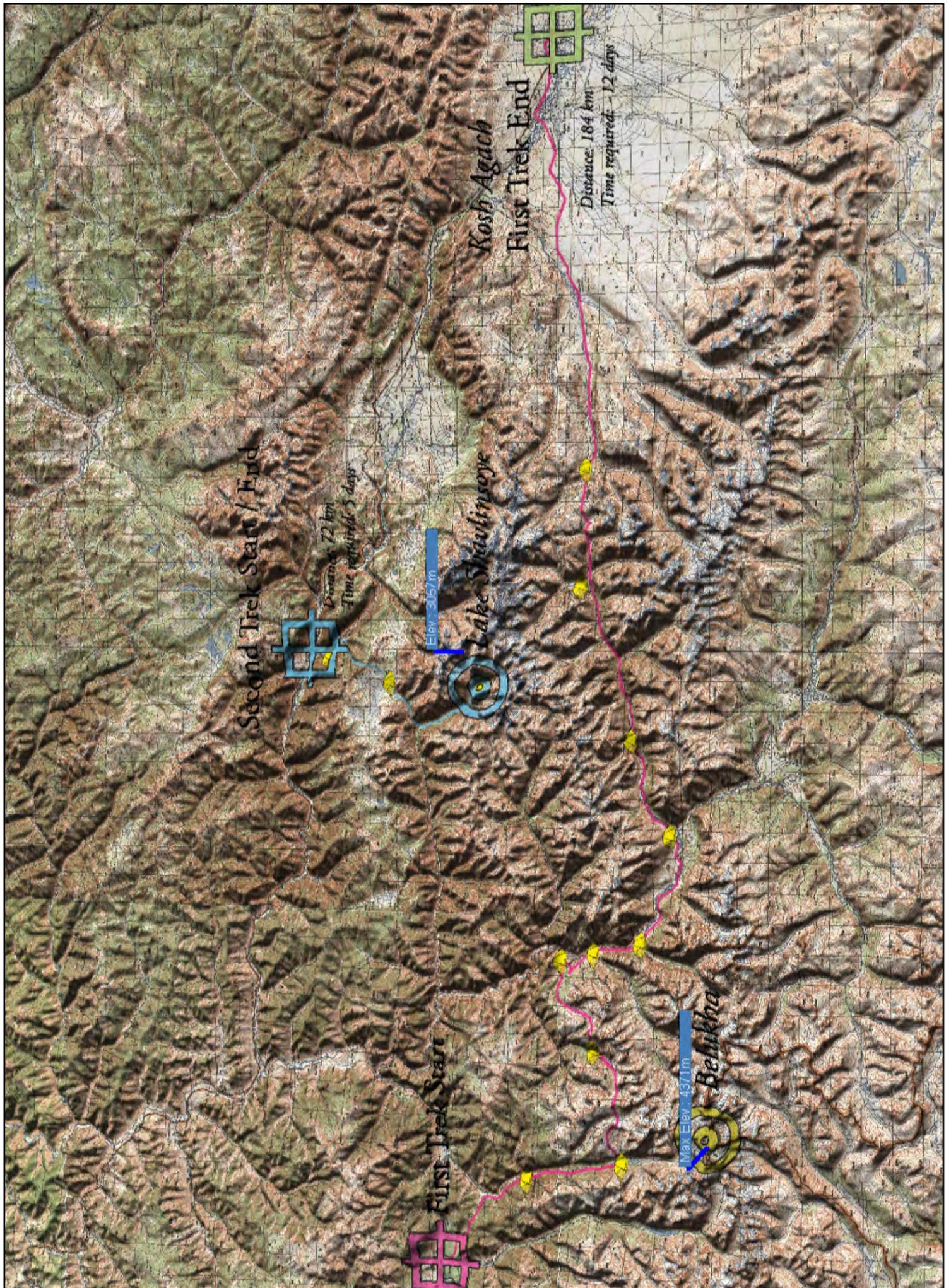
#### SUNDAY 29TH JULY

Another rainy day and although it was one of our two rest days set aside for Lake Akkem, Richard and I set off to the west with daypacks. Intending to get over to the next valley system in order to get a view of Lake Kucherla, we followed a river up the steep mountainside behind our campsite, clambering over rocks and getting wet both from the rain and the river. After getting above the tree line we turned back to see an awesome view of the valley we were camped in and over to Yarlú Valley to the East. We did not quite reach the top but had enjoyed the tough scramble in the absence of full weight backpacks. We turned back after a few hours and made it back to camp before the darkness rolled in.

#### MONDAY 30TH JULY

The second of our rest days saw the return of the much longed for Sun. The contents of the team's backpacks, along with the team themselves, were promptly turned out and washed in the river and, after hanging out our clothes, two separate parties headed out. Tim and Sam crossed the lake by row boat and set out to find the trail up to the next high pass and to decide on its suitability for the team when fully loaded. Adam and myself set out to the South towards Belukha.

Tim and Sam crossed the lake by boat and crossed the marshland until they reached the pine trees that carpet the valley which feeds into the Akkem river about 1 kilometre down from the lake. The path seemed to peter out and on reaching the top had been wholly replaced by both animal tracks and nothingness. Despite not finding the route, Tim and Sam met a couple on the mountain who told of the magical and magnetic power of the Yarlú Valley. Many people in both Russia and Central Asia believe the Altai to be a special and spiritual place and it was by no means uncommon to hear strange stories from trekkers and even meet people who can only be described as pilgrims to the area.



Map 3. A three dimensional model of the terrain.

After crossing large areas of bog and many tributaries feeding into Lake Akkem along its western side Adam and I reached the crooked bridge that takes you over the glacial stream feeding from Belukha into the lake. This brought us into the area directly to the north of the mountain and gave us a dramatic view up to its peaks and of the treacherous scree slopes to the east which lead to the start of the ascent.

The evening brought further strengthening of Russo-British relations with camp fires, singing, chatting and of course drinking with our Russian neighbours most of whom were also trekking in the region and some of whom were about to attempt Belukha. Again their hospitality was on display throughout and a lovely evening (if somewhat lacking in the translation department) was had by all.

## TUESDAY 31ST JULY

We were up early despite the previous evening's festivities and were rowed across the lake in a metal tub by one of the people from the meteorological station. We were off and would have two high passes under our belts by nightfall.

After walking across the marshland and up through the pine trees we started on the steep, grassy hills. We travelled past the Yarlú valley and down into the Tekeliú valley stopping on the way for lunch with the best view of the trip so far, a vista out across the whole massif surrounding Belukha (photo 5). An extremely dramatic view, the meteorological station now looked tiny in comparison to the mountains of the surrounding landscape.

Our decent took us along a precarious ridge line by the side of a near vertical scree slope down into the Yarlú Valley. We then cut away from the path and bounded down a marshy slope which acted like shock absorbers, allowing us to almost run down with our whole boots disappearing into the ground with every step.

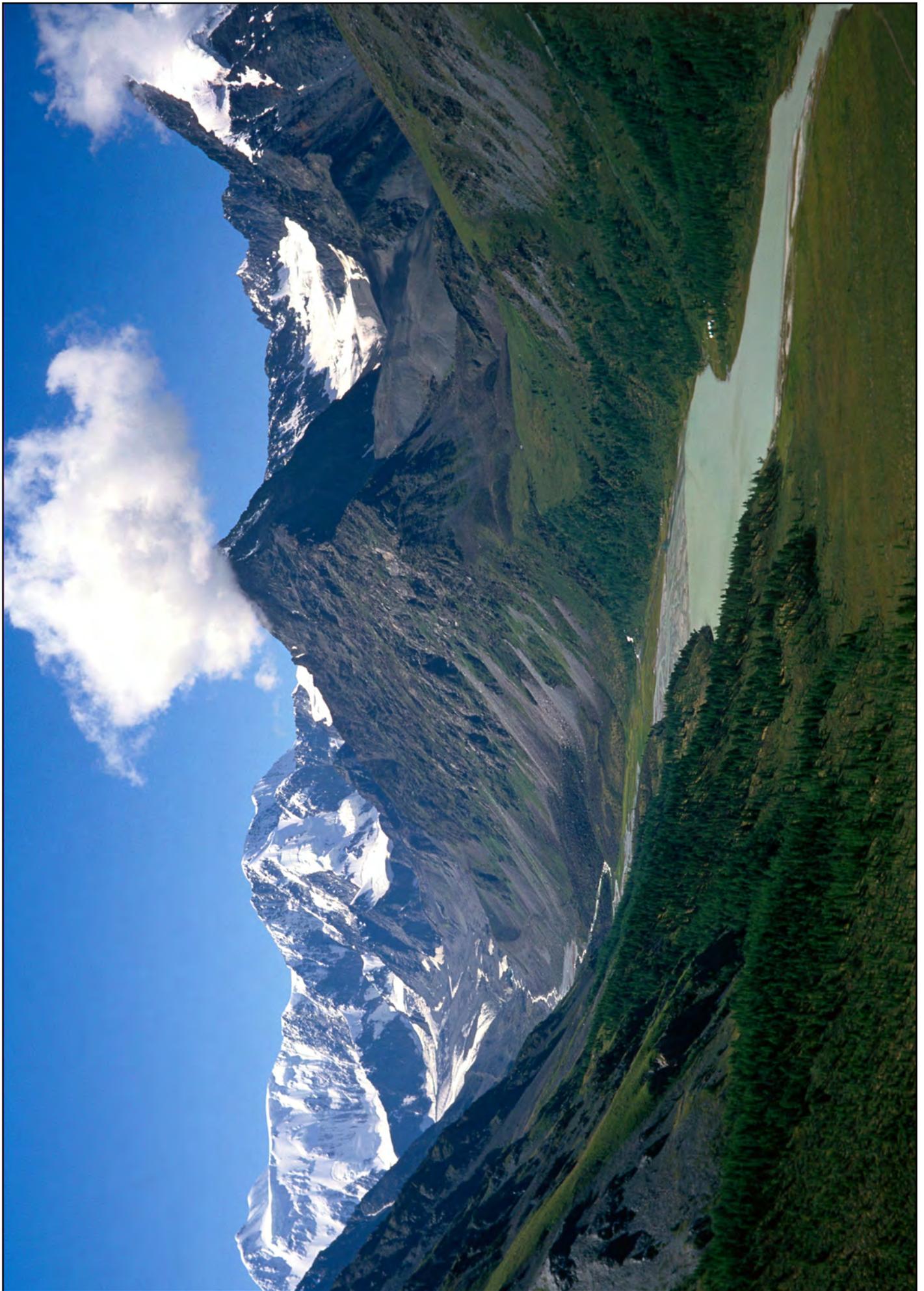
At the bottom lay the Tekeliú river and the team, exhausted from the first high pass, sat down on its bank. In addition to deciding how best to cross it we were each looking to the second high pass, dreading it. Everybody agreed that despite our fatigue we should crack on.

Cracking on resulted in a wet Sam and a very wet Nick. The river was of fairly high volume and speed and unfortunately Sam and myself were both fully submerged before making it to the other side. After wringing out our socks and placing them back into sodden boots we again set off. The marsh that had proved so helpful on the previous decent now provided us with one of the hardest ascents of the trip. It took over two gruelling hours of stomping and stopping, along with enumerable false peaks to make it up, but again the view back out over all the ground we had covered that day made it worthwhile. We descended only halfway down into the next valley before pitching camp out of the wind, next to a pepperpot of marmot holes.

## WEDNESDAY 1ST AUGUST

It finally felt like the expedition had begun and we had left civilisation behind. There were no longer trekkers, settlements or large paths anywhere to be seen. It was sunny again so we all washed in the freezing cold glacial stream and dried some of our kit out.

We set off down the Sukhaujersh valley. The first part of the day was fairly uneventful except for the numerous bear prints and droppings we came across. As the day went on the sides of the valley became much steeper and we found ourselves struggling to stay on the banks of the river as opposed to in it. The familiar dark ominous clouds were moving in again so we pushed up the steep



*Photo 5. This stunning view of Lake Akkem from the first pass lifted our spirits during the arduous climb.  
Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

river banks to a small tree covered ledge. A slightly lopsided camp was set up and we cooked under the bivouac and left the fire burning all night to ward off any roaming bears. Our camp site looked like my exact mental image of a bear habitat.

#### THURSDAY 2ND AUGUST

After a bearless night we carried on along the river, again over steep scree and rock. At one point rocks under Tim's feet gave way and he slid between five and ten metres down the slope and into the water with large rocks following him, only narrowly missing his head. Thankfully he was fine other than some cuts and bruises which we cleaned and bandaged up before carrying on. Richard found the turning we wanted and we set off away from the river up the steepest high pass to date. Parts of the ascent involved full climbing with all four limbs though it was still a scramble and the team decided roping up was unnecessary. Most rocky sections were only suitable for one person to climb at a time due to the loose rocks.

The smell of wild herbs was almost overpowering as we ascended and the sun was blazing down. Gradually the dark clouds started gathering overhead once more but this time when the heavens opened it was hail that came pelting down. There were extremely loud crashes of thunder ripping through the air directly overhead and large forks of lightning very close by. We were actually quite worried as we had climbed the majority of the distance (~700m) in the sun and were now close to the top. Rather than descend quickly or push up and over the top we decided it would be safest to set up the bivouac in a hollow in the ground between some rocks which got us below the level of the surrounding terrain. We huddled in the freezing cold and soaking wet until the storm had passed and when we emerged half an hour later the bivouac was surrounded by a 10 centimetre pile of hail stones.

Once again the view at the top was a dramatic one, this time stretching for miles in all directions and being enhanced by the large dark clouds rolling across the sky in various directions. There looked to be another front moving in so we quickly began the descent and found ourselves sliding down scree once more. It was a quick decent and then onto marshland again. Before long despite the lack of good camping ground we pitched the tents with the dark clouds still overhead and spent a long time failing to light a fire with damp wood. We cooked with the petrol stoves and went to bed.

#### FRIDAY 3RD AUGUST

Today we lost the animal track we had been walking along and eventually decided to cut across a river and through some woods. We were taking very poor paths through the thick undergrowth so the going was slow, there was a lot of retracing of steps or trying to find better routes. The fact that when we emerged from the forest hours later we were on a large open grassy hill exactly where we wanted to be with the Argut River running through the valley below is a testament to Richard's navigation skills. We made it down and set up camp near a tributary of the Argut. There were a couple of log cabins nearby that we had avoided, they did not look inhabited.

#### SATURDAY 4TH AUGUST

Three horsemen appeared on the ridge above our camp site today. As we were packing up camp. Two came to speak to us and were surprised to find we spoke almost no Russian whatsoever. They were wearing military fatigues and at first we thought we were about to have trouble with our border passes but it turned out they were horse guides and were taking a group of tourists on a long horseback trek. They seemed fairly amazed to see us, particularly in view of our lack of Russian or guide. Lots of smiling was done in both directions and they set off shortly before us.



*Photo 6. A quick rest on day five whilst working out a river crossing. Photo by Richard Luckyn-Malone*

The whole day we seemed to be following their fresh tracks though never catching up with them. We were following the river Argut and it was again a scorching day. The Argut itself was always in view down to our left but the land we were walking on seemed to change dramatically as we progressed. This is one of the remarkable things about the Altai region, it seems that every valley system has its own micro climate and therefore flora and fauna. One minute you will be walking through a green and lush landscape in what feels like a temperate rainforest and the next you will be in a semi-arid dusty landscape with cactus-like plants dotted about and large sandstone rock formations.

Tim and I set up for lunch and waited for the others. Adam turned up shortly after and explained that Sam was vomiting and feeling exhausted. We waited but before long I set off back to find them but failed to do so after almost an hours walking. All parties were worried. It turned out they had managed to walk past our lunch spot and had stopped up ahead wondering where we were. Tim was sent forward from our position and eventually found Richard walking back towards us. The group, slightly bemused, reassembled and set up camp once more having covered much less ground than hoped.

The day had been the hottest yet with no available shade and the going was tough. Sam had become dehydrated, exhausted and was feeling very weak. He felt better that night as he managed to eat a full meal and drink rehydration salts. We ended up camping in a field next to where the horses we had seen that morning had been put out to pasture and cooked in a deserted log cabin. It was very basic like something out of a Western, the two horse guides were camped next to their horses so who uses the cabin I do not know. Richard cooked a delicious meal, using wild garlic, earth balls and mushrooms that he had found along the way.

#### SUNDAY 5TH AUGUST

We were hoping to find the bridge across the Argut today. We came across Zim Argut, the first settlement we have seen since leaving Belukha. There was a large open plane before the village where the cows and horses were pasturing and then the village itself, consisting of small wooden cabins with strangely ornate and colourful window frames and little penned off gardens for animals and vegetables. It is an Altai village with a little stream running through, a generator at its centre and about thirty properties - absolutely beautiful. I'm sure that life must be hard but I cannot help feeling it would be amazing to live in such a remote and beautiful area. There were few adults about, just children and the barking dogs I associate with every rural settlement. We tried to buy bread from the one adult we could find, a very elderly lady. *'Privyet, ya bih khatyel khlyep? Skolka stoit?'* unfortunately to no avail. Did she speak Russian? Then again were we actually speaking Russian?

After a few photos we decided to leave as we figured our presence was probably disturbing the locals slightly. The adults were presumably out ranching and harvesting their crops, we had seen some fields with hay stacks before entering the village. It is likely that the locals work in a collectivised fashion though that is pure speculation and there was no opportunity to really chat with anyone. We continued walking and saw a few children on horse back who followed us for a short while laughing and smiling. We said hello but it was clear they were not sure what to make of us.

After over an hours walk past meadows and scrub land and with the strong smell of wild mint and garlic always present, our hopes of a bridge across the Argut were fading. Out of nowhere, two men on horse back came riding up to us. After a protracted dictionary based circular conversation in broken English, Russian and of course hand signals, it was established that there was no bridge across the Argut and that the only way for us to cross was to walk back to the village and let them row us across. Needless to say we set off back with the men, smoking and chatting all the way and



*Photo 7. With light fading to the west we came to this breathtaking view. Unfortunately we would have to get down to the valley base before night. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

before long we were being piled, along with our bags, onto a tiny inflatable dingy and being rowed vigorously across the river at its widest and calmest point. In two trips and after a small fee was levied we were back on dry ground on the correct side of the Argut. A stroke of luck really because it would have been a long walk back the way we had come.

#### MONDAY 6TH AUGUST

An uneventful day of mainly walking on the flat. We saw more small settlements and were again walking on a track used by vehicles. The afternoon saw some small hill climbing and on regaining the Kazem river there was more walking through forest and searching for suitable river crossing points. We set up camp amongst the trees on the silted up banks worrying about the possibility of a flash flood during the night, but unable to find anywhere else more suitable.

Plans changed. We decided that we would no longer attempt to reach Aktash as another river crossing would be needed and judging by the rivers we had recently crossed, we would have trouble with the next one. Instead it was decided to head for Kosh-Agach 120km away and then sort out transport back towards Aktash before the rafting.

#### TUESDAY 7TH AUGUST

We hoped to get across the river in the morning and get another 10km or so under our belts before nightfall, but inevitably this was not to be. On reaching a large widening of the river where it split up into multiple channels we felt sure we had found the ford marked on our map and proceeded to spend five hours walking around the area trying to find a place to cross. The first few channels were reasonably easily negotiated, although the water did come to waist height in some. On the far side however, the final two channels were really treacherous. We tried walking linked up as a five man chain, but soon realised it was not at all safe. In its centre the channel became very deep and too great a surface area had to be exposed to the fast flowing water; the force of the water would just push you over. We toyed with ideas of roping someone up and them swimming across and setting up a line, but all the ideas just seemed too dangerous.

It was not until Adam and Sam went for another look downstream that the solution was remarkably stumbled across. The way across involved running down stream on to a ridge in the centre of the channel then forging your way upstream against the flow of water before cutting across from the ridge across slightly deeper water to the bank. How Adam and Sam worked this out I do not know, but it is a good job they did as moral was getting pretty low and turning back was becoming a distinct possibility. We roped up to a large piece of deadwood and through a combination of high leg lifts and hauling on the rope we made it to the other side.

That night we were in fine spirits, having overcome a formidable obstacle as a team and we set up camp nearby on a ridge overlooking the river. Drinks were had by all and a feast cooked by Richard.

#### WEDNESDAY 8TH AUGUST

We walked through forest and meadows up the valley until we reached the split in the river. We turned off left and had a gruelling afternoon of uphill sections again mainly through dense forest and some meadows. The route was littered with lots of small river crossings and it was getting dark as we reached the final large river crossing of the trip. We had been walking for half an hour through bushes taller than ourselves, when suddenly we emerged on the bank of a river standing in front of a huge fresh bear print in the silt. We looked about for the crossing but decided uneasily to set up camp in a small copse on the river bank and attempt the river the next day.



*Photo 8. From the top of the Karagem Pass it was possible to see all the way to the Mongolian border, over 150km away. Photo by Richard Luckyn-Malone*

#### THURSDAY 9TH AUGUST

It took half an hour to walk upstream and cross the river. In the blazing sunlight we emptied our backpacks, washed clothes, aired the tents and sleeping bags and general organised camp. We were having our first rest day since Belukha and it was well deserved. Richard went for a wander up the Kazem Valley towards Mount Mashy Bashy, whilst the rest of us read books and played cards. It was a lovely day, with a backdrop of snow covered peaks and coniferous clad mountains.

There were huts and banyas across the field from where we were camping and it was clear we were getting back towards civilisation. A group of Russians crossed the river where we had, saying hello as they walked past and later that evening one came back to chat to us by our campfire as we were cooking. He gave us all roasted pine cones to eat and explained how to prepare them. It turned out he was an academic from Novosibirsk and we chatted about his life and what we were doing in Russia. Before leaving he invited us to his *banya* later that evening but we declined as we were getting up early in the morning to complete the final high pass of the trip.

#### FRIDAY 10TH AUGUST

We were up before 6am and had left before 7am. It was very cold, the sun had not risen over the ridge line and there was a frost on the ground. We covered a large distance during the early hours and were glad to have woken early. Our only stop before the ascent in fact was to bandage Richard's thumb which he cut on some rocks.

The Karagem pass did not take us long with our new found fitness levels and it was reasonably easy going. From the top we were able to see the valley leading towards Kosh-Agach (70km) before us and it was striking how flat the landscape had become. Beyond Kosh-Agach were the Mongolian plains.

We covered a fair distance that afternoon and set up camp down in the valley just past some cabins we had come across.

#### SATURDAY 11TH AUGUST

We set out expecting a long walk, but before long we were hoping to find some form of transport. After reading about some people who had been picked up just past the Karagem Pass, although they had arranged transport in advance, we knew there was an outside chance that there would be something available. The walk to Biltier and on to Kosh-Agach would be a long, flat and monotonous journey that we were not desperate to undertake.

As if by magic, we saw a bright green tarpaulin nestling in some trees after about an hour of walking and on inspection were greeted by two Russian men in army fatigues. One spoke rudimentary English and before long they had us sitting down in their camp drinking English tea and eating sweets... it was like a dream after eating heavily rationed dehydrated food for weeks. They were the support team for a mountaineering expedition that would not be returning for a couple of days and as a result were happy to give us a lift all the way to Kosh-Agach.

So ended our days in the wilderness and it was on to phase two of the trip, but not before enjoying the delights of Mongolian culture in Kosh-Agach.



*Photo 9. A view of Mashy Bashy from Lake Shavlinskoye. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

## 4.2 *Second Trek by Richard Luckyn Malone*

SUNDAY 12TH AUGUST

After a heavy night of eating and drinking, the morning proved to be surprisingly constructive. Following our meeting with the group of Russians on the evening of the 9th, we had been toying with the idea of doing a short trip to see Lake Shavlinskoye, a concept that was now a distinct possibility due to our success in getting a lift from the base of the Karagem pass. So, whilst slightly hung over, we made preparations to leave that afternoon. Again, Richard would be leading the trip with Sam and Adam, Tim and Nick preferring to remain and enjoy the simple joys of Kosh Agach.

The preparations were divided equally amongst the three as before, Sam and Adam looking after food and supplies, whilst Richard looked over the maps to see our best route and drop off points. By two o'clock there was a taxi waiting outside and, after making careful arrangements about where to meet five days hence, we jumped in, anxious to see the world go past a little faster than four miles per hour.

The drive was a stunning journey crossing the same ecological boundaries we had experienced during the trip. Over the three hour trip we came down from the Mongolian plateau, passed through sections of arid and semi-arid mountains, and soon found ourselves deposited at the base of a lush temperate rainforest, similar in appearance to the Akkem Valley some two weeks previous. Once the beauty of the place subsided, Richard became worried; the next few days were bound to be a little wet.

The next 20km were a sharp climb so instead of starting off in the already failing light, we decided to cross the river at Chibit and set up camp there. This proved to be more ambitious than one would presume. After setting off in numerous directions searching for the bridge across the raging river, we were eventually given directions by a local woman. We were fairly surprised therefore, once we found the bridge, to find it a complete wreck. What was once a well constructed five steel wire bridge with wooden decking, had over time lost all but a few of the planks bridging the wires. With twilight rapidly approaching we decided to cross as soon as possible as if there were another bridge, which the vehicle tracks on the other side suggested, we would struggle to get across before sunset. So, with our heavy packs we tight roped across it, using one of the higher wires for balance, a scary crossing indeed.

MONDAY 13TH AUGUST

In the early morning we packed up the camp and began the steep climb out of the valley. Compared with the tracks of the first trek, these were far more worn and at parts much muddier. We passed a number of families on the way, sharing information about where we were from and going. Many of them spoke very good English and were in large groups, similar to those we met whilst on the way to Lake Akkem. For six hours we climbed the muddy path, finally reaching a windy plateau just after noon. A ribboned cross on one side of the path indicated that we were going the right way and after a quick lunch we made our way down the valley to the South of the plateau.

We were hoping to get to Lake Shavlinskoye by the evening, but despite our quick crossing of the plateau, the descent down a fast stream was slow going and with the knowledge that we would have to go up further than what we went down, it soon became apparent that we would not reach the lake until the next morning. And so, as we turned the corner to start the ascent, we found a suitably idyllic camp site and went down for the night.



*Photo 10. Breakfast in the rapidly melting snow. A cold morning is always good to get the group to leave at a reasonable time. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

## TUESDAY 14TH AUGUST

After a difficult night listening to mice scrambling up and down the tent, we got up to a wet and cloudy sunrise. The path to the lake was through thick woods, barely above the water level and with the steady rain these soon turned into a quagmire. Remembering how beautiful this spot was meant to be certainly helped us press on, otherwise I think we may well have spent another night there. By midday the river ascended sharply and after climbing the prehistoric turin, clogged with hundreds of dead trees, we saw our first glimpse of the lake. In the mist and rain it was certainly not what we were expecting, but nonetheless since we were staying at least two days, we found a good campsite to the East of the lake and got the fire started.

## WEDNESDAY 15TH AUGUST

Today was very wet so most of it was spent in the tents or in front of the raging fire we had constructed last night. Richard read cover to cover the expedition medical guide to put off the hunger pains, and later joined Sam in an attempt to swim in the lake during one of the seldom spells of sunshine. By the late afternoon we had dispensed with any serious plans to leave the camp; the rains still fell heavily and even the Russians in the surrounding campsites, who usually battled on in the face of such weather, spent the day confined to their gazebos.

## THURSDAY 16TH AUGUST

As predicted, today began with brilliant sunshine. We delayed our return journey by four hours to soak in the rays and dry off a little. By midday we could see that the clouds were slowly forming over the pinnacle of Mashy Bashy, so set off back to Chibit. By the early evening we had nearly made it to the top of the high pass and decided to camp there. It was unusually cold in the evening and by the time we had crawled into our cramped sleeping bags, snow had started to slowly fall. We were all grateful to have three warm bodies in a two man tent that night.

## FRIDAY 17TH AUGUST

After a quick round to photograph the icy morning, we set off back to Chibit. As is the case with linear return treks, the foreknowledge of what is before you makes the going very tiresome. The path downhill seemed a great deal longer than before and the bridge much more dangerous. From Chibit we had a 6 km walk along the Chutsky Trakt to the meeting spot in Aktash. Even worse than before, each kilometre was marked so we knew exactly how far we had gone and how far there was left to go.

By six o'clock we reached Aktash and collapsed in a roadside karaoke diner. The ladies working there seemed unconcerned by our dirty and probably smelly clothing; instead they enthusiastically served us beer and hot food and insisted that we had a go on the karaoke machine. After finding Nick and Tim at the hotel on the other side of town, Richard gave the ladies a rendition of a few Beatles tunes. They were most pleased.

By 1945 we were on a bus with the Team Gorky leaders on our way to the camp some 20 kilometres to the West. Waiting for us there was an array of Russian food and two dozen middle aged Russians who would be our group. Friendly exchanges took place next to a roaring fire and each of us introduced ourselves to the rest of the group with a toast of vodka. We were greatly relieved to have things organised for us and for the next week relished in the fact that not only could vast distances be travelled with little or no effort, but also each delicious meal was provided without our exertion. In many ways this marked the end of the trip as an expedition, from then on we were passengers.



*Photo 11. A safety kayak keeps watch on one of the rafts. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

### *4.3 The Rafting by Nicholas Skipper*

SATURDAY 18TH AUGUST:

Today we managed to obtain some suitable clothing from the other rafters and had a quick lesson on how to raft and the necessary commands in Russian and safety procedures. In order to practice and get used to the raft we spent five hours on the Chuya river, going through a couple of grade three rapids. Before each rapid we all disembarked and inspected what was coming up. Quite a lot of time was spent doing this but, as all the team explained later, it was essential for safe rafting. Today's rapids only served to wet the teams appetite for the grade five rapids we would be rafting in a couple of days.

After four hours of rafting we went up to the northern bank and loaded the rafts and then ourselves into an old truck. Whilst crammed into the back we continued to introduce ourselves to the group and before long a mug of vodka made its way round, raising the team's spirits over the cramped 20 kilometre journey back to the camp.

SUNDAY 19TH AUGUST:

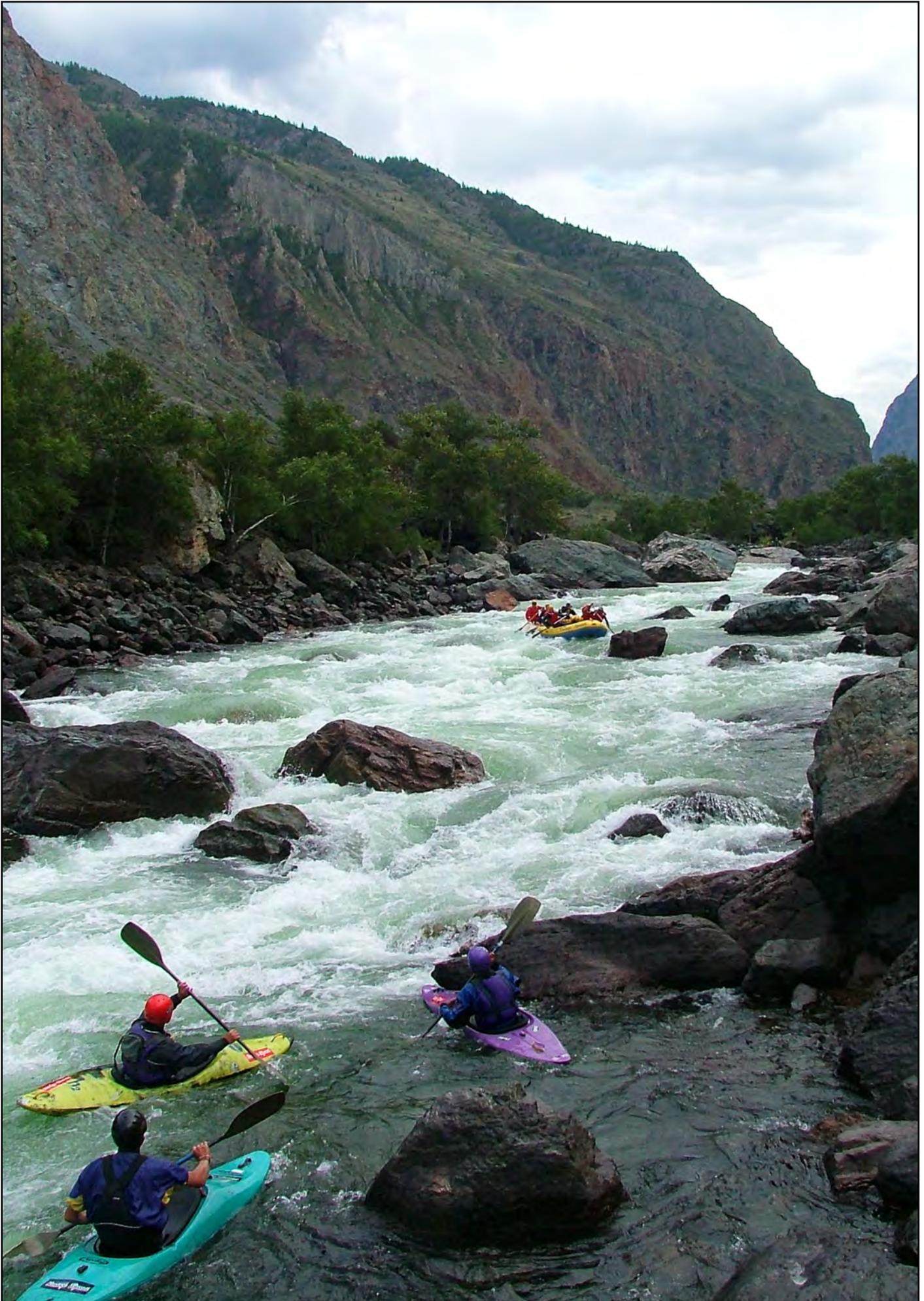
Early in the morning a fine breakfast of pancakes, porridge and fruit was served whilst the camp was slowly packed up and piled onto the back of a pickup truck. Knowing how long it was to our destination, we were all worried that we would have to pile in after them, but thankfully an alternate form of transport arrived. The trucks that appeared seem to be unique to the former USSR. They are effectively an articulated lorry cab with a garden shed bolted to the back. Inside are spring mounted seats, to offset the lack of suspension and a wood burning stove.

Once all the gear had been loaded, and the people in the back of these trucks, the slow movement towards the Chulyshman canyon began. As the trucks rarely seemed to get above 30 miles per hour, there was plenty of time to admire the beautiful scenery that we were passing through. After returning to Aktash, we turned North and began climbing a 3,000 metre high pass, giving us great views not only of the Chuya range to the south, but also of the Sayan mountains to the East. After paying respect to the sacred trees by tying a piece of cloth to their branches, we began the descent in the general direction of Lake Teletskoye. We passed through a number of large Altai settlements, all beautifully constructed of local birch wood, and searched through the fields looking for wild mushrooms to cook with. By the early evening we had reached the Chulyshman canyon. From above looking down, both the canyon and the river looked remote and yet beautiful, anticipation again rose within us. At the bottom we unloaded the trucks and inflated the rafts. By nightfall, dinner was ready and the trucks were long gone. The rest of the supplies would be carried by raft alone.

MONDAY 20TH AUGUST:

We only spent two hours on the river today, but this section involved our first grade five rapid. No one has taken a plunge yet but we have nevertheless all ended up soaking wet. I think the reason we stopped so early was that the next section of river is high sided for a long stretch and has many rapids before any suitable camping. Tonight we stayed beneath a sheer rock face in a lovely grassy spot, with a large waterfall just in view.

One of the raft leaders, also by the name of Tim, introduced us to some of the wild marijuana which he explained was the best in the Altai. In the evening, in front of the fire, we shared this and the vodka amongst our team mates. Last night was a very heavy night as the Russians were trying to make us drunk, so tonight everybody wanted to go to bed early.



*Photo 12. Safety kayaks keep watch on the river. Photo by Nicholas Skipper*

#### TUESDAY 21ST AUGUST:

Today saw five hours of rafting with two sets of grade four rapids. It was a slight baptism of fire but no men overboard as of yet and a lot of smiles all around. Seeing the landscape from the rafts is a very different experience from walking through it; it is pleasant not to be dripping with sweat and out of breath for once. The days are in fact much more serene now, though of course there is the small matter of the huge set of rapids occasionally interrupting the mood.

Our bodies were still exhausted from the trek, so little time went by without thinking about the next meal. The food was exemplary, but we were always on the lookout to make sure that we were not being too glutinous. It was a constant psychological battle when faced with that amount of good food not to fill your plate to the brim and to leave some for the rest of the group. Some of us fared better than others.

#### WEDNESDAY 22ND AUGUST:

A long day on the river with many long continuous white water sections and even a grade five. We have all been swapping positions in the rafts each day and it has been decided that by far the most exciting are the front positions - you really get to see what is coming and it usually smacks you in the face moments later. Later in the day, Andre offered the position of leader to one of us, maybe to make sure that we did not think his job was easy. Richard stepped up to the mark this time, successfully grounding the raft on pretty much every rock in our path. It certainly was not easy.

#### THURSDAY 23RD AUGUST:

No rafting today but four of the team headed out with many of the Russians to a large waterfall two and a half hours walk away from camp. The walk itself was fairly tame in comparison to what we had been doing just a few weeks before, although there was a small section of *via ferrata*. The waterfall itself was much more impressive than any we had seen during our trek. There was a huge volume of white water cascading down in every direction around huge black volcanic rocks. We heard the rumbling of the water long before the falls actually came into sight.

The evening saw a *banya* set up and Richard and Sam were brave enough to try it. A *banya* is a type of sauna set up in a heavy canvas tent using rocks heated in a fire and water to create steam. The Russians absolutely love them and spend their idle flagellating themselves and others with birch branches before running out and diving into the icy cold river water. The meal was also a special one this evening. A goat was purchased from a local tribesman and after butchering was cooked up into a stew. After being successfully initiated into the Russian customs of *banya* and food preparation, we felt much more at ease with our team mates and that evening enjoyed a number of enlightening conversations about Russo-British relations and their opinions on Vladimir Putin.

#### FRIDAY 24TH AUGUST:

50 kilometres were covered on our final day on the river but with virtually no rapids so this meant a great deal of paddling. It was a very quiet and relaxing day in which virtually all the team suffered mild sunburn. We ate wild berries from the banks of the river in between bursts of paddling.

As the evening drew in we emerged out onto the open waters of Lake Teletskoye, our final destination and proceeded round the bay to a beautiful camping spot just along the beach from the mouth of the Chulyshman. After pulling our raft out of the water we waded back in and followed the Russian tradition of splashing all the other rafts as they arrived. The rafting was now over and we would relax that evening before catching the seven hour ferry ride back across the lake early the following morning. From there we boarded a bus for the five hour journey back to Barnaul, stopping off at stands selling a number of goods from pancakes with soured cream and wild strawberries, to wild honey with cashew nuts.



*Photo 13. Unpacking the raft after arriving at Lake Teletskoye. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

In Barnaul we realised that our return train tickets had failed to materialise and so would have to stay for the next week to catch a flight the next Friday. In the meantime we enjoyed the finest of Russian cuisine and urban culture. Our team mates left for their respective homes that Sunday, but first showing us a few nights out. We were sad to see them go.

## 5. Culture

We were lucky enough to be exposed to a great deal of both European and Asian culture whilst in the country. In particular, the final week spent with the Russian group was an invaluable way to learn a little about what it means today to be Russian. Despite the country's size and ethnic diversity there seem to be traits that are almost universal and after spending time with that group it is quite easy to identify them. At the same time, there are over a hundred different ethnic groups, each with their own customs and traditions in the Altai Republic alone.

### 5.1 *The tribes*

With so many different tribes present in this region, it is difficult to identify which is which as they are all Turkic peoples with a shared ancestry with the Buryats of Mongolia and the Tatars of Western Siberia.

#### **The Altai or Oirots**

The largest group by far is the Altai, who make up approximately 30 percent of the population. In most of the larger towns there will be a number of Altai who are integrated into Russian society. We found them to be on the whole a friendly group who often spoke better English than their Russian counterparts. Outside of the Russian towns and cities, there are also large Altai settlements in the central and southern parts of the region. These were signified by traditional wooden cabin style houses, with ornate blue edging around the windows. In these settlements the proportion of Altai was closer to 100 percent. These settlements always appeared to be pretty empty and we were frequently warned to avoid them at night due to the effect of alcohol on the Altai. Nevertheless, the people we did meet were extremely helpful and seemed genuinely sorry not to be able to communicate with us, except to ask whether we had any brandy with us.

We read a lot about Altai beliefs and traditions, but sadly it was very difficult to ascertain what was specific to the Altai people and what was general Russian mysticism. The Altai were historically animists, first shamanists and then converting to burkhanism in the 1930s. However, due to religious restrictions in Soviet Russia, they are for the most part outwardly Christian. During our trip we talked to a number of people about the spiritual places, *life magnets* was the term used, of the Altai. These were situated at the sources and meeting points of the large rivers, along with other places of outstanding beauty such as high passes. At these points people passing through would tie ribbons to the trees, over time completely engulfing the branches.

#### **The Telengits**

Towards the border with Mongolia the Telengits are the dominant ethnic group, accounting for just over 1 percent of the total population. The Telengits belong to the greater Southern Altai cultural group and are marked by both their territorial and cultural resemblance to their Mongol neighbours. Since the Mongol plains require a different type of existence to the lush mountains to the north and east, this group has developed their own cultural identity in order to survive. The lack of wood in the region means that house construction in Kosh-Agach uses more modern materials such as bricks and corrugated iron. Although, as before, we had difficulty in communicating with these people, many of the younger generation are studying English at school and were very willing to talk to us.



*Photo 14. One of the many sacred ribboned trees. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

## The Kazakhs

As at any point you are only a few hundred miles from Kazakhstan, this ethnic group makes up over 6 percent of the Altai Republic's population. The Kazakhs are a nomadic people, spending their summer months cattle ranching in the mountains and returning to settlements when the weather cools. Despite the remoteness of the Altai Mountains, many of the valleys were fenced and some even irrigated by Kazakh nomads to preserve their livestock and lay claim to the land. The Kazakhs do not drink alcohol and are therefore quite easy to spot when compared to their inebriated neighbours in the evenings. They also practice Islam and there are a number of mosques with shiny metal roofs in the southern part of the republic to accommodate the Kazakh population. The Kazakhs seemed to be a more industrious people and were often seen working in the service sectors, such as catering, hospitality and as drivers. Of all the tribal people, the Kazakhs were the friendliest, often smiling and exchanging jokes.

## 5.2 *The Slavic Russians*

The fall of the Soviet Union has clearly made a large impact on the Slavic Russian population, shifting their cultural similarities from Central Asia back to that of the days before the revolution. This has been fuelled in part by the almost decade long period of economic growth, making most Russians richer than anyone can remember. As a result, the urban Russians we came across are an increasingly cosmopolitan group, keen to enjoy the luxuries that a European alignment has to offer. Whilst we didn't spend long enough in Moscow to make any judgements, a week spent in the Altai-Krai capital, Barnaul, coupled with what we had learnt from our rafting group, greatly educated us about where capitalist Russia is heading.

Whilst it is well known that in the poorer regions there is a strong reminiscence to the Soviet days, the people we came across during our travels were singularly happy with the modern Russia and in particular their outgoing president Vladimir Putin. Large shopping complexes in Barnaul housed some of the finest clothes and food stores I have seen outside Western Europe, and the fashion of the day seems to have borrowed as much from the likes of Paris Hilton as in America. In the evenings, whilst the less affluent sections of society perused the Barnaul central fairground or waterfront, taking barges into the Ob and dancing well into the night, the young rich crammed themselves into underground clubs, listening to hard house, wearing sunglasses in the gloom and drinking only the finest champagne. This exuberance was not what we had expected from such a recently communist country. The arrival of Sunday however, was quite a surprise. It appeared as if the entire population was crowded outside the many Orthodox churches, wearing beautifully formal dresses or suites, making our Sunday best look quite drab. The contrast was unique, and it left us wondering which side was the more important, or even whether it was only a simple reaction to the time before.

Whilst downtown Barnaul educated us to the urban lifestyles of the Slavic Russians, our time in the Altai Mountains and the people we met there, was invaluable to learn how the modern Russian thinks. At all times we were impressed and indeed surprised at the number of people trekking up the mountains and staying for prolonged periods with little outside support. Whilst this is normal behaviour for our group, for most young professionals in Western Europe the idea of putting a thirty kilogram bag on your back and sleeping in a tent for two weeks is not only strange, it is repulsive. By Lake Akkem however, we enjoyed the company of no less than five Microsoft junior programmers, having a holiday with their girlfriends. Similarly the enthusiasm and energy of our rafting group, made up of middle aged and middle classed men was greatly surprising. It left us with the firm belief that the Russians were a much tougher breed than the Western Europeans and gave meaning to the phrase "If you scratch a Russian, you will find a Tatar."



*Photo 15. Lenin overlooking the population of Aktash. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

Russian traditions followed them everywhere. In the evenings, following afternoon tea, the men of the group would set off with an axe and saw to find some dead wood and a large fire was made. Large stone piles were erected on both sides and a log resting across these could hold a pot to be heated by the fire below. All members of the group would sit around the fire and help if needed. Otherwise, a glass of vodka was passed around along with cigarettes or possibly marijuana if a local source was found. The protocol was to continue passing the vodka around until no one drank any, then a five to ten minute break was in order. Often the vodka was followed by sweet tea or soda. After dinner, this system would continue with heated discussions about politics and foreign policy developing, fuelled no doubt by the vodka. The evening would end when the last person collapsed into their tent for the night.

The Russian people were incredibly generous and would often share everything of theirs with us, usually tea, food and vodka. We found this quite awkward because our stores were very strictly controlled as we had little surplus and didn't know for how long they would be needed. In at least three separate occasions we had entire meals provided for us out of pure generosity. We all felt quite ashamed not to be able to return the service.

### 5.3 *The Banya*

The Russian *banya* deserves a quick mention. It appears that wherever the Russians go, they will always have at some point a banya, which is the equivalent of a very hot sauna. Richard and Sam were lucky enough to have one during the rafting trip and enjoyed the experience immensely. In the early afternoon, before the ubiquitous tea break, a large fire would be constructed around a large circle of rocks. After six hours of heating, the fire was cleared away and a tent erected around the hot rocks. A bucket of water scented with tea tree oil and herbs was used to provide the steam. The men went first. Everyone stripped naked and huddled around the rocks, at the same time beating themselves and each other with bundles of birch sticks.

The heat and steam was intoxicating and both Sam and Richard were convinced that the Russian men were trying to make them faint. Once your skin had reached the colour of beetroot, you were allowed to leave the tent and jump into the nearest pool of water, in our case the Chulyshman River. At any other time, getting wet was something to be avoided at all cost, the water was freezing, but at this point it was simply perfect. This was repeated five or six times and eventually dirt and dead skin was scraped off your body using a blunt knife by one of your neighbours. Richard remarked that the entire affair was probably the most homoerotic thing he had done since boarding school and certainly there was a feeling of initiation in it all. After a further wash, you were deemed to be clean and returned to the fire to continue the vodka along with copious amounts of water.

### 5.4 *Food and Drink*

As has already been remarked, the fall of the Soviet Union has shifted Russia's cultural focus from Central Asia to Europe and cuisine is one of the more obvious examples of this. Traditional Soviet food borrowed heavily from Central Asia and remains the most common type of cuisine in Russia, especially amongst the lower classes. Central Asian cuisine is mostly lamb based, present both in their wet and dry dishes. The staple diet around the markets is *shashlik*, a lamb kebab with onions and chili sauce wrapped in thin bread, and in the cafes the most common meal is *lagman* a lamb and noodle stew. Fried bread, often with ground lamb inside, was also very common and could be bought even in the smallest of villages.

Amongst the Russians, ground pork mixed with barley which they called porridge, was the staple dinner boiled on a fire and eaten with spicy garlic cloves. Apéritif courses of creamed beetroot and lettuce, cured meat and fish and salted mushrooms were often larger than the main meal and were always delicious.



*Photo 16. A wonderful stone mural in downtown Barnaul. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

Breakfast consisted of *blinys*, buckwheat pancakes with porridge and fruits. Lunch was often delayed to be more of an afternoon tea, a custom greatly enjoyed by our English group. Earl Grey, English breakfast or green tea was drunk plentifully with sweet dry bread and small chocolates. *Blinys* were often eaten at any time of the day as a snack with soured cream and wild fruits, meat or salted mushrooms rolled up inside.

Vodka was the most popular drink, but beer was also common. The Russian's we met were very proud of their home brew vodka creations, known as *samagon*. We tasted a number of different varieties, varying from wild berries to bee toxin.

The more cosmopolitan restaurants boasted a much wider selection of foods and cuisines than most Russians seemed used to. Georgian food is extremely popular and was a strong influence in the pre revolution days, hence enjoying a resurgence. A wider selection of fish and meats could also be bought in the cities, even going as far as sushi bars in downtown Barnaul. Grandmother's pie, a one kilogram conglomerate of meat and vegetables was a common sight as were fine pastry and coffee houses, a good example of Europe's impression.

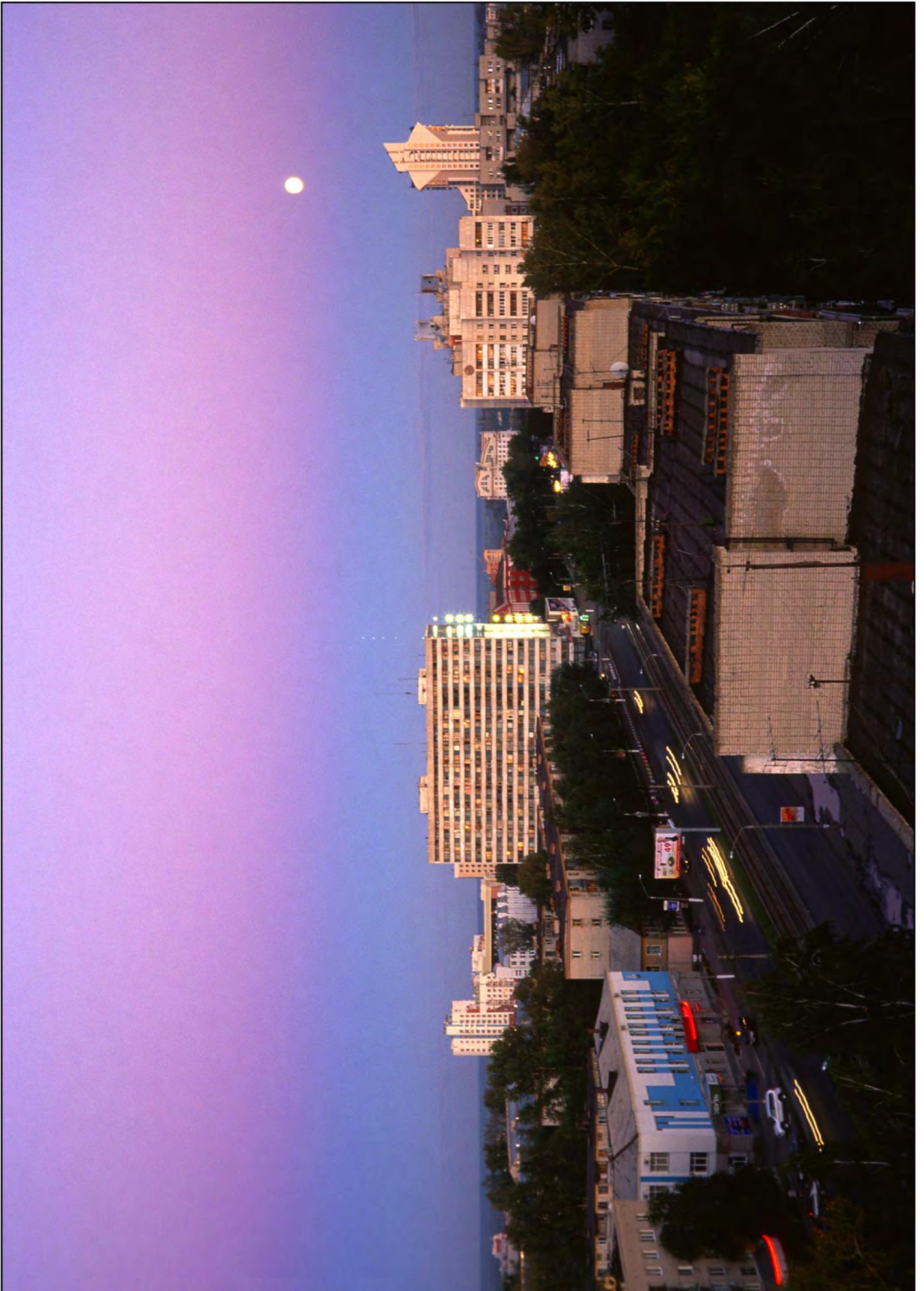
## 6. Some common prices

Price (Rouble)	Price (£)	Item
20	0.40	Bottle of Mineral Water (Legenda) (1.5L)
40	0.80	20 Cigarettes
10	0.20	Round flat bread
50	1.00	Round flat bread (on Mountain)
1000	20.00	Airport Transfer
250	5.00	Double hotel room
50	1.00	<i>Shashlik</i>
40	0.80	1ltr Vodka
25	0.50	Bottle Beer (350ml)
50	1.00	Main Meal
2000	40.00	100km Taxi
400	8.00	100km Hitch hike
6000	120.00	3000km Flight
400	8.00	4 hour Bus + Bags
10	0.20	Single Metro
25	0.50	Instant noodles
20	0.40	Snickers bar

## 7. End Note

### 7.1 Final Thoughts

So what if we were to do this again? What did we learn and what would we do differently? We achieved everything we set out to do and a little more, so in that way the expedition was a success. However, many of the group feel that it was an awfully long way to go to only see a small part of an otherwise vast region. When travelling abroad, there is always a balance to be struck between travelling far, seeing many things but not ever really getting below the surface, or spending time in a small place, understanding it fully but ignoring how it fits into its surroundings. In this trip we tended towards the latter and it worked simply because for such a small region it was incredibly



*Photo 17. The Moon rising over Barnaul. Photo by Richard Luckyn Malone*

varied both environmentally and culturally. In retrospect however, it would have been worthwhile to venture into the surrounding areas, in particular Tuva or Mongolia, and despite it being on the list of original objectives, the practicalities of such excursions were never really looked into.

In addition we were constrained by a lack of local knowledge. There was simply a limit to how much information a map or English guide book could tell you and this affected our route finding in both treks. The paths we chose were therefore well trod, and relatively dull. Later on, whilst talking to other trekkers we realised that there were other paths completely unknown to us which in retrospect we probably would have taken. This is in part due to our complete lack of Russian understanding, but we all knew that it would be a problem.

In conclusion the expedition worked well. The group dynamic was good and there was a lot to learn from each member. The fact that all the objectives happened shows that the planning was both realistic and resourceful and looking back on it, the original objectives that were later struck off would have been impossible due to time and financial constraints. Despite some of us feeling that we could have achieved more with our time, by the end the group concluded that it was a challenging, rewarding experience and most importantly, at the right level for the team.

## 7.2 Thanks to

It is hard to express what this trip means to us. It encompasses over nine months of hard work getting the necessary information, equipment, contacts and funding together. Though we were not able to fulfill all of our plans what we were able to do will stay with us for the rest of our lives.

The feeling of being self-sufficient in an inhospitable environment, of overcoming mental and physical challenges is not only rewarding but extremely gratifying. In retrospect even the worst experiences, such as trying to cross large fast flowing rivers, were exhilarating and something that we would all jump up to do again in an instant. The spectacular scenery, views, crisp air and people we met along the way, helped to keep us motivated and will no doubt spur us to do something similar in the future.

An expedition like this is somewhat of a logistical and organizational nightmare and we would like to express our gratitude and thanks to the following people and organizations, who helped, provided us with support, knowledge and funding, in doing so making it all possible.



MOUNTAIN SAFETY  
RESEARCH



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
LONDON



THERM-A-REST



SEALLINE



FORCE TEN



VANGO



*Photo 18. An image from the Earth from Space Archive showing the Altai Range. To the top right is Lake Teletskoye and the wide canyon to the south the Chulyshman. Photo by NASA*

And of course our respective family and friends who gave their support and put up funding; all of the University College London Expedition Committee, specifically Kevin King, Jane Zuckerman and Ruth Siddall for support and guidance; Maurice Gowen at Cascade Designs for helping provide us with kit; AMG group containing Force Ten Tents, Vango and Wayfarer foods; GMPCS Personal Communications for satellite phone advice and rental; Wilderness Medical Training; The Royal Geographical Society; Alexander at Connect Russia and Kras Air in Barnaul. In addition Team Gorky for advice and excellent organisation and Mark Sugre for invaluable information. Finally, all the people of Russia we met on our way who helped us, we are extremely grateful.

## 8. Appendix

### 8.1 Sources of Information

#### Maps

<http://maps.poechali.org/en/>  
<http://www.topomaps.eu/>  
<http://mapy.mk.cvut.cz/data/>  
<http://www.mapsworldwide.com/>

#### Map Legends

<http://rkkaww2.armchairgeneral.com/maps/keymap/mapkey.htm>  
<http://jomidav.aldavies.net/SovietMaps/Russian%20Military%20Mapping.pdf>

#### General Information

<http://www.waytorussia.net/>

#### Mountain Information

[http://www.alexclimb.com/routes\\_e.html](http://www.alexclimb.com/routes_e.html)  
<http://extreme.k2.omsknet.ru/eng/altai/Altai-e.htm>  
<http://www.summitpost.org>

#### River Information

<http://kayaking.ru/en/rivers/altai/shavla.htm> - Sadly dead at the moment

### 8.2 Contact information

I would be more than happy to answer any specific queries. My contact details are:

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