

British Mountaineering Council Report

A SHORT WINTER IN THE HINDU KUSH

Mir Samir 19,878ft (6,059m), Afghanistan

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A SHORT WINTER IN THE HINDU KUSH

EXPEDITION OBJECTIVES

- Mir Samir, Afghanistan 19,878ft (6,059m)
- The team will attempt the first winter ascent of the mountain
- The team will also attempt a first ascent of the unclimbed North Face

SUMMARY

The team attempted the first winter ascent of Mir Samir, Afghanistan. The mountain, located in the remote upper section of the Panjshir Valley, was made famous by Eric Newby and Hugh Carless in the popular adventure book "A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush".

Our objective was the unclimbed North Face, although if conditions prevented this we planned to climb the East Ridge, the same route Eric Newby attempted in the summer of 1956. Eric and his climbing partner turned back 700ft from the summit after running short of time and becoming concerned about getting down in the dark.

Unfortunately, a number of factors led to our expedition being cut short. The theft of a kit bag containing essential equipment, coupled with very deep snow conditions and route finding difficulties, meant the team were unable to even reach the base-camp of the mountain.

While the summit of Mir Samir escaped us, the expedition was a success in the sense that we travelled safely within Afghanistan, met some incredible people who welcomed us as their guests and had the adventure of our lifetimes. Climbing Mir Samir in the depths of an Afghan winter was always an ambitious dream, but I feel we have come away wiser and hopefully with the knowledge to come back and try again.



Eddie Bingham, James Bingham, Quentin Brooksbank and Mark Wynne

The expedition members dressed in local gear (from left).

INTRODUCTION

It was clear from the very beginning that attempting a winter ascent of a near 20,000 ft mountain in Afghanistan presented us with a formidable challenge. Three of the team (James, Mark and Quentin) had previously travelled to Afghanistan in the summer of 2010 and successfully climbed Mt. Noshaq, at 7,492m the highest mountain in the country. That expedition provided us with some vital insight into such a misunderstood country and undoubtedly laid foundations for our trip to Mir Samir.

Having read Eric Newby's book and keen to explore more of Afghanistan, we started to research the possibility of following in Newby's footsteps. In November 2010 we contacted David James of Mountain Unity and mentioned our plans for an attempt on Mir Samir. David had previously assisted during the planning of our Noshaq expedition and had a wealth of contacts within Afghanistan. He discussed our plans with the American led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) who were based in the Panjshir valley. David subsequently reported back that the PRT were very interested in developing tourism and felt that Mir Samir was a viable objective. This came with a risk warning that the mountain sat on the border with Nuristan which had become unstable, but the advice was if we approached from the Panjshir side it should be safer.



There were many worries given the remote location and security concerns within the country. While our last trip had taken us to the relatively stable north east of Afghanistan, this time we would have to fly into Kabul. At that time we only had limited knowledge of the security situation in and around Kabul. While we understood the Panjshir valley to be relatively safe by Afghan standards, we would still have to travel out of Kabul on the open roads. There would be many concerns to address before the expedition could become anything more than a pipedream. Aside from the security we could also expect extreme weather conditions. Would the roads be passable in winter? Could we even reach the mountain at that time of year?

ROUTE AND MAPS

KEY CONTACTS

Key people who supported us, provided advice and guidance are detailed below. Without their help the expedition would never have happened.

Philip Abbey, Provincial Reconstruction Team. Philip worked at the Panjshir PRT. He provided us with information on the roads and travel, advice on weather, security and permits. His help was invaluable. Panjshir was one of the first provinces in Afghanistan to take control of its own security and when this transfer of power took place the PRT closed. It had been disbanded by the time we travelled to the area.

David James, Director, Mountain Unity. David set up Mountain Unity in March 2009, as a social enterprise to provide marketing and capacity building support to economic development in north east Afghanistan. David mainly provided support for our earlier trip to Noshaq, but right at the start spoke to the PRT to gauge whether they would support our Mir Samir expedition. It was this initial encouragement that set the wheels in motion.

Jerome Starkey is a war correspondent and investigative journalist, who at the time was based in Kabul, Afghanistan. He not only provided us with invaluable security information and guidance, but also put the whole team up at his house in Kabul. Jerome also introduced us to various high ranking officials and politicians which greatly facilitated our transit through the numerous checkpoints.

Dr Abdullah Abdullah is an Afghan politician and a doctor of medicine. He was an adviser and friend to Ahmad Shah Massoud, legendary anti-Taliban leader and commander known as the "Lion of Panjshir". In 2009 Abdullah ran as an independent candidate in the Afghan presidential election and came in second place. Dr Abdullah approved our expedition and discussed the trip with the Governor of Panjshir. This high level support was very useful as we travelled to the Panjshir and had to pass through numerous military checkpoints.

Ali Farhad, Dr Abdullah Abdullah's "media guru". Ali discussed our expedition with Dr Abdullah, who in turn spoke to the governor of Panjshir. All of these men fully supported our endeavour. Ali was concerned about security and said he couldn't entrust anyone with our safety. He therefore decided to drive us to the Panjshir himself. For a while, perhaps swept up in the whole adventure, I think Ali even contemplated joining us for the climb.

Peter Jouvenal, former freelance cameraman, who as the Taliban fled Kabul on 13 November 2001 filmed the BBC's World Affairs Editor, John Simpson, walking into the city. Peter now owns the Gandamak Lodge in Kabul. After a meal at his restaurant, Peter kindly offered the loan of his land rover to the expedition. This greatly assisted us when travelling over the high passes and snow covered roads in the Panjshir. Peter also introduced us to his former guide and fixer Rahman Beg, who had worked for him and John Simpson during the time of the Soviet invasion.

Rahman Beg ("RB"), former guide and fixer for John Simpson and Peter Jouvenal. Following Peter's recommendation we employed RB to accompany us as we drove to the Panjshir. Although RB now lived and worked in Kabul, he is from the upper Panjshir and his contacts within the remote mountain village that we stayed were vitally important.

Shannon Gaplin, Director, Mountain 2 Mountain. Shannon is the founder of Mountain 2 Mountain, a non profit organisation, dedicated to creating programs to empower and encourage women and children in the rural villages in Afghanistan. During her time in Afghanistan Shannon also cycled the length of the Panjshir valley and was able pass on the details of her experience and the reception she encountered. Her personal account of travelling within the Panjshir was very useful as we assessed the risks of travel up through the valley.

James Wilcox, Director, Untamed Borders. James' company provides bespoke adventure travel holidays to remote countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and North East India. James had arranged several small adventure travel tours to Kabul and had travelled into the lower Panjshir valley. He was therefore able to provide us with a good understanding of what to expect.

EXPEDITION MEMBERS

James Bingham (36): Expedition Leader

James grew up in North Wales and was introduced to the hills by his Dad. He climbed Tryfan when he was 7 and has kept going ever since! Over the last 10 years James has travelled the world following his dreams of high adventure in the mountains. Expeditions have included successful ascents of Mt Everest, Lhakpa Ri, Noshaq, Ama Dablam, Island Peak, Lobuche peak, Aconcagua, a couple of attempts on Denali and a failed winter ascent of Elbrus.

He started out on guided expeditions before building the experience and confidence to lead his own trips. Now James seeks out remote regions, climbing in small teams, travelling light and ideally with climbing friends. Last summer he led a team comprising two school friends and an Alaskan salmon farmer to the top of Afghanistan's highest mountain, Mt Noshaq (7,492m). Against all odds the team accomplished the first British ascent of Mt Noshaq in 35 years.



Eddie & James Bingham

Edward Bingham (30): Climber

Edward is a former British soldier lives on the doorstep of Snowdonia, where the hills became his playground. At the age of 21 Edward joined the Army and from there he further developed his mountaineering skills following assignment to the Army Alpine Training Centre.

Edward has climbed extensively in Wales, Scotland and the European Alps, gaining significant experience on rock and ice routes. He has successfully climbed many alpine mountains including Mt Blanc and the Matterhorn. Beyond Europe he's trekked and climbed in North America, including an ascent of Mt. Denali.

Quentin Brooksbank (34): Climber and logistics

Growing up in Snowdonia, Q made the most of conditions all year round, especially the great winters! Regular forays in to the dark winter depths of the Scottish Highlands and European snow and ice climbing trips to the Austrian, Bavarian and French Alps. He was an integral team member on the successful expedition to Mt Noshaq.

Summer 2011 was spent climbing in the Cordillera Blanca, Peru.



Mark Wynne &
Quentin Brooksbank

Mark Wynne (36): Climber, team medic and photographer

Four months after leaving school Mark went looking for action by joining the Royal Marines. During his eight years in the Corps he served in jungle and desert terrains, as well as spending five winters in northern Norway, gaining his military ski survival instructor qualification.

On leaving the Corps Mark pursued his love of the mountains in Europe nearly always with a snowboard on his back searching for powder, of which he found plenty along with some close encounters with the odd avalanche!

Mark was called back to the Royal Marines for duty again in 2008 for his first experience of Afghanistan in Helmand Province for nearly seven months. He often looked to the distant mountains wondering how good it would be to explore them but from where he was sitting at the time it wasn't very likely. That was until he was offered a place on the Mt. Noshaq expedition last year, which crazy as it sounded to most people, appealed to him as the best holiday idea he'd ever heard!



ADMINISTRATION AND LOGISTICS

Destination area: Afghanistan

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advise against all travel to specific regions of Afghanistan and against all but essential travel to other specific regions of Afghanistan.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advise against all but essential travel to Bamiyan, Parwan and Panjshir. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advise against all but essential travel to Kabul.

Research materials and information sources:

Interesting links:

The source of our inspiration - Eric Newby's book "A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush"

<http://www.panmacmillan.com/Titles/displayPage.asp?PageTitle=Individual%20Title&BookID=410419>

Eric Newby's obituary <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1532127/Eric-Newby.html>

Hugh Carless' obituary <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jan/22/hugh-carless-obituary>

Our previous expedition to Noshaq:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-10758430>

<http://www.thebmc.co.uk/modules/article.aspx?id=3852>

Training and equipment testing:

The team met several times in some the worst weather that the mountains of Snowdonia, North Wales, have to offer.

Permission and permits:

The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) of Panjshir Province initially advised that the security situation should allow us to visit the region safely. The PRT stated they would arrange a letter of introduction from the Director of Culture and Information, which will allow the team to travel in the area. The PRT subsequently closed their office in the Panjshir and by November 2011 they advised us that the security situation within the Panjshir had deteriorated.

We thought we may need to take police / armed militia with us as we travelled through the Panjshir valley. We had to do this when we climbed Noshaq. In the end we decided it would be safer to travel under the radar without police or military escorts.

Fund-raising

We applied for grants from the following organisations:

1. British Mountaineering Council (BMC)
2. Mark Clifford Award
3. Mount Everest Foundation (MEF)
4. Nick Estcourt Award
5. Polartec Challenge
6. Sports Council for Wales
7. Wilderness Award
8. Berghaus

We won the Wilderness Award for 2011 (£650) and received grants from the BMC (£500) and Mount Everest Foundation (£2,000). We are very grateful for all of the support we received. The rest of the trip was self-financed.

Finances

The attached Appendix details the main costs of the expedition.

Insurance

It is possible to obtain insurance coverage for travel and high altitude climbing in Afghanistan. IHI Bupa provided over cover, although there is a 300% premium loading for Afghanistan. We paid £341 each and arranged over through the following broker:

Coral Parfitt, Bellwood Prestbury Limited
4 Imperial Square, Cheltenham, GL50 1QB, United Kingdom
T: +44 (0)1242 588 678 F: +44 (0)1242 588 688
www.bellwoodprestbury.com

Travel, transport and freighting

We flew to Kabul with Gulf Air and took all of our equipment and supplied with us. Our return flight from London to Kabul cost £687. Their customer service is very poor and they changed our flight schedule several times without any consultation or notification. Their customer service centre doesn't respond to emails. But there was some good news - they didn't charge a penny extra for the 160kg of luggage that we checked in! They are also the only carrier that offers a through service from London. We changed at Bahrain and the flight was without incident.

We carried the bulk of our food and supplies with us as we didn't want to spend a lot of time shopping in Kabul. There are a couple of Western supermarkets in Kabul and you can get hold of most food products. Western imported foods are expensive and these Western style supermarkets have been targeted by insurgents in the past.



Fuel

Given the difficulties of obtaining canisters of butane/propane we opted for liquid fuel. We purchased unleaded petrol in Kabul as we could not find any other suitable fuel. There was no obvious white gas or naphtha. We had the same issue when we travelled to the north of Afghanistan in 2010. This time we took our own jerry cans as the ones supplied on our last trip contaminated the fuel.

Accommodation in Kabul

We stayed with Jerome Starkey and other journalists at their house in central Kabul. At the end of the trip we stayed at the Gandamak Lodge which comes recommended www.gandamaklodge.co.uk

You have a couple of choices with the accommodation. The high end hotels have the most security, blast walls, metal detectors, more men with guns etc, but they also tend to be subject to some of the most audacious insurgent attacks. The smaller, more discrete hotels and guest houses, hopefully fall under the radar.

Kabul Airport

No vehicles can get close to the arrivals or departure gate, so you have to walk several hundred meters to reach the taxis and buses. There are plenty of young men who will be eager to help carry your luggage so best have a few dollars loose change ready. It does get fraught and two baggage handlers came to blows over our luggage.

Taxis

There are lots of taxis at the airport, and it costs about \$10 to get to the centre of Kabul. However, given we didn't know where we were going, it was recommended that we get a pick-up from a minicab company called Zuhaak taxi: +93 777 409 030. They are one of about five companies geared up to serving the expat community. Their operators & drivers speak passable English. They normally charge \$5 a trip, but it's probably about \$20 from the airport. They have a fleet of newish red Corollas.

Food and accommodation

For high altitude freeze dried meals we brought it all from the UK. It is possible to buy discounted American army ration packs in the local markets around Kabul. Kabul has several western style supermarkets which are well stocked. You could buy everything in Kabul if needed, but the prices are high and the supermarkets have been targeted by insurgents.

Cash points

These are very limited and we only located them inside a couple of the western supermarkets. They have a maximum withdrawal limit of 200USD per credit card per day. It is therefore advisable to bring your cash from home. US Dollars is the currency of choice and is accepted everywhere. It is easy to change into local currency if needed. There are limited opportunities to pay for goods and services, including hotels, by credit card. Bring plenty of cash.

Clothes

When travelling around Afghanistan we dressed in local clothing (Shalwar Kameez) and had grown beards. It certainly made us feel more inconspicuous when walking and travelling around. We spent several days wandering the streets and markets of Kabul and had no bother from anyone. Some of the team visited a tailor on the first day and bought inexpensive tailored clothing.



Water

Bottled water is widely available in Kabul, we also melted snow and ice in the mountains.

Communications:

Satellite phone: SO-2510 Thuraya Satellite Phone with GPS

Spot trackers: Spot Connect and Spot Satellite GPS Messenger

Email is available in the larger hotels and guest houses.

Our mobiles had reception in Kabul and also on the road to Panjshir.

Specialist equipment:

Avalanche transceivers: We'd never bothered with them for climbing trips before, but given the winter conditions we decided to take them this time. Luckily we had no need to use them, but it provided some additional peace of mind.

Security

The risks of travelling in Afghanistan cannot be downplayed. Most of our expedition planning concerned making sure we minimised the security risks as far as possible. However, in the months before departure the security situation in Afghanistan markedly deteriorated.

Towards the end of August 2011 we received news that two German climbers had been kidnapped close to the Salang Pass. The news later took a dreadful twist when we heard that the climbers had been murdered. Of course, at such a time we had to reflect on whether it was wise to continue with our own expedition.

Over the next few months we made additional contacts on the ground in Afghanistan in order to try and gain further insight into the security situation. Looking at the news there appeared to be a constant stream of attacks and no obvious lull as the winter approached.

In August 2011 Taliban gunman stormed the British Council in Kabul killing 12 people. In mid September the Taliban launched coordinated attack across Kabul, in which Nato's headquarters and the US embassy are among those targeted. And then in mid October the Taliban carried out their first successful suicide attack in the Panjshir valley, targeting the PRT building.

This news unsettled us all and I think we all reflected as to whether we should continue. In November our lead climber, decided the trip wasn't for him and dropped out. Although his decision was understandable, having one of the team drop out made us all think seriously about whether we were taking the right decision.

Following further consultation with foreign nationals who live, work and have travelled to the areas we were heading to, we decided to travel. We took it one step at a time and decided we would firstly travel to Kabul and then assess whether we should travel to the Panjshir. If we made it that far then we could assess whether or not to continue to the upper Panjshir as we had received specific intelligence that this could be an area of concern. And once in the upper Panjshir we would then assess whether the conditions allowed us to travel into the mountains.

Whether or not to travel to Afghanistan is very much a personal decision. Of course there are significant risks and you have to take the risks onboard if you do travel. We tried to look beyond the newspaper headlines and reflected on the fact that Kabul is a city of 3.6m people. These people get up every day and go about their daily lives. As a westerner you are more vulnerable, but we spent nearly a week walking the streets and had no hassle from anyone. Those people who did notice us were welcoming and friendly. Perhaps we were lucky, but that was the chance we took.

There are private hire companies in Kabul who will pick you up from the airport in an armoured land cruiser. We did think about this for a while, but having sought further advice, we opted for a more low key approach. No one knew we were coming or where we were staying. We changed into our local clothes in the arrivals lounge and called a recommended minicab company (Zuhaak taxi) when we arrived at the airport.



Heading out of Kabul on the road to the Panjshir valley

The roads are in good condition and fully surfaced. It was January and the roads were clear until we were well into the Panjshir valley.

Checkpoints

When approaching checkpoints at night, switch on your interior light and approach the checkpoint cautiously.

Motor Insurance

We drove a borrowed land rover to the Panjshir valley from Kabul. We were advised that there is no vehicle insurance so you have to take your chances on the road if you decide to drive. It is probably safer and more sensible to arrange a taxi to drive you.

Transport to the Panjshir

Originally we planned to travel with Afghan Logistics who were recommended as one of the best transport and logistics companies in Kabul. However, after contacting them from the UK for a quote, they refused to take us and advised us not to come to Afghanistan given the security situation. This was more unsettling news given they had a clear commercial interest to transport us. So when we finally arrived in Kabul we didn't know how we would get to the Panjshir or whether it would be safe enough to travel. In the end we borrowed a land rover from Peter Jovenal and Ali Farhad drove a second car. Zuhak taxis would also have taken us and we did receive a reasonable quote. When we returned from the Panjshir we drove ourselves in the land rover and hired a taxi for the second vehicle. Taxi fare around 100USD but expect to haggle hard.



Snow chains

In winter these are essential for driving through the higher mountain passes where the roads are covered in snow and ice. We didn't have them and this meant one car couldn't get all the way and we had to hitch a ride with a local taxi with chains! We managed to get our land rover through but had to dig it out several times. Snow chains would have saved a lot of bother and the embarrassment of being overtaken by local buzkashi rider on the way to a game!

Winter conditions

We came prepared for a winter ascent. Our equipment was what you would expect for a Denali or even an 8,000m peak. Sleeping bags were good for -30c.

Avalanches

Based on the large amount of snow that falls during an Afghan winter we were very concerned about the general avalanche risk. Each member of the team carried a transceiver, probe and shovel. Even on the roads there were risks. We travelled in two vehicles and at times switched on our transceivers.

Medical arrangements:

Mark Wynne was the team medic given the medical experience he gained serving with the Royal Marines. We had two full first aid kits which also contained high altitude medicines and antibiotics (amoxicillin and ciprofloxacin).

Itinerary

The itinerary can be found in Appendix.

Conclusion

The expedition was always a long shot, not only attempting a first winter ascent, but over the past year in particular the security situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated to a point where I think we all questioned whether we should continue. We are all pleased we took the risks and travelled to this beautiful country. On reflection this trip wasn't so much about mountains, it was the people we met and the places we stayed. It was a true adventure.

Expedition: A short story.

We arrived in Kabul on the evening of Thursday 11 January and spent three nights with Times journalist, Jerome Starkey and his housemates. These guys were fantastic and Jerome's subsequent introduction to Ali Farhad (Dr. Abdullah Abdullah's media guru) helped facilitate our passage through the Panjshir. Ali discussed our expedition with the Doctor, who in turn spoke to the governor of Panjshir. All these men fully supported our endeavour.

Ali was concerned about security and said he couldn't entrust anyone with our safety. He therefore decided to drive us to the Panjshir himself. For a while, perhaps swept up in the whole adventure, I think Ali even contemplated joining us for the climb!

The night before we left for the Panjshir, we bumped into Peter Jouvenal, at his hotel The Gandamak Lodge, who was once the cameraman of John Simpson when they secretly trekked through the mountain passes of Pakistan in to Afghanistan during the days of the Taliban's fall. Peter kindly offered to loan us his Land Rover for the duration of the trip. After a fantastic meal at his restaurant, and against all our safety briefings, we found ourselves driving back to Jerome's house through the streets of Kabul, in Peter's trusty Land Rover – completely ignoring any local vehicle regulations and those that our own country would normally enforce upon us.



Peter kindly introduced us to his former guide and fixer Rahman Beg ("RB"), who was from the upper Panjshir. After a few late night telephone calls to his boss persuading him to agree the time off work, RB agreed to come with us.

We left Kabul at 6am on Saturday 14 January. Having Ali and RB with us was fantastic and we passed through the military checkpoints without problem. Jerome had become interested in our journey and along with RB and Ali, decided to accompany us to Parian.



Sightseeing in front of one of the many relic Russian tanks with the Upper Panjshir in the distance.

James Bingham, Mark Wynne, Quentin Brooksbank, Ali Farhad, Rahman Big and Eddie Bingham. Photo: Jerome Starkey

The journey was without incident and we were treated to a beautiful sunrise over the plains outside Kabul. As we progressed further up the Panjshir valley, the route became more challenging with the roads covered in snow and ice. Ali's car eventually became stuck and could not continue. Without snow-chains, even the Land Rover was struggling and we had to dig it out on a number of occasions. A local car with snow chains stopped to help and we managed to hire this vehicle in order to continue over the pass.



Quentin Brooksbank waits in front of one of the many posters of Ahmad Shah Massoud at a Panjshir security check point whilst Ali Farhad secures our safe transit.

Quentin, RB and I were the first to arrive at Kawjan, a small hamlet of stone/mud houses, just beyond the Parian District Centre. RB recommended that we wait in the Land Rover while he spoke to the local men who had started to gather around. RB appeared to know most of the men in the village and once he had explained the situation, we were invited to meet the village elders. In spite of our reservations, we were warmly welcomed by everyone. Interestingly this was the area that had been specifically flagged to us as a potential security risk. In the event, the local Chief insisted that we stayed in his house and for the next two nights we were treated as their guests and offered shelter, delicious breads, thick winter stews and lots of hot tea.

Unfortunately for us, it later transpired that a large kit bag had gone missing, probably between the contents of the Land Rover being unloaded and manhandled up to the Chief's house. The news came as a bitter blow to us all as the bag contained vital equipment for our expedition; after a year's planning and to have come this far, it was now looking as if the trip was in jeopardy. For Quentin, the news was even more disappointing as he had lost his thermals, sleeping bag, insulated boots and snowshoes. As a team, we had lost a tent, one of our climbing ropes and an important cooking stove.

As guests in the Chief's house, we were put in a very difficult position. How could we bring up this apparent theft without offending our guests? I held a private meeting with RB and the village Chief. RB advised that the situation was getting "very dangerous" for us and we risked slighting the Chief's honour. We decided to stay for another night in the village, in the hope that the situation would change and that perhaps the bag would reappear, but we were without luck.



"Tense times", negotiating permissions, with the District Chief of the Upper Panjshir and a room full of curious villagers, to continue our expedition into the mountains.



Permission granted – the team finally sets out from the Kawjanvillage into the mountains of the Hindu Kush.



We mustered what kit we had. Mark had some spare leather trekking boots and although only suitable for UK weather, Quentin decided to continue into the mountains and see how he found the conditions. To his credit, he managed to stay with us for two days and nights, sleeping in -20°C with an old Russian army surplus sleeping bag, before making the tough decision to turn around and make his own way down the valley and back to Kabul

Although obviously sad at seeing Quentin leave the team, Eddie, Mark and I continued to work our way up the valley towards Mir Samir basecamp. Progress was incredibly slow. The snow was deep, the route not obvious and the sleds we relied upon to haul our gear were millstones around our necks. We constantly fell into deep snow and even with snow shoes it was up beyond our knees. The valley sides were too steep for the sleds which constantly slipped off the slope, threatening to pull us down towards the valley floor.

After four days of this torment, we lowered ourselves down into the valley. We thought the Samir River would be frozen and that we could follow its course, which would offer better terrain for hauling our sleds. This worked for a time and we made some progress but later in the day, the ice thawed and we found ourselves breaking through the ice. The floor of the valley was a classic terrain trap with evidence of recent avalanches sweeping down. We proceeded with caution, switching on our avalanche transceivers and keeping a good distance between the next man.



The sleds, weighing nearly 20kgs, proved to be hazardous on the steep terrain.

Our progress was ultimately blocked as the valley led into a steep ravine with polished rock walls on either side. Ahead of us lay a frozen waterfall which at first appeared passable. I led out and managed to climb about half way up when suddenly the snow and ice broke away. The waterfall was covered only with a soft snow bridge which simply could not hold our weight. To have fallen through would have been a disaster.



James Bingham punching through the fast thawing Samir River bed...

The next day we tried to climb back up the valley side but the terrain was too steep with our large packs and sleds. We had been climbing for five days now and had only managed around 1,000m. We couldn't believe how hard it had been and how little progress we had made. The weather forecast was heavy snow and possible storms. We were so behind our planned schedule now there simply wasn't time to climb the mountain even if we managed to get to base camp. After considering our position, we made the difficult decision to turn back and head down.

Arriving back in the village later that day, it was clear how slow the uphill journey had been. We couldn't believe how quickly we returned after all those days of hauling. There were some fine moments when we arrived back in the village and gave our sleds to the local kids; seeing their smiles as they played with their new toys, somehow made everything seem worthwhile.

The expedition was always a long shot; not only attempting the first winter ascent but over the last year, the security situation in Afghanistan had continued to deteriorate to a point where I think we all questioned whether we should continue.

However, we are all extremely proud of ourselves for taking the risks and feel fortunate to have travelled to this amazing and beautiful country. This wasn't so much about the mountain but the people we met and the places we stayed. It was a true adventure.

Upon returning to Kabul, and following a few beers behind the triple security doors of one of the few 'Western' drinking holes and a number of days exploring the city's streets, Mark and Quentin managed to organise flights to the ancient province of Bamiyan for some sightseeing and three days off-piste skiing.





Above and below: The manmade voids, carved into the sandstone cliffs in the 6th / 7th Century, where the ancient Buddha used to sit watching over Bamiyan were destroyed by Taliban artillery in 2001.



Koh-e Baba – Mountains



In the absence of chair lifts and gondolas a couple of hours were expended 'skinning' up the Koh-e Baba mountains to take advantage of the beautiful virgin powdered slopes. We met the enigmatic Steve Parker , a New Zealander, who had given up some his time to teach a couple of local sheppard's and budding guides the dangers of avalanches in their back yards.



Steve Parker, left, and Mark Wynne , right, snowboarding down a beautiful powder filled couloirs.

However, these beautiful slopes hide a deadly force...the close call of a strong avalanche brought us quickly down to earth from the highs of incredible back country skiing. We all carried avalanche transceivers, probes and shovels as a precaution and fortunately Mark was shrewd enough to alter course and snowboard out of harms way. Quentin didn't have much choice about which way the avalanche was heading, but his steady hand managed to take some great pictures!



The final day was taken up by cross country skiing in the newly formed National Park of Band-e Amir and its beautiful frozen lakes. A super ending to an adventurous trip in a country that some perceive as dangerous!



Itinerary

Day	Date	Where
Tuesday	10/01/2012	Depart London
Wednesday	11/01/2012	Night 1 Kabul (Jerome's house)
Thursday	12/01/2012	Night 2 in Kabul (Jerome's house)
Friday	13/01/2012	Night 3 in Kabul (Jerome's house)
Saturday	14/01/2012	Night 1 in Kawjan (Local chief's house)
Sunday	15/01/2012	Night 2 in Kawjan (Local chief's house)
Monday	16/01/2012	Walk to Camp 1 3,010m
Tuesday	17/01/2012	Walk to Camp 2 3,218m
Wednesday	18/01/2012	Walk to Camp 3 3,430m
Thursday	19/01/2012	Walk Camp 4 3,480m
Friday	20/01/2012	Attempt to reach Camp 5. Return to Camp 4. 3,480m
Saturday	21/01/2012	Return from Camp 4 to Kawjan. Drive back to Kabul. (Jerome's house)
Sunday	22/01/2012	Back in Kabul (Gandamack)
Monday	23/01/2012	Back in Kabul (Gandamack)
Tuesday	24/01/2012	Back in Kabul. (Gandamack)
Wednesday	25/01/2012	James and Eddie flight back to London Mark and Q fly to Bamiyan
Thursday	26/01/2012	James and Eddie arrive at Heathrow
Friday	27/01/2012	
Saturday	28/01/2012	Mark and Q leave Bamiyan
Sunday	29/01/2012	Mark and Q arrive at Heathrow

Finances

The table below details the mains costs of the expedition. We already had the bulk of the equipment needed from previous overseas expeditions. As you would expect the biggest cost was the flights, followed by the insurance.

Expense	£
Flights (x4)	3439.15
Spot Tracker (x 2)	289.00
Probes (x4)	196.00
Avalanche transceivers (x4)	1000.00
Shovels (x3)	105.00
Sleds (x4)	46.25
Spot Tracker (service)	115.00
Spot Tracker (service)	153.00
Ropes x 2	310.00
Sat phone credit	114.46
Stove Service kit	17.99
Stove Service kit	15.75
Tent repair sleeves (x 2)	10.78
Tent repair patches	3.15
Primus Omin Fuel Stoves (x 2)	261.00
MSR fuel bottle	15.30
Insurance (x4)	1364.00
Fuel containers (x4)	26.11
SIM card reactivation fee	40.00
\$200 USD - payment to RB	126.00
\$100 USD taxi back to Kabul	63.00
\$50 USD tips	31.50
\$70 USD fuel	44.00
\$150 Kabul hotel	94.50
Food and drink	600.00
	8730.94

Personal Kit list

Rucksack	Spoon
Daysack	Mug
Duffel Bag	Bowl
Snowboard Bag	Flask
Waterproof Stuffsacks	Knife
Bivi Bag	Leatherman/Multi tool
Sleeping Bag	Whistle
Sleeping Bag Liner	Headtorch
Thermarest & Patches	Spare Headtorch
Rollmat	Batteries
Pillow	Small Solar Charger
Pee Bottle (that doesn't leak)	Photo Camera
Down Jacket	Video Camera
Down Trousers	Tripod
Heavy fleece jacket	Passport/Visa
Shell Jacket	Money
Shell Trousers	Watch
Mid Layer Top	GPS
Mid Layer Bottom	Compass
Thermals	Climbing Harness
Socks	Twin Axes
Trainers	Leashes
Normal Boots	Crampons
Altitude Boots	Poles
Overboots	Snowshoes
Spare Laces	Splitboard/Skins/Spares
Gaiters	Shovel
Helmet	Probe
Wooly Hat	Avi Tranceiver
Spare wooly hat	Ice Screws
Balaclava	V thread tool
Baseball Cap	Belay Device
Neck Gaiter	Pussic Loops x 3
Liner Glove	Slings x 4 (60cm x 2 and 120cm x 2)
Work Glove	Karabiner locking
Mitts	Karabiner non locking
Spare down mitts	Few Metres of Tat
Spare Gloves	Crevasse Rescue Kit
Sunglasses	Mini Traxion
Goggles	Tibloc
Travel Clothes	Mini Rollers x 2
Wash Kit	120 cm Sling
Toothbrush	4 Karabiners
Toothpaste	
Shaving Kit	
Sunblock	
Lip Salve	
Hand Sanitiser	
Toilet Roll	
Foot Powder	
Blister Kit	
Hand Warmers	
Towel	
ipod	
Sleeping Mask	
Ear Plugs	
Rations for 14 Days	
Hot Drinks for 14 Days	

Trail Snacks for During Day
Energy Drink Mix
Water Bottle x 2 & insulator
Camelbak

Team kit

Tent/Poles/Pegs (EV2) James	Contacts List
Tent/Poles/Pegs (trango 2) James	Maps
Tent/Poles/Pegs (North Face) Mark	Solar Charger & Various Leads
Tent Repair Kit	Spot Tracker
Cooker 1 James	PLB
Cooker 2 Q	Radios x 3
Cooking Pot 1 James	Sat Phone & Spare Battery
Cooking Pot 2 James	Waterproof Case for the Above 2 rows
Fuel Bottles (1 ltr)	Sewing Kit
Fuel Bottles (0.6 ltr)	Duct Tape
Fuel containers (5 ltr)	Spare ice axe - wieghs less than large snow stake
Fuel	Spare Crampons
Funnel	Rubbish Bags
Maintenance Kit (stove)	First Aid Kit x 2
Lighters	Anti Diarrhoea
Windshield	Dex
Snowbag	Diamox
Cooking Platform	Ciprofloxacin for diarrhoea
Pot Grips	Amoxicillin antibiotic
Ropes	Water Purification Tablets
Quick draws	Binoculars
Carabiner screw gate	Pencils & pens - union jack gifts
Carabiner wire gate	
Nut set	
Slings	
rope tat	
Snow Stakes	
Snow saw	
Sledges & Rigging	
Marker Wands	
Summit Flags	
Plane tickets	