



Bilibino 2015

Chuvan mountains, Bilibino, Bilibinsky District, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Russia

9th August – 5th September 2015

Simon Smith & Graham Dawson



Summary:

In August 2015 Simon Smith and Graham Dawson travelled to a recently discovered granite massif in the Chuvan mountains in Chukotka, North Eastern Russia. As the first British expedition to the area they encountered wild stormy weather and the unseasonably early onset of winter, plastering their big-wall free climbing objectives in snow and ice. Despite extremely adverse climbing conditions, a brief weather window allowed the pair to establish a new route on a formation called 'The General'. The 300m E4 was named Ilium and involved quality climbing with the odd bit of 'necky gardening'. Further vertical forays proved fruitless as bad conditions prevailed, and, as classic Scottish mixed conditions rolled in to the mountains, they regretted not packing their ice tools. After escaping from basecamp in a storm the two battled over high passes in even higher winds with huge loads in search of climbable rock. Unfortunately winter had set in firmly making rock climbing in the style they had prepared for impossible.

Objectives:

To be the first British team to visit the newly discovered big-walling area in the Chuvan mountains near Bilibino, Russia and pioneer first ascents of multi-pitch routes of significant difficulty in Alpine style. To maintain a 'leave no trace' ethic in our camping and climbing activities.

Travel:

Air travel is the only way to access this remote part of Chukotka in the summer months (winter ice road). We flew: Glasgow – Amsterdam – Moscow – Magadan - Kepreveem (Bilibino) using KLM, Aeroflot and IrAero.

Funding and sponsorship:

We were lucky enough to receive grant sponsorship from The Jeremy Willson Mountain Exploration Grant and a small grant from Tunnock's (yep, the teacakes!). Significant kit sponsorship came from Montane, Tendon Ropes, Lightweight tents, Freelander solar panels, 3rd

Rock clothing and Buff.

Emergency Plan:

Non-critical situation: local mobile used to summon quad bikes for return trip to Bilibino.

If helicopter evacuation required emergency response was to activate 406Mhz satellite personal locator beacon.

Self rescue from any climbing situation will be our only course of action.

Bearspray procured from contact in Bilibino.

BMC insurance.

Medical treatment:

Graham Dawson is a qualified doctor and WEMSI wilderness physician with expertise in mountain medicine and Simon Smith is trained in outdoor first aid and is a Summer Mountain Leader. Full expedition first aid kit kept in base camp at all times. Smaller first aid kit for climbing. There is a small Hospital located in Bilibino.

Provisions:

While some energy bars/chocolates/sweets along with a comprehensive spice selection were purchased in the UK almost all provisions were procured in a baffling assortment of small shops in Bilibino. Staples were porridge, buckwheat, lentils, pasta, tinned fish, salami and cheese. Fuel for our MSR was petrol which meant lots of cleaning.

Expedition Costs:	£
Travel to and from country (inc. excess luggage)	450
Travel within country (inc. excess luggage)	1700
Local employment costs	None
Food and accommodation in transit and in Bilibino	300
Expedition provisions UK expenditure	50
Expedition provisions Russia	150
Permits and fines	150
Insurance costs	500
Jeremy Willson Mountain Exploration Grant	-1000
Tunnock's Teacakes Grant	-75
TOTAL:	2225

Expedition Timeline:

Days 1-5: Travel Glasgow – Amsterdam (layover) – Moscow – Khabarovsk- Magadan (2 nights, one on airport floor planned, one in hotel due to flight cancellation) – Keperveem.

Days 5-6: Met at airport by our contact, kindly put up in an apartment for two nights, several visits to immigration office to pay fines incurred for not having proper 'Arctic frontier zone permits', many shopping forays to a perplexing array of small mini-markets to provision the expedition.

Day 7: A very wild ride! Two heavily loaded quad bikes a dirt-bike and a battered Yamaha held together with sellotape provided our transport along with four amiable Russians and lots of beer and vodka. First along mining roads then very rough tracks to a drop off point 30km NW of Bilibino. A heavily loaded 7km slog in wet weather through wetter tundra brought us finally to basecamp (68°18'23.32"N, 165°50'5.75"E).

Days 8-10: Shuttling loads from the drop-off stash, waiting for a glimpse at our rock objectives

through the cloud and worrying light snow! Then improving weather and time spent waiting for rock to start to dry.

Day 11: Just about climbing weather. We had set our sights on the East facing side of 'the General' as a warm up climb. After skirting icicles at the base and scrambling up an easy gully to the start of the steepness we found what looked to be a compelling and continuous crack system. Some off-width grunting led to precarious tiptoeing up mostly verglas free slabs with just-sufficient protection dug out of shallow flaring seams. Some fine finger cracks spiced with occasional, worryingly loose flakes and run out 'necky gardening' with the odd enjoyable and diverting 5c move thrown in led us 285m to the summit. We named the route 'Ilium' E4 5c and a sense of momentum began to build as we eyed up other appealing looking lines on the descent.

Day 12: Woke to steady falling snow. When this cleared in the afternoon we switched objectives to make the most of what little day remained and climbed the first 3 pitches of the semi-bolted Australian line 'Basil Brush' on The General with difficulties up to French 7a on wet technical slabs. We then fixed 150m of static and descended to basecamp to prepare for a summit bid the next day.

Days 13-16: Stormy weather, temperatures down to below freezing inside the tent, winds of over 60mph, lots of tent re-guying and wall construction, heavy snow and large ice streaks forming on the walls; regretted not brining ice tools for the developing Scottish mixed conditions! Two Russian climbers and a trapper made a brief appearance, great cultural exchange involving 95% proof medical ethanol, salt pork, whisky and rifle shooting ensued before these gnarly hard-men declared "climbing season over" and bid a retreat in a storm lull. We also had a visit from the Australian team climbing in the next valley who advised us to retreat to their lower elevation for the chance of better climbing conditions. Retrieved fixed lines in poor conditions with anchors under 3 foot of snow.

Day 17: After worsening storms we used a brief weather window to break camp and then we battled over a high pass in strong winds and snow carrying 35kg+ loads to camp in the lee of a boulder high up the adjoining river valley.

Day18: Poor weather.

Day 19: Good weather, carried climbing gear up to Australian camp at 'Finger Crack Cirque' and scoped potential for new lines. Basin above the walls loaded with snow and seeping but hopes for climbing rose.

Day 20: Awoke to wet snow, both went on separate hikes but as the weather improved returned to camp then literally ran up to the cirque. Started up a line at 7pm, wet snowy slabs led to loose but diverting chimney climbing terminating at a fantastic looking finger crack unfortunately choked with veg and ice, descended by 10pm with plans to return and finish the climb.

Day 21: After an optimistic approach hike weather worsened again and hopes again dashed, consolation was found in a gift of more medical ethanol from the Aussies, recommended for the weight conscious camper, a mind-bending taste sensation mixed with boiled Haribo....

Day 22: With brain crushing hangovers we decided to undertake the 12k death march with all our kit to the head of the valley for early extraction by truck and quad bike with the Australians. Big party back in Bilibino with generous Russian hosts, a bizarre variety of local delicacies and thankfully no more Ethanol.

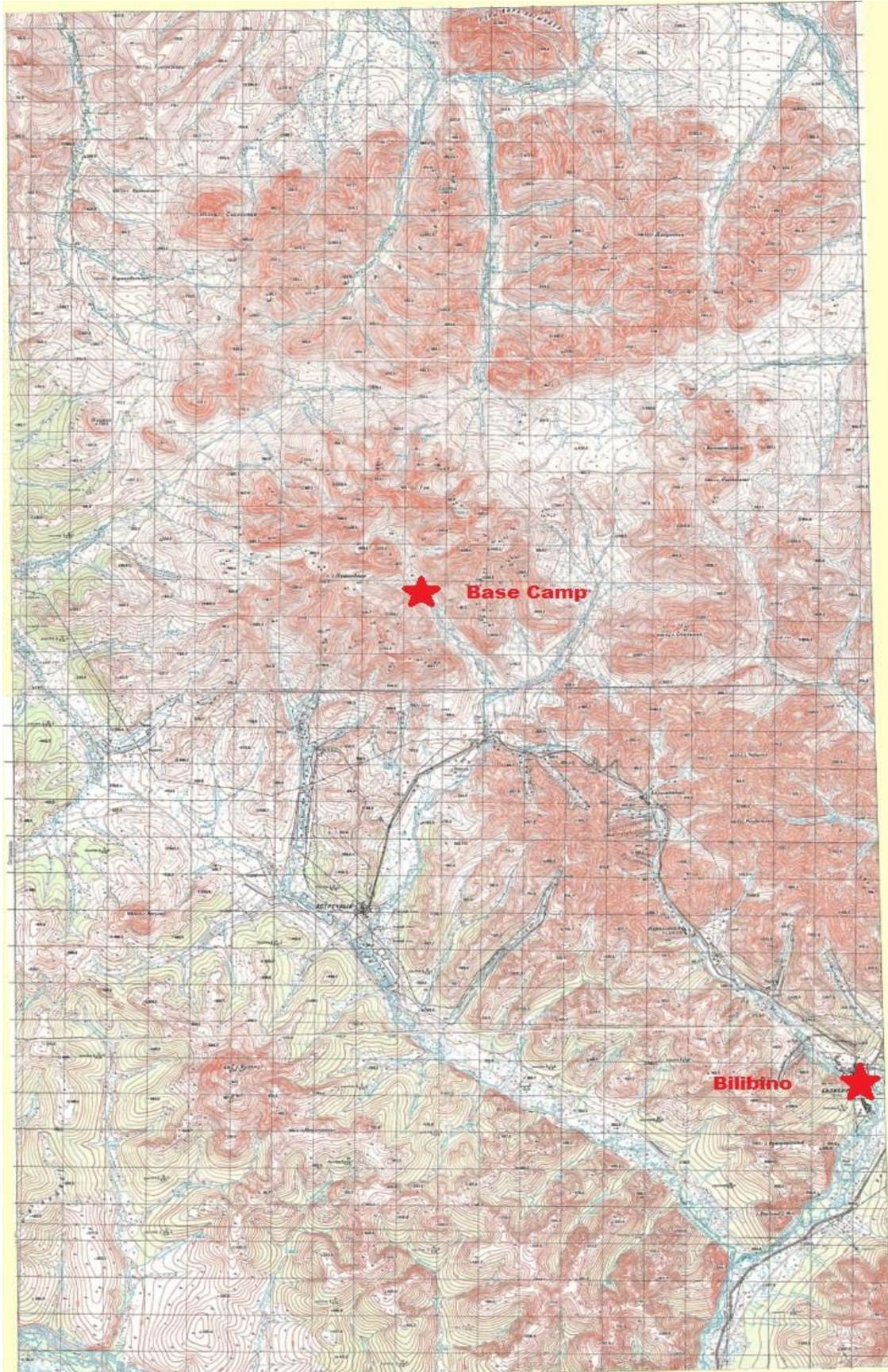
Days 23-24: Further hospitality in the form of a 120°C 'Banja', wilderness drives, more locally made meals and partying, all this congenial hosting was truly humbling and proved a perfect ending to our adventure.

Days 25-27: Return flights overnighting in Khabarovsk and Amsterdam.

Conclusion:

Despite the frustratingly unseasonable frosty weather, the one new route we did climb turned out to be a belter and the Russian companionship and hospitality we encountered was worth the trip alone.

Map:



Photos:



Formations, from left: Komandnaya peak ('Kommander'), 'General', 'Monk', 'Mini-monk'



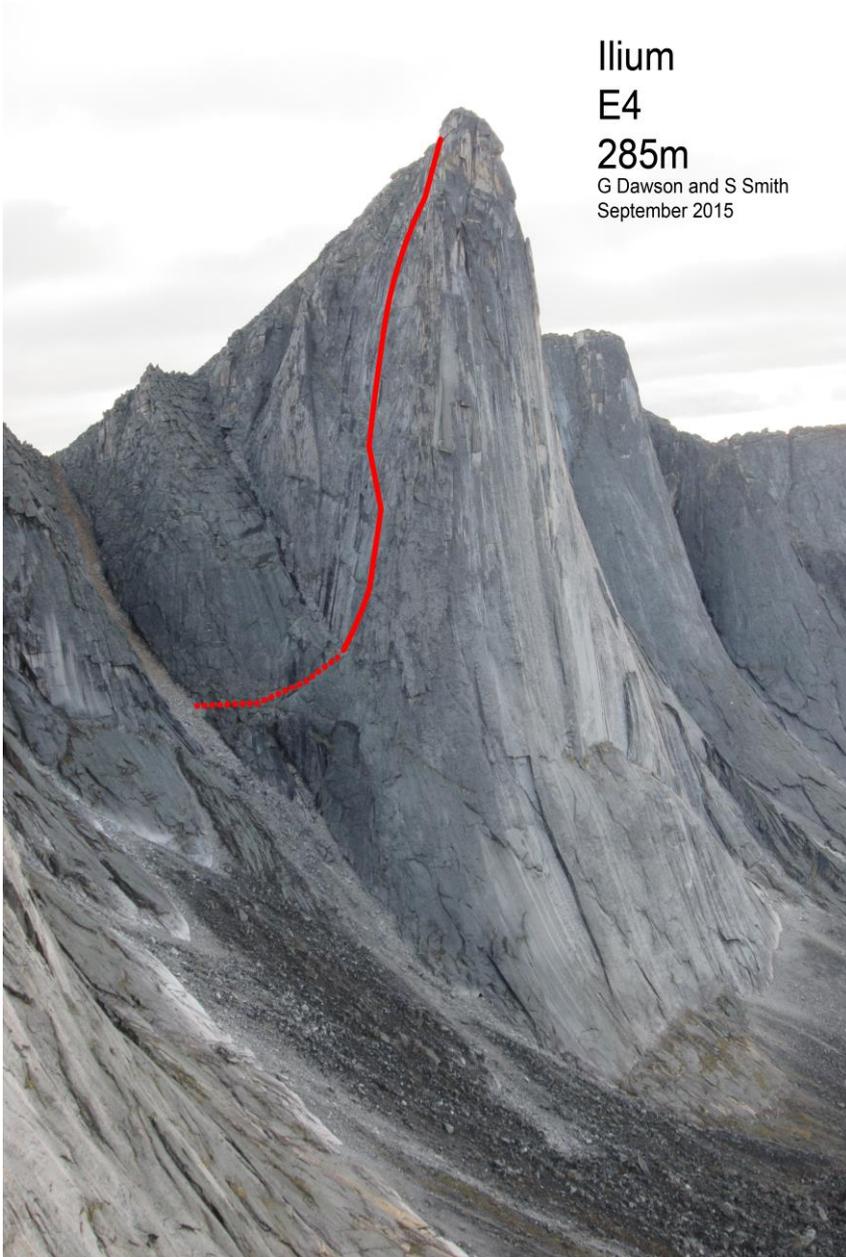
Graham Dawson on the first pitch of 'Ilium'



Simon Smith on pitch 5 of 'Ilium'



Bouldering down in the valley



Ilium

E4

285m

G Dawson and S Smith
September 2015

Photo-Topo for *Ilium E4 5C*

Many thanks to our sponsors:



FREELoader

