**Tajikistan 2016**

On 15th July, Will and I boarded the plane at Gatwick, hugely excited for the trip ahead. We were fit, healthy, even acclimatised from an ascent of Mont Blanc just a week before, we had all the necessary equipment, and (Will at least) had plenty of experience. What could go wrong?

The plane journey went smoothly, and we arrived relaxed, blissfully unaware that we had missed a military coup in Istanbul by an hour! After a day in a hotel in Dushanbe, we headed off bright and early the next morning. The journey was an interesting experience, with rocky roads, dodgy Tajik music blasting out, faulty brakes, and a door that wouldn’t close, and had to be held shut by the driver’s son. My experience was not enhanced by the Russian man who insisted on lying down half-naked pretty much between my legs for much of the journey. But we did finally get to Djirgital, where we would be getting the helicopter to base camp, only to hear that due to bad weather, we would probably not fly for two days. We were housed in a hostel which could easily be mistaken for a Soviet prison, but at least we had a bed. Our diet of bread and water, designed to avoid diarrhoea, and a town devoid of entertainment possibilities, led to an extremely dull two days. One of the few highlights was spotting a Russian woman who we knew from Khan Tengri base camp last year and had labelled ‘The Chicken Lady’ for her extraordinary bright yellow jacket, trouser, and hat combo - we were hugely excited to see her and desperately hoped she would be sporting the same outfit this year. After two and a half days of mind-numbing boredom, there was finally a good weather day. Waking up late, we were caught out by some uncharacteristic efficiency from the travel agency, and were only able to get on the third and final helicopter of the day. But it proved irrelevant as we were still able to grab a prime tent spot, and soon we had scavenged a table and some makeshift chairs, and created a nice cooking area. This done, we set up our flag pole, hoisting the British flag to claim our area of the base camp for Queen and country, informing our French, Singaporean, and Romanian friends of this development. We silenced their protests by pointing out we had the biggest flag.

The next day, feeling surprisingly good, and very glad that we had opted to bring our own food rather than pay for meals in base camp after hearing a number of people vomiting throughout the night, we headed up on a short acclimatisation walk. We seemingly chose the worst possible route with the loosest and steepest sections of scree available, making for an at times frustrating day, but at least this meant that next time we went up we would know what not to do. Lo and behold, we were a whole hour faster the next day, and by early afternoon had established camp near the top of the scree, just before the glacier. This efficiency did have the downside that we were left with about eight hours to kill before bed, introducing us to the sort of monotony which would in fact fill many of the days to come. It was also our first opportunity to enjoy a freeze-dried meal, and sadly it would also be Will’s last. Will has many skills, but eating freeze-dried foods is not one of them, and he soon discovered that even one mouthful of his Spaghetti Bolognese was enough to make him retch. This was a significant blow given the centrality of freeze-dried food to our meal plan, but as I reminded Will, our french friend Vincent had already told us ‘There are no problems, only solutions!’ so we would surely find a way round it. I was of course also desperately disappointed at this turn of events, and showed my solidarity by eagerly polishing off Will’s meal.

The next day we headed up to 5000m, but again had a very short day, only two hours. This left the rest of the day for us to be frazzled by the baking hot sun, and we both got pretty sunburned and dehydrated as we foolishly decided not to put up our tent. In the morning we returned to base camp, and spent the next day and a half basking in the warm sun and playing some cards.

Feeling well rested, we headed back up for an assault on Chetiroch, and were pleased to take just three and a half hours on our way up to camp at 5100m. Will got the chance to try out his solution to the food problem - 200g of spaghetti was the culinary extravaganza which came to the rescue, and would serve him well for the rest of the trip. We got an early night, ready for a 4am start the next morning. When the alarm went, we managed to drag ourselves out of our sleeping bags relatively quickly, and despite (or perhaps because of) the chilly temperatures, were on our way within an hour. The first half hour passed without incident, but as I led off up the initial snow slopes, it became apparent that my concentration was not at its sharpest. Lured off route by some footstep-like avalanche marks, I headed on to a steeper section. Realising my mistake, I tried to traverse, but was far too casual, and slipped. Panicking, I desperately whacked my ice axe into the snow, but it failed to bite in the soft snow. Luckily I landed on a sort of ledge, and gratefully headed up back on to our intended route. Will was less than pleased at the prospect of what might have been were it not for the ledge, and I hoped this would be the end of my mishaps for the day. Unfortunately it wasn’t. Before long I felt a strange movement below both my feet, and looked down to see both of my crampons had come undone. I sheepishly sat myself down, feeling very silly as Will tied up my crampons for me. As we progressed up the slope, things seemed to be going better, although I was hampered by some painful indigestion. To top off my bad day, I managed to drop a water bottle, which bounced down to the glacier far below. After four relatively miserable hours, we arrived at our planned camp spot at 5900m. When we arrived, another tent was already set up. About an hour later, a solo Iranian climber returned to this tent, and asked us if he could borrow some gas as he had run out. In return, he gave us some crispbread, rice, and curry - it seemed like a very good deal to us. ‘What a friendly, generous man,’ we thought - little did we know how wrong we would be proven later in the expedition!

We had hoped to go to the summit the next day, but a lot of snowfall and strong winds overnight had left the upper snow slopes in dangerously unstable condition, so we decided the safest option was to simply return to base camp. As we descended, we spotted a lone figure wandering along the glacier below. A couple of hours later, we caught up with him, and found a very strange sight - a Tajik man in ripped trousers, a T-shirt and tracksuit top, and ordinary trainers, with no bag and clutching a two litre plastic bottle of water. He asked us the way down, and we pointed him in the right direction, very confused as to what this man had been doing alone on the glacier. When we returned, we learnt that he was in fact the camp doctor, who had got drunk and decided to walk up to the glacier, and spent what must have been a freezing cold night there without food or much water. Search parties had been sent out in all directions to look for him, and he had been assumed dead. We decided in the event of medical difficulty we would probably rely on each other rather than entrusting our health to this madman.

The next three days were rest days, as we prepared for our assault on Peak Communism, and waited for a good weather window. These days were very dull, but did bring a comic highlight of the trip. We were waiting outside the base camp building, hoping the staff would let us in to play cards, and were pleased when one of them stuck his head out the door. But rather than undoing the padlock, he instead launched a huge gob of spit directly towards us, before disappearing nonchalantly back into the building, leaving us in fits of giggles. Otherwise, however, it was a frustrating couple of days as our impatience grew and grew. Finally some good weather came, and after a leisurely get up and some lunch, we headed off to advanced base camp, arriving within two hours.

With the alarm set for midnight, it was never going to be the best night’s sleep, and this was hardly helped by the sound of two enormous avalanches crashing down our prospective route just two hours before we were due to set off. It was therefore with a certain degree of trepidation that we set out, but luckily thanks to Will’s good navigation we were able to cross the notorious ‘Ramp’ within an hour and a half. We then scrambled up some rock for about half an hour, before hitting the seemingly endless snow slopes of the Borodkin Spur. The deep snow made for tough going, and when we were overtaken by a French couple who had set off two hours after us, we decided it was time to stop to avoid wearing ourselves out too much for the next day. Still, 1300m of height gain seemed a productive day. We found what we thought was a great camp spot, tucked underneath a hanging serac to the side of the spur. Unfortunately it actually turned out to be a terrible spot, as it was tiny, very cold with snow pressed against three of the four tent walls, and exposed to huge waves of spindrift which blew on and into our tent for much of the night. We therefore woke up feeling slightly worse for wear, and Will’s mood was not improved by the fact his boots had frozen, meaning he faced a half hour struggle to get his boots on. His day didn’t improve from there, and four hours, a snapped pole and crampon-ripped trouser leg later, it was an unhappy Will who arrived in camp on the Pamir Plateau. He soon cheered up after some food and water though, but high winds meant that the next day would have to be a rest day. They also meant that we couldn’t use our stove, even inside the tent, so the next day was one of hunger and dehydration. We payed for this the next day, with the 500m walk up to our next camp turning into an absolute death march in the later stages, particularly from me, who made sure to complain vociferously about how terrible my head and stomach felt every time I got in earshot of Will. We dived into our sleeping bags gratefully, just in time before the weather came in. The bad weather lasted for the whole of the next day too, leaving us with another fun-filled day in our sleeping bags. The highlight (or lowlight), was me spilling the best part of a litre of water, carefully avoiding my own sleeping bag and drenching Will’s! Needless to say he was not best pleased…

The next day the weather was much better, which gave Will the chance to dry out and meant we could head up to 6850m, where we set up our final camp. We got an early night, looking forward to hopefully summiting the next day. However, our plans were completely thrown out the window by the events of that night. At around 8.30pm, we heard footsteps outside our tent. Curious, I looked out and saw a lone climber, who I beckoned round to the front of our tent. It was the old Iranian man we had lent gas on Chetiroch! He was shivering, had no head torch, and looked confused, but he refused our offers of water and food. I watched and shone my torch for him as he attempted to put up his tent (while sitting inside it), but the slope he was on, and the way he was rolling around, it looked like he was about to roll off the mountain! Shouting a warning, I dived out to grab his tent and him. Will quickly put on his boots and hurried out to try to put the man’s tent up for him, while I took him (we later learned his name was Abdi) into our tent, where I then dressed him in his down jacket, put him in his sleeping bag, and gave him some water and food. Will’s attempts to put up the tent were hampered by a broken pole and lack of level tent spot, and we decided the only thing to do was take Abdi into our tent for the night. He promptly assumed a central position, taking up at least two thirds of the tent, with me and Will left squashed against the sides of our tiny tent. This led to a cold and sleepless night, as we worried about what to do with Abdi and whether he would die in our tent, whilst he slept soundly, blissfully unaware of our worries. At about 4am, he woke up, stretched, and announced ‘I sleep very well!’, much to our chagrin. We had decided we would take him down to base camp, but Abdi had other ideas. When we told him of this plan, he protested strongly, saying in his very stilted English, ‘I very good. I go to summit.’ A very long and tedious argument ensued, lasting three whole hours. In this time, we had decided that he must have cerebral edema, as nobody in his right mind could want to go up after the sort of near-death experience he had had the previous night. We therefore gave him a variety of pills, and waited for an hour or so for him to see sense. However, this didn’t happen; he just became more animated, and started trying to force his way past us out of the door. Soon, we realised that the situation was untenable, and we would have to let him go, especially seeing as he clearly wasn’t ill, just an idiot. Unbelievably, he then tried to go off with no bag, little food, and no water, asking to leave his bag in our tent. We told him there was no way he was leaving his stuff in our tent, but did give him a litre of water and some chocolate bars, and watched carefully as he left the tent, still not quite believing what we were seeing.

Exhausted from a night of no sleep, we were forced to take a rest day. We struggled to sleep, and at that altitude recovery proved very difficult. At about 5pm, our favourite Iranian returned, but our relief turned to anger and disbelief as he asked to come in our tent again! We told him he could go and find his own tent spot, but did watch carefully just to check that he was competent enough to put up his own tent. Finally rid of Abdi, we were free to concentrate on our summit attempt the next day. At 3am, we set out, and for the first half hour it seemed to be going well. That was until Will was struck by diarrhoea - hardly the ideal time at almost 7000m, in temperatures below -30 degrees. What followed is probably best left to the imagination, but the end result was that Will got extremely cold, and fearing the possibility of frostbite, we were forced to return to the tent to warm up. We didn’t venture out again until 7.30, once the sun had made it much warmer, but still both suffered from pretty cold hands and feet. This time we made it further, about two hours, before the dreaded stomach rumblings struck again for Will, at 7050m. He sensibly made the tough decision that he was too weak to carry on, but we both agreed that I should still try to reach the summit. Unfortunately, whereas the day before we had planned to go with two other pairs, today nobody else was attempting the summit, and the tracks from the previous day had been erased by the wind. This left me breaking trail alone for five hours, leading to painstakingly slow progress kicking my way up the slope towards the summit ridge, which in my sleep-deprived, dehydrated state seemed only to get further and further away. Eventually, with my pace slowing to snail-like proportions, my strength waning rapidly, and the clouds coming in, I realised that I was fast running out of time to get back before nightfall, and that even if I could reach the summit, I would be left with little strength or light to get down. So at 7250m I turned around and headed down, retracing my footsteps through the falling snow, feeling like an old man as I stopped to catch my breath after every five steps. Now in a whiteout, I was relieved to finally reach the top of Peak Dushanbe (the subsidiary peak) and catch a glimpse of our tent, collapsing into the tent where we both had a long night’s sleep.

Fortunately Will felt a lot better in the morning, which was good because I was feeling battered, bruised, and mentally exhausted after my 10 hour battle the day before! It was therefore a very slow start, but Will led us down through deep snow, with me staggering along behind, using the classic tactic of taking photos as an excuse for multiple rests. Luckily it it didn’t take long to get down to the plateau where we sat for a while to boil some snow and chat to the Czech and Romanian pairs who were there too. While we were chatting, the chief guide, Aleksei, arrived from base camp, looking tired and extremely angry. Upon arrival, he began yelling at us in Russian, ‘Who rang to say that his friend was dying?’, repeating this again and again, while we protested our innocence. This was actually far more scary than anything the mountain had thrown at us, and both Will and I were convinced he was about to come over and lay us out flat. Luckily, with support from our Czech friend Katarina, we were able to explain that we had rung to say *Abdi* was ill, not one of us, and that there must have been a miscommunication. To his credit (and our huge relief), Aleksei immediately realised the mistake, he had clearly encountered Abdi before. ‘Ah, the old Iranian man’, he growled hoarsely. ‘He takes food, he takes water, he is a bad man. When we get back to base camp, we lynch him.’ We thought it best not to ask how a man who spoke so little English knew the word ‘lynch’, but it certainly made us even more grateful that Aleksei was now on our side.

After this episode, we had the irritating trudge back up Peak Semyenova, and in fact as the snow came in we decided to camp at the top of the peak, before descending the next day. We eventually arrived back in camp around 7pm, just in time for some free dinner which the base camp staff kindly gave us, and despite looking like disgusting sludge was actually quite tasty (or at least seemed it after eleven days surviving mainly on chocolate bars). We were also pleased to learn that the helicopter flight had been moved forward to the 14th, and after two days playing cards and sleeping, we were delighted to be heading home. This left us two days to experience the delights of Dushanbe, and we made sure to immerse ourselves in Tajik culture by spending most of our time in the Irish pub. We also spent a lot of time trying to navigate infuriating Tajik inefficiency as we tried to sort out a visa extension just one day before our flight, which the travel agency had failed to do in the last four weeks.. Luckily, we did eventually get it with the help of a lady from the British Embassy, without her we would probably still be stuck in Dushanbe. Anyway, we eventually made it onto our flight, and were very pleased to return home to good beds, showers, and nice food. So not a successful trip in the way we hoped, but certainly an eventful and exciting one. Peak Communism, we’ll be back!