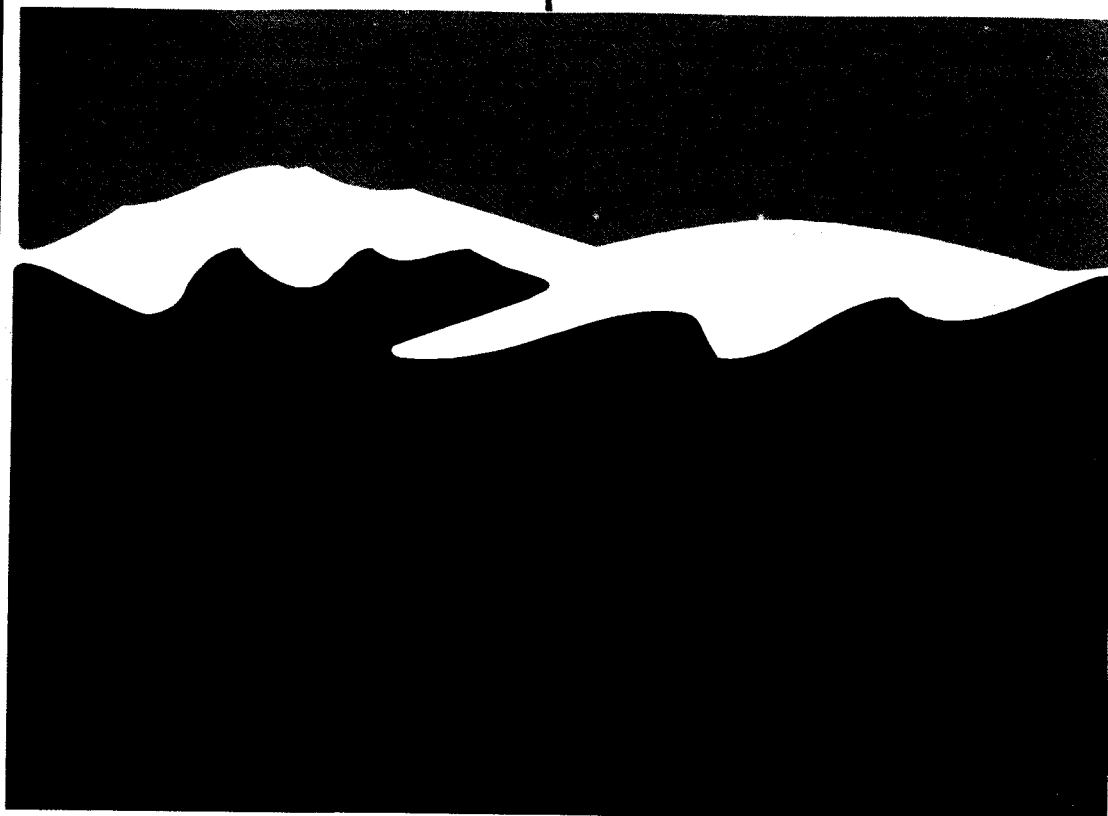


CEUNANT 1997

Welcome to the 1997 edition of the Club Magazine
- an opportunity to update yourself on the activities
of some of your pals and gain inspiration for future
trips.



INSIDE
The Future of Climbing Clubs
Bolivia
Kirghizstan
Alps
plus...
Skincare in the Mountains
Readers husbands (photos)

CLIMBING CLUBS...WHO NEEDS THEM?

After, and only after! I was made Fat Controller did I start to think seriously about what the Ceunant was for; what a successful club looks like; what the members want from it and what should our longer term objectives be.

The sort of questions we were being asked by the lottery grant people (What is our youth development programme? What policies do we have to ensure the appropriate representation of women and disabled people?) - made me realise that we are very unlike the sports clubs they normally deal with, are we even a sports club at all?

The obvious place to look of course, should be the constitution. It is of little use, talking at length about the detailed arrangement for the election of officers and the holding of meetings etc but very short on what we should be doing. There is mention of arranging indoor meets and facilitating safe mountaineering, plus a line on our environmental responsibilities (what have we done about them?), but not much else.

Historically, the club, set up at a time when climbing, long the preserve of the upper classes with upper class climbing clubs set up very like Gentlemen's Clubs, was opening up to the general population. The Ceunant was set up essentially as a training organisation and closely associated with the Birmingham Athletic Institute (BAI) with lots of rules designating individuals as official climbing leaders and they and only they were allowed to go on the sharp end of the rope! This approach was abandoned and the club, along with most other local British clubs, addressed the issues of the day. Transport was a problem and coach meets were common. The main activity on a Club night would be organising lifts and partners for the coming weekend, and for some, it still is. However the majority of members now have access to a phone and some form of transport plus a number of regular partners. Hitching up to Wales, for most, is a thing of the past. Accommodation was also an issue. The present membership owe a huge debt to previous generations of members for the vision and enormous effort involved in the purchase and renovation of Tyn Lon (without the benefit of a National Lottery).

The health of the club, by almost any measure, is sound. A large membership, approximately 150 now and still expanding. When I joined it was in the high 90s but was in any case limited by the constitution to 100. One problem the Club does not have is money. Last year we again made a surplus of around £2500 and while we will probably be ploughing that back into the cottage this year, it does give us scope to expand our activities in the future if we choose. The cottage, unlike many club huts, is well used, plus we are about to benefit from renovation that will put it into superb condition for the distant future. Our outdoor meets are well supported...well, except for the ones no-one goes to.

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There are some clouds on the horizon, however. The ageing of our membership is a fact, and inevitably, as we get older, we get less active. We could always rename the club the Grey Rope. The next generation of climbers appear to be less interested in clubs. Their sport revolves around the climbing wall, not the pub. The club functions of meeting partners, arranging transport and training can all be done better at the wall! There is a marked decline in attendance on a Wednesday night at the Queen's in favour of the wall. We are also poor at absorbing new, younger members into the club. I remember someone complaining to me about the Cave and Crag occupying a corner of the Queens, on the basis that they might steal our prospective members who might turn up on spec on a Wednesday night. I can picture the scene: a budding Johnny Dawes scratching his head and thinking "Which of these two bunches of old gaffers will be off doing some high standard routes this weekend?" or even, "Is there anybody at all in this pub who will take a novice climber out and show them how to tie a bowline?"

Tyn Lon remains our key asset and has become for most the focus of the club and its social life. In this there is also a danger of the club becoming by default the Tyn Lon Club. The Ceunant, particularly after the current renovation could risk becoming a sort of timeshare with parties. It will be interesting to see whether people are motivated to travel further afield this summer when the cottage is closed.

What of the club's wider responsibilities? We are, after all one of the largest clubs in the country, but what do we do for the general well-being of our pastime? We subscribe (quite a lot of money) to the British Mountaineering Council which tackles issues of access, insurance, technical research, rules for sport climbing etc. We do now have representation on the BMC local area committee, but apart from that, little or nothing at a political level. You may say that we shouldn't become involved in politics, but think on. At the moment the Right to Roam Bill, which would give access to walk on any open land as a right, is being postponed yet again due to a well organised lobby by landowners. There are a lot more climbers in this country than there are members of the Country Landowners Association (600) but we aren't organised. We, and climbers in general, are too busy enjoying ourselves to look after our own interests.

What do other clubs do? Other sports eg football, tennis, golf etc are actively involved in training and bringing on young people in particular, also organising competitions and providing facilities, but they tend to be a lot more expensive to belong to. Climbing clubs, however, are not like other sports clubs with their emphasis on teams, competition and elitism, or at least, they haven't been up to now. Will climbing competitions change this? The Grants Officer at the BMC is only interested in grants for climbing walls! Some of the national clubs have taken on the role of producing guide books and host joint meets with international clubs. The university clubs sponsor and promote

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international expeditions. On the continent, climbing clubs build mountain huts and are run like businesses, organising guides and large scale holidays.

In looking to the future, we certainly need to keep doing the things that have made the club prosper while other clubs have foundered: looking after the cottage, which is the main source of our healthy finances; maintaining an active social side; retaining an active and stable membership and maintaining sound administration. However, we also need to address the challenges posed by the drift away from clubs. I think walls have changed forever, the nature of climbing. They have attracted large numbers of new participants and delivered a boost to technical standards, but they have also left a big gap between where the sport ends and the adventure begins, which is maybe a new role for climbing clubs, helping those who want to make a transition from wall to crag.

Here are a few suggestions for the future:

Reciprocal arrangements with clubs abroad;

Buy some specialist equipment to aid members doing interesting things;

Buy a shed full of mountain bikes and canoes;

Sponsor expeditions;

A better band at the dinner. £2000 could have got us the Swinging Blue Jeans (I thought Denbo's Midnight Runners were great for £300);

New Member meets;

Spend more on the cottage - some new furniture would be nice;

A full colour magazine; An Internet site;

Larger barrels of beer;

More barrels of beer;

Bigger fireworks (maybe not); A really big Millennium party;

More training focused on new members;

Move our club night to nearer the climbing wall

ANY MORE IDEAS?

JIM BRADY

TREKKING IN THE TIEN SHAN

JULY/AUGUST 1997

I had always wanted to go to the **Tien Shan**, the Celestial Mountains, since first reading about their existence. It was their name that did it really. They begin modestly in Uzbekistan, just to the right of Tashkent and weave their way along the border of Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan to taper off at some point in Tibet 1600 miles further on. In the process some of their peaks rise to over 6000m and the most celestial of these are Pobeda and Khan Tengri.

Pitifully disorganised and with a summer holiday looming, I booked a trip with Himalayan Kingdoms who sorted the visas, flight, internal travel and everything else in the time it took me to get jabbed up and packed. I met a friendly party of eight fellow trekkers at Heathrow and we arrived in the capital, Almaty, after a 15 hour flight with a brief stop in Vienna. Not much later we called on the tour organisers, Kan Tegri, at their office in the national football stadium. Four hours after landing we were walking from the outskirts of the city.

Our guide, Vladimir, is the Dean of Tourism at the University of Almaty. Some

of his students accompanied us as interpreter and horse handlers as a normal part of their training to be tourism managers. For Olga, the cook, it provided a rest from her day job as a sculptor and an opportunity to get into the mountains. The horses had less incentive, six of them carried everyone's belongings, camping gear and food. We did manage a daysack of bare essentials each.

The walking was strenuous but through a beautiful and varied landscape. We were following one of the ancient routes used by nomads to move herds of horses into the grassy valleys of the Northern **Tien Shan** for the short summer. So the trail contours along the sides of steep gorges full of pines and mountain flowers to high passes. Gaining height gradually, to avoid apoplexy, we arrive at a lovely camp site for the first camp, just on the tree line at 2700m. The horses failed to join us since to of them had fallen off the path, rolled down a steep slope, and naturally, had not felt like going much further. So we spent the night foodless and pitless, but the stars were glorious and helped us ignore the

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freezing cold. So did the vodka, packed as a "bare essential".

The horses arrived at first light and injuries were treated by the vet in the party armed with drugs donated by the rest of us. We had all forgotten what they were supposed to be taken for, but anyway, the horses recovered speedily. On average, we walked for eight hours a day, starting very early to make river crossings before the glacial meltwater raised the level too high to wade. This was a novel experience, wading between ice covered boulders in my trusty all-terrain sandals as dawn turned the distant snowy peaks pink and gold. Not that I was appreciating the dawn properly until after the traditional Kazak post-river-crossing and pre-breakfast slug of vodka to revive the circulation.

The most spectacular leg of this trek was the walk up a dry glacier to the Aksu Pass. It was dotted by vast mushrooms formed by boulders precariously balanced on pillars of ice that they have shaded from the sun for decades. We didn't need crampons for this, but I did wonder about our less than sure-footed carriers as I gazed into the icy black depths of the crevasses. An easy hop

over the bergschrund and a steep climb up a narrow path over scree brought us onto the Pass where, at 4500m, we were puffing but delighted by the view of the highest peaks of the Northern Range, the closest we had been after walking for 6 days.

Although they are stunning, edged by towering seracs waiting to topple, these superb ridges and wickedly pointed peaks are mostly unclimbed. The conditions are too unreliable and they are too small to have the kudos of the summit ticks available in the Central Tien Shan.

Two days later we said goodbye to the horses and their handlers and piled into an ex-Soviet troop carrier. Ponderous but relentless, this thing ground its way through fallen rocks and trees, rivers and mudslides. Eventually we reached a road and drove, slowly to the start of The Trek - Part II.

Most of the drive was along the shores of the immense Lake Issy-Kul. We swam in the tepid salty waters and followed the example of the locals on the beach, covering ourselves with slimy mud before sunbathing. This is

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as effective as Ambre Solaire and only slightly less pungent.

The second part of the trip began from Karkara a small village, surrounded, like lots of others, by farm buildings and machinery derelict since the collapse of collectivisation. The town of frame tents nearby, with its restaurant, bar, saunas and helipad is erected every summer and more than doubles Karkara's population. It is run by Kan Tegri and climbers fly from here to base camps on the Inylchek Glacier. But we trekked.

For two days it rained and it snowed and then by some miracle, since it was bang on schedule, the ex-army helicopter swooped over the brow of the hill and swept us off to the South Inylchek. What a tremendous ride. The glacier is about two miles wide and it took more than half an hour to fly its length. The glacier seemed a long way down, but the 7000m peaks of Gorki, Khan Tengri and Pobeda still towered above us. It was perfectly acceptable to lean out of the helicopter and take photographs, in fact, the crew encouraged it with a grin and a brisk shove. Fully laden, the helicopter stayed low,

actually skiing uphill for the last few feet to shudder to a halt on the flattened area of moraine that was the landing pad.

The base camp is as good as Tyn Lon but with less snoring and someone else cooks the dinner. Frame tents house visitors and the workers and guides who live there all summer. There is a diesel driven sauna and a large hill of rusty cans and bones. Lightweight refuse is flown out but not the heavy stuff. Whilst wandering I came across two dead helicopters. Apparently the first had crashed non-fatally with a party of army climbers and the other had landed rescuers safely and then fallen over into the crevasse while they weren't looking.

Walking across the glacier convinced me of the seriousness of the terrain. Two branches meet pushing up ridges the size of Moel Siabod. Crossing several of the ridges and the crevasses that separate them was a knacker business at this altitude, and it was extremely hot. I was full of admiration for the six Russian climbers we saw setting off to attempt Pobeda. Carrying packs like small sheds, they planned to set up three camps and to do the

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climb over three days, gaining most of the 10000 m in the first two and traversing the 7km ridge to the summit on the last. This was the Ordinary Route. The faces are very unstable, so we could hear avalanched continuously. After the first explosive crack, the rumbling went on typically for more than an hour. I knew that I was looking at huge blocks of snow tumbling down a vertical kilometre, but on this scale it looked surprisingly liquid, like lumpy porridge only faster and more dangerous. The weather was clear and the visibility excellent. The Russians must have been

pleased; they had waited three weeks for it to brighten up.

On our final night, we were called from the farewell party in the snug, fridge-like mess tent to venture out into the cold (about -12 degrees) to see a night rainbow. A distinct ring of bright light encircled one of the peaks. I have never seen one before and have never read about it, but I was not persuaded by the UFO theory. It was a good ending, though - like everything else on the trip, a new experience.

Helpful bits:

Indispensable book:
The Lonely Planet Guide

Maps:
Stanfords, 12-14 Long Acre London WC2E 9LP 0171836 1321

Explain clearly that you want large scale maps for finding your way around, or you 'll end up with aviation maps. The large scale maps are schematic; they show main features and spot heights but no contours or trails. Climbers don't need a map. Get the bus from Almaty to Karkara, helicopter, and then look up.

Money:
The tengge is only barely acceptable; travellers cheques just cause consternation. US\$ work well. On this kind of trip there are only limited opportunities to shop. Here is a general guide to prices:

vodka	10\$ half litre
beer	a lot more
ethnic hats	silly money for embroidered felt, and you wouldn't want an unethically furry one.

Medication: **consult a vet before you go.**

DAN AND MEG IN CANADA

We went for six weeks to meet Kate who had been studying at Calgary University for a year and travelling around in the Western USA. This holiday is the only one from which I've returned and not felt that it was good to be home. I could live in Canada.

We flew to Vancouver on a scheduled flight for about £550. It is a clean, attractive city and although I don't usually like cities it is a great place : some fabulous buildings, a wonderful art gallery, museums, a huge and wonderful park, seaside and, of course, shops (where Levis are half price.) In general, everything cost about the same as it does in Britain (or even less now that the rate of exchange has improved.)

We hired a car (air-conditioned, hatch, and automatic gears) and drove north through British Columbia to Whistler, over to Vancouver Island, took the ferry to Washington, down the Columbia River valley to Mount Rainier, in to Olympic National Park and finally back north via Seattle and Vancouver to Banff and Jasper. Most of the time we stayed on Provincial or National Park campsites and they were very cheap and unbelievably clean and tidy. They put us to shame. Usually situated within the forest, they have large and well-separated tent sites with barbeques at each site. The showers and toilets were always spotless. Some of the mountain sites only have earth-closet dunnies and no showers but glacier melt rivers make good washing places, although chilly.

The weather in this part of the world can be very British but we were lucky and the sun blazed down almost all the time we were there. The general pattern of the day was to get up very early and walk early in order to avoid the heat and the people. It's all so big that you meet few people anyway, even if you stick mainly to well-known trails. Leaving the tent early meant that we would meet maybe half a dozen people going up as we were going down.

The mountains are fabulous and fantastic. Forest, forest and yet more forest finally gives way to Alpine meadows better than anything I've seen in the Alps. A vast profusion of brilliant flowers that had me gasping and oohing and aahing in a very boring way. We also saw many magnificent rock-faces with no climbers on them! We went in July and there was still quite a lot of snow about, even on the popular trails. At that time of year it was rather like trying to walk on piles of granulated sugar : very knackered. No crampons are needed unless you intend to go peak bagging.

We usually managed to arrive at the park campsites by about midday and so we were lucky enough to get sites most nights. A couple of times we had to go and find private campsites and these were not so spacious and clean (but still more spacious and clean than British campsites - what a disgrace we are!) Despite the fact that the park sites are so vast (some have over a 1000 places) they don't seem big. They are so well-screened by the natural forest and so well arranged that you feel quite private. None are visible from up the mountains and most can be easily missed by driving right past them. You need to book if wilderness camping up the mountains because camping off-site is not allowed and is very closely monitored and enforced within the parks.

Some of the high spots.

The walk up Singing Pass in Garibaldi Provincial Park, B.C. I now know what utter silence is. I think you would be able to hear the glaciers creaking if you listened long enough.

DAN AND MEG IN CANADA

The Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, Vancouver Island. It has a wonderful section on the North American First Nations (Indians to you and me.)

Wickaninish Beach on Vancouver Island. Or any of the other dozens of beaches. They are rather like out-size versions of Newborough beach but lined with massive fallen washed tree trunks and backed by temperate rain forest. Note the word "rain" ; it is there for a reason.

Wickaninish Beach restaurant. Yum! Our only "good" meal out and worth the expense. Try the clam chowder but only if you've worked up a good appetite.

If you fancy the West Coast Trail you need to book in advance which is difficult even if you live in Canada. It gets booked up for the high season on the day that booking opens and only 12 people are allowed to do it each day. Try the Olympic National Park coast trail instead. No booking needed and very similar.

The Columbia River valley. And the excellent rock-climbing area of the Cascades. There really should be a Ceunant trip there. Ask Dan about it!

Mount Rainier National Park has some lovely trails from which you get magnificent views of Mount Rainier itself. Rainier is a crampons and ice-axes job, for the experienced only, but the other mountains nearby are where you will see true Tundra vegetation with lupins only three inches tall.

The Museum of Flight, Seattle.

From Banff, the Edith Pass and the Cory Pass. More magnificent rock faces were seen.

The Columbia Icefield Parkway. This is the road from Banff to Jasper and is justifiably famous for its spectacular views. One of the best trails we walked started just opposite the Columbia Glacier. 100's of marmots.

The clean toilets everywhere! You can tell this really impressed me.....

The bears, coyotes, elk, marmots, deer and eagles. We saw them all but luckily we didn't meet any cougars.

Air-conditioned hire cars and easy-peasy driving on almost empty roads through wonderful mountains.

The vast emptiness of the high rolling land between the coastal mountain ranges and the Rockies. It is covered in mediterranean scrub and is just like the old Western movies, only real.

Finally, almost all Canadians seem to be charming, intelligent, friendly, young, good-looking, tanned, slim and fit. If you are my age you will prefer to spend a few days over the border in Washington. Reverse all the above features for almost all Americans. You will then be the one who feels charming, intelligent, friendly, young, good-looking, tanned, slim and fit.

Don't forget the mosquito repellent. Don't camp under aspen trees in a hurricane.

A Nine Star Weekend

Val Hennelly

The forecast was good. I'd forgotten my Tyn Lon key, but I knew it didn't matter because the hut would be buzzing with people.

Hazel and I rushed up to Wales full of plans. Our journey was only briefly interrupted to offer help - not needed - to John and Margaret Beddard en route from Shell Island, but broken down on the A5; they'd heard the forecast too and were about to set off for Scotland.

We were, therefore, perplexed to find Tyn Lon in darkness, but fortunately, the Fayrol was open, so we hijacked Emlyn's key. Andy Dowell sloped in later that night, but there was no-one else there to wake up to a perfect morning.

We'd settled on a challenging agenda- shopping and Milestone Buttress Direct were finished by 12.00 and then it was off to Holyhead to enjoy Dream of White Horses in the sun.

Neither of us had climbed on Wen Slab, and I had but looked at Dream in fear when I was young, so it took us a little time to work out that we couldn't see it from the North Stack Lighthouse. That error over, we joined the obvious crowds above Wen Lawn and were relieved to see only two other teams on Dream. We didn't know the tides and the other teams were traversing in from the notch, so we did the same -nothing to do with my hate of abseiling to sea level on an unfamiliar cliff! The first pair were foreign and so moving carefully, and the second team had a false start from the hanging belay at the end of the first traverse pitch. All this led to a minor traffic jam, but I enjoyed frying gently on the slab, turning in my temporary hanging belay to ensure even cooking on all sides. Hazel enjoyed the shade of the pinnacle and, eventually everything freed up and she waltzed across to join me.

I expect a lot of you reading this have done Dream, and some more have got it on your hit list. It's a great climb. The first traverse pitch is easy, as long as you descend far enough below the notch before you start traversing, and the second pitch is interesting climbing up a right to left slanting crack. The third pitch is an intricate delight. You start by descending Concrete Chimney (distance depending on where your partner ended up), and then move left and ever leftwards. The rock is surprisingly solid and the protection for you and your second a challenge to arrange.

Entertainment was arranged for us halfway through the climb by the passing of the Seacat to Ireland; though we barely saw the boat, about 15 minutes after its passing, the sea in Wen Larn started to heave. There were several lads at sea level watching their friend on something hard, and suddenly there was shouting, drenchings and lots of concern. But they got away with wet egos and a new caution of a calm sea.

We were smug as we supped our pints. How to follow such a good day out. Overcome with idleness, we had a slower start on Sunday. Hazel had never been on the Snowdon Railway and I needed little excuse. So we took the train to Halfway Station and walked down to Floggy. Great Slab had no occupants and after the first 15 feet we both enjoyed the climb, which takes you up acres of rock at a reasonable grade. The real crux of the day had been talking to the tourist train passengers. Though the slog down the path in the evening was hard, we were glad we hadn't done it on the way up.

And nobody else turned up at the hut. we felt lucky to have had such good weather, a memory to savour in a warm and wet February.

The Art of Suffering, or, HOW TO STAY ALIVE

I think it was Bonatti who once said that the art of Alpinism is to learn how to suffer. Some truth there, all right, but these things are relative, one man's meat etc...and, let's face it, Bonatti was a tough old boy.

The thing is, though, you do need just a bit of experience to enable you to judge why you are suffering and whether its -

- a) you just need to toughen up a bit to see it through 'cos that's the way things are in the Alps;
- b) your previous decisions were good ones but it might be wise for the party to bale out now 'cos you're just not going well enough for the conditions
- c) your previous decisions that got you thus far were bad ones and if you don't bale out now you're going to die soon.

How satisfying it is then, when a plan to abort the climb or not to embark on the route, leaving you wondering whether you've mistakenly just missed the only good weather window suddenly proves itself to be correct beyond all doubt.

A case in point was last August: the Bunny and I are sat underneath the NE spur of the Droites in lovely afternoon sunshine, tooled up and raring to go for the big one. Tomorrow's forecast - brill. So we have a wee choice: start up now, risk a little stonefall on the approach gully and bivvy as high as poss on the spur or walk over to the Argentiére hut, get loads of good sleep etc, start up it at 3.00am by headtorch and blast it up to the end of the difficulties on the first day....We decide on the latter course, insurance policy here being excellent quality bivvy gear and a lightweight flysheet to throw over us because the weather window will be interrupted by a short storm at night apparently.

The hut warden gives us the thumbs up for our route and the weather for the next two days - his radio link up with the Meteo gives an encouraging print out; very high tech, we're both impressed and encouraged. So, all we have to do is get up on time. We do. It's now 3.00am and we're standing on the hut terrace looking at some fine drizzle and low cloud (ie, we're in cloud at the hut). I feel it in my water that this is not just a bit of early morning drizzle to suffer through, so one of the Alps' bigger routes is not for us today because I don't trust the forecast. Something about this cloud doesn't look good. The Swiss guide who's assessing aspirants that week joins us on the balcony and agrees, happy enough that his students have also made the same decision as us. Great. We're happy too. We walk out. It clears up a bit. Enough to lull you into a rethink, and then the heavens open up for twelve hours or more. We pat ourselves on the back for avoiding one big epic on one big route. Smugly we drink beer.

The Art of Suffering, or, HOW TO STAY ALIVE

Nothing changes. Chamonix is still a wonderful place to kill yourself. That wonderful paradox between the ice-cream and tinsel in the town and the fight for survival in situations just 20 minutes away up the teleferic. Up to date information is required and available, to help you make life promoting decisions, though. The information highway in the valley buzzes with up to date information on current conditions. From camp-site stories to Guides' Office advice, you just have to sort the wheat out from the chaff and decide who's bullshitting - a big factor. A common camp-site theory is that the Guides will always tell you that its not safe and so on. The thing to do is to ask everyone. If they all say the same thing, take note!

Ken Priest and myself arrived in Chamonix in early August hoping to get third time lucky on the North Face of the Dru.

The routes log book in the upstairs office of the Haute Montagne was our first port of call. Yes, some party had done our route the week before. Great! And in good condition too. Wonderful! Our first attempt had seen us beaten back with stonefall; our second attempt left us valley bound in storms. Now on our third attempt, it looked like we might get lucky. We were prepared like no-one ever was; knew the route inside out. All the variations. All the escape ploys. All the descent routes. And now the Dru looked dry and sunny. The ice in the Niche was receded and so we would get lucky. We would skirt the rim of it in stickies and run up the thing! In the log book were reports of stonefall on the Bonatti Pillar from two or three separate parties, but the American Direct on the West Face had constantly good conditions reported; all reports approached from the Montets telepherique, crossing the Mont Blanc Glacier - super - cos that's the approach we want.

Our plan, brilliantly simple, was to do the approach across the Glacier, a descending and hence easy plod to bivouac level with our start point at a safe bivi site spotted a couple of years earlier. The first section of the route to the Niche, was known to us and in these dry conditions we would be above the danger zone of the Niche by 10 or 11 in the morning, leaving us time to finish and descend the same day. We wanted this route bad. I felt really on form. I was up for beating the Guidebook time on this one! We were ready, confident and relaxed - a potentially dangerous enthusiasm, but tempered with caution.

Our prayed for weather window arrived on cue. We were already packed and ready to go. We go. We get suspicious now. The easy gully down from the Montets to the Glacier turns out to be life threatening of the loose variety and my thermometer shows that its warmer than forecast. Four full 50 meter abseils down the gully and one more to get to the bottom. We stop. The Mont Blanc Face of the Verte is angry. The shattered remains of the Glacier, a shadow of its former self, looked highly unstable and was being swept by debris. A tenuous path across is spied and taken note of, but will be Russian Roulette at the moment. A change to the plan. We'll bivi here and run across in the morning and start the route by torch. Traversing out of the gully provides a safe bivi and we're still in control. More suspicions: its now one in the morning and contrary to forecasts, its too warm to get into our

The Art of Suffering, or, HOW TO STAY ALIVE

bivi bags and I'm unzipping my jacket and the collar on my vest. We don't sleep well but it's OK. We make good use of the time: I traverse by torchlight to get a plastic carrier bag full of snow and we drink gallons of tea and feed our faces. The barometer readings confirm our fears as we listen to sections of the glacier collapsing below us with sickening crashes. Dawn was lovely over Mont Blanc's summit and the Aiguilles but as I looked down the glacier below us, our previously noted path was no longer complete. As we watched, we saw collapses taking place. We were now in the right place at this wrong time, not suffering.

The decision to retreat was an easy one to make, but less easy to execute, bearing in mind the loose nature of the gully, but we duly arrived safely at its top in time to see 3 young lads with an unsteady and unconfident look about them approaching us to descend the gully. Needless to say, we gave them the benefit of our knowledge to date and explained what we English mean by Russian Roulette. They were French and ignored us. They were going to climb the West face Route.

Several days later in the log book back at the Guides' office we read their entry: 'West Face Direct, excellent conditions.' Now looking at their dates, it was apparent that they spent that first day on approach only and they mention nothing of the glacier. Call me an old cynic, but anyone following their advice in the log might get the wrong impression about local conditions. Their entry might have read 'gambled with our lives after ignoring good advice and got away with it'. Ergo: you can't always rely on log book entries to give you the whole picture. As with most of these bigger routes, getting on and off them is just as likely to kill you as the route itself. As they were on the West face, Christophe Profitte was seen to be running away from the Bonatti Pillar shouting to people 'go back..dangerous rocks...' etc. He was quoted as saying that he'd never been so frightened in all his life!

We went off and climbed loads of other safe routes, none of which had been on our tick list, but came back in one piece. I had to spend 520 francs on a Camelot 4 1/2 for the Brown/Whillans route on the West Face of the Blatiere, but, believe me it was worth every penny.

As for the Dru: a week or so after returning home, we learnt that a slab of rock 250 metres wide and 150 metres tall fell from the West Face, taking out the base of the West Face and the base of the Bonatti Pillar, which is now undercut. This was just the start of a rockfall which sent a cloud of dust for miles, leaving the Bonatti Pillar in a state of total collapse. a rockfall of historical importance! But fear not, it'll always happen to someone else, won't it?
(How much suffering do you like?)

SUMMER IN THE FRENCH ALPS

It's a Thursday evening in July: Finish work - load family into the car - we're off !! The route's familiar, M1, M25, M20, the Channel, A26, A1, Macon, Geneva etc. etc..

It's now Friday afternoon and we (*that is Tony, Ann, Amy & Katie Millichope*) arrive at that extremely British bit of France - The Argentiere Campsite in the upper Chamonix valley. (The weather is similarly British - it's raining !) Adrian Casey, Martin Bemand, Andy Ring & Andy (Harry) Sharp have been here for the past week. Before the rain they've managed climbs on the Aiguile-du-Midi & the Petit-Aig-Verte, with a few days of valley cragging at Servos & Les Galliands.

A couple of days of rain and the sun shines again, the forecast is 'beau temps' sack's are packed and off we head for the hill. Adrian, Martin & Harry for Mt. Blanc, Andy & I for the Aig-de-Pelerins. Mt. Blanc proved that whatever route you take it's still a very big hill, while Andy & I found that dashing out from work and acclimatising in the bar is no substitute for actually being fit. Some excitement when Andy and I almost became the latest members of the Ceunant downhill club! In the end a more controlled descent of the Pelerin couloir was made. Still, good fun was had by all and a safe return to the comforts of the campsite and the delights of the Thursday night mobile Pizza service.

A few days later while Martin, Andy & Harry go ice climbing on the Mer-du-Glace, Adrian and I head for the

Tour Ronde. Excellent planning ! We find that the last telepherique to Pt-Helbronner was at 3.00pm (*its now 3.30!*). Quick change of plan (*in the telepherique queue*) and we decide on Mt. Blanc-du-Tacul instead. A night spent on the col-du-Midi and a good climb on the N-face triangle the following day, *despite for the softening snow & falling ice !!* Catching one of the late service telecabins we descend back to the valley arriving just in time for Pizza-night on the campsite. - *Excellent timing!!*

Adrian, Martin, Andy & Harry now had to return home. We had a further week. With afternoon storms becoming more problematic a couple of days walking with Amy in the Aig Rouges turned into a minor epic with a hurried decent from our camp to a Hut in the teeth of the worst electric storm of the trip. *Standing with 10-foot long tent poles in your hand whilst trying to put the tent up is not recommended when the sparks are flying overhead!!* During the remainder of the week Ann enjoyed some high level walking and a night under the stars while Katie enjoyed watching parachutes land in the field next to the campsite.

Mid August saw the arrival of Mark Hellewell & John Bunny, with designs on the Dru, the N-Spur of the Droites & the Walker. Unfortunately generally poor conditions put these off for another year. However some good climbing was had on several of the Chamonix Aiguiles & Aiguilles Rouges

The Tick List

(*apologies if I've missed anyone out*)

Petit Aiguile Verte	N W Ridge	F/PD	Adrian, Andy, Harry, Martin,
Aiguile du Midi	Cosmiques Arrete	PD	Adrian, Andy, Harry, Martin,
Mt.Blanc du Tacul	Contamine Negri route	AD	Adrian, Tony
Aig du Peigne	Vaucher route	TD/VI	John, Mark
Aig du Pouce	Voie du dalles	TD/IV	John, Mark
Aig de Pelerins	?	?	John, Mark
Aig du Blaitiere	Red Pillar	TD	John, Mark

For Adrian, Martin & Harry it was their first visit to the Alps and I get the feeling it won't be the last. With climbs ranging from valley crags to some of the best high alpine routes in the world it's difficult to go to Cham' and not have a good time. Add to this the human attractions of the valley, bars, restaurants, swimming pools, shops and the general ambience of the place make it almost all things to all people, save perhaps those seeking solitude. For someone like me trying to combine climbing mountains with a family holiday it was ideal.

TONY MILLICHOPE

BOLIVIA 1997

'What's the Bolivian for Fuck Off and Die?' We were pent up. One beggar too far. The begging beggared description. Abandoned, feet and hands chopped off. Eyes and tongue gouged out; face riven almost in half by a machete. These husks of people were fully qualified to beg. Don't mess with the bad guys.

Sutty was a hypertense ball of fitness already awash with red corpuscles straining to escape the human sink of La Paz for the high, pure Cordillera. I was still on my knees, lungless. La Paz is halfway to outer space, well beyond my oxygen threshold. I'm an under 3000 foot man, a sub-Munroist. I'm the only climber who has more trouble on the finishing pitches of Cloggy than the starting pitches. Extra sensitive to altitude, I scuffed around the dusty streets. We had only arrived yesterday. We moved through a streetscape of hawkers, hustlers, addicts, beggars, deadpan campesinos, street artists, con-artists, the orphaned and the homeless. Just like being back home in Moseley.

The others seemed disgustingly healthy. James and Hilary were keeping up

their keep-fit routines with strenuous rounds of in depth shopping. Dennis walked back and forth dozens of times to the monolithic Post Office trying to get a wish you were here message through the Bolivian telecoms service, known to all as an impossible task.

Olly was the only one in my category. He looked terrible. But then, even when he is fit, he looks like he has just escaped from a particularly harsh correction camp. Have you noticed?

Down the mean streets we went, trying to get oxygenated. By junkyard bus, we took a semi-suicidal trip to the highest ski slope in the world. With a bus width of six feet and a vertiginous rough track five feet wide, ample excitement was guaranteed. We took the ridge behind the shredding upper cable and rattled off four 5200-5400 metre peaks in two hours. Howzat. Blood was squirting in jets from my eyeballs, lungs collapsed like old knackered bellows, kneecaps were butchered from the crawling. The others strolled on unconcernedly. Only Hillary produced a good alibi, regarding an ozone free sunbathing opportunity.

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But quick, we had to go back. The driver was agitated. An emergency. A Brazilian passenger was ill. We had to descend, mucho pronto. Strange, it was the Brazilian who helped me back on the bus.

At last came the day and we were on our way, up out of the dusty canyon of La Paz, out onto the Altiplano, through the human hell of El Alto, population 400000 and due to double within eight years. On and away across the Altiplano, as far as the four wheel drive can go to the last dusty settlement.

'Senor, why are you loading three rucksacs onto my wife?' This is a little embarrassing. The donkeyman has only three dusty, patient donkeys, not four.

As we round the long hillside, an astonishing vista unfolds, a cirque containing a dozen ice-clad beauties, enclosing a valley with lakes, beaches and many streams. Base camp at about 4700 metres. We camp in a sheep/llama fold. They are herded in each night to protect against the howling (real) wild dogs. I am eating diamox by the pound. Despite advice, Dennis and Olly camp by a stone shelter. Their neighbours soon make themselves felt. a tribe of hyperactive rats suffering

from the twin problems of starvation and dysentery.

Indians roam around. There are maybe 20 - 30 other climbers/trekkers, mainly commercial in the area. Beer and protection of camp are offered for sale. We buy the protection. I am rendered teetotal.

In the dark of the next night, we stumble up moraine looser than the aforementioned rats' guts. Suttty has already disappeared into a dark gulch leading to the glacier snout. Within 15 minutes of leaving camp, the party is split. Eventually he realises the error of his ways and bounds antelope like up the broken hillside.

A Hollywood dawn sees us out on the glacier weaving round very long lateral crevasses. Ahead is El Diente, 5400 metres, and, if lungs permit, Alpamayo Pequeno. This is a gasping situation. Suttty is already a dot in the distance. Maybe I need a three mile long rope. Our route gradually focuses into fine snow and rock ridges - sharp, exposed, delicate, the snow in condition normally reserved only for the magazine photos. To a sharp snow summit and much double gasping.

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Ladies and Gentlemen: on my left, the Amazonian rain forest, a dazzling sea of cloud for the next 3000 miles; on my right, the Altiplano desert, stretching from Peru down through Bolivia and on into Chile. The Andean crest is certainly the great divide separating different worlds.

*Next night we are at it again, bumbling on in the direction of Illusianita, 5400m. A fine sharp effort, requiring a full semi-circle of the summit in order to gain the top. The descent had its moment or two. Dennis sliced his arm open on a knife blade of slate on the ridge. Blood spurted in gushes. Dennis was emptying fast. The surrounding snow turned into a crimson bad dream topping. Suttty, like a gypsy mending an old bucket, administered first aid in double fast time. The now ghastly pale Dennis looked like the hapless victim of a very large, very thirsty Amazonian vampire bat. A rapid descent down the awkwardly crevassed glacier was interrupted only by our party's classic demonstration of *How Not To Cross Large Unstable Snowbridges*.*

After a rest day we set out in a very dark night for Condoriri at a multiple gasping 5700m and reputedly well in there in the South American beauty stakes.

Halfway up a gully of rotten and disintegrating scree, Suttty slowed down to about 100 miles per hour to announce that he was unwell and may not be able to continue, as he flashed back. Thick cloud swirled, making the dark night darker. Dennis's ruptured arm pulsated. At last we struggled out of shattered gullies onto the upper glacial plateau. Dawn dawned blearily through mist and cloud.

'We ought to go down. It would be serious to get lost up here.' This received the time honoured and considered judgement: 'Bollocks, lets just have a look'.

We traced a tenuous line over glacial slopes, terraces, monster crevasses and snowbridges. All the while, there was a lightening, a paler light seeping through, and eventually, even astonishing gaps in the cloud showing glimpses of wild and empty valleys below. A traverse around the peak led us to a steep gully in its flank. This led us on to the start of the main summit ridge just as the clouds lifted and dissolved in the morning sun. Coondoriri divested herself of all her veils at once. Quite a scene. All three Condoriri peaks stood sharp and clear. We were on the central and

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highest peak, on a crest of sharpest perfect snow, so narrow, it had holes in it like lacework. Lefthand Condoriri looked even better, more remote and more technical. Anyone for next year?

On the descent we met the others, plus two Scottish girls on their way up. The girls had had lashings of sponsorship to come and play in Bolivia. Women plus big mountains equals sponsorship. But they were as fit as fleas and good with it.

Back at base, a raggle taggle group led by OTT of Sheffield, had moved in literally on top of us, with tents actually touching. 'my leetle tent, she ees so weak, I need to shelter eet under yours'. Noisy polluted days and nights followed. 'Look, why do you have to camp on top of us? You have the whole of the Cordillera. Why us?' Two Americano-Argentinian twins, the group leaders and self appointed superheroes tried the diplomatic approach: 'We're all mountain friends...why can't we...' 'FUCK OFF'. Our diplomacy had gone into overdrive. This was getting close, very close indeed. A little touch, one more little touch and it would be World War 999. Fortunately, we were heading back to La Paz. But first a

final confrontation with our tent guards. 'No we are not paying protection money, pals'. Two sides can play nasty. All excellent stuff for Anglo-Inca relations.

Our next little number was Huayna Potosi, 6180m, easily accessible and an easy ascent by the normal route, but for all that a real Himalayan scale stunner. We stopped at Hugos refuge. Yes, there is now a refuge in Bolivia. Hugo is Bolivia's leading guide and a real party animal.

Next day we headed up to Camp One at a hyperventilating 5500m. There were about six other tents in the area, including the Scottish gels, and from one tent the sound of a familiar voice, 'Bloody hell, its Joel' Archie from Bristol and Ceunant member on a world tour.

On the morrow, we reached the fine summit via a little face left of the normal route. The mountain is a big shouldered beast on a large scale and its summit no place for vertigo sufferers. On our descent, e bumped into OTT again. We couldn't pass up the opportunity. Another full lesson was in order with up front total abuse, applied obscenity, controlled aggression and massive

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threat. A major axprod in the goolies, perhaps, in reserve. Excellent for clearing the nostrils.

Olly was not with us. He had to dash back to La Paz on a massive leak mending expedition of his own. Having drunk unfiltered, untreated water in some crazy experiment on his guts, he got what to us non-medics was a totally predictable result. If you think he looks ill when well, you should see him when he is ill. Amazingly, having swallowed pounds of some magic compound unavailable in the UK on the grounds that it kills you, he was back at the refuge on our return. Next day he summited directly from the refuge without an intermediate camp. Some people make you sick.

The Italian face on this mountain looks superb and safe. Anyone for next year?

Now it was back to La Paz in an open truck full of Indians. Were some of them our tent guards? Dust seeped into places which would not have been thought possible.

James, Hillary and Olly were departing, leaving Satty, Dennis and me for a final do on Illimani, 6480m, the God of Light. For this we were to be joined by the girls who

were still running on the four star fuel of sponsorship. I was worried about Annapurna like scenes of amputation, as they had gotten a touch of frostbite on Huayona Potosi.

Illimani, while it dominates the scene from La Paz, doesn't look that impressive. Don't believe it. Up close it is the business, a chaos of icefalls, ridges, faces and facets, all on a massive scale. Climbed, unclimbed? Who knows. Antartica tilted through sixty degrees. One statistic: the summit ridge is twelve km long, with steep ice throughout its length, never dropping below 6000m, with four major peaks, all stunners, all guarded by huge cascades of ice. Once started, there is no way off until the end. It has been done only once, in 1979, by a French guide, with four bivis and five long days of total commitment and no peptalks at half time. But what a route, what a beauty. One of the best high mountain dos in the world. Anyone for next year?

First camp is at 4600m, and next day on up to a lovely little glacial dell called Nido de Condores 5500m. I don't know what it means, maybe some kind of condorial airport. More protection guys were here! Hugo was also here, concocting party

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materials from the coca plant. Above us the Chilean ridge climbed sharply, so called after eight Chilean deaths in 1989. They were all roped together, so in good trade union fashion, one out, all out.

The South face of Illimani is a well known fridge. South is the same as North in the Northern Hemisphere. There is no escape from minus thirty until the sunlit summit ridge some hours away. Dawn put on a spectacular. Illimani's shadow stretched out to the horizon on a sea of cloud. Sajama, 6500m, the highest peak in Bolivia was clearly visible like a rising moon 180km away. Magnificent faces and ridges glistened in the purest light. Illimani is more like a mountain range than a single mountain. Hugo is already on the top, mobile phone in action. His party is miles below with frostbite and collapse threatening. All around, ice peaks were showing off their perfect lines. While Hugo talked, I concentrated on gulping in great lungfulls of vacuum. This was not hyperventilation. This was apoplexy.

Descent was fast, into the thickening air. After a leisurely tea and sunbathe at Camp One, a rapid pack-up, dodge the guards and down

to Basecamp. After an anxious vigil, the girls finally appeared out of the gloaming, frostbitten. Hugo immediately sprung into action, pulling out all the stops from his well-known best seller *How To Treat Frostbite On A Couple of Crackers*. After a detailed search in the most unlikely of places, Hugo pronounced it was the toes. Among his many talents, Hugo is also a practising doctor. Tea, rum, sympathy and Bolivian jungle juice followed.

Next day, laden with extra sacs and rapidly blackening girls, we stumbled down the mountain to a last outrageous thrash in La Paz.

Table surfing at 3500m. Rule: no more than two table legs on the floor at once, while at the same time emptying a bottle of Tequila. Non-participants are not allowed. Set the benchmark for next time. The girls by now were looking more like they came from Zimbabwe than from Scotland. Michael Jackson in reverse.

Then on to a selection of seedy and seedier nightclubs, led by guido Hugo, on into a tequila sunrise. Adios Bolivia.

Psst: Anyone for next year?

MORE UNUSUAL ENQUIRIES

The BMC and Berghaus have been running an information service for over a year, and have dealt with a large number of enquiries, amongst which:

The hopelessly optimistic...

Q Can you tell me what the weather will be like in Scotland next year? Will it rain?

Q Can my son enter the climbing World Cup? He's climbed at Hathersage and regularly gets to the top of the climbing wall.

A Can he onsight 8a?

A Probably. He's not afraid of heights, you know.

Q Can my boyfriend enter the World Cup? He says he's a really good climber and regularly top ropes French 6a without falling off.

Q I need a certificate so I can climb outside. Where do I get one?

A You don't need one, sir.

A That's ridiculous. What's to stop me getting to places I shouldn't be, then?

Q Do I need Diamox to climb Ben Nevis?

Just plain weird...

Q How long would it take a small boy dressed only in school uniform to catch hypothermia?

Q Assuming that Father Christmas flies around at the height of Everest, could you tell me what clothing he should wear?

Q Should all mountaineers carry jelly babies?

At school, geography was never their strong point...

Q I know a film crew has been to the top of Everest, but has anyone ever filmed on top of a higher mountain?

Winner of the Get a Life 1997 Award

Q I like indoor climbing and want to go on holiday. Are there any good climbing walls in Spain, France, Italy or Greece?

SOME CAUTIONARY TALES

A user of a mobile phone in North Wales, on dialing 999 got through to the Dublin rescue service. The 80 miles of intervening water were a hinderance.

The use of a mobile phone in an attempt to contact the author of a guide book because the party lost the route is surely an example of lack of overall ability.

A party of four on a fell run used a mobile phone to ask for help because it became dark - as it does every day - and they had no torches. Nor did they have the equipment to spend the night out in the mountains. It was a dark and stormy night. Their money would have been better spent on torches.

SAINT PETERSBURG AND BEIJING

It just had to be a clapped out Lada that collected us from St Petersburg Airport. The car definitely groaned under the weight of our rucksacks in the boot after the driver had pushed to one side what was suspiciously like the parts of a home made still.

After tentatively testing a few inquiries sentences in basic Russian (hoping desperately that my Brummie accent didn't distort the meaning) to my surprise- and horror- our driver began to jabber at full speed. Even more surprise when I could actually follow some of it!

She dropped us off just around the corner from Palace Square in front of a terrace of pre-Revolutionary French style town apartments, which had definitely seen better times. The huge and solid front doors opened onto a vast marble staircase; after about six flights we reached Fort Knox. Double heavy metal doors with decorative plastic mahogany coloured cushioning were opened after numerous locks had been opened and alarms de-activated. Elena, our homestay host greeted us and ushered us into a dimly lit interior reminiscent of my grandmother's house, full of old brown furniture, a grandfather clock and that musty smell of a forgotten era.

Elena was a very private person, the best in whom emerged after a bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin. She had been a well-off geologist before Perestroika, in her middle age. After perestroika, wages were not paid, and the rouble collapsed, wiping out her savings overnight. In those hard times, getting food was the main priority (and still should have been, judging by what we were given to eat). She survived by teaching English and putting up people like ourselves. Having listened to the difficulties of life in post-Perestroika Russia, I asked her if she would prefer to go back to life under communism. **Never!** was the firm reply, but, as I suspected, capitalism was not quite how she had imagined. The so called freedom was now wrought with the anguish of finding enough work to enable her to buy food, electricity, water, rent, medicine etc, whereas previously, all these had been more or less provided - at the cost of hours of queuing.

As for St Petersburg: **Winter Palace** contains the Hermitage collection> Elegant baroque and rococo designs - with 1100 rooms, walking boots and compass are required.

Peter and Paul Fortress contains an ornate gilded church interior - blinding inside, take snow goggles.

Church of the Spilt Blood, only reopened last year after 30 years of restoration. Imagine the inside of the RockFace covered from floor to ceiling in the finest mosaics you will ever see.

Canals - home to many millions of mosquitoes. take as much spray as possible. These little buggers kept me awake at night suffocating under sheets, while Fiona became a favourite bloodbank.

Peter the Great on horseback, actually, a statue of Peter the Great on horseback... a beautiful statue popular for newly weds photographs. Unfortunately, also the haunt for bears in muzzles and shackles touting for photographs with tourists. Sickening and degrading.

Farewell to Elena. On to the train station to catch the overnight Red Arrow to Moscow...

TO BE CONTINUED

IN THE TATRA MOUNTAINS

Cheap flight to Prague. Long way to go for a weekend of sights - let's make it a couple of weeks and do a bit of exploring. Interesting for me as an old leftie to see how Eastern Europe has fallen to pieces since the rise of capitalism.

The High Tatras sounded like a suitable destination, and for no other reason than that I found a guidebook (The High Tatras, Colin Saunders and Renata Narozna) - it was selected. The High Tatras form the frontier between Slovakia and Poland and are within the Tatras National Park.

Prague must be the only city in Europe where you can get a 10pence bus ticket from the airport to the centre. We spent 3 days wandering around the eyeachingly beautiful centre and sampling amazingly cheap and good beer before boarding a sleeper train to Poprad in Slovakia, the starting off point for the Tatras. Waking up shunting into Poprad, we see huge mountains in the distance. My companion's plans to knock off a peak before lunch crumble and we resort to a comforting square of chocolate. Two bars later, there's no doubt about it, we've got to get off the train. The usual amusing encounter at a foreign railway station buffet sees us sitting down a little later with a glass of washing up water and a lung pie each; a similarly successful trip to a cash machine gets us two pounds.

The next bit's great. Having negotiated train tickets, which seem to cost 4 pence, we get on Thomas the Tank Engine which rapidly fills up with loads of people of all ages and appearances in what must be walking kit. Thomas sets off and within minutes we are out of the grey dismal railway and into dense and fragrant Hansel and Gretel forest.

IN THE TATRA MOUNTAINS

The toylike train meanders quietly through the forests, stopping at clearings through which we can see woodcutter residences, and every now and then, a bit of spectacular mountain scenery. We've gained a good bit of height, and by the time we get off at our selected destination, Starý Smokovec, we're really in the mountains. The frequent train service links a necklace of mountain villages and resorts contouring around the lower High Tatras, if you follow me.

We left the bulk of our baggage at the left luggage at the station and, having asked a friendly lad at the station to phone ahead and book us into our selected hut, set off to the Tatra Highway, the 45 km east-west footpath through the Tatras. The railway station is at about 1000m and our hut at a little over 2000m. The first 200m pass in a rapid blur - from a cable car to the winter ski slopes. After that, we wander gently upwards through thick forest, on well-marked and made paths until we reach a midway hut, the destination of most of our cable-car companions. The Zamkovského hut offers beer, goulash, chocolate and the opportunity to stamp my guide book with a pretty stamp to show off to my friends. Sitting outside the wooden building covered in decorative fretwork, we spot one of the sights that indicates the true greatness of the Slovak nation. From the path up which we had just sweated emerged a citizen with 5 crates of beer strapped to his back to supply the hut.

Wood crates. Glass bottles. Half litre bottles.

My companion's offer of assistance with a bottle or two was courteously declined.

IN THE TATRA MOUNTAINS

A few days later, as a path steepened up to one of the higher huts, a notice above a pile of logs and huge gas bottles invited us to carry them up the next 1000 metres for the reward of a cup of tea and the admiration of hut comrades. I was gutted to be loaded down with my toothbrush and spare knickers and unable to contribute to the greater good, but could not understand why my companion did not take the opportunity of a round of applause and a cup of tea on the comrades at the end of a weary day.

We continued through the forest as it gave way to dwarf pines, which gave way to steeper rock and arrived, thanks to the huge footpath and reasonably regular signs made out of rustic twigs, at our hut - the Teryho hut. This was a small one, already quite full. Most of our companions, as they were to be in most of the huts, were Polish and Slovakian. This hut, like the others we stayed in, was well supplied with beer and lemon tea, dished up a reasonable goulash and breakfast and provided comfortable bunk beds. An extra treat was the cup of dried beetroot soup one of the Polish lads shared with us. Lights out at about 8.30 meant that we had about 12 hours sleep a night and towards the end of the trip were getting sleep poisoning. No, the thought of getting up at 5 didn't occur, somehow.

Leaving the next morning, slightly icy, we passed several little tarns as we carried on up to our first peak, and fabulously found ourselves basking in a cloud inversion, as the sun beat down on us. The weather stayed bright for another few days as we wandered around from hut to hut, up a couple more peaks, across icy saddles, in and out of dwarf pine zones and past still, green lakes. The peaks were all under 3000m and in a reasonably compact area. After the weekend rush, you could feel quite alone in a mountainous playground. The hut delicacies of fried cheese and sauerkraut soup were well

IN THE TATRA MOUNTAINS

sampled. I conducted my conversations throughout the trip in Russian, which was possibly a mistake: as we met few Russian speakers. I had few replies.

My companion's menu German, however, got us a hearty meal in the most unpromising locations. We did try to pass ourselves off as Poles a few times, after I discovered that Polish rates in the huts were even cheaper. The Ceunant membership card worked as well.

We couldn't disguise ourselves sufficiently well as invalids to gain admission to any of the delightfully situated sanatoriums lower down the valley and were ceremoniously marched out of the waiting room by white coated staff.

It does have to be said that hut rates, food etc were remarkably cheap for Western Europeans. We felt quite wealthy and at the end of our mountain trip were able to stay in the poshest hotel in Stary Smokevic and eat the entire menu with champagne for little more than the price of a small dog.

We spent the whole time within the Tatra's National Park. It seems to have lots of rules compared with our relationship to the countryside: walkers are expected to follow well-marked paths and not wander off to make their own way; some peaks are only accessible with a guide. While walking for a week, I saw no litter or footpath erosion or fire remains, despite the fact that this is the Central European version of the Lake District, only with huts. We weren't climbing, but a number of people were. The path and guide rules don't seem to apply to climbers. The popularity of the area would make it inadvisable to visit in July and August. We went at the end of September, and were just up against the early winter snows on the highest passes and peaks. Anyone wanting to be enthused, borrow map or Guide book or see photos - call me.