



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

WHAT is the highest mountain in Europe?

Many people think it's Mt. Blanc (the White Lady) on the French Italian border at 4,810 meters, i.e. 15,781 feet.

While this may be the highest mountain in the European Union, it's not the highest in Europe. That honour is bestowed upon Mount Elbrus at 5,642 meters, in Russia, sandwiched between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

To get there you fly from Moscow south for 1,000 kilometres to the edge of the Russian border beside Georgia in the Caucasus Mountains, in a region which was a world hot spot a few years ago as the Russian tanks rumbled over the border to quell the impetuosity of their neighbours. Russia involved with territorial disputes and threatening to send the army in? Sounds eerily

familiar. In fact the Russians had closed the southern side of Elbrus a few years ago as the natives were re-opening only recently.

On this trip to get to Elbrus I flew from Moscow to Mineral-Nyve Vody and then was transported on a rickety bus for four hours across a border into another Russian Republic, i.e. Kavardino Balkariya just beside south Osetia and the Chechnya Republic where the weather would prove to be as hot as the political temperature...

Why was I travelling for 24 hours from Limavog via Belfast City and London Heathrow and Moscow? Well, in the past, I have been fortunate enough to trek to Kilimanjaro, Everest Base Camp, Kinabalu in Borneo and the Atlas Mountains and this was to be my fifth attempt at high alti-

tude. I had made it to all my other targets but this one was to prove my toughest one yet. As ever I was going with Adventure Alternative who are not only friendly and reliable but also incredibly efficient.

DAY 1

I staggered off the plane in Moscow at 5am their time, i.e. 2am Limavady time, pretending that I had slept. The last time I was in Moscow Sharon and I were smuggling out a Soviet Union flag which the day before had been on top of a St Petersburg flagpole - we had paid a local to liberate it for us - but this time the tension levels, like the energy levels, were low. I bumped into two blokes who were dressed in hiking gear and guessed they were on the same mission I was. We exchanged a few stories and all planned to summit seven days later. In MDV, I quickly met up with the rest of my group, i.e. Gary and Mandy from England and Tom, Magne, Vebeka and Sunni, four intrepid Norwegians - we were seven strong and when Sasha our local guide met us outside the airport doors, the team of 8 was complete.

I always go on these expeditions with Adventure Alternative - they look after you, their guides are great, the acclimation is measured and they know the score. They have you well briefed so there are no nasty surprises when you are on the hill.

I have been very fortunate to meet great groups of people when I go on treks. The group dynamic is so important. We all compromise and go out of our way to accommodate the wishes of the others. I was the interloper here because the others were all travelling with people they knew but soon I felt I was surrounded by practically family. We would all support each

5642

other through thick and thin - and believe me there was to be a lot of thin over the next 10 days... The Norwegians very luckily spoke English all the time so the rest of us felt included.

We arrived at Terksol nestling in the foothills of the Caucasus. The hotel was really homely and comfortable. I took myself for an evening stroll by the river which ran through the valley and the colour of the water reminded me of the River Kush in Nepal which was similarly glacially cold. I was very conscious of the fact that I had access to home comforts for the next three days because once we were up the mountain home comforts (including electricity and phone signals) would be a thing of the past.

DAY 2

The best way to deal with jet lag is just ignore it so I was up with the lark to start our first walk of the trip. We were already at 2,200 meters and our aim was to climb to 3,000 meters just to test the legs, the lungs and our susceptibility to AMS i.e. Altitude Mountain Sickness. When we emerged I noticed a lovely wee dog and it didn't take much encouragement from me or the dog to ensure that she joined us for our 3 1/2 hour trek. The dog reminded me of my wee Roxy back home and Vebeka named our new canine companion Candy as she ate sweet things (that's Candy, not Vebeka). As we climbed higher, we took in the magnificent views of nearby mountains and a green blue lake way beneath us. I had heard that Elbrus was not a pretty mountain but the scenery was fantastic, just like an alpine scene. There was even a chair lift for skiers in the winter. We plodded on up to a café which was regrettably shut. We couldn't go any further as the area was a Russian military zone and I didn't want to have a row with President Putin just yet....

Sasha led us down a steep slope through a forest where the smell of wild garlic was overpowering. Once safely down we went for a Russian sauna. My version of a sauna is five minutes in the Leisure Centre after a training session but here they did things properly - 20 minutes sauna then in to a freezing plunge pool to bring the core tem-

perature down and then into a nice sitting area to drink beer! Then repeat for the next hour! I didn't have a beer, however, as the beer was the "5 6 4 2" brand and I didn't want to jinx my attempt at the mountain.

Dinner at night was a fish with its head still on. The fish and I looked balefully at each other and both of us promised that neither would interfere with the other. It remained untouched. The chef was a bit upset but we were able to communicate in French and she eventually forgave me. After dinner it was a quick stroll around the market stalls outside selling lots of 5642 merchandise. Again it was the case of look but do not touch!

DAY 3

We set off in a different direction through a stunningly beautiful valley, up past a war memorial (as far as the Russians are concerned the Great Patriotic War didn't start until 1941 and the Second World War in 1939 doesn't even get a mention), then up to an Observatory. Again this was a military area so we kept well away. When we set out, Candy - the rascal - was talking with another group but with the bribery of some food she left them and came to rejoin the Adventure Alternative 8! Yes, I know, shameful! At the observatory we had our first view of Elbrus. It towered above us nearly more than 2 miles further into the sky. We all metaphorically gulped and knew that whilst it looked pretty as a post-

card with its white peaks thrusting up into the blue sky, it was going to represent a lot of hard work. On the way down we visited a huge waterfall (the Norwegian word for waterfall is "foss", by the way) and we had lunch in a café surrounded by photographs of Everest as the café owner had not only conquered Elbrus (highest in Europe) but Everest (highest in Asia and also the world).

Our group was a homogenous one. Despite our different backgrounds we all gelled. Mandy works as an IT specialist in a school in London. Sunni is a carer for disabled adults, Magne is a computer and IT whizz kid, Vebeka is a kindergarten principal, Tom is a chef in the oil rigs in the North Sea and Gary is a retired copper from Dorset, who had biked from John O'Groats to Land's End, parachuted, kayaked in 12 hour races etc. etc. His nickname was Action Man and it wasn't hard to see why! We had two mascots for the trip - Candy the dog and also Fudge the teddy bear, who sat in the back of Gary's rucksack calmly surveying what madness his owner was now getting up to...

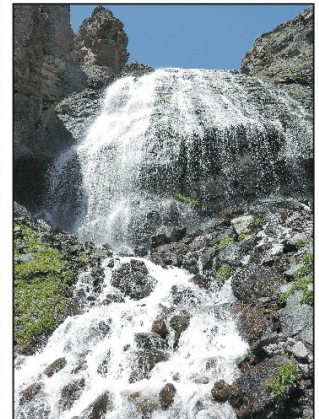
We had a kit inspection at night and Sasha was not happy with my boots and gloves - they got the red card so I had to go and hire alternatives along with poles and ice axe and crampons. It began to dawn on me that we were going to go fairly high if we were going to need all this stuff. The idea behind poles was to save energy. Swimming behind someone else saves 30 percent energy. Biking behind someone else saves 40 percent energy and using poles can save 15 percent energy. I knew in several days time 1 percent of

an energy save would be brilliant so 15 percent sounded great to me.

In the pub at night Tom and I met an English guy called John who had summited earlier the same day

and who looked fresh as a daisy. Tom and I wandered back to our hotel convinced we were all going to make it to the top...

Join me next week to see if that tipsy dream comes true!



A local waterfall. wk2706



Our canine companion Candy with Tom and Gary. wk2708



Our lucky mascot, Fudge! wk2705



Mount Elbrus viewed from 4,100m. wk2704



The Adventure Alternative Seven. wk2707

Mount 4,100m

Our lucky mascot

The Adventure Alternative Seven

Our canine companion

A local waterfall