



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

W.B. Yeats wrote about a "Terrible Beauty" but here in the Caucasus Mountains we were surrounded by a savage beauty.

The view from 4,000 metres on the slopes of Europe's highest mountain was beautiful, but there was more than a hint of danger all around. Sasha, our local guide and general all round good guy, would point and say: "Over there is where a 30-year-old died of a heart attack... Over there is where a bloke who got lost and died with his mobile phone still in his hand..." - And we weren't even nearly at the dangerous part of the mountain yet!



This might be Gary... wk2815



It was all hard work...honest. wk2817



Several local smaller peaks. wk2809



The view from Treksol. wk2808

'A Savage Beauty'

The snow plough fell down a crevasse with ten people on board... Over there is where a man died of hypothermia... Over there is where a 30-year-old died of a heart attack... Over there is where a bloke who got lost and died with his mobile phone still in his hand... - And we weren't even nearly at the dangerous part of the mountain yet!

I was with my six new friends from Norway and England on an expedition organised through Adventure Alternative to try to climb Mount Elbrus in Russia...

DAY FOUR

I woke in Terksol, the gateway to the mountains, a Muslim village and still surrounded by the vestiges of civilisation.

We packed up and headed off in a mini bus after a fruitless attempt to find Candy, our lovely local canine companion. After a short bus trip we were on a cable car taking us up to 2,900 metres. Not only did we have our rucksacks etc. but we also had food for a week i.e. we were like an army on the move. My Achilles heel, my back, started to play up and I couldn't carry too much but considering I couldn't stand up two weeks previously however, I was doing alright.

I had gone to my chiropractor, Paula Fyfe and we went through the usual drill as I hobbled into her surgery: "What event have you entered and when is it, she asked: "Walled City Marathon... This Sunday..." I mumbled back. I go into her clinic like Humpty Dumpty after the fall and leave like a spring chicken. Of course, 42 kilometres of shuffling around the streets of Derry didn't do the back much good, but one session later, I was on the flight to Moscow.

I was still pleasantly surprised at the facilities at 2,900 metres i.e. I had a bed, a bog and electricity! We went out for a hike up to 3,500 metres i.e. up above the snow line.

Mandy from London really struggled and started to get sick, not a good sign of things to come. We went up to 3,700 metres eventually and on the way down ice got in my boots and my feet got very wet. No problem today, but this would be a major problem on Summit day unless I got my gaiters changed. Frozen wet feet could be the difference between being able to summit - or not.

The Norwegians were brilliant on the snow, especially on the downhill sections. I tried to dry my boots with an electric boot warmer I had purchased the day before. The device looked like a piece of torture equipment, but at least it worked...

DAY FIVE

Our aim today was to get our kit and us transported to 3,900 metres. I heard thunder and lightning seemingly all night. When I groggily got up I enjoyed what was to be my last shower for five days. I spent ages putting on my boots and gaiters. As my back was un-corporative again, the lads were great and carried all the heavy stuff. We then shared another cable car with a bunch of Russkies whose main luggage seemed to be 60 cans of beer - maybe we would have a party on the Summit together?

Then we transported kit and kaboodle in a snow plough up to our ice box, sorry, sleeping quarters. It was so cold up here that we were surrounded by three foot steep snow drifts. We had to kick the door open to push the snow back. The snow plough is a great form of transport and the drivers have probably been Red Arrows fighter pilots in a previous existence because this terrain is scary enough to walk on, let alone drive a

vehicle up a 25 percent gradient!

We then went out for a hike over 4,100 metres with the idea of "Climb high, sleep low." We followed the small flags which were put in the snow every hundred metres but on the way down we got a bit lost in the freezing fog. I wouldn't like to stray too far off course here.

The facilities in the Ice Box were primitive so if you had to answer a call of nature, we would just say: "I am going out to make some yellow snow!"

I was feeling ok, no headache but the environment was much tougher than any other mountains I had been on. They say that being here at 4,100 metres is similar to being on top of Kilimanjaro at 5,800 metres. Today I was higher than Kinabalu in Borneo and also the Atlas mountains in Morocco, but thankfully no sign yet of the dreaded altitude mountain sickness.

DAY SIX

Friday the 13th - what a night! The door blew open, Gary and Magne tried to force it shut at 1am but we still ended up with snow inside when we eventually woke.

As usual we had porridge for breakfast from our cook Natalia who was creating gastronomic wonders in the kitchen with very few facilities. I felt very week this morning, but we left at 8am. Tom lent me his gaiters to prevent the snow from coming into my boots, what a life saver! So typical of the kindness and generosity of everyone on this trip. We hiked for five hours up to 4,700 metres to the Pryut Rocks. We were passed by snow ploughs and snow mobiles taking up skiers and snow boarders who were set for a much speedier descent than we were. On our trudge down I met Chris and John whom I had met at the airport, they were looking strong. The views at the stage were fantastic, we were above the clouds and seemingly above real life as well. It was just surreal but basic up here.

All you wanted to do was climb, sleep, eat, recover - repeat. Our meal of course consisted of more borsch (the Russian staple kind of meat soup) and some pasta. Mandy couldn't eat anything, she was sick and getting sicker. No phone signal up here.

Friday the 13th is normally a day of calamity, but for us it meant there was only

two more sleeps to go before Summit day!

DAY SEVEN

We have decided to pay a bit extra today to hitch a ride in a snow plough to take us up to 4,700 metres, then walk up to 5,100 metres. This way we would be able to say that we walked every last tough metre on this mother of a mountain (because on Summit Day we would get the same form of transport up to 5,000 metres and start from there).

We moved into our new digs at 4,100 metres, there was no electricity, but there was ice inside the window, snow on the floor which didn't melt, a long drop toilet (which dropped a very long way off the side of a cliff) i.e. all the usual home comforts!

Sasha took us out on the ice to teach us how to use an ice axe properly. It could cost us our lives if we didn't know how to arrest an unscheduled descent down the face of the mountain so we were very good pupils. The other end of an ice axe is to gain purchase on the snow and ice - kick hard with both crampons in to the ice to gain a foot hold, then drive the ice axe in to get an anchor, then repeat with both feet every half metre for several hours, i.e. tiring!

As we rested at over 5,000 metres, masters of all we surveyed and as we gazed out over clear blue skies over what seemed to be most of Europe, we couldn't believe it when we saw Mandy struggling up to join us. She hadn't eaten for three days, had been throwing up and was doing this on willpower alone. This was to be the high point of her trip however. When we got her down to the sleeping quarters, she was confined to bed until she was medevacked out the next day on a snow mobile.

The day before Summit Day is like the day before race day - it drags and all you want to do is get the waiting

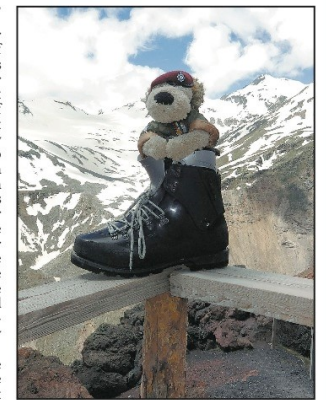
over and get on with it. We all retired early to our beds. I put on three layers before crawling into a sleeping bag liner inside a sleeping bag and this bag has made it to the top of Everest and to the North Pole i.e. it was very good kit - and I was still frozen! I also happened to be on the most uncomfortable bed in all of Russia! Sasha told us there were gasses in the air if we ever did make it to the saddle at 5,300 metres. Elbrus was an extinct (I hope) volcano.

The oxygen level is not only half of what we enjoy at sea level

See if I make it to the summit next week.



Russian War Memorial. wk2814



Fudge all set to conquer the peaks! wk2811



Stuff needed to climb a mountain. wk2810