

The Roads We Choose

A Himalayan season

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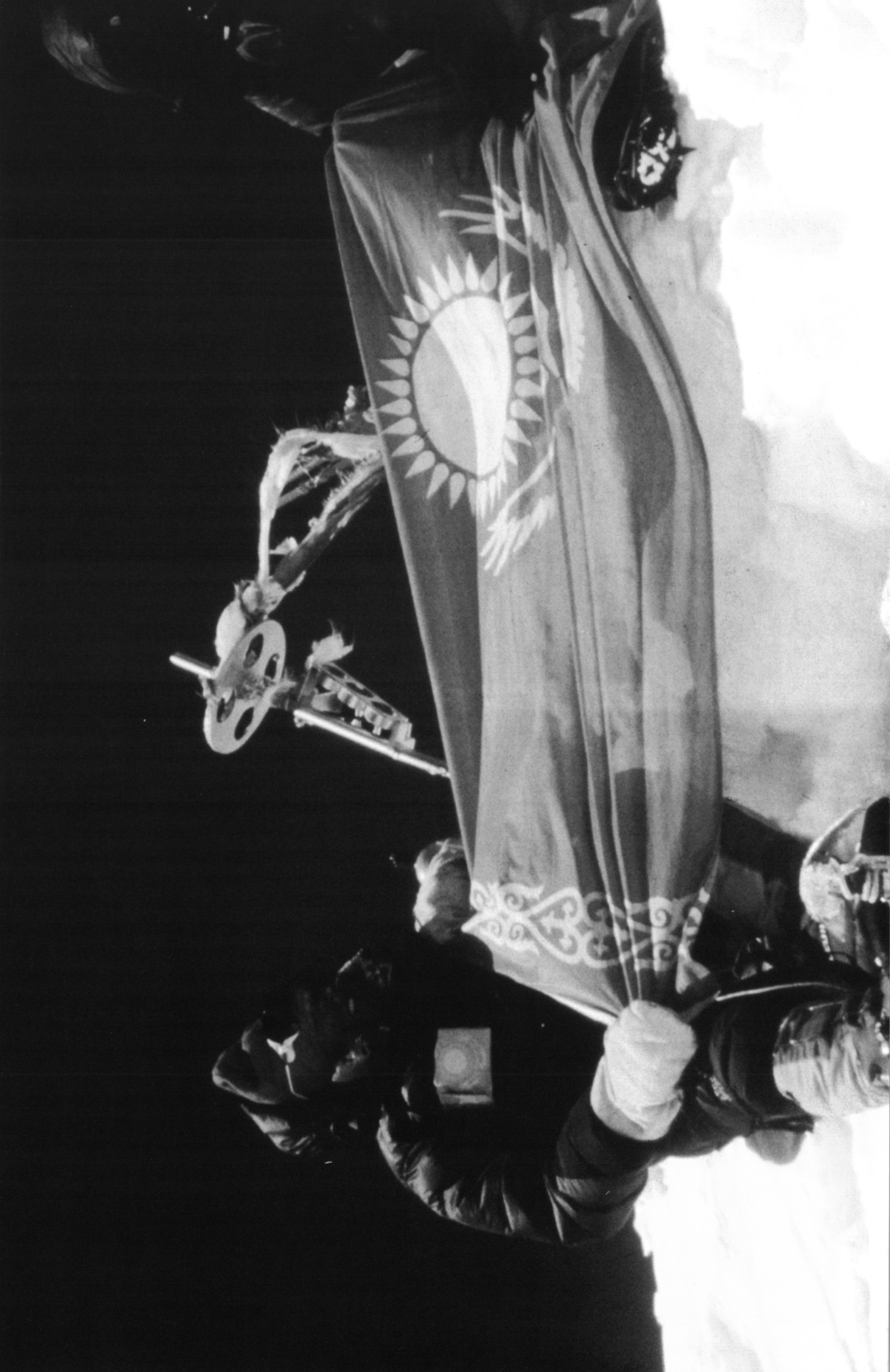
In the Himalayan season of 1995, I made three ascents of 8000-meter peaks, beginning with Everest via the north ridge in the spring as part of the International British Expedition. This was my second successful ascent of Everest without oxygen, and seven members of the expedition also successfully reached the summit.

In the fall, I made a solo ascent of Dhaulagiri by the north ridge. Although I was included in the first-ever expedition from Georgia, and I established the camps and acclimatized with the Georgian alpinists, I was on my own on the final ascent. On October 7 at 6:30 p.m., I left Base Camp to attempt an ascent in less than 24 hours. By the time I reached the second camp at 6500 meters at 11:30 p.m. a hurricane wind gusted, and I began to doubt the wisdom of continuing the ascent. But after waiting in a tent until 2 a.m. for the wind to let up, I left toward the third camp, which I reached at 5:45 a.m. At the fourth camp, there were one Bulgarian and four Spanish climbers who, because of the strong wind, hadn't risked leaving for their summit attempt very early in the morning.

After eating breakfast and warming up with the Bulgarian climber, I left the tent at 8 a.m. for the summit. I began to slowly climb the steep, snowy ridge, already lit by the bright morning sun. After the ridge, the last steep snow-covered slope of the mountain reminded me of the dangerous section of the pre-summit slope of K2, but at that time I was not so fatigued, so emaciated by the height and so helpless in the face of the mountain. Far below I saw that a group of five people — the Spanish climbers and the Bulgarian — had left the camp to make their attempt on the summit. On the summit ridge, I was met with increased wind and a sensation of an enormous void and of my own insignificance within it. From all sides, an impressive panorama of mountains opened up, blue skies alternating with white clouds. The last meters of the route were very dangerous, crossing a steep, corniced ridge with enormous snow drifts. Before the very summit, a huge snow slab came off under my crampons, carrying away with it into the abyss any remaining trivial pride in my ascent. I was suddenly struck with such a feeling of exhaustion that, were it not for the teeth of my crampons gripping the icy cliff, I would have been flying down the slope with the snow avalanche. This only reinforced my feelings of the insignificance of personal, egotistical yearnings for records, compared to the greatness and eternity of the mountains themselves.

The first Kahzahki flag at the top of the world: Anatoli Boukreev with Martin Adams (U.K.) in 1986.

Anatoli Boukreev collection



On the summit, it was only just before descending that I actually looked at my watch, as if the very result of my speed ascent had ceased to interest me. I started my descent at 11:45 a.m., which meant that I had reached the summit at about 11:30 a.m., for a total of 17 hours on the ascent. But on the summit, I did not rejoice in my achievement. Instead, I suddenly understood that more significant than my results was the very process of connection with the mountains. Man constantly needs trials and struggles, first of all with himself, not with the mountains. Their strength is indisputable and eternal, while man is always searching, always in evolution. And the roads he chooses depend on his spirit, pushing him on to greater challenges. With my accumulated tiredness, the descent seemed significantly more difficult and dangerous. After an hour of descent, I noticed the Bulgarian climbing up. He walked in my track, but by his own road, with his own summit at the end of the journey.

Only at the second camp did I stop to drink tea with Georgian friends before continuing. Night arrived at an altitude of about 5000 meters, and at the height of Base Camp the glacier was covered with a fog and visibility was lost even with a headlamp. Somewhere near the camp, I could hear voices, laughter, music. The time was 7 p.m.; just slightly more than 24 hours had passed since I had begun my climb. Even as exhausted as I was, my thoughts traveled back up the mountain, along the hard and dangerous climb, and I realized that my ideal of such an ascent was still far off, that the mountains were so much bigger than my own ambition. I needed to be so much stronger, to go through so much more, to strive always harder, in order to find what I search for in the mountains.

The end of every road is only the beginning of a new, even longer and more difficult one. And on the day after my return to Kathmandu, I met by chance my fellow countrymen, climbers from Kazakhstan, who had arrived for an ascent of Manaslu in the winter season. Suddenly, in the crowded, noisy center of Thamel, one of them shouted my name and stopped me as I was strolling and daydreaming among the restaurants and shops. The Manaslu expedition had originally been planned for the fall season of 1995 and was to tackle the South Face, a very dangerous and still unclimbed route. One of the last attempts to climb the face, in the fall of 1990 by a team from Kazakhstan, ended tragically with three climbers dying in their pioneering attempt of this futuristic route. It was in the memory of the climbers who died, Gregori Lunyakov, Zenur Haletov, and Marat Galeiev, that the 1995 expedition to Manaslu was conceived. But at the end of the summer of 1995, it was already decided to change the date of the expedition to the spring of 1996. Then, in September while I was on Dhaulagiri, the leader of the expedition made the decision to carry out the expedition in a shorter time period with a smaller team and in the winter season, not by the South Face, but via the first ascent route from the north, all of which significantly decreased the



expenses of the expedition.

All of these details I discovered later during the expedition, but there in Kathmandu, I needed to give an immediate answer to the question — was I ready or not to join the members of the Kazakhi expedition, who were in need of my experience? After finishing the ascent of Dhaulagiri, I had never considered that another expedition would follow immediately after — an expedition, in my opinion, no less difficult and dangerous. I was tired, of course, both physically and psychologically. But I quickly answered yes, since I never doubted in the success of the Manaslu expedition, and since I had known well the climbers in whose name the expedition was created.

Gregori Lunyakov and Zenur Haletov were older than me, and with them I had done many excellent climbs in the mountains of the Pamirs and Tien Shan. The last of our climbs together was the unprecedented traverse of the four summits of Kangchenjunga in 1989, the year before their deaths. For me, it was also important that, after a long, four-year break with the climbers of Kazakhstan, and in spite of the economic hardships, political instability in the countries of the former Soviet Union, and the indifference within the republics to the achievements in sports and alpinism, we had found the possibility to go together again into the Himalayas. It was good to see this rebirth of our special breed of alpinism, and to realize that not all that was great had died, that it was still possible to see our heritage in the great powers of sport. The high altitude alpinism in the former USSR, with its extraordinary accomplishments in the mountains of the Tien Shan and Pamirs as well as in the Himalayas, is unique in the world, both for the high level of climbing on big walls at extreme altitudes and for the teamwork employed. Such unusual performances and achievements can be compared with other great Russian schools, such as the classic Russian Ballet, the work of our scientists and the dedication of the cosmonauts.

From our old, experienced team which had occupied the foremost position in high altitude climbing in the former Soviet Union, there were only two on our current assault on Manaslu. They, along with myself, had experience on ascents of 8000-meter peaks. The two were Yuri Moisayev, who had climbed Dhaulagiri by a new route in 1988 and 1991 and Kangchenjunga in 1989, and Vladimer Suviga, who had climbed Kangchenjunga and Dhaulagiri in 1989 and 1991. My participation strengthened the team, even more because since the time of our last joint expedition in 1991, I had climbed constantly and without any breaks in training. During that four year period there had been many huge and difficult changes in our country — in economics, in politics, and ultimately, in the lives of every person. But some of the people, and especially climbers, didn't greatly change. What didn't change was the spirit inside of us, which drives us to choose again and again the roads leading to the mountains, to choose difficulty and danger, and to reach beyond the material comforts of our civilized world.

On our team, there were many young climbers already familiar with the logistics of expeditions. The expedition started out on November 3, with some of the members leaving by bus, in order to sufficiently acclimatize during the trek to Base Camp. The main equipment load, together with the doctor of the expedition Valentine Makarov, the leader Kazbek Valiev and myself, left later by helicopter. We all met again on November 18 in the last village before Base Camp, Samagoin. Two more days were still needed trekking with the porters through snow to reach Base Camp at the height of around 4700 meters.

After only three days, the first camp was established at around 5500 meters. After a few more days we had reconnoitered and pushed the route through the icefall cascading down from the north slope of the mountain. At this height, we made the second camp in the most level spot, near 6200 meters. After staying the night, the team descended to Base Camp where we took a short, two day rest. On November 29, the 10 members divided into two groups of five men and started at the same time back up the route. On December 1, we established the third camp on the ridge close to 6800 meters, next to the abandoned and buried tents of the previous Japanese expedition. With us we had carried up enough food, gas and equipment to establish the fourth and last summit camp.

The whole team worked together in complete harmony, as one machine. Our days usually began with the rising of the sun. We left our tents close to 8 a.m., and by 3 in the afternoon, all were back in the tents. After 3 p.m., the sun would set behind the northern ridge of the mountain and a terrible cold would descend, accompanied, as a rule, by a ferocious wind, from which we could escape only in the tents, and in even better, in our sleeping bags. Higher than 6500 meters the wind was significantly stronger and seemed to be independent of the time of day. At night, the temperature reached down to minus 40°C, and even in the tents it got below minus 10°C. Due to the extreme conditions, each of the groups were divided into their own tents, but tried to work in close cooperation.

We spent one night of acclimatization at the third camp and then descended to Base Camp for a short two-day rest. On December 5, all 10 of the climbers left on our final assault and on the same day reached the second camp. On the next day, we again left all together to the third camp, where the two tents we had placed earlier awaited us. December 7 arrived with wind, but the gusts gradually subsided. It was still very cold, but all the climbers reached the height of the proposed summit assault camp without delay. Working together, we quickly dug a platform out of the hard-packed snow on the large, ice-covered plateau before the summit, at about 7400 meters. Even before the tents were set up, the wind increased considerably, threatening to become a hurricane. Once in the tents it was bearable, although crowded with five people in our Russian-made four-person tents.



During the night, the wind increased and seemed to blow right through the walls of the tent, stealing heat even from the sleeping bags. The temperature inside was minus 20°C, and one could only imagine what it was outside.

In order to begin our summit attempt by 6 a.m., we began to prepare for our departure at 4 a.m. We planned to try in any conditions, keeping all 10 climbers together. However, leaving together was impossible, since in the crowded tents we could not all get ready at once. But all the same, at 6 a.m. the first climbers began the ascent along the gradual slope of hard snow and ice. Close to 10 a.m., the first ascensionist was crossing the last steep icy ramp leading to the corniced ridge of the summit. The first three climbers arrived at the highest point in intervals of five to ten minutes: Yuri Moiseyev, an experienced alpinist, with the young 24-year-old Alexander Baimakhanov and behind them, myself, struggling with a frozen camera, which was refusing to work in such low temperatures. The rest of the members caught up to us on the summit in the course of one and a half hours. Immediately after us, Dimitri Sobolev and Shavhat Gataoullin climbed to the summit, and a little bit behind them was Oleg Malikov. Bringing up the rear in the group of summitters was Dimitri Muravyov and Vladimir Suviga. The two young alpinists Mikhael Mikhaelov and Dimitri Grekov, fearing the possibility of frostbite, had returned to the tents in the first, coldest morning hours of the climb.

It was already almost 2 p.m. before all the summit climbers were back in the tents of the summit camp and preparing for the descent. We had planned to begin the descent as early as possible and to try to go immediately to the second camp. But at the end of this cold summit day, not all could endure such prolonged effort in such low temperatures, at this high altitude, without rest. While descending in front toward the tents of Camp 3, I saw how difficult it was for most of the climbers to make the last meters of the descent. Gathering together at Camp 3 at 6 p.m., we discovered that two of us were missing: Mikhaelov and Grekov, the same ones who had turned back before the summit.

By radio from Base Camp, we were informed that they could see the pair sitting in the snow on the steep face at the beginning of the descent from the high camp. Something had happened to our friends, although before we all left on the descent, neither of them had complained of feeling bad. Evidently, they did not have sufficient experience to be able to correctly judge their strength. Very quickly, without rest or drink, the young Shavhat Gataoullin and I started back up to help. Our ascent was hampered by the dark, but we only used our headlamps periodically, in order to conserve the batteries. It took us three hours to reach the two, but we were in time to help them. One of them already lacked the strength to fasten on his own fallen crampons, or to descend the steep icy slope unassisted. But a tragedy was avoided, thanks to solidarity and collective action, the very qualities that the



high altitude climbers of the former Soviet Union had been famous for during their height.

We continued into the night on our risky and cold descent through fog and frost toward the tents of the camp. Before reaching the camp, some of our friends climbed up to us with hot tea. While sipping on the tea, and looking at the tents, now so close, the sick Mikhael and his companion relaxed, let down their guard and made a mistake. Suddenly one of them slipped, and both fell over a 15-meter ice wall and began sliding down the steep slope. With a jerk, I was torn from my ice axe, with which I had belayed the pair's descent. After falling about 20 meters, we were stopped by the rope, which I had fixed to an anchor before we stopped for tea. No one was injured in the fall, and after another 15 minutes we found ourselves in the tent, where I warmed my hands, as I had lost my mitts in the fall. I luckily escaped with light frostbite.

The continuation of our descent on the next day was without incident. At Camp 3, we had oxygen for the sick climber, which had been brought up earlier in case of a medical emergency. On the next day, December 9, all of the team had returned to Base Camp by late in the evening. The seriously frostbitten climber, who had been threatened with amputation, felt much better because of the use of oxygen, and our doctor didn't call for a rescue.

The winter ascent of Manaslu was not an ordinary climb. I would like to hope that it is only one of the important victories of a renewed Kazakhi team on its way to revival. Even more, I hope that the accumulated knowledge of previous generations of climbers didn't die along with the fall of the Communist era, and that it will travel further and higher toward the summits of the Himalaya and Karakoram. And I would like to believe that the roads we choose depend less on economic problems, political battles, and the imperfections of our external world, and more on our internal calling, which compels us to go anew into the mountains, to the heights beyond the clouds, making our way to the summits. The sparkling summits, and the fathomless sky above our heads, with their grandeur and mysterious beauty, will always draw humanity, which loves all that is beautiful. This was, is and will be the magnetic strength of the mountains, independent of the worldly, trivial vanities and fusses, beyond which, at times, we cannot see the real, the beautiful and the eternal.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Nepalese Himalaya.

ASCENTS: Mount Everest (8848 meters) via the North Ridge, Spring 1995; Dhaulagiri (8167 meters) solo via the North Ridge, in 17 hours 15 minutes from Base Camp to summit, Fall 1995; Manaslu (8163 meters) via the Japanese (North Face) Route, Winter 1995.

"The last steep icy ramp leading to the corniced ridge of the summit:" Moyasiev and Baimakhanov at 8100 meters.
Anatoli Boukreev