Expedition Report for the CU Altai Expedition 2015

In August and September 2015 the Cambridge Altai Expedition travelled to the Altai Mountains in Russia aiming to attempt several non-technical ascents as well as some treks to remote high-mountain lakes in 3 different sub-areas of the region. The expedition was divided into three separate outings each lasting about a week. Each outing consisted of reaching a fairly remote location where we set up basecamp, followed by camping there for several days and going out on day treks without rangers, and then returning back to the village at the end of the outing. We are pleased to report that we successfully achieved the aims of the expedition, safely reaching all three of our destinations and completing a variety of rewarding ascents and treks, as well as learning a considerable amount about the area and the craft of expeditions.

Upon landing in Gorno-Altaisk we drove for 6 hours to the village of Ust’ Koksa on the bank of Katun’ River, one of the main rivers in the Altai. The next day we set off for our first outing to the plateau of Lake Kyrgyz at 2200m, driving part of the way through the forest and walking the rest. The plateau took a total of two days to reach, the main part of which was a 30 kilometer walk, first along the valley of Kuragan River and then rising along a smaller river valley to the plateau. For the walk in we were accompanied by a ranger from the Katun’ Biosphere Reserve with 3 horses (one for his supplies and two for ours). The walk in was really scenic and it was particularly captivating to see the Kuragan valley stretch for many, many more kilometers into the wilderness, with no trace of civilization.

The plateau was already in autumn colours when we reached it and provided a really scenic location for camp near one of the lakes. Over the next 3 days we successfully reached three summits, which, despite not being technically difficult, provided for some quite long mountain days and some valuable lessons. Some of them may have been first British ascents.

On the fourth day we had a restful morning making pancakes on the stoves, and then set off for the walk out in the afternoon, getting back to Ust’ Koksa the next day. Throughout this outing we were extremely lucky with the weather, which was almost completely cloudless and windless. Temperature-wise, during the day while in the Sun it was quite warm and similar to the Alpine summer weather, but as soon as the Sun set, it turned very cold very quickly, reaching sub-freezing by bedtime which only got colder during the night. However, we were expecting this and were quite well prepared. Our ranger, Sergey, was a
great companion, and we all got on with him really well, despite the language barrier for most of the team. He had been a ranger at the Biosphere Reserve for 16 years and had many interesting stories to tell us, which Andrey would translate to the rest of us. He also very kindly gave us a lot of advice for our second outing to the Akkem area. He led us on the walk in and walk out, while the day-treks we did by ourselves. At one point when he saw us trying to light a campfire with our matches he marched into his tent and brought out a full-on blowtorch to help us out!

Our second outing was to the area of Lake Akkem (2000m), which lies in the incredibly beautiful Akkem Valley at the foot of Mt Belukha, which is the highest mountain in Altai. To reach it takes two solid days by foot, which for us turned into two and a half days as a result of a paperwork-related delay on the first day and an uncooperative horse on the second day. On the second day of the walk in, as it started to snow in the afternoon, at about 2300m we very luckily came across an empty wooden yurta (traditional Altai hut, consisting of one round room with wooden shelf-beds surrounding a fireplace in the centre, with a hole in the roof as the chimney), built for hikers to stay in. For this walk in we went along the Kucherla valley, which runs parallel to the Akkem valley, and then crossed to the Akkem valley over a series of passes, which were gradually getting higher in altitude, culminating in the Kara Turek Pass (3077m), which is the highest mountain pass in Siberia that can be walked by horses, before the final, extremely beautiful, descent into the Akkem valley.

Following Sergey’s advice, we set up camp not near the main Lake Akkem but in the valley of river Yarlu, an incredibly scenic valley, whose river runs into the main Akkem river. Despite being slightly higher (at about 2100m), it was warmer than staying by the Lake would have been, as it is sheltered from the cold winds that come from the Akkem glacier and Belukha, as well as being more isolated from tourists. Despite the remoteness of this area, it is relatively well-visited by tourists due to the amazing scenery and the proximity of Belukha (some of them cheat and get helicoptered in and out though, as we later saw). There we completed day treks to the foot of the Akkem Glacier, an unnamed 3000m summit (which may also be a first British ascent), and the Seven Lakes Valley, a remote valley of high-mountain lakes. In this part of the trip we met some mild cases of indigestion, which, despite not being serious, meant that one of the outings had to be abandoned (we successfully repeated it the next day however).

For the walk-out, we went along the Akkem valley rather than back over Kara Turek. This path was very different, being a fairly monotonous but very beautiful and therapeutic trek through a gently inclined forest. Once again we were accompanied by a ranger, Pavel, for this and the walk in, while doing all the...
day-treks by ourselves. We were also really lucky with the weather again, which remained sunny throughout our stay. It turned to rain on the last day of the walk out, but we reached civilization by early afternoon that day and went straight into the banya (Russian steam sauna).

For the last outing we went to the Multinskie Lakes area (1700m). Despite all the walks still being quite long, this was the most relaxed part of the trip. We reached it by a 4x4 (which was more like a small tank) driving through some spectacularly muddy and bumpy ground. There is a campsite that operates on the bank of the Lower Multinskoye Lake which operates during the summer, which was still running, so that’s where we stayed. From there we completed three walks to the more remote lakes lying further along three different valleys which intersect at the main Multinskie Lakes. On the final night after our last trek of the expedition we made a celebratory outing to the campsite banya.

There were no major health problems apart from an occasional break out of indigestion brought on by a steady diet pulses.

We went slightly over budget due to needing to spend more on kit than we expected, as well as several unforeseen in-country expenses, but were able to fit within our contingency reserve.

On the whole, we were really pleased with how the expedition went, managing to achieve our objectives, and learning a lot in the process.

There were many lessons we learnt during the expedition, some of which are:

- If there is a flat bit of land which looks like it might be boggy, it probably is
- If you get interrogated by government officials, don’t tell them you have a GPS even if you do
• If you have pulses for dinner, don’t go to bed straight afterwards
• Bed at 9pm, wake up at 5am is a very nice rhythm to get into
• Keeping boots inside the tent when it’s freezing during the night makes the morning A LOT more bearable
• When going to bed at night, check there aren’t any water filters left outside (else they will freeze overnight and become unusable)
• Keeping something in an uninhabited tent will still keep it warmer overnight than just leaving it outside will
• Don’t take your boots into a banya/sauna to attempt to dry them – they will melt instead!
• If it starts snowing and you come across a hut, don’t just walk by!
• A good singing voice keeps the bears away
• Matches are good at lighting fires but blow-torches are better!

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