

The Road to Scuptura Chokursu, 'Sculptures Peak'



Darkness is descending rapidly. The storm, which had been ominously building out of the corner of my vision for the past hour, is now only a few peaks away: its lightning forks ceaselessly striking the nearby summits. The wind is building, the snow increasing. It's becoming a more dangerous situation by the minute.

Dave is worried; he's pushed way past his last reserves of energy; I too am running on vapours. We have been on the go for two days and still the route has yet to let up. It constantly gets harder, increasing the difficulty, pushing us beyond our limits. There is still several hundred metres left before the summit, but with no obvious line to get us there we are struck with indecision. 'Should we stop here?' A night out in these conditions is not going to be comfortable to say the least. Still, retreat is not really an option considering the horrendous terrain we've just passed through. We are well and truly committed now. The only decision left open to us now is whether to stop for the night, or, to push on, through the darkness into the imminent storm.

At the age of 12 I first received a copy of the 'White Spider' by Henrich Harrier. I read and reread it repeatedly for years, mesmerised by the epic battles won and lost in the attempt to conquer the North Face of the Eiger. The book seeded a desire within me to fight my own pitched confrontation with a mountain; to be the first person to its top, to climb a new line. In short, I was desperate for adventure.

“Kyrgyzstan, how do you spell that?” In truth I didn’t even know where Kyrgyzstan was, or even how to pronounce the name of the country that I was eventually destined for. There were thousands of questions, many of which remained unanswered, in those early days after being invited onto the expedition. But I did know one thing, on first seeing that beautiful picture of the North Ridge of Kizil Asker, I knew this trip was going to be the adventure I was so desperately seeking.

My wife gave me amazing support and suggested if I really wanted to then we could work something out. This despite, having a 6-month-old baby, just having spent 5 months in the Alps, getting married within 6 weeks and supposedly looking for a new job! I owe her big time!

The ITMC Tein –Shan Agency, whom provide all the logistics locally for climbing and trekking expeditions. Supplied us with a truck in addition to our driver, Sergei. What a truck it was, all 10 tonnes and six wheels of it. Standing next to it, the wheels were bigger than me! From here the adventure really kicked off in style, but not quite in the style we had expected.

Despite a bone shattering top speed of 35 mph, our truck repeatedly broke down, got punctures, hissed water and spat oil. But with a lot of head scratching, a few fags, plenty of sledge hammer bashing and some bribery by Sergei our driver, we eventually made it to the notorious mountain bogs of the Western Kokshal Too.

It was in these bogs that the world beneath our tyres came an awful lot closer. One would no longer have to climb up into the truck, you simply stepped through the door. The truck was now well and truly stuck in the mud! It was only after a day of continuous digging, jacking and collecting of rocks, did we manage to extract our truck.



We eventually arrived at our new base camp, at the snout of the Kormakova glacier. We were already tired just from the journey, but after spending four days cooped up days travelling Dave and I had so much pent up energy we were like Saturn V rocket on its launch pad. Off we blasted, straight into the mountains to acclimatise. The next week we spent in the mountains repeating the Canaidnian, Sean Issac's route, 'Silent Bob' and then climbing our first new route, named 'Sarah's Daddy' in honour of my daughter. The route was technically quite difficult, with a steep crux on tentatively thin 3 inch-thick ice. Yet we were fit, healthy and in high-spirits and ultimately made to the top.

After a week in the mountains we allowed ourselves our first real rest: We then set off for an attempt at the North Ridge of Kizil Asker. After a soul destroying five hour walk-in, we finally arrived battered and bruised on the Kizil Asker Glacier, ready for our attempt on the mountain. The next morning we woke early at only a few hours past midnight. Nervous, daunted, but also extremely excited, we left the tent. Our packs heavy with the weight of our supplies, we set off with in trepidation, out into the cold, crisp star-lit night.

By late afternoon we had managed to get established on ridge proper. It was tough work with several pitches of Scottish 4, some general mixed and some crazy Alpine VI rock climbing. "Well done mate!" I shout up to Dave upon reaching the next belay "That last pitch was completely unprotected. It's was well scary and pretty ballsy stuff" Dave carries straight on though, tucking into the delights of some pretty serious mixed climbing, up a corner, a chimney and then, abruptly, a dead end.

He's stuck: his ice axes and the front points skittering around and popping out far above me. 'I really hope he can do this' I think to myself, huddling up at the belay ledge "it's getting dark and I'm too shattered to want to give it a go myself". "I can't do it! shouts down Dave; he is completely pumped, and this is the hardest mixed climbing he has ever done. Tired, and spent, I yell up he has to do it. "So you better get your head down and sort it!". This seemed to work: off he went, up and up into the dark, teetering on his points, scratching with his axes, desperately trying to feel his way up the rock.

The next bit certainly looked daunting: A roof capped the corner, blank and impassable, looming above the tiny figure far above me. There was a blank slab out left, a possible escape? But even from here I could tell there that not a single placement of gear was going to be found on that blank granite face. Dave was now well and truly beyond the point of safe return. Yet this may have been a good thing as it kept his tiring mind alert and me on my toes, wary of the serious consequences a slip up would cause at this point.

It was a tense atmosphere. We had been climbing for the last 18 hours, it's was now dark, he had been hanging on in there on this pitch for the past 1.5 hours, doing some of the best climbing I have ever seen. Defiantly the most determined. Struggling up to the roof, he somehow found a hook under the overhang for his ice axe. Grunting and straining in the darkness, Dave managed to a massive rock-over on the lip of the roof; nothing to his left, nothing but a potential bone breaking 20m fall to keep is mind focused, hanging on nothing. I think it must have been sheer adrenalin that kept him from falling.

10 minutes later, I hear the call: "On belay!" and start to follow Dave up into the dark, desperately hoping he had found a bed for the night.



I lay there daydreaming about what had passed and what was to come. “Could it get any harder?” I mused to myself in the relative warmth of my sleeping bag. I was definitely having the adventure I wanted, having my cake and eating it. I kept thinking “will we find a way through this maze of rock and ice? Will we make it?” I said goodnight to my wife and daughter, saying sorry to Leann for being away and telling Sarah, my daughter, that Daddy will be home soon.

The sun rose the next morning and daylight lit up the mountains in a glorious golden glow. I just lay there, taking in the beauty of my surrounding, and at the same time, working my way through each ache and pain trying to get some life back into my now severely battered body. I also questioned the pale, golden sky, glistening in the beautiful morning’s light: “how long will this good weather last?”

I thought today we might get a chance to cover more ground, moving together up surely easier terrain, but, it turned out, we had completely underestimated this ridge. The mountain was throwing everything at us. We did more and more rock climbing, some pitches on solid, beautifully sculpted rock; other times on terrifyingly loose choss. There was ice pitches, down climbing, traverses, nightmare sections of rope-drag, dead ends, some pretty hard mixed stuff and then at about halfway up were left staring at a blank wall.

Dave didn't think we could pass this obstacle. Even if we got up that, the next pitch looked even worse. Our spirit's plummeted. Yet, it's my turn and we have to keep moving. Looking closer, a thin crackline split the rock, nothing else though, and the crack is only big enough for picks and front points?

Well I have to try, so the crack it would have to be. There's not one foothold bigger than a single grain of granite out off on the walls either side of the crack. Off I launch into the unknown, climbing blindly, not really knowing what I was doing. It turned out to be well protected, if you could hold on and place the protection that was. One mono-point of my crampons in the crack torqued, one ice axe tip balancing on an edge, the other stacked on top. My right crampon's mono point is on a grain, I'm at 5000m with calf's burning, veins pumping, throat burning. Bloody hell! I still have my rucksack on, why hadn't I left it at the belay? It weighted a tonne. My mono points kept popping, but slowly I crept up, hardly daring to believe it; I was actually climbing this thing!

The route never let up, not once. After another couple of tough rock pitches I was hanging there, chucking brick size pieces of loose rock off the mountain. My gear was wedged in a sandwich of loose rock, my foothold was wobbling, I had just put back my handholds and my brain was fried. I can't say I enjoyed these feelings, but I wanted the top. I knew we could get there. But now, to top everything off, a massive storm front was approaching over from the West. By now it had started to rumble and growl ominously, growing closer by the minute. It weighed heavily on both our thoughts.

I'm starting to wilt. Dave face looks drawn. Where are we going to bivi? How are we going to get down? How are we going to survive the storm that was now only a few peaks away and looking extremely menacing? The thoughts scream around me head. We both feel very exposed, but are not beaten yet. We dig deep into our diminishing reserves.

It was now dark and we had to get decisive; we're going for the top, it's decided. We better hurry though. We headed out right, in the pitch-black, across an ice field: the oncoming storm ceaselessly chasing us. We are endlessly hoping to find a gully to get us the top. For the first time on the route we had been able to move together two pitches, it's steep and unconsolidated but it occurs to me that this might be the summit cornice. Yes, it was. We're at the top! The storm smashes into us with the power of freight train.

I have never been so cold. I made the schoolboy error of leaving a small gap in my bivi bag's zip to let air in, well it froze in place and instead of air, snow just poured in. I could not feel my right set of toes. The wind was blasting, the snow falling by the bucket load. And it was cold: so, unbearably, cold. Probably around minus 30°C, not that such big numbers mean anything when you are literally being frozen alive. My wife and daughter tell me I have to move my limbs, get some warmth into the quickly freezing digits. "if you don't there will be hell to pay!" I hear them chime.



An hour later and the weight and force of the snow had pushed me off my ledge. I hang on the slope in my harness. The next 5 hours is a desperately battle to maintain feeling in

my toes. I shout to Dave, who replies he is okay. I knew he was suffering as bad as I was, we had to get down!

It was too windy to try and head diagonally back the way we came, the only viable way was straight down the west side. We had no idea what was down this side. We were preparing to descend into the complete unknown.

I thought the climbing was hard, but this was just mind blowing. We had done about 15 Abakalov abseil's, in the most intense bombardment of spindrift and falling ice I had ever witnessed. At one point I thought Dave was next to me on the belay: I thought I could feel his shoulder. I could not see, hear or talk to him. I was struggling to breath and had just been knocked off my feet by the force or the spindrift. I was trying to pretend this was normal, when in fact if we survived this it would be a miracle. It felt like I was standing in a kids TV gunk tank, but instead of goo, it was freezing steel ball-bearings smashing into me.

We continued to abseil, still making Abakalov's. Eventually with only 30cm of tat left, having used all the planned tat, prussicks, ice axe lanyards everything we could find, we hit the bottom. But we didn't stand around to congratulate ourselves: we were terrified we might get killed from, falling ice, avalanche or even one of the massive 100ft serac's that are directly above us.

To top everything off, we were on the wrong side of the mountain! We have not had any water or food for the last 24hours, the storm prevented us from be able to melt snow and the burning in our throats prevented us from eating. A trickle of melt water on the rock provided our first and well deserved drink.

The thought of getting back to the tent, was a desperate one, as all we wanted to do was just sit down and sleep, by now I could hardly lift or move a limb and the idea of just lying down and sleeping was so tempting, I knew that if we did fall asleep, we were not going to move for a few days! It was a constant battle to fight of the sleep. With every few steps, we would collapse and then realise we had to get back up and keep fighting the exhaustion to get back to our tent.



(The last two thirds of the descent route)

We staggered the last four kilometres, blindly walking twenty steps at a time and collapsing. I think we fell in about a dozen crevasses on that descent, but in the end we made it. I lay in our tent three days after leaving it, amazed. That was the most intense, beautiful, hardest climb of my life. All that dreaming of adventure, wanting to climb a new route, tread where no-one had trod, and now I had done it! I had just said goodnight to my wife and daughter as I had done every night and was about to congratulate Dave and say goodnight to him, to only find he was totally engrossed in a sudoku puzzle!