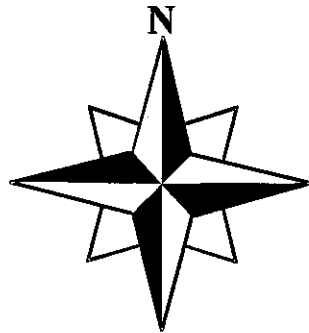


1994 Bezingi Wall Expedition



Contributors: Andy & Pete Benson

INTRODUCTION

This report contains the details of the recent mountaineering expedition to the Bezingi region of the Caucasus mountains of southern Russia.

The team consisted of four members :

- Andrew Benson
- Peter Benson
- William Edwards
- Allan Powell

Unfortunately for personal reasons Robert Durran who previously was to attend the expedition was unable to participate.

Dates of the Expedition: 30th June - 15th August

Described as the heart of the Caucasus the Bezingi region consists of eight peaks of over 5000 metres. Four of these summits lie at the head of the Bezingi glacier forming a 2000 metre face over 12 kilometres in length. Known as the 'Bezingi Wall' this face has attracted the attention of European climbers from the 19th century onwards. Immediately to the north east of this wall lies the equally impressive Mishirgi basin containing a further six peaks of over 4500 metres in height.

Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to give a detailed account of our expedition to The Bezingi region southern Russia. In addition we hope this report will also be of use to anyone wishing to undertake a similar expedition.

Expedition Aims

- (1) To make the first British traverse of the Bezingi Wall.
- (2) To climb as many of the existing routes in the region.

Travellers Tales

The expedition left for Moscow on the 30th of June from London Heathrow on a British Airways scheduled flight. Unfortunately we were somewhat over weight (with our luggage, not Will's stomach !) so even after some delicate negotiations some extra cash had to be handed over.

We were met in Moscow by our contact called Inna, and whisked off to her apartment. From here a visit to the local and only climbing wall in Moscow was had. This was a remarkably modern affair, suitably overhanging, bristling with bolt-on holds. Later that night we were invited to take part in a Russian Vodka drinking session. Several, well six or was it seven bottles later, Al was unconscious and Will was doing his part to improve male Anglo - female Russian relations.

When we finally surfaced the next day it was a mad dash to reach the train which was to take us to Nalchik. Here we met our Russian speaking guide, Niel, who was to travel to Camp Bezingi with us. The train journey passed without too much incident apart from attempting to burn the train down with a badly behaved petrol stove, and nearly getting thrown off the train by the Ukrainian border authorities who were not particularly pleased by the fact that we did not have the relevant visas to travel through the Ukraine. Thankfully Niel was able to smooth over this minor mishap and onwards we travelled.

On arrival at Nalchik, we were met by Vahal the administrator of camp Bezingi and taken to the Alpinist hotel which is a sort of holding tank for climbers waiting to travel to camp Bezingi.

Further amusement was had in the Nalchik market when Al and Pete were spat at by an old woman selling some cheese. Seemingly she took great offence to their bare legs, especially Al's who's were on full view due to his high cut running shorts. A quick exit was advised and trousers were donned for the rest of our stay in Nalchik. Seemingly this kind of welcome is usual in Muslim countries.

The next day we travelled to Camp Bezingi in Vahal's converted ambulance which looked like some kind of terrorist van. The track was extremely rough and at one point the van got stuck in the mud and we all had to help push it free, Niel falling flat on his face in the quagmire when the van finally lurched forward.



Camp Bezingi

The set-up at Camp Bezingi was somewhat confusing at first but we had the system under control after a few days.

The Camp itself consists of 10 buildings located on an isolated grassy plateau at an altitude of two thousand and two hundred metres, close to the snout of the huge Bezingi Glacier, the largest in the Caucasus. The accommodation consisted of large blocks of plywood huts which contain many self contained rooms which can sleep three or four. Sheets and blankets are provided by the Camp which made a welcome change to sleeping bags. Whilst we stayed in camp we were fed in the vast dining room of the camp. The diet was of variable quality consisting mostly of dubious cuts of mutton as this was the most readily available foodstuff. However this food was passable to survive on and could be supplemented by the 'productie' store, where butter, cheese, bread, chocolate, tinned fish etc. could be bought fairly cheaply.

Information on routes could be obtained from Yuri, the man in charge of mountaineering activities in the camp. He has been coming to Camp Bezingi for over thirty five years and has an amazing in depth knowledge of all the surrounding mountains. There was very little in the way of written descriptions so the information was relayed by means of a whole library of beautiful black and white photographs covering the whole range. Yuri spoke a reasonable amount of English which was a great help to us as our translator, Niel, only stayed with us at Camp for a day. Probably the biggest difference to climbing in the western Alps was the total lack of any weather forecast. This seemed to be the norm and the advice we were given by Yuri was to take a tent. We soon realised the immense benefit of carrying the tent on routes and so it became an indispensable item of gear. Also somewhat lacking was any map, again this seemed fairly normal to climb without one. Another difference was the use of a small radio which was provided by the camp.

The Climbing

This is what we had really come for and we were not disappointed. As previously explained the Bezingi region contains two main glacier basins, these being the Bezingi glacier and the Mishirgi glacier. We all thought that the Mishirgi basin was better in terms of the climbing that it offered and the beauty of the mountains. Most of the routes were all of a fairly serious nature with a four day round trip being the shortest time for a smallish route. Most of the big faces are of a mixed or pure ice nature, so little room for any rock jocks.

Also there was no 'cragging' (rock climbing on smaller cliffs) to be had, so it was either 'Go big or go home'.

ROUTE ONE

LYALVER, 4350m

Route: North Ridge from the East
Grade: 2b, Russian PD, Alpine
First Ascent: A.Schulze and party, August 1903

This mountain is one of the easiest and smallest peaks on the Bezingi Wall. It was originally intended to continue along the Bezingi wall to the next peak of Gestola ,4860m but unfortunately our MSR stove suffered from a ruptured fuel line at the first camp. This meant our ability to melt snow was zero as this was the only stove we had on the route. However the climb to Lyalver was enjoyable in its own right being a straight forward snow slope then several hundred metres of easy rock ridge to the top. We descended by the same ridge down climbing all the way. In retrospect it was a blessing in disguise that the stove had gone to the great cooker showroom in the sky, the final resting place of all heating appliances! Because our slightly under-acclimatised bodies were struggling to climb 4300 metres let alone 4800 metres. The extra five hundred metres would have been slightly tiring to say the least, especially since it was necessary to lug all our heavy weight equipment; tent, sleeping bags etc. over Lyalver to make camp before climbing Gestola.

ROUTE TWO

ULLU-AUZ-BASHI, 4670m

Route: North Face
Grade: 5b, Russian ED. Alpine
First Ascent: A. Naumov, N. Andrejev, B.Dauter, G. Naumova, August 1961

The guide book describes this as a fairy tale north face, and gazing upwards from Camp Bezingi it was clear why this was so. The usual briefing before departure from Yuri insured that we took the most logical line up the slope that is sticking to the ice slope, rather than detouring up every single boulder sticking out of the ice as the Bender guide would suggest. The evening before the ascent was spent at a rather pleasant bivouac beside the North Ullu-Auz glacier. At the rather unpleasant time of 11.30 pm we departed to climb what we expected to be 1000m of 45 degree snow. It soon turned out to be a rather gnarly outing, the majority of the face was composed of rock solid brittle ice. This proved very hard and unnerving to climb. Because of the time consuming nature of the climbing, we took longer than was ideal, a bivouac half way up the face seemed inevitable.

Fortunately the upper rock region afforded a comfortable bivi. The views were magnificent. The next day proved to be even worse, after 11 pitches we found ourselves on the summit rock tower grappling with a large amount of rubble. One boulder having to be tied off by Al with a prussick loop to prevent it trundling down on top of the rest of the team below. After a second bivouac on the summit with no food or water since we had run out of fuel for the stove we began to descend down the upper reaches of the Mishirgi Glacier. Unfortunately this was in very bad condition with the three icefalls being particularly difficult and very dangerous to descend. However once back at camp we decided that it was in the end a jolly good climb.

ROUTE THREE

Shkhara, 5200m

Route: Tomaschek Rib
Grade: 5b, Russian ED, Alpine
First Ascent: H. Tomaschek, W. Mullerr, August 1930

Billed as 'one of the great rock ridges of the world', the main north rib running up to the second highest peak in Europe was an obvious challenge to us. The jumping off point for this route was a small triangular metal hut at the head of the Bezingi Glacier called Jangi Kosh. Due to bad weather coupled with a slight dose of lethargy it took five days before we finally left for the route from Jangi Kosh.

The initial section of the climb involved some very pleasant rock climbing but this soon turned into a more mixed nature as we gained height on the face. In fact some of the climbing was fairly tricky with several pitches of Scottish 5, not easy with a monster sac. After climbing continuously for eighteen and a half hours we finally reached the bivi ledge but we could only excavate a small ledge in the snow that would accommodate two people in the tent, so Pete and I were forced to sleep outside of the tent on less than perfect ledges. The next day the climbing was similarly pleasant although the wind had whipped up and the spindrift was becoming a problem. The conditions deteriorated even further so we decided to camp below a serac slightly below the summit dome as this would be the most sheltered site if the weather decided to get any worse. The next day we woke to a very stormy scene with copious amounts of spindrift being blasted on to us. However we decided to battle on, the spindrift being some of the worst that I have ever experienced, bad days on Ben Nevis included. Thankfully we soon topped out onto the summit dome where the wind eased a little and we were able to push onto the summit fairly quickly. The summit's rarefied air was no place to linger, we quickly began the long descent down the Cockin Ridge. This turned out to be fairly un-enjoyable, comprising mostly of 50 to 60 degree knife-edge snow and ice ridge which was tedious and time-consuming to descend. After another night on the mountain on the descent we finally reached the sanctuary of Jangi Kosh and could reminisce over what was an excellent and highly rewarding climb to the second highest mountain in Europe.

Before we began the route Will discovered that one of his plastic boots had split at the front where the groove for the crampon bale located. As we could not obtain a new pair of plastic boots and a repair was impractical, he managed to hire a pair of Russian leather boots. These were OK for climbing in but unfortunately became saturated with water and Will's toes became badly frost nipped because of the cold and the wet. This ruled him out from any further climbing as he did not want to risk further damage to his toes.

ROUTE FOUR

Misses-Tau, 4320m

Route: East Face
Grade: 5b, Russian TD+, Alpine

Due to a large amount of snow that fell in the second half of the trip we decided to climb a lower peak in the hope of avoiding most of the snow that was blanketing the higher routes. Yuri suggested that we might like to climb Misses-Tau from the east and gave us all the information that we required on the route as it was not contained within our guide book.

A pleasant walk was had from Camp Bezingi up the Mishirgi glacier to an excellent campsite below the east face. That night we were treated to a spectacular avalanche originating from the serac ridden North face of Dych-Tau, causing us to leap out of the tent as a white blanket came thundering down towards us. Thankfully we were out of the direct fall-line and were only blasted by the icy plume riding in front of the main avalanche.

The next day we began the climbing proper and started up a fairly loose open gully and after a few pitches that could only be described as gnarly, we came onto a well defined ridge consisting of some beautiful solid granite. We donned rock boots and began to enjoy some pleasant rock climbing in the warm sunshine. However this was not to last and the usual afternoon cloud enveloped us and it soon began to sleet. Meanwhile the climbing was getting steadily harder culminating in a very steep crack which succumbed to full aid climbing techniques employed by Al. As it was by now twilight a small ledge was excavated and our trusty tent was perched aloft the precarious pedestal. In fact 6 inches of the tent was hanging over the edge of the ledge forming a trough in the groundsheet that was slightly disconcerting.

Thankfully the next day dawned bright and sunny and we were soon moving fast over the snowy broken ground that lay above. On reaching the snowy saddle below the summit rock tower we dumped all rucksacks and continued onto the summit. The rock again was superb and very enjoyable as we did not have the disability of our rucksacks. After regaining our rucksacks we made camp. The descent was fairly straight forward down the steep glacier on the north face. Downward progress was made mainly by abseiling from fixed anchor points.

Several hours later we were again enjoying the spectacular views up the Mishirgi valley jubilant from yet another fine climb.

Review

The following information is laid down in a concise manner to assist any future expeditions wishing to climb in Russia. During our preparation for this expedition, we had access to very little information, particularly on the set-up at camp Bezingi.

Travel

There are several possibilities for travel to Russia and then internally to the mountains.

(1) Air travel

Obviously this is the best option, there are daily scheduled flights from the UK to Moscow. We managed to obtain cheap tickets as all the members in the expedition were under 26. However these type of discount tickets are not always readily available.

Internal flights are operated by the infamous Aeroflot from Moscow to Mineralnyje-Vody and would seem to be fairly reliable as many of the other visitors to Camp Bezingi had travelled via this route.

(2) Train travel

It is possible to travel by train from London to Moscow and takes around three days to complete the journey. It is cheaper than the cost of a full air ticket. The train from Moscow arrives at Nalchick and takes approximately two days.

However Ukrainian visas would appear to be required as the direct railway route passes through the Ukraine. We had hassle for not having Ukrainian visas, the situation is not entirely clear and it would be best to check with Ukrainian Embassy. The cost for the train travel is again less than the internal flight.

1994 Bezingi wall expedition itinerary.

London (Heathrow) - Moscow (Sherimento): British Airways scheduled flight

Moscow (Krushy Railway station) - Nalchick : Direct Sleeper train

Nalchick - Rostov : Direct Sleeper train

Rostov - Moscow (Krushy) : Direct Sleeper train

Moscow (Sherimento) - London (Heathrow): B.A. scheduled flight.

Our Recommendation.

In retrospect we think it is best to fly all the way. This may prove slightly more expensive but it maximises climbing time at Bezingi, and it is by far the most hassle free way of travel.

Note. At the time of travel the Foreign office had recommended British nationals not to fly internally in Russia with Aeroflot, because of safety worries.

Camp Administration

The workings of the camp were at first a little confusing and it seemed to be rather restrictive in a climbing sense, but everything soon worked itself out. We negotiated a rate for 'nights in camp' and 'nights out of camp'. Niel was particularly helpful here. The exact costs can be found in the finance section.

All that was required when we wished to depart for a climb was to consult Yuri who would give us further information on our route, fill out a form of our plans and issue us with a radio.

He would normally notify the camp administrator that we would not be requiring to be fed, but out of courtesy we would normally let Vahal know that we were going into the hills.

There was no restrictions placed on which routes that we could attempt, even though heavy restrictions used to and still are enforced on aspirant Russian and Ukrainian mountaineers. In fact quite the opposite was true as Yuri seemed to encourage us onto the harder routes.



Food

The food situation at camp Bezingi was satisfactory for our needs. Whilst in camp all our meals were cooked for us, and a typical menu for one day follows.

Breakfast:	Bread - Pudding rice - Mutton with rice - Tea
Lunch:	Bread - Soup - Salad - 'Hamburgers' with fried potatoes - Drink-o-pop
Dinner:	Bread - Mutton with rice - Coffee sweetened with condensed milk

The portions that we received were adequate although sometimes we could have done with larger quantities. In addition to the food cooked by the camp, the storeroom provided all the essentials that were needed to survive in the mountains. The main types of food have already been previously mentioned in the main body of the report. However some particular notes on the food follow.

Most of the prices were similar to that found in Britain apart from a loaf of bread which worked out at about 10p. One of the best things to be found in the store was a powdered drink called Drink-o-pop. This was super concentrated and made even the most fowl snow melt taste superb. Another drink available at the camp was tins of sweetened condensed milk. This became one of our favourite treats whilst we stayed in camp as it served to quell any cravings that we had for sweet things as well as providing us with huge amounts of energy.

All the food in the store is in hessian sacks and so when you buy food from these sacks you must have a separate (polythene) bag to put it in. We never had enough bags and frequently resorted to using sleeping bag stuffsacks.

A typical days food while we were climbing would usually consist of ;

Porridge / semolina for breakfast, sweetened with sugar and a spot of dried milk. Sweets and chocolate for snacks during the day. Our main meal usually consisted of noodles with flavourings to make it slightly more palatable.

Since we did not know what food we would be able to buy in Russia, we took out some food with us. We bought noodles, flavoured rice, sweets, chocolate and shortbread. Although these items were not essential they did make for small treats while on the hill. It's amazing how tasty a 19p packet of shortbread can be when you have been eating mutton for weeks.

Visas

For any travel to Russia a valid visa is required. In order to obtain a visa it is first necessary to obtain a letter of invitation from either a tourism organisation or from a national living in Russia.

When we were applying for the visas we did not know anyone to personally contact. So we communicated with a company called Alpindustria who put us in contact with V. Koroteyev. They run a similar company and gave us the letter we required to obtain the visas. It is a straight forward procedure to get the visas, as long as you have all the correct documentation. There is a Russian consulate in Edinburgh, where we obtained our visas.

Sponsorship

The feasibility of this expedition was realised by the tremendous support that we were given by various companies and award bodies.

It would seem as if the best method of obtaining help are as follows:

Get a good proposal together, presented in a readable fashion and send it to as many people as you can get addresses for. Expeditions tackling new or difficult climbs in remote areas stand a better chance of success (in gaining sponsorship that is !) because there are lots of expeditions travelling to the more popular areas and it would be impossible for the sponsors to support them all.

As there was a large Scottish contingent on our expedition we aimed our fund-raising particularly at these people which seemed to pay dividends.

In return the Sponsor will usually ask for a report, of which this is one, and equipment manufacturers will usually ask for action photos of their gear in use. Also other publicity in the form of slide shows can boost the 'return' that the sponsor will receive.

A final point is to apply very early as many award bodies have their cut off dates before Christmas for expeditions leaving the following summer.

There now follows a list of the sponsors for our expedition with addresses, contact names. And the help that we received from them.

Award Bodies

(A) Mountaineering Council of Scotland

Kevin Howett,
National Officer,
Mountaineering Council of Scotland,
71 King Street,
Crieff, PH7 3HB.

The MC of S donated a cash grant of £750

(B) The Liam Elliot Award

Hamish Irvine,
Liam Elliot Memorial Fund
40 Braid Road,
Edinburgh, EH10 6AD.

The Liam Elliot fund donated a cash grant of £250

(C) The Scottish Mountaineering Trust

John R.R.Fowler,
Honorary Secretary,
Scottish Mountaineering Trust
4 Doune Terrace,
Edinburgh,
EH3 6DY

The SMT donated a cash grant of £500

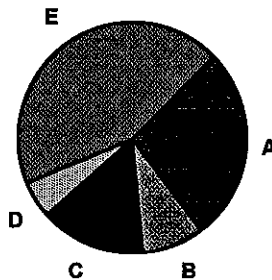
(D) The University of Edinburgh

Enterprise Centre
24 Buccleuch Place
Edinburgh, EH8 9LN

The University of Edinburgh gave a cash grant of £150

(E) Personal contributions

At the end of the expedition we calculated that each member had contributed about £300 each.
fig 1: summary of funding



Equipment suppliers

<u>Company</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>Contact</u>
NEVISPORT	Nevisport Ltd 261 Sachiehall Street Glasgow, G12	Rab Ferrel
VANGO	Vango (Scotland) Ltd 70 East Hamilton Street Ladyburn Greenock, PA15 2UB	Jim White

Vango offered the us expedition rates on their products. They also offered to pay for any good transparencies of their gear in use.

ULTIMATE

Ultimate Equipment Ltd
Churchill Industrial Estate
Lancing, West Sussex
BN15 8UG

Dave Ross

Ultimate offered the loan of a couple of tents, in return they wanted some transparencies of the tents in use.

VENTURA

Ventura Holdings (U.K.) Ltd
Hall House
New Hutton
Kendal
Cumbria LA8 OAH

Gordon Fraser

Ventura offered us 30% off the retail price of their products. Their products include Asolo.

There were many other companies that offered their support to the expedition, unfortunately we couldn't make use of them all. The deals that we were offered were similar to the those mentioned above.

Finance

Before we set left we pooled all the money and changed it into US dollars. This seemed the best currency to take as roubles are worthless outside Russia and they are prone to high inflation, devaluing them.

Exchange rates.

Below is a table of the exchange rates that we got when were in Russia. It is easy to change from Dollars to Ruples, but almost impossible to do the opposite.

$$1 \text{ US Dollar} = 2000 \text{ Ruples} = \text{£}0.62$$

The general working currency in Russia is the rouble, we paid for food etc. with roubles. When we were dealing with any travel companies or the camp they wished to be paid in dollars.

Expenditure

The Expedition as a whole cost about £2800 for four people.

Spending Breakdown of major expenditure.

<u>Description</u>	<u>Cost</u>	
• Visas	£40	
• Membership of the MCoS	£40	
• Flights to Moscow	£625	
• Accommodation in Moscow and single rail tickets to Nalchik	£279	\$450
• Accommodation at Camp Bezingi	£961	\$1550
• Return Transport from Nalchik to Camp Bezingi	£93	\$150
• Rail tickets from Nalchik to Moscow	£90	\$72
• Interpreter for 5 days	£72	\$115

At camp Bezingi we managed to negotiate paying \$20 per night per person when we were in camp. This gave us three meals and the room for the night. When we were out of the camp we were charged \$5 total. On top of these we still had to pay for food and we took out about £400 for any emergencies. A special bank account was opened to control the financial aspect of the expedition. All grants etc were paid into this account.

Miscellaneous

Photography

All four of us carried compact cameras at most times, they proved to be invaluable and provided us with a brilliant photographic record of the trip.

Unfriendly Activities

The political situation in parts of Russia is very unstable. The Bezingi region seems to avoid much of this. The only trouble that we heard of, was foreign tourists being kidnapped from Mineralnyie-Vody. In retrospect I feel that Russia is no more of a dangerous place to travel than any other European country.

In hindsight

There are several things that if I were to do the trip again that I would of done differently or of taken out with us. It may well be possible to camp at Bezingi which would save a lot in accommodation costs. It would have been better to deal with the Camp Bezingi Administration direct, this would of saved paying people in Russia. Will's boots splitting were a major problem, if we had some epoxy resin it may well of been possible to fix them. Because it is almost impossible to get any climbing gear of western standards at Bezingi, it is highly advisable to take plenty of repairing materials to mend damaged gear, the Russian glaciers show no mercy.

Weather

The weather in the Bezingi region tends to be more settled than in other mountain regions. In a good summer there can be settled sunny weather for two weeks, ha ha!

The weather wasn't quite as good as expected. We were told that it had been one of the coldest and unsettled summers for thirty years, just our luck. There is no weather forecast, only a general indication of what the pressure is. Even when the weather was unsettled there was no major storms. Most of the time we could shelter from the bad weather in a tent on routes, which sometimes could be pretty miserable. During the afternoon clouds would usually envelop the lower slopes, this made it grim at Camp Bezingi.

Insurance

All the members of the expedition were covered by the British Mountaineering Council's insurance policy. This is relatively inexpensive and offers good medical and rescue cover.

Useful Addresses

Below are a few addresses that would be useful.

Alpindustria	tel : 0107 095 367 3183
Russian Travel Company	fax : 0107 095 2926511
Russia, Moscow	BX 10942
105 037	
IZMAILOVSKAYAD	

Alpindustria were the first people who we had contact with when planning the trip, for some reason they passed us on to the company below. Alpindustria have a large shop in Moscow where almost any type of western and Russian climbing equipment can be bought - including titanium ice screws. The 'office' as it is called was where we confirmed our return flights, the staff speak English and will do anything for you, for a few dollars.

V.KOROTEYEV fax : 095 350 0544 452 8133
Fund of assistance to
Mountaineering, Rock Climbing
and Mountain Tourism

We were met off the plane by the above organisation.

Intourist
Intourist House
219 Marsh Wall
London, E14 9FJ

Intourist are the official tourist board for Russia.

The End ...

The Bezingi Region offers some extreme Alpine climbing in a beautiful and unspoilt part of the world. All the members agreed that it was one of the best climbing trips we had ever done and that we should return soon. If you have any further queries about the expedition or climbing in Russia please get in contact at the address below.

Pete & Andy Benson, tel : 0141 942 7202
18 Iain Road,
Bearsden,
Glasgow, G61 4PA