

Three Mongolian Mountains

In August 2018, Norman and Anthony accompanied by Eric and Jangbu of IMG and Batsuren, IMG's local representative, visited Mongolia to climb Mount Khuiten and nearby peaks. Blessed by great weather on the days that mattered, it was highly enjoyable, both the climbing and learning more of the history and culture of this fascinating country.



In Ulaanbaatar, we visited a monastery featuring this fine Buddha, then the museum and the large city square where you see the team gathered, with a seated statue of Genghis Khan, founder of the great Mongol Empire in the background behind us.



Early the next day, we flew west for 3 hours across a vast and empty landscape to the town of Olgii. Mongolia's population of 3.1 million, of whom about half live in Ulaanbaatar, occupy a land area six and a half times the size of the UK. Travelling by van over rough roads for six hours we came to the entrance of the Tavan Bogd Park and set up camp.



In the spacious dining tent, we had the first of many excellent meals prepared by Chef Tugsuu, a highlight of the expedition.



In the morning, after the camp was packed up and the camels loaded, we set off on a pleasant hike heading further west towards our Base Camp. From 2,720 meters (8,920 feet) we moved up gradually on mellow terrain past herds of yaks .



At a first pass at 3050 meters (10,000 feet) the mountains became visible.



After about 3 hours, we paused by a lovely lake bordered by flowers for lunch.



While we were relaxing, it was good to see passing by the camel chain laden with our baggage led by Tugsuu on horseback.



During the trek, particularly as we moved a little higher, mountain flowers of many types and many colours appeared.



Eventually we reached the top of the second pass marked by an “ovoo” (sacred heap of stones) around which we were advised to walk three times in a clockwise direction.



We could see down to the Potaniin Glacier and our Base Camp away in the distance. Altogether it took us about 5 hours for just under 15kms (9.3 miles) and due to the ups and downs of the terrain some 488 meters (1,600 feet) of elevation gain.



After dinner, Jangbu and Anthony walked up the moraine beside us to look down on the Base Camp situated at 3,090 meters (10,140 feet). It was fuller than expected with hiking groups and some mountain bicyclists well spread out.



And on the other side, we could see the glacier lit up in the evening sun.



The next day was planned for “acclimatization” including a moderate hike but due to persistent rain, we turned this into a short hike up the hill to the north of the camp. In the afternoon, Eric and Jangbu helped Norman brush up his ascender techniques.



The following morning the weather had brightened in line with Eric’s forecast from home which proved remarkably accurate throughout this trip. With two now added to the group, Mongolian climbing guides Otgo and Sainaa, we set off towards the glacier about 3.5kms (2.2 miles) initially along this pleasant undulating path which we came to know well.





As we moved higher, there was some new snow on the ground. We saw ahead the Mongolian ponies that our porters used to carry our gear part of the way. We ate lunch, put on crampons and roped up. There were a number of crevasses which Otgo negotiated with skill. Our destination, the High Camp, was situated behind the second pyramid slightly to the left of the center of the picture.



The slope steepened and the snow grew deeper as we neared our destination.



Our High Camp was located at 3,775 meters (12,400 feet). We settled in for a restful afternoon, planning an early start tomorrow. The journey from base camp had taken just under 5 and a half hours for a distance of 9kms (5.6 miles) and a total elevation gain of 700 meters (2,300 feet). Here unlike Base Camp we were quite alone and unlike Base Camp there was no Tugsuu so freeze dried food featured for dinner.



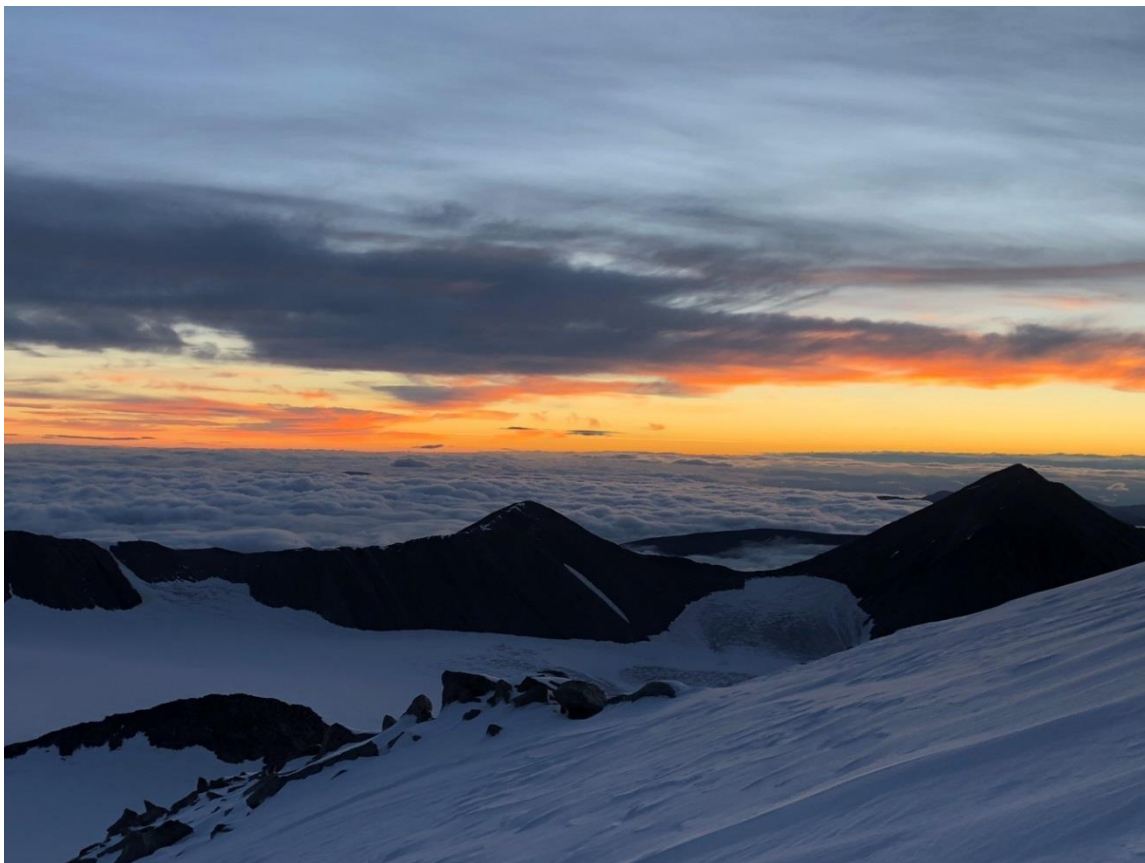
Expecting plenty of fresh snow from the fall two days previously, we arose early and set off soon after 0300.



We had two teams, Otgo leading the way and kicking steps, Eric deepening Otgo's steps and then Anthony, followed by Sainaa, Batsuren, Norman and Jangbu. After a short gradual section, the slope steepened.



Soon we were rewarded by a beautiful dawn and made steady progress upwards.



Sometimes as in the photo below the steps were well formed and easy to use and sometimes the soft snow crumbled in making the footing less secure.



The route in some places goes quite close to a big drop off to the east. Just below the 4th rock is the steepest section where a fixed rope is often used. Today's conditions allowed us to proceed without one but as we paused above the rock Otgo fixed it to secure the descent.



After the steep section, the slope gradually flattened out and after about 4 and a half hours, we reached the top. The second rope team soon came up, Sainaa waving his hand in greeting.



The summit shot taken by Jangbu shows Batsuren, Eric, Norman, Anthony, Sainaa and Otgo at the top of Mount Khuiten (4,374 meters or 14,350 feet).



Enjoying the great weather, we spent about 45 minutes on the summit with magnificent views, here looking south to the mountains of China.



The descent needed care but went more smoothly than expected as the steps in most places were well kicked in. The scene below shows the short section of fixed rope. In good conditions we were back at the high camp in a little over 2 hours.



Jangbu was up early the next day to catch the sun rising above the mountains to the east and we prepared for our ascent of Mount Nairandal.



Soon the sun lit up Mount Khuiten.



Nairandal is a much easier climb than Khuiten but is hugely worthwhile. We set off in the same rope teams and in just over an hour and a half we were at the summit of 4,082 meters (13,390 feet).



Mount Nairandal sits on the border of three countries, with magnificent views, looking north and west to Russia, with Kazakhstan visible in the far distance, looking southwest to China and southeast and east back to Mongolia.



On the left in the background are the mountains of China and on the right Russia.



Here to the south we see Mount Khuiten and to the east, on the left of the picture, the black pyramid where our high camp was located.



Back at camp, we enjoyed some tasty noodles and loaded up our backpacks. A cold wind was blowing as we set off but this soon subsided. We came to some wreckage of an old helicopter crash seen on the way up. Jangbu and Sainaa paused for a more thorough inspection and Sainaa who clearly had not had enough exercise on the mountains decided to kick the larger portion all the way down the glacier.



When we caught up with him, it had been carefully placed on the side of the moraine where future climbers will no doubt welcome it as a comfortable perch for putting on their crampons.



Back at Base Camp, Batsuren produced a delicious bottle of Singur beer.



Anthony's day had one more event, a brief board meeting to attend where he was doubly fortunate: the warm sunny weather persisted and the sat phone worked well.



After two full days Norman decided to catch up on his book while Eric, Jangbu and Anthony with Batsuren and Sainaa, used the unneeded “contingency day” we had built into the programme to climb nearby Mount Malchin. Once again, the early morning was clear but Eric’s reliable forecast was warning that rain was on the way.



We set off at 0712 back along the same track that led to the glacier.



The lower part of the mountain was grassy with some more wild flowers to admire.



Soon the grass gave way to rocks, stones and gravel but mostly the path was clear.



Eventually with a few brief forays on to the snow, we reached the summit ridge



It took us 3 hours and 38 minutes to reach the summit at 4,050 meters (13,290 feet) and this time we did not linger long wanting to be off the ridge before any thunderstorms appeared. As we descended, it rained heavily for a short time causing us to don our full raingear. This did the trick and the rain stopped, holding off till shortly after we reached camp some 7 hours after we had set off, a round trip of 12.7kms (8 miles) involving an elevation gain of some 950 meters (3,116 feet).



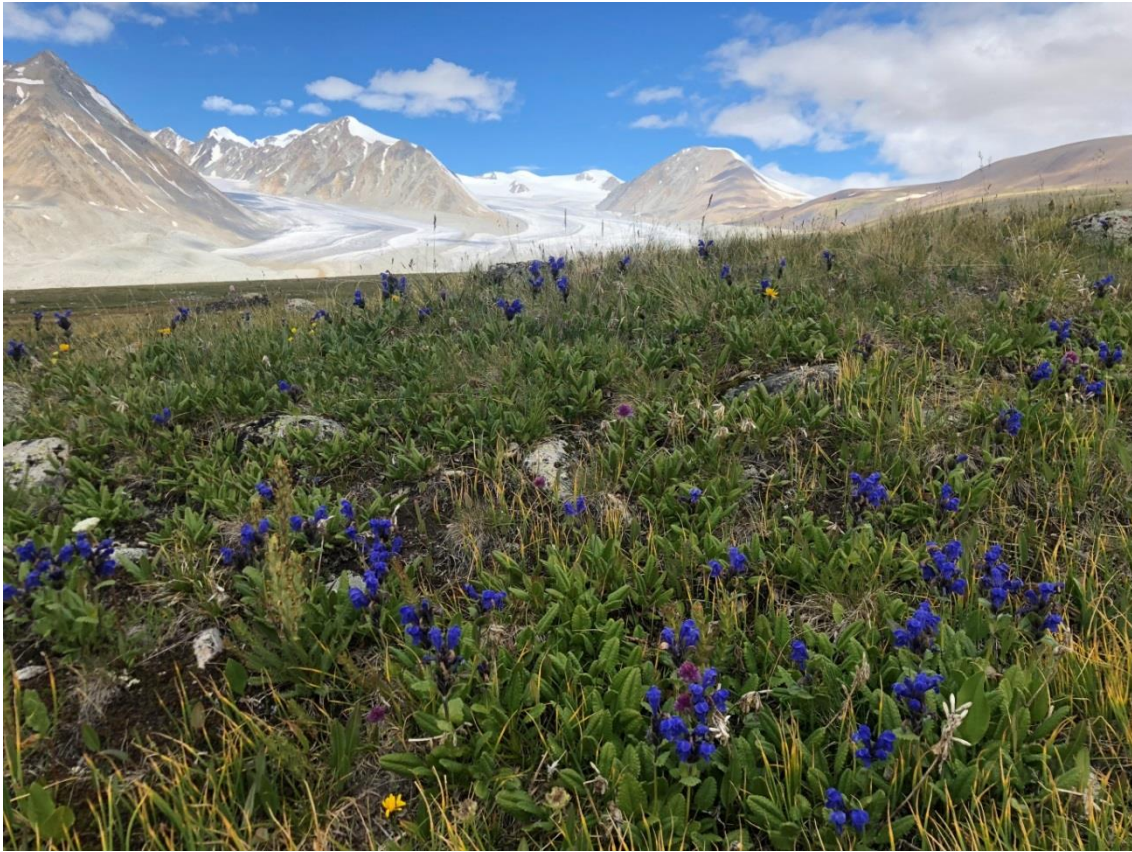
After yesterday's rain, it was heartening to see Jangbu, coffee in hand, silhouetted against a clear morning sky.



We set off for our final trek from Base Camp down the White River Valley. With the going soft from yesterday's rain at the beginning we stayed well above the river.



There were again some splendid views particularly looking back and we passed occasional herds of yaks and horses.



As we descended the valley, we began to see some gers (Mongolian word for yurt) dotted here and there stopping at one with this group of young yaks where we were hospitably entertained.



The route was benign though nearing the end Norman needed to summon some energy to leap across this stream with a helping hand from Jangbu.



It took us 5 hours and 48 minutes for a distance of 17.6k (11 miles) to our camp site at 2,408 meters (7,900 feet). In the early evening as the clouds reflected the setting sun, we could see some coming rain.



For our final breakfast, Tugsuu produced a pizza expertly cooked with a blowtorch.



Our vans took us along rough roads for 7 hours to Olgii, punctuated by some interesting stops, the highlight of which was meeting the eagle hunter seen here in his traditional costume. Somewhat reluctantly the young 12 kg (26lb) eagle was transferred first to Anthony and then to Norman.



In Olgii, after a welcome shower at the Eagle's Nest Hotel, we went to a nearby ger for dinner prepared by Kogershin and his family, who are Kazakhs, a small Muslim minority in Mongolia living mainly in the west of the country.



The meal was excellent but the true highlight of the evening was Kogershin and his two children entertaining us to a series of songs, mainly Kazakh but also Mongolian and one each in Russian and English.



On return to Ulaanbaatar, we attended the Tumen Ekh concert featuring a memorable display of traditional singing, dancing and a very skilled contortionist.



Our final day included a visit to the magnificent Gobi cashmere store and an excellent dinner at the Veranda Restaurant with great food and wine to go with the good company, a fitting end to a great expedition.

