

ITINERARY OF A TOUR IN THE CENTRAL CAUCASUS.

By MAURICE DE DÉCHY.

THE following Itinerary shortly indicates the route followed on my journey. My first aim being to see as much as possible of the scenery along the great chain for photographic purposes, I resolved to connect the two parts of the high route between the valleys of the Uruch and the Baksan traversed by the first mountain explorers of the Caucasus, Messrs. Freshfield, Moore, and Tucker, in 1868, and Messrs. Gardiner, Grove, Moore, and Walker in 1874; and to add to it the untraversed link between the Ardon valley and the Uruch. Of mountain ascents we proposed in the first place to ascend Elbruz, the culminating point, and to try Adai-Choch and Kotchtantau. From the Baksan valley we intended to cross to the south of the great chain by a glacier pass new to travellers, investigate closely Uschba, the Caucasian Matterhorn, and close our journey with a visit to Independent Suanetia. Photographic work was one of our principal objects, the landscapes of the Central Caucasus being almost a virgin field for the photographer. Favoured with fine weather during the first part of our journey, we completed the high-level route from the Ardon valley to the Baksan, and attacking at once Adai-Choch, succeeded in the ascent. Near the base of Kotchtantau the weather changed suddenly, and anxious not to lose Elbruz, being rather late in the season, we hurried on. After the ascent of Elbruz we crossed over to Suanetia and gained the impression that Uschba is a possible mountain. But snow fell for days and days till the bottom of the valley and all the mountains appeared closed for the year, as in some seasons in Switzerland when at the end of August snow comes down into the valleys and all high work is over. Everyone in the Caucasus told us that the season was exceptionally adverse. I agree with Mr. Freshfield that Tau Tetnuld will be a comparatively easy snow ascent; the true point of attack is from the south, from the Adisch glacier. The favourable season for mountaineering in the Caucasus begins rather earlier than in the Alps; at all events, a journey should begin at the end of June, and although there is a prevalent opinion that September must from the more southern position of the Caucasus be generally a splendid month, it appears that it is rather late for high work. Nothing has changed since the visits of the two expeditions

in 1868 and in 1874, all the difficulties about horses and porters, and food, and the disregard of time, are still the same. Official recommendations from the Russian Government should be asked for, and are given in the most liberal and kind manner. It will always be extremely difficult to procure a competent interpreter, speaking the three principal languages of the mountain tribes—the Ossetian, Turko-Tartar, and Suanetian, as well as the Russian and some other European language. Some knowledge of Russian will for that reason be found very useful.

For a prolonged journey and in bad weather a Whymper tent is almost indispensable; for high work sleeping bags. We encamped for thirty nights, sleeping in our tent; and besides our cooking apparatus, some of the preserved provisions we took with us were of great use. In general, apart from the great ascents, the journey differs widely from an Alpine tour, and offers both the enjoyments and the difficulties of an expedition in far countries beyond European civilisation. This must be remembered by the mountaineer desirous to try the magnificent peaks of the Caucasus, and should influence him particularly in the choice of his guides. It is preferable to make Tiflis the starting point, for all aid is procurable there.

I was accompanied by Alexander Burgener as leading guide, and a young man named Peter Joseph Ruppen, from Saas, who acted as a second. In the ascents of Adai Choch and Elbruz both worked well, and Burgener as the leading man showed his excellent powers on rock and ice, and that endurance which ensures victory.

From the Ardon valley to Balkaria the journey was entirely made on foot.

July 12–19, 1884. We left Odessa by steamer for Kertch, stopping *en route* at Sevastopol and Yalta. At Kertch we changed steamer and reached Taganrog by the Sea of Azow; from Taganrog we gained, by rail, Wladikafkas *viâ* Rostow.

- „ 20. Carriage road from Wladikafkas *viâ* Archonskaja and Ardonskaja, involving a great detour, to Alagir. Fine views of the whole chain.
- „ 21. From Alagir to Nicolai in the Ardon valley. Partly road for small carriages.
- „ 22. From Nicolai to the Cai valley, which opens in a westerly direction. Bivouac at the foot of the glacier; Adai-Choch invisible.

- July 23. Left camp at 7 A.M. On the slopes along the glacier; three hours later on the glacier, magnificent scenery. The upper part of the glacier much crevassed. To force our way through the séracs involved most difficult and dangerous work. All our efforts to leave the séracs and to mount by the rocky sides of the glacier proved impossible, and we had to retrace our steps and to make our way through the séracs. Adai-Choch appeared as a snow peak with two principal summits, the highest a sharp ice needle, overtopping all the neighbourhood. We reached at 5.45 P.M. an icy promontory, on the top of which we discovered some rocks. We found very little space to lie down; melted some snow for a single cup of tea; height about 11,000 to 11,500 feet; very cold. In the night storm and snowy rain.
- „ 24. We started at 5.30 A.M., weather clearing up. Adai-Choch far and high. Mounted to the crest of our promontory, followed it and climbed a long snow couloir to the top of a mountain-wall lying in front of our mountain. Adai-Choch showed as two distinct peaks, the nearer and higher a sharp ice needle. We attacked the arête, which we now followed during the whole ascent. Snow in perfect order. Weather clear but cold. The work much resembles the ascent of the Weisshorn, only the rocky obstacles on the arête, towers which we had to mount or go round, are more difficult. The arête mostly very sharp—sometimes corniced. In such places we had steps to cut, but no hard ice. We pushed forward, as the weather threatened again, and stopped only a few minutes on a first summit at noon. We reached the highest summit, 15,244 feet Δ R.M. (Russian five-verst map), perhaps rather more, at 1.30 P.M. Fine view of the mountain groups towards Kasbek and down to the green meadowlands on the south. We left after a halt of 15 minutes and arrived at our sleeping-place at 7 P.M. Found all our things wet; nothing to eat. In the night rain and snow with intense cold. Peter very ill from cold and fatigue.
- „ 25. Left in the morning. No possibility to again make our way through the séracs, storm and rain had broken down the snow bridges we had used. For

hours we found no way down. We had to cross, before descending, over to the next glacier on the left, and by it we regained the main glacier below the séracs. Left the glacier again at about 2 P.M. Found our porters with the provisions. Arrived at the camp at 6 P.M. in rain.

- July 26. From camp down to Nicolai.
- „ 27. From Nicolai to Sadon; here is a mine. Sunday and some church fête of the mine labourers. Invited to stop there. Ossete dances.
- „ 28. Left Sadon at 8 A.M. Delay with luggage horses; no bread ready. Through a monotonous valley. Top of the col 12.15 P.M. Fine views eastwards on the ascent, on the top overclouded.
- Arrived at Kamunta, the highest village in the Congut valley, the eastern branch of the Uruch, at 3.30 P.M. Opposite a glacier landscape, in the corner Adai-Choch visible.
- „ 29. Left Kamunta 9.30 A.M., no horses or porters forthcoming sooner. Steep and very hot ascent. First height 11.30 A.M. Magnificent views in the Skatykom valley. Over stones and snow to the col 4.30 P.M. View of the mountains of the Uruch valley. At 7 P.M. reached camp above Gular.
- „ 30. Left camp at 7 A.M. Down to Zenaga; splendid view of the Karagam glacier. Over a low hill to the Uruch valley and to Styr Digor, about three hours. Very hot. Leaving Styr Digor at 4.30 P.M. we bivouacked, after wandering through splendid gorges, at 7.30 P.M.
- „ 31. Left camp at 6 A.M., 2½ hours later were at the foot of the mountain wall. The path exceedingly difficult for our luggage horses. One of the animals fell. We had to carry our luggage and to cut a path through the snow for the horses. It is about 2½ hours' ascent to reach the first col. Farther on a second and higher col. The snow being too soft for the horses, we had to camp on the small level plain between the two cols, about 9,000 feet; the surrounding scenery very grand.
- August 1. Left camp 6.10 A.M., reached col of Stulevesk 8.50 A.M. Horses came much later; luggage had to be carried over some places. The view towards Balkar of the mountain range of Kotchtantau and Dychtau, is of the utmost imaginable grandeur.

The outline of those mountains in Mr. Freshfield's 'Caucasus,' represents very carefully their appearance. Kotchtantau looks very formidable, the true king over the other mountains. Once on the col at its right (north) base, with much step cutting and ample time, success could probably be gained. We thought it advisable to try to reach this col from the other, the Besingee, side. Leaving the col at 10 30 A.M., we arrived at the entrance of the Dychsu gorge at 7.15 P.M. The scenery is throughout very fine and varied. Near the camp is a cattle guard-house (Karaul).

- August* 2. We entered the Dychsu gorge on the wrong side; without path we forced our way through thick wood, over rocks and pretty difficult chimneys for many hours. One of our party unwilling to give in: at the end we were cut off; impossible to go a step further, so with a view from a projecting rock of the inner scenery beyond the gorge, we had to return. We moved our camp $1\frac{1}{2}$ hour down the valley.
- „ 3. Left camp only at 8 A.M.; the horses said to be stolen, but afterwards found: a pretext to gain payment of a whole day. Hot path down to Kunim.
- „ 4. Visited and photographed the gorges of the Tcherek.
- „ 5. Monotonous paths from Kunim to Besingee. Left Kunim 6.45 A.M. On the col 2 P.M., clouds. Three hours to Besingee.
- „ 6. From Besingee upwards through the Urban valley. Bivouac about 1 hour below the Urban glacier.
- „ 7. Left camp 6.30 A.M.; splendid weather. Crossed the Urban in its lower part, and entered the glacier valley (Misirgi glacier) on its left. At 2.30 P.M. highest point on the ice-wall at the cirque in the background of the glacier. The ice scenery overpowering, the topography bewildering; we could not find out the true summits, or the point of attack, either of Kotchtantau or of Dychtau, so we returned to our camp, where we arrived at 7.5 P.M. It seemed necessary to devote one or two days to reconnoitring, and to mount some lower peak opposite the opening of the Misirgi valley. But, unhappily, in the evening came rain,

the barometer fell rapidly, so we resolved to push forwards for Elbruz, and to come back later from the south to Besingee. The bad weather—which began now and continued—frustrated this plan. For the next comers Besingee will be the best base of attack for Kotchtantau. Ample time must be allowed for reconnoitring.

- August* 8. Left camp at 7 A.M., down to Besingee; arrived there at 11.30 A.M. Leaving Besingee at 3 P.M., we reached the low col in $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours, and Tchegem at 8.30 P.M.; rather a long day, in pouring rain.
- „ 9. Bad weather, clearing up at midday. I photographed the highly picturesque scenery of Tchegem.
- „ 10. We left Tchegem, after a long delay for horses, at 10 A.M., by a route shorter and more direct than that used by Mr. Grove's party. At first, where this track leaves the other route, some picturesque rock scenery, but the rest of the way extremely dull. Weather still very bad; reached col at 3.30 P.M. About two hours down bivouacked in the Gesdenti valley, near a deserted shepherd's hut. There is a shorter cut down to the Baksan valley, but with the bad weather we preferred the circuit, which crosses the mountain spur lower down.
- „ 11. Left camp at 8 A.M., crossed over the mountain pass to the Baksan at 10 A.M. At noon at Korchoschan, in the Baksan valley; in the evening at 7.30 P.M. at Urusbieh. The first part of the way very monotonous—from Tchegem to Urusbieh some practicable and more interesting route should be looked for.
- „ 12. At Urusbieh: most hospitable reception from the Urusbieh family, but no start possible, although the day was very fine.
- „ 13. Left Urusbieh at 8.10 A.M.; a large company, four brothers of the Urusbieh family, Ismael, Hamzat, Mohammed, and a younger one, all known from Mr. Freshfield's and Mr. Grove's narratives; the eldest son of Ismael, two or three of the most celebrated hunters at Urusbieh, a couple of servants, all on horseback; even Burgener's no small figure on one of the smallest ponies I ever saw. This upper part of the Baksan valley abounds in fine landscapes, the views towards the side valleys being exceedingly beautiful. We arrived at our

camp, near the foot of the two Elbruz glaciers, at 5.30 P.M.

- August* 14–21. Camp for eight days near the foot of the Elbruz glaciers. Regular bad weather came on. Snow and rain fell alternately; still, once or twice the evening showed no clouds on the firmament, rain following in the morning; or there was some clearing in the morning, and we started, to be beaten back, after one or two hours' walk, by rain. At one or the other moment I photographed the splendid group of the Tungsorun mountains; and we had regular hunting days. Two steinboks were killed, and we had much amusement.
- „ 22. A cloudless morning; we started at 10 A.M. Mohammed and the eldest son of Ismael, who at first had wished to share the honour of ascending Elbruz, deserted one or two days before. Ismael now joined us, with his favourite hunter and four porters. From the height above the icefall we had a splendid view of Uschba and Tungsorun. At 3.30 P.M. we reached the rocks, our sleeping-place being exactly the same as Mr. Freshfield's, where we found the ground levelled. Half-an-hour lower down we saw also the stone wall of the sleeping-place of Mr. Grove's party. The weather changed again, and we went to bed in low spirits.
- „ 23. The whole night the storm was raging, and it snowed round the tent. We had intended to leave shortly after midnight, expecting much bad fresh snow after the last ten days of broken weather; but till six in the morning the storm was raging. At 7 A.M. the sky cleared up very quickly and the storm ceased, and then Burgener (under the impression that the ascent can be accomplished in from 7 to 7½ hours, although I urged that Mr. Grove's party had employed 9 hrs. 40 mins. under favourable circumstances) pressed to start for the 18,526 feet high mountain, urging that there was some hope of a tolerably good day—though there seemed all the signs of the continuation of the bad weather. Ismael renounced going up the mountain, but insisted that we should take with us his hunter. I declined, but remarking that he urged me to let this man go so as to have a witness of our success, I agreed, although the man

was of no use to us, and we took him on our rope. So we started at 7.30 A.M. We halted half-an-hour at 10 for breakfast, on some rocks in the middle of the glacier, the weather still improving. The two summits were clearly seen. But soon the weather became worse and worse. The snow was in very bad order, lying fresh and powdery on a basis of ice, so that many steps had to be cut. The work was very trying, the storm and cold intense. Without a moment of rest we moved upwards, knowing that we were exceedingly late for such a mountain, in such weather. Happily, late in the afternoon the storm cleared a little; we found much rock on the last slope, emerging through the snow. This last part of the ascent proved much easier, and at six in the evening we stood on the highest crest of the north-western summit of Elbruz. We planted a flag and flew downwards. Our descent was very quick; only the hunter, who was with us, gave us much trouble: he slipped at every step on snow only a little frozen, in his leather sandals. We hoped to be clear of all difficulties before night-fall, and to reach at 10 or 11 our sleeping-place; but, unhappily, at 8 P.M. we found ourselves in a very strange situation, such as we had never met with in the Alps. On a steep slope, where we had had to cut some steps in mounting, the storm had swept off all snow. The whole had now a glittering icy surface; we could not move a step without cutting, and in a dark night without moon, with raging storm and intense cold, at a height of over 14,000 feet, we had to cut steps for four hours! We were all severely frostbitten. We reached our sleeping-place at 2.30 A.M.

- August* 24. Descended to our camp and moved three hours downwards towards Urusbieh.
- „ 25. Down to Urusbieh; pouring rain.
- „ 26—29. At Urusbieh. The 26th and 27th bad weather, but the 28th clearing up and the 29th a very fine day. Despite all our remonstrances we could not effect a start; not only were there no horses ready, but there was a difficulty as to bread and provisions.
- „ 30. Left Urusbieh at 10.15 A.M., went for some hours up the Baksan valley, then into a side glen. Camped near the foot of the glacier at 7 P.M.

August 31. Left camp at 6.45 A.M. with five porters; after two hours reached the glacier; the surrounding mountains called by our people Betscho Tau; the scenery superb. On the col at 10.50 A.M. (height about 11,800 feet.) The view towards Elbruz and Tungsorun on one side, and on the other towards Suanetia was indescribably grand and beautiful. We quitted the col at 11.30 A.M., and after a long and tiresome descent we left on the right a long glacier stream, entered a small gorge in which we continued for hours, and, crossing a stream issuing from Uschba, which became visible in the last part of the way, we chose in the forest our bivouac at 6.45 P.M. No finer situation could be imagined.

- Sept. 1.* To Betscho; at midday heavy rain.
- „ 2. At Betscho. In the evening we saw Uschba. All the rocks overladen with fresh snow. A way up the face seemed to be not out of the question. A practicable couloir leads up to the broad rock wall below the top, and through this wall a small cleft, the bottom of which was filled with snow, promises a way up. The face is the whole day exposed to the sun. On the north side of Uschba a glacier mounts up nearly to the top of the mountain. In regard of its superb mountain architecture Uschba is unrivalled.
- „ 3. We left Betscho for Mugal, a day's journey; weather cloudy. Landscape very beautiful.
- „ 4. The weather still bad. All thoughts of exploring the Adisch glacier or mounting Tau Tetnuld were abandoned; we chose the route by the Latpari Pass to the Rion. We started from Mugal at 8 A.M., traversed a col from whence we had a fine view of the Adisch glacier and Tau Tetnuld, only partially hidden by clouds, to Bogresch, where we crossed at 10.45 A.M. the route of Mr. Freshfield's party through Suanetia, on their way from Adisch to Latal *viâ* Suni and El. We continued our way *viâ* Kal, and mounting the path to the Latpari Pass, encamped in the evening in the highest forest. Heavy snowfall.
- „ 5. In the early morning, before sunrise and a little after, we had an overpowering view of double-headed Uschba overtopping all the neighbouring mountains—a view not to be forgotten. I hoped

to photograph a little later with better light, but unhappily in half-an-hour the vision had passed away. We reached in $1\frac{1}{2}$ hour the col of the Latpari. We saw for moments Tau Tetnuld, a fine snow pyramid, the Adisch glacier, with its broad icefall, the mountains above Utschkull, and other parts of the view, which I believe to be the most beautiful panoramic view in the Caucasus. The Latpari is the tourist route of the future, and its panorama will some day be justly praised in prose and poetry. It is a long descent of about $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours to Tcholür, and we pushed forwards, passing some very fine gorges of the Zenis-Squali to a bivouac $1\frac{1}{2}$ hour below Tcholür.

- Sept. 6. Left camp at 6 A.M., arrived two hours later at Lentechi, passing again through magnificent gorges. Thence we continued through always beautiful scenery and arrived in the afternoon at Zagiri, now the post of a high government official. There we found a most hospitable reception, and entered into full European civilisation after a rarely interrupted camp life of nearly two months.
- „ 7. Sunday. We started late in the afternoon, crossed a low col to Orbeli, passed in the evening the gorges of the Xidganuri river, which we thought the most beautiful we had seen in the Caucasus, and arrived at night at Alpane, in the Rion valley.
- „ 8. At Alpane the carriage road begins, but no carriage, not even a troika, can be had at Alpane or procured at Zagiri. We had ordered beforehand a carriage from Kutais, where we arrived at midday after eight hours' fast driving. I started with the rail for Tiflis, arriving at night. Burgener and Ruppen left by rail for Batoum, and next day with steamer to Odessa, and then homewards to Switzerland.
- „ 9-17. After passing a day and a half at Tiflis I drove by the Dariel road back to Wladikafkas. The view of Kasbek is fine, and the wild scenery of the Dariel gorge highly interesting. It takes four days' and four nights' railway travelling from Wladikafkas to Odessa, *via* Rostov, Charkow, and Elizavetgrad. There is no correspondence between the trains, and the rate of speed is very slow.