

THE PIRIN MOUNTAINS, BULGARIA

ABODE OF THE THUNDER GOD

13th - 27th June

Introduction

The YRC meet to Bulgaria came about after a chance communication from Lizzie Alderson, who runs Pirin Adventures, a company which provides mountaineering, trekking and walking holidays in the Pirin Mountains of Bulgaria. Further conversations with Lizzie in Leeds and some research on the internet confirmed that it would be a novel and extremely interesting location for an overseas meet, with plenty of scope for a fortnight's hut-to-hut trekking, taking in ridges and summits as we pleased.

Named after Perun, the Thracian god of thunder and lightning, the Pirin Mountains are crystalline and located in southwest Bulgaria within the western part of the Rila-Rhodope massif. The Pirin massif slopes southwards and has a width of 30-35km.



The main axis is oriented NW-SE with an approximate length of 70km. The northern part of the range comprises the Pirin National Park of 232 square kilometres, which has UNESCO status. The geology is complex but the mountain ridges are mostly granite. The Koncheto ridge and its continuation over Kutelo and Vihren summits are different and comprise marbleised karst with remains of the granite intrusion and some limestone. Limestone is also present around Mt Orelyak to the east. There are over 180 glacial tarns and lakes in Pirin. The Alpine zone scree and rocks are replaced by sub-alpine meadow-bush areas around 2300m and mountain forest between 1000-2000m. This ecological diversity was enhanced by the rapidly ablating snowfields present in June, providing us with an amazing display of flora and fauna.

The range has over 50 peaks above 2500m rising to Vihren at 2914m and access is supported by waymarked trails and a mountain hut network which had just opened. An itinerary was planned that would minimise duplication between the two weeks and maximise the amount of the massif to be visited during the hut-to-hut treks. This naturally included a traverse of the famous Koncheto ridge planned for the second week.

Lizzie and her partner, Lukasz, at Pirin Adventures arranged accommodation for us nearby in a house in Bansko and provided all our catering needs except for meals provided by the huts. Lizzie's meals and muffins are now legendary! They also booked the huts and drove us to the trailheads and collected us at finishing points. They freely provided their detailed knowledge of the routes and gave us a stress-free holiday.

Mick Borroff

Summary

Sat 13 Arrive: Sofia - Bansko
 Sun Vihren Hut - Todorina Porta - Malka Tordorka - Tordorka - bottom ski lift station
 Mon Bezbog Hut - Dzhangalska Porta - Mozgovishka Porta - Valyavishki Chukar peak - Tevno Ezero Hut
 Tue Tevno Ezero Hut - Mozgovishka Porta - Chairska Porta - Tipits Ridge - Bashliyska Porta - Vihren Hut
 Wed Vihren peak or rest day
 Thu Todorova Ornitza - Demyanitsa Hut - Chairska Porta - Banski Grob - Begovitsa Hut
 Fri Begovitsa Hut - Prevala col - Zabat peak - Bashmandra - Pirin Hut - Malina Hut
 Sat 20 Malina Hut - Senoto - Orelyak peak - Popovo Livadi Hut / second group arrive
 Sun Vihren Hut - Demyanitsa Hut / mountain biking / white water rafting or rest day
 Mon Predel - Ushitsite Porta - Dautov Vrah peak - Yavarov Hut
 Tue Yavarov Hut - Koncheto Ridge - Kutelo I and II peaks - Premkata - Vihren peak - Vihren Hut
 Wed Vihren Hut - Banderishka col - Spano Pole Hut - Banski Grob - Begovitsa Hut
 Thu Begovitsa Hut - Solishteto col - Rozhen village
 Fri Rozhen village - visit to Rozhen Monastery - Melnik pyramids - Melnik
 Sat 27 Depart: Bansko - Sofia

Detailed Itinerary

13th June

Arrived in Sofia and were transported to Bansko, a town on the northern side of the Pirin, a journey of just under three hours.

14th June

We drove up to the Vihren Hut (1955m) in sunny weather and walked up towards Banderishka Porta to enjoy the massed crocuses near Muratovo Lake where the party divided.

Mick, Mike, Tim and Lukasz walked up to the Todorina Porta and then enjoyed a scramble along the granite ridge over Malka Tordorka (2712m) and Tordorka (2746m). A chamois herd was encountered at the top of the ski lift and after a swift descent down a couple of ski pistes, we finally waited out a thunderstorm at the bottom lift station and returned to Bansko.

Helen, Ken, Phil and Evelyn and Lizzie meanwhile continued up the valley, ascended a snowfield to gain the Banderishka Porta to admire the extensive views and then returned the same way back to the waiting cars at the hut.

15th - 16th June

We were all driven to the Gotse Delchev Hut above Dobrinishte, where the Bezbog chairlift whisked us up to the Bezbog Hut (2236m) to begin a two-day trek, with an overnight stay at the Tevno Ezro Hut. The delightful valley passing below Bezbog summit was followed to a trail junction just before Popovo Lake.

Mick and Tim headed west over the Dzhangalska Porta into a beautiful little-visited valley with a dozen or so tarns and lakes nestling in the granite which is part of the Demyanitsa Circuit route. More late snow fields were ascended to gain Mozgovishka Porta, where a traverse over Valyavishki Chukar (2664m) led to another col and a decent to the hut, delightfully situated beside the partly frozen waters of the Tevno Ezero lake at 2512m.

The rest of the party headed south on the main route passing Popovo Lake making steep snowy ascents over the Demirkapa and Krlev cols before descending west to the hut at the Tevno Ezro. This roundabout route to the refuge was reportedly easier but given the snow accumulation was not.

Valentina, the charming hut warden, spoke English and provided us with an excellent dinner of lentil soup, meat and potatoes, baked sausage, salad washed down with beer and tea. The hut is only provisioned by pack-horse and despite this, Valentina loved it so much she has been there every year from May to November for the past 16 years!

Fortified by omelettes next morning, we all set off together climbing up to Mozgovishka Porta to the west,

contouring to the Chairska col and then followed the red-marked E-4 path northwest along the undulating ridge over Prevalski Chukar (2605m), Malak Tipits (2644m) and Golam Tipits (2645m). We passed through lots of dwarf pine, known locally as cleg, which was impenetrable unless cut back from the path. Ken slipped on a boulder on the ridge and badly bruised his thigh, but he soldiered on slowly. A final steep descent to the Bashliyska Porta then down snow slopes to pass the Banderishki lakes took us down to a well-earned beer at the Vihren Hut.

17th June

Rest day for some! Ken decided to rest his leg and opted to go white water rafting with Lizzie and Lukasz. As it was his first experience of rafting he was pleased that the river level was end of the season 'lowish'. Even so, the 12 km run had plenty of thrills including a stop to climb onto a river side rock to jump into the river - fortunately he had been provided with a wet suit.

As Tim was only here for the first week, he wanted to climb Vihren and have a go at continuing to the Koncheto Ridge. However, having climbed to Vihren's summit, it was clear that a major thunderstorm was approaching forcing him to return to the Vihren Hut. Everyone else enjoyed the morning sunshine leisurely exploring Bansko's old town church and museums. The church bell tower had a substantial stork's nest complete with residents. Michael and Helen also visited the thermal mineral pool in Dobrinishte for an afternoon dip. We all enjoyed our evening meal in a fish restaurant - trout or carp!

18th - 21st June

With Ken staying in Bansko, the summits were wreathed in cloud as the rest of us set off south in the drizzle from the trailhead at Todorova Ornitza following the Demyanitsa River valley towards the Demyanitsa Hut (1895m) where we stopped for a mug of tea and admired the substantial stream-fed washing tub outside. The previous afternoon's thunderstorm had washed away the bridge over a side stream but some awkward boulder-hopping got us across dry shod (except for Tim who used the Wellington boots provided, but found that the water over-topped them)! At the bottom of the steep climb to the Chairska Porta, Phil and Evelyn decided to return to Bansko and on their way back waded the stream. At the col, Tim, Mick, Michael and Helen stayed on the green marked trail down through the meadow-bush zone, instead of taking the Tipits ridge. In increasing drizzle, we followed overgrown and poorly waymarked paths through the dwarf pine and juniper scrub around Banski Grob and then down to the pine forest, negotiating a couple of very dubious bridges on the way to reach the track to the Begovitsa Hut (1750m), where we saw three fire salamanders evidently enjoying the damp conditions. Lizzie and Lukasz joined us for dinner, having come up from the trailhead to leave our lunches for the next day and a massive cake.

Fortunately the weather was better the next morning as we left the hut heading east to the Prevala col where Mick and Michael ascended Zabat (2688m), the higher of the two peaks guarding the pass. Lush meadows then led down to the pine forest where a small herd of wild boar with six piglets was briefly observed before they took refuge in the woods. The forest became deciduous lower down as we reached the Pirin Hut (1640m) where we stopped for some tea - architecturally different and well overdue for some renovation work. Tim then left us to drop down a track to the roadhead above Pirin village to be collected and returned to Bansko ready for his flight home the next day. Sandy tracks led the remaining three of us east to our beds for the night at the Malina Hut (1560m), where we met Phil and Evelyn who had walked up from the Pirin village track. Despite the arrangements Lizzie made with the hut manager, the warden didn't seem to be expecting us, but after some hasty phone calls he did manage to feed us with omelettes, tomatoes and bread (accompanied by some of Lizzie's excellent cake and muffins).

After a breakfast of bread and home-made raspberry jam, cheese, cucumber chunks and tea we set off through the forest east then south to join the E-4 trail accompanied by two friendly dogs from the vicinity of the hut. After resolving a few navigation challenges with non-existent paths and deficient waymarking, we reached the path leading over Senoto to the flower-decked limestone ridge heading to Orelyak peak. The orchids and gentians and multiple other alpine flowers were amazing. Unfortunately Orelyak was now in cloud and we decided not to bother with the remaining hundred metres or so to the summit as there was no chance of a view. It then rained steadily as we passed two large flocks of sheep and their shepherds on our way down the track down to the Popovo Livadi Hut (1500m). Our two dogs then disappeared with another group! Fortunately the sun came back out allowing us to sit outside to enjoy another well-earned beverage. After a hot shower, a splendid dinner was enjoyed followed by a short karaoke session in English and in our honour. This was followed by some folk singing by a group of Bulgarian ladies. They were staying in the hut for the weekend and were appreciative of the carafe of the local red wine we had donated to them.

On Sunday we collected the car left for us in the hut car park and descended the main road to the town of Gotse Delchev which was briefly explored before driving back to Bansko.

Meanwhile on Saturday, Ken decided to get to Sofia by taking the railway from Bansko and had an incredible train journey. Initially a five hour thrill of a ride on a narrow gauge railway through remote beautiful wooded valleys and countryside to link up with the main line to Sofia in Septemvri. Remnants of Bulgaria's era of Soviet domination were evident and the price was equivalent

to a cheap bottle of wine. It was an unforgettable experience.

Lizzie had recommended that Ken stay in the Hostel Mostel in Sofia - a short walk from the station. Again, it was very good value with an inclusive eat as much as you like (or are able) breakfast and a beer and pasta supper. He estimated that he was three times the average age of the other occupants. That said he found it to be a wonderfully friendly place meeting a new person every time I sat down, and for us lucky Brits, everyone was communicating in English! Ken spent one day looking round Sofia with its interesting churches and museums. On his second day he joined a hostel trip to the Rila Monastery 'the one thing you must see in Bulgaria' - some 74 miles from Sofia. It certainly was a splendid spectacle.

After orientating themselves on Saturday, four of the six new arrivals Chris, Dave, Fiona and Richard decided to try out the local mountain biking around Bansko on Sunday. This excursion was partially inspired by the well-documented routes found on a local website, with easily enough in the local area for a full week of off-road mountain bike riding.

With the four of them clearing out all of the adult stock of bikes in the shop, they set off in the rain along the "Dead Dog" route, the oldest MTB trail in Bansko. Although the party set off the correct way round the track, a mountain biking race happened to be under way in the opposite direction, leading to a number of perplexed riders thinking they had taken a wrong turn.

The well-marked "Dead Dog" route initially headed up the hill from Bansko towards the Vihren Hut before breaking off left into the forest and contouring around the hillside. If the low cloud hadn't been clinging to the trees, they might even had a decent view. Where the forest track started to turn significantly uphill, "Dead Dog" dropped into a steep decent to the old church of St Nicola (renovated with a fund from the EU). While there were no official obstacles, the muddy ground and stream crossing provided interesting terrain.

It was about this point the riders discovered that their rim breaks were ineffective due to a combination of wet pads and new cables stretching. Some consolation could be taken in that at least the flooded tracks from the torrential rain helped slow their decent. After that excitement, "Dead Dog" followed a series of pleasant tracks back along the valley bottom to Bansko. Thoroughly drenched and muddy, the only way to suitable recover was to ride to the thermal spa pools for a swim and refreshing beer.

The other two Kjetil and Richard Taylor elected for a 'warm up' walk with Lukasz on Sunday. Leaving the Vihren hut in torrential rain, which turned into a

snowstorm, they crossed the Premkata col and descended to the Demyanitsa Hut where they were rewarded with a beverage and an examination of the water driven washing machine outside.

22nd - 26th June

We all drove up to the trailhead above the Predel pass that connects the Pirin with the Rila Mountains to begin our five-day traverse across the Pirin to Melnik.

This route started with a steep climb up through the woods and dwarf pine to the Ushitsite col. Mick and the two Richards took a path hacked through the dwarf pine to reach Dautov Lake and ascended Dautov Vrah (2597m) before returning to the col. We then followed in the rest of the group's footsteps down through the meadow-bush and forest to reach the large Yavarov Hut (1740m) with its friendly guardian. Hot showers and another good dinner were enjoyed. The hut warden could not understand why we wanted a 2-bed room and a single instead of the cheaper 3-bed option until Michael gave an impressive impersonation of a sonorous snorer to the warden's great amusement.

Phil and Evelyn descended to the roadhead to be collected by Lizzie. The morning had brought a good forecast for our traverse of the Koncheto ridge and Vihren. Another stiff climb through the forest and dwarf-pine zone passing the small Suhodolski Lake frozen at the margins brought the rest of us to the Suhodolski Preval saddle on the main ridge. Richard Taylor was not on form and decided to go back to the hut with Booker, who was not really enjoying the prospect of increasingly exposed terrain. The mist steadily began to reach the ridge from the Greek side as we made steady progress along the ridge. A few snow fields were turned or crossed. One had slipped and severely buckled at a short wall but fortunately was now stable as it was well below the overnight freezing level which had been above the summits. This was crossed as quickly as we could!

Further ascending traverses brought us to the Koncheto shelter (2760m) where we had lunch. This stop nearly proved expensive for some. Fiona, fumbling for water from her sack, dislodged a stuff-sack containing two new duvet jackets. This rolled then bounced down the convex slope uncaught by Helen and Kjetil in the 'slips'. It vanished out of sight into the rising mists/clouds and was not to be seen when peering down the slope. As we left the shelter, Richard decided to investigate further down and disappeared from view.

Another climb then took us to the start of the Koncheto Ridge proper, with the mist melting away on the northern Bansko side. Soon after starting on the ridge a voice from the mist called "Are you up there?" It was Richard on a lower traverse returning to us from hundreds of

metres below, where he had recovered the split stuff-sack complete with intact contents, having seen marks where it had bounced on the snow patches. He promptly set off back to the start of the ridge to be sure he had done it all!

The famous marble crest is about 400m long and some 50-100cm wide. The exposed traverse is protected by a substantial wire cable and was all over too soon! The ridge was then followed over less exposed terrain up to the summits of Kutelo I and II (2908m and 2907m) before dropping to the Premkata col before final 250m rocky scramble to Vihren's summit (2914m). After enjoying the views, made more atmospheric by the mist periodically melting away on the north side and constantly changing the visibility, we began the long descent via the Kabata corner passing a herd of chamois seen the week before by Tim. We finally arrived at the Vihren Hut after some ten hours to enjoy an even more well-deserved beer and return to Bansko.

Suitably fortified by another of Lizzie's excellent dinners and breakfast, all of us except Chris, Michael, Helen and Evelyn returned to the Vihren Hut for the next stage, a climb over the range back to the Begovitsa Hut. The weather was warm and sunny as we ascended to the Banderishka col and turned south following the pole-marked route across the damp meadows to the Spano Pole Hut (2050m), where we stopped for lunch, enjoying delicious home-made chicken soup. Further meadows were crossed and eventually the correct trail in the dwarf pine down to the Begovitsa Hut was located after an interesting river crossing. The mosquitos were troublesome here with Mick sustaining some 30 bites through his T-shirt! Lukasz and Lizzie joined us again for dinner at the hut, accompanied by the rest of the party having walked up from the Begovitsa roadhead. Later, Kjetil's enquiry regarding the distinction in English between a mug and a jug led to an entertaining description of all the different uses of those words and of the word brace.

In fine weather Philip and Evelyn descended to the roadhead to drive the spare car directly to Melnik and the rest of us set off on the trail towards the Pirin Hut, heading southeast as we climbed up through more of the meadow-bush zone to the Solishteto col. The pole marked route led down through extensive meadows with wonderful flowers being grazed by herds of horses and cows. We then entered the pine forest which was bedecked in Spanish moss before emerging in much drier grassland accompanied by lots of butterflies. The precariously perched church of St Elias was visited before we descended a dry streambed to Rozhen village and Blagoy's hotel. Just before the village Michael saw a 30cm+ black snake, probably a Caspian whipsnake. After refreshments and a welcome shower, a delicious traditional Bulgarian dinner was enjoyed.

The last day of this trek began with a visit to the very peaceful Rozhen monastery founded in the 13th century before taking the relatively short path to Melnik village. This threaded itself through the famous conglomerate sandstone pyramids at high level before dropping down to another dry riverbed that emerged in Melnik. After exploring the village and lunch, we returned to Bansko.

27th June

Return to Sofia airport for return flights, a journey soon to be shortened by the completion of an EU-funded new motorway from Greece to Sophia.

Participants

Week One: Mick Borroff (Meet Leader), Evelyn Dover (guest), Philip Dover, Tim Josephy, Helen Smith, Michael Smith and Ken Roberts.

Week Two: Dave Booker (guest), Mick Borroff, Phil Dover, Evelyn Dover (guest), Chris Luby (guest), Fiona Smith (guest), Helen Smith, Michael Smith, Richard Smith, Richard Taylor and Kjetil Tveranger.

Sources of Information

Domino Map - Latin spellings are taken from the Domino 1:50,000 map of the Pirin. This map was found to have variable accuracy locally, but it was generally good enough to be used for detailed navigation (but aided by our GPSs particularly in the southern part of the Pirin, which is less visited).

The Pirin Mountains - Kingdom of the Thunder God. Jerzy W Gajewski.
The Alpine Journal 1991-2; 96: 155-9.

Walking in Bulgaria's National Parks. Julian Perry.
Cicerone Press, Milnthorpe, 2010.

360° panorama from Mount Vihren 2914m. ISKAR Tour. <http://www.iskartour.com/en/panorama360/vihren-summer>

Pirin hiking trails, maps and hut information.
Pirin National Park Directorate.
<http://pirin.bg/eng/tour/huts.html> also at the tourist information office in the centre of Bansko.

Mountaineering in the Pirin Mountains
<http://www.summitpost.org/pirin/151879>

Mountain bike trails round Bansko
<http://bansko-mtb.com/en/>

Conclusion

The Pirin Mountains were a great place to visit and have many similarities with more familiar parts of the Pyrenees, such as the Aigüestortes National Park and Andorra which are also glaciated granite sprinkled liberally with tarns and lakes. The mountains were glorious in June with patches of wild flower colour, luminescent lakes and snow flanked mountains - a beautiful wilderness.

Flights to Sofia were not expensive and members arrived from Turkey, Manchester, Gatwick and Oslo (via Moscow). With two weeks, we had the opportunity to sample some of the best trails and make a number of ascents and traverses, but there is plenty of scope for more.

We had arranged a series of hut to hut treks this time and typical days were 20+km and 1,000+m ascent. Several long mountain ridgelines on the granite caught our attention and a future visit could incorporate several days exploring these from a hut base such as the excellent Tevno Ezro Hut.

Our choice of going in late June was aimed at arriving late enough for the huts to be open but before the crowds that appear in the July holidays. This strategy worked in that we rarely saw anyone else in the hills, other than at a hut or working herders with their animals. This year had heavy late snow in April and this had not all ablated. Late snowfields covering the marked trails often had to be crossed or ascended adding interest, but crampons were fortunately not needed. Only once did the condition of the snow cause us real concern. The Koncheto Ridge was not accessible from the Yavarov Hut during the first week due to avalanche-prone snow remaining on the approach and on the ridge itself. Fortunately this had cleared sufficiently for our later successful traverse.

The huts are generally not of the same standard as in the western Alps but some had been renovated. Their staff were invariably friendly and welcoming, being very tolerant of our almost non-existent Bulgarian and difficulties reading Cyrillic. We ate well - the food provided was plentiful and appetising. The herb tea and local beers were excellent!

Bulgaria is still a comparatively inexpensive place to visit. Flights were under £200 and Pirin Adventures charged us £450 pppw on a fully catered/transported/housed basis, so day-to-day expenses were just pocket money.

We are very grateful to Lizzie and Lukasz at Pirin Adventures who tirelessly supported our trip and adjusted plans to our often changing requirements. They can be warmly recommended to any future visitors. Their advice and local knowledge was invaluable in route selection and in highlighting unmarked routes to summits etc., which we would otherwise have missed. After two weeks of the YRC with days often starting before 7am and finishing around midnight, Lizzie and Lukasz were going to take a couple of days off to recover! Returning to England, Wales or France, we also needed a day or two to recover from our exertions.



The Melnik Pyramids



**Contouring to the
Chairska Col and the
Tipits Ridge**

**Carpets of crocuses
by Muratovo Lake**





Frozen waters of the
Tevno Ezero lake

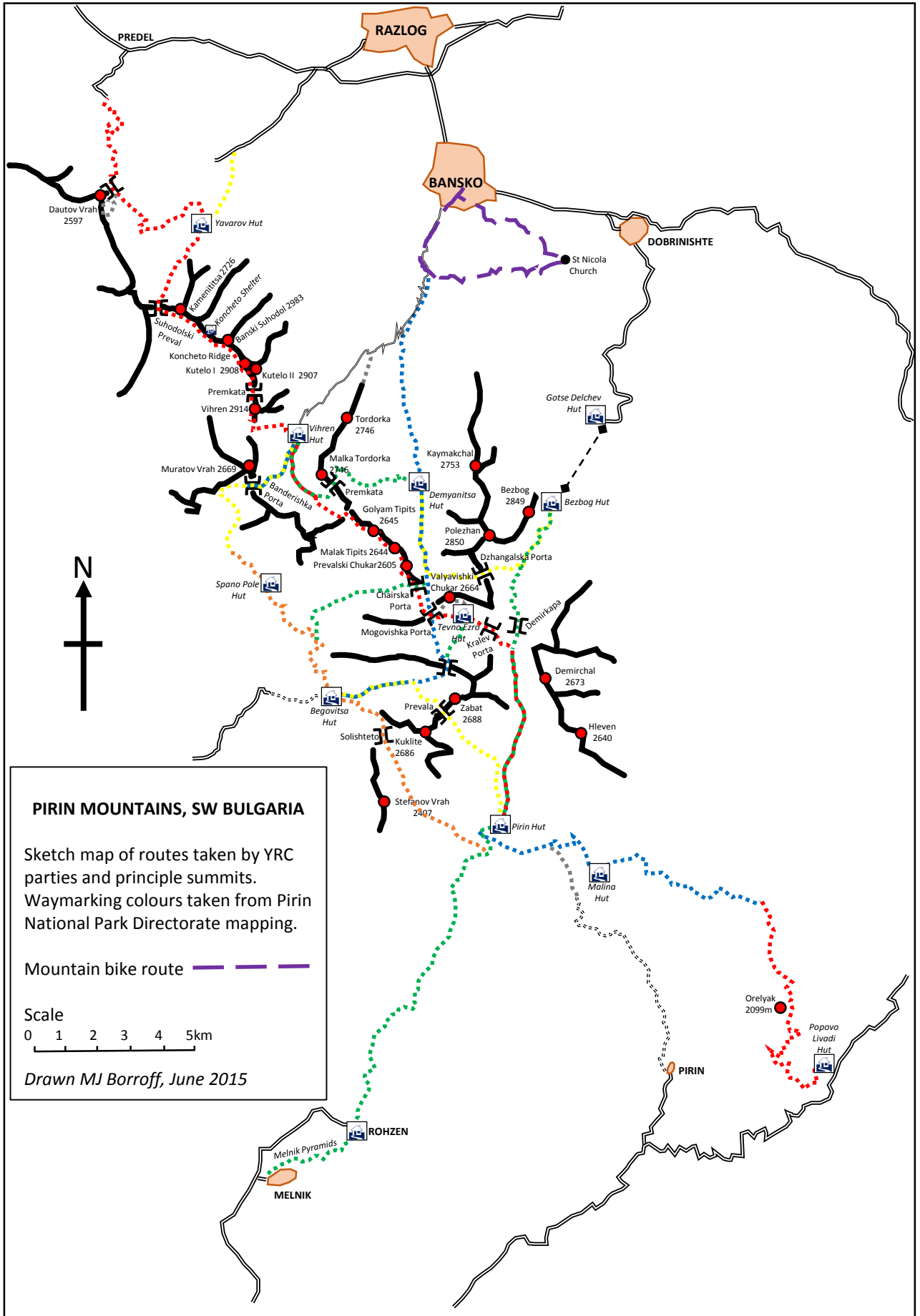
View from Tordorka to
Vihren and Kutelo peaks



The Koncheto Ridge

An interesting
river crossing





PIRIN MOUNTAINS, SW BULGARIA

Sketch map of routes taken by YRC parties and principle summits. Waymarking colours taken from Pirin National Park Directorate mapping.

Mountain bike route ————

Scale
0 1 2 3 4 5km

Drawn MJ Borroff, June 2015