



## AAC Publications

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### **Bezengi Wall, Complete Winter Traverse**

Russia, Caucasus

The Bezengi Wall (sometimes spelled Bezingi) rises along the mountain frontier between Russia on the north and Georgia on the south. The sharp, ca 13km ridge links several of the highest peaks of the Caucasus: Lial'ver (4,350m), Gestola (4,860m), Katyn-Tau (4,974m), Jangi-Tau (5,085m, also spelled Dzhangji-Tau), Shota Rustaveli (4,960m), and Shkhara (5,200m). The full traverse had never been completed in winter.

A large portion of the ridge crest is located at around 5,000m, with steep, 2,000m glacier walls on either side. It alternates between snowy and rocky parts, with numerous gendarmes and cornices, upon which belaying is extremely difficult and confidence is needed. A peculiarity of the wall is the absence of simple routes up any of the peaks; descent from the traverse is practical only at the start and finish and in its middle, after climbing 6.5km.

The first summertime traverse of the Bezengi Wall was accomplished from east to the west, in 1938, by a team of Leningrad alpinists led by Evgeny Beletskoi, one of the strongest alpinists in the USSR at the time. The crossing took 18 days with advance caches. The traverse of the Bezengi from west to east was accomplished 15 years later, in 1953, by a team led by another outstanding Soviet alpinist, Kirill Kuzmin.

In winter, even at the foot of the wall, the temperature often drops to  $-25^{\circ}$  to  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Nearly all previous attempts at a winter traverse ended shortly after they began.

In the winter of 2007 a trio of alpinists from Moscow, using summer caches of food and fuel, managed to surmount the section from Shkhara to Eastern Jangi-Tau over a month of climbing, but the attempt ended tragically. The leader of the group perished, and the two other participants received injuries and frostbite. They were rescued on the 34th day via a grandiose operation with the aid of a helicopter.

In the last days of December 2013, a quartet of alpinists from St. Petersburg—Sergei Kondrashkin, Petr Kuzenkov, Nikolai Totmyanin, and I—began the traverse by climbing Lial'ver, on the west end. During the traverse there was stable weather, with an average daytime temperature of around  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  or lower. We greeted the New Year on Western Jangi-Tau. In the area of Western Shkhara (5,057m), we were forced to sit for the night in an open bivouac; the short daylight hours did not allow us to find a good ledge to set up the tent. We descended from Shkhara on the 12th day of the traverse. We placed no advanced caches nor prepared the route. Approximate difficulty: Russian 6B.

**Viktor Koval**, provided by Anna Piunova, Mountain.ru, translated by Henry Pickford

## Images



Climbing Jangi-Tau West on December 31, 2013. Temperatures during the traverse averaged  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ .



Sergei Kondrashkin on the ridge between Shkhara West and Main Shkhara on January 5.



The ca 13km Bezengi Wall from the north. (A) Main Shkhara (5,200m). (B) Main Jangi-Tau (5,085m). (C) Katyn-Tau (4,974m). (D) Gestola (4,860m). (E) Lial'ver (4,350m).

## Article Details

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