



AAC Publications

Signuniang National Park Permit Issues

China, Sichuan, Qonglai Mountains

[Editor's note: Pat Goodman won a 2009 Lyman Spitzer Cutting-Edge Award from the AAC. This report on his permit frustrations in October 2009 is reprinted from the AAC's trip reports.]

The five Chinese men and women stood confident, and in an odd way I felt some condescension from them. Four of the five were dressed similarly: red Ozark Gore-Tex jackets and black rain pants. The oldest man of the group had on a white, button-down shirt, black tie, black sports coat, and nice black slacks—he looked bothered.

David Sharratt and I were standing at the lavish entrance station to the Shuangqiaogou, in Siguniangshan National Park, Sichuan Province, China—the Chinese alpine equivalent to Yosemite Valley. We had left the U.S. on September 25 with the intention of establishing a new route on unclimbed Peak 5592, aka Seerdengpu, the Barbarian, or a host of other disconcerting names. The Chinese man in the black sports coat had told our taxi driver to take us back to Rilong (about 35 minutes) and get the proper paperwork from the Sichuan Mountaineering Association (SMA). A bit confused, Dave and I reluctantly got back in the van.

In Rilong, at the office of the SMA, things got even more confusing. Neither Dave nor I speak Mandarin well, and the officials did not speak English very well. After about two hours, Dave and I had signed and thumb-printed a tree's worth of documents, not to mention coughing up a butt load of cash, but we still did not have the proper "permit" to go climbing—we only had permission for camping and trekking. The documents we signed specifically stated we would not rock climb, ice climb, mountaineer, or otherwise summit anything. Later we learned any such offense would likely land us a \$9,000 fine, confiscated equipment, and a possible stint in jail. The SMA officials told us that to obtain a climbing permit we needed to apply in person at the SMA office in Beijing, wait two weeks for it to get approved, and come back. If we wanted to do a first ascent, the process would take longer and cost more. Even though every SMA representative was friendly, I was still very upset.

I had climbed in the Bi Peng Gou in 2005, also within the boundaries of Siguniangshan National Park, and I'd studied countless trip reports and talked to several American and Chinese climbers that had frequented the valley. Not once did anybody mention traveling to Beijing to get a climbing permit. Our understanding was that permits, if necessary, could be obtained either at the park entrance or from an SMA official on location. However, as of June 30, 2009, that process had apparently changed. We got back into the van and sped toward unforeseen circumstances in our otherwise well-planned adventure.

Back at the park entrance, we were once again met by the sentries. After we showed them our papers, they let us through the gate, charged us more money, and gazed on in bewilderment as we loaded 25 days of supplies onto the empty tour bus. As the bus wound through brilliant alpine terrain along the 35-kilometer paved roadway, I held back my trepidation and doubts. After about 25 minutes, we saw Seerdengpu in all its glory. I yelled at the bus driver to stop, then Dave and I tossed out our luggage, walked about 15 minutes from the road, and set up base camp—a first for us both considering the scale of this alpine objective.

The following is an excerpt from Dave's account of the following days:

"We laid low in camp and watched our route on the northwest buttress. From a previous attempt, the

buttress was reported to be featureless and polished. The line was not obvious, but after days of spying it from different angles at different times of day we had pieced together a nebulous line of discontinuous crack systems. Though a few long sections looked blank, our initial shock and apprehension were fading and the route—in our imaginations—was coming alive.

“Rain fell, as did snow; the valley would fill with mist and then clear. The weather was never violent; we heard only the occasional rumble of distant thunder. The rock would dry for an evening only to be covered in rime ice the next morning, then melt and stay soaking wet. After watching this cycle repeat itself a few times we became impatient, pulled high camp, and turned our attention to the southwest face in favor of sun and fast-drying rock.

“We had ideas of potential lines, but nothing looked obvious. While hiking up the 1,000-meter scree approach I noticed a clean-looking crack system. We switched gears, jumped on it, and found clean, solid granite and splitter crack systems, mostly hand-size and occasionally widening enough to jam a knee—mostly 5.8 and 5.9. The most difficult pitch of the climb, dubbed the E5 Pitch, was a poorly protected friction face (5.11?). We climbed within about 350 vertical meters of the summit—to the “eyebrow,” the base of the first major ledge that holds snow. Here the angle eases off to the summit, but the route finding did not look easy. We had boots, tools, and crampons, ready to switch gears from rock climbing to alpine. However, an injury forced retreat—a descent that proved long and soggy.”

I must admit that during our attempt on Seerdengpu my mind was not at ease. Visions of enraged Chinese police ravaging our camp and taking us hostage, my furious family forced to come to my aid, paying the bounty for my freedom—a situation completely driven by my selfishness and pride. For the first time in my alpine climbing career I was hesitating, scared to continue upward, not because of difficult climbing conditions, but because of circumstances forced upon us by the tangled web of Chinese diplomacy. We were out of bounds, up against the power of paperwork in a foreign land, ignoring the promises we had made for nothing more than the fleeting moment of tranquility on an untrodden summit. My composure faltered, and I used the searing pain in my wrist (caused by a fall on the approach) as justification for retreat.

Perhaps our concern was impractical—the odds of being discovered by the proper authorities seemed low. After all, did they really travel the valley floor scouring the walls for trespassers? Apparently they did. Several days after our attempt, I was confronted by park officials driving a black Audi. As the rear door opened, I saw a stern face, followed by the sound of broken English: “No permit no climb,” the man said as he pointed to the west face of Seerdengpu. Our one and only warning. Party’s over, I thought. The next day, Dave and I dumped our cache of food on the Tibetan family that occupied the nearby home site and we left the valley, sullen and dismayed.

In the months since our trip, I have gathered a mix of information from other climbers that battled similar hurdles last year. (All the web sites I found are in Chinese and are hardly of any use.) Here is what I know as of January 2010:

Climbing permits for the Sichuan Province of China can either be obtained from the SMA office in Chengdu (tel. Liufeng 13808185968) or Beijing. Climbers do not need to be present, but the documents need to be requested and paid for by somebody representing your group in person. The permit will most likely be issued the same day, although I have been told you do not really get the permit, just a receipt for the permit. The requirement for permits has been in place since the mid-’90s but has not been strongly enforced until 2009.

In addition, a liaison officer is now required for all non-Chinese expeditions. His cost is around \$100 per day. As for the actual cost of the permit, I am uncertain. I recently spoke with people who secured the proper documents for a climb in 2009 and spent \$3,000 for 10 days of climbing. The cost is more for attempting first ascents. Siguniangshan National Park charges a daily revegetation fee (around 20 RMB per person), entrance fee (50 to 80 RMB), and bus fee (70 RMB per person) for the

Shuangqiaogou.

Although the trip was frustrating, we are nonetheless very grateful for the opportunity to have attempted this peak. This trip would not have been possible without the support of the American Alpine Club Lyman Spitzer Award, the W.L. Gore Shipton/Tilman Award, as well as Mountain Hardwear, Evolv Sports, Sterling Ropes, and Black Diamond.

Images

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