



## AAC Publications

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### **Shakhdara Range, Peak Karl Marx, Ascent of Southwest Rib and Attempt on Northeast Face**

Tajikistan, Pamir

In mid-July, Doug Chabot, Steve Swenson, and I traveled to the central Asian country of Tajikistan. Our original plan for the summer was to climb in Pakistan. However, a few weeks before our planned departure, we still had not received our climbing permit. At this point, we made the decision to pull the plug on Pakistan and start looking at other options. I suggested the Pamirs of Tajikistan, and Doug quickly began researching the area. Without much time to hash it over, we settled on Peak Karl Marx (6,723m) in the southern Pamir.

Tajikistan doesn't require much in the way of permits, so we put together a trip quickly. On the flip side, Tajikistan also does not have much in the way of expedition outfitters to help with logistics once in country. We owe a huge thank you to Bo White, who has spent a lot of time in Tajikistan and helped us with some logistics. Most importantly, Bo put us in touch with Zhandia Zoolshoeva, the director of the Pamirs Eco-Cultural Association (PECTA) in Khorog. Zhandia and her staff were instrumental in helping us to pull this trip together.

The launching point for the approach was a small village called Jawshangoz, where we were able to hire donkeys for the five-hour trek to base camp at 13,000'. A high-pressure system settled over the area, and we wasted no time in taking advantage of it. After only a couple days in base camp, we began climbing up the southwest rib of Karl Marx, and we summited three days later. We felt very fortunate that we had summited so quickly after arriving in country.

Feeling more fit and acclimatized, we turned our attention to the 6,000-foot northeast face. In the 1970s, this face had been climbed, siege-style, by Soviet mountaineers. We planned to climb it alpine-style. However, there was one big question. There was a white band of rock about one-third of the way up the face; this looked to be marble and had no visible weakness. We had read that the Russians had drilled several hundred holes to climb the face, and we feared that we did not have the gear to get up it.

After much discussion, we decided we would do a reconnaissance climb up to the white band to have a closer look. We moved up under the face and made an advance camp. Because the temperature was unusually warm, and we had seen water running down the face in the afternoon over several days, we decided to start at midnight so we could be above the initial ice face before the sun warmed the upper mountain. We woke at midnight but did not cross the bergschrund until about 4 a.m. We knew we were behind schedule, but the weather was clear and we had no reason to not keep going.

Steve was leading the fifth pitch, about half way up the ice face, when the sun touched the upper part of the mountain. Doug and I were at the belay when we heard a rumble, and looking up we saw the sky filled with rocks. Doug screamed "Rock!" and we tried to get as small as possible under our helmets and backpacks. Steve, despite having one tool ripped completely out of the ice by a rock, managed to stay on. Doug took a hit to his left shoulder and was not able to use his left arm, and I had my helmet caved in, but other than a headache and chipped front tooth, I was fine. We quickly began rappelling, trying to reach the safety of the bergschrund. During the descent we were under constant rockfall, and Doug took another hit, this time to the face. There was a lot of blood, but luckily it was a clean cut and nothing was broken. Once we were under the bergschrund, glad to be alive, we regrouped and headed back to base camp to lick our wounds.

Back at camp, we decided the weather was too warm to get on any steep mountain faces, and we sent word for the donkeys to come get us. In the end, we felt fortunate that we were able to summit the peak, and other than the rockfall incident we had a great trip to a region that few foreigners see.

Rusty Willis, AAC

Editor's note: **More info on these climbs and the region can be found in several posts at Steve Swenson's blog.**

## Images



Approaching the ca 1,800m northeast face of Karl Marx. The southwest rib, behind and right, was first climbed in 1946, for the first ascent of the peak.



The northeast face of Karl Marx from the approach to the southwest rib.



Peak Karl Marx (6,723m) from base camp.



A battered Doug Chabot, thankful the damage wasn't worse.

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