



AAC Publications

The Ashat Valley: Sabakh, new variation on north face; Argo, new route; West Parus, south-southwest buttress; other ascents, history, and logistics

Kyrgyzstan, Pamir Alai, Sabakh Region

I first thought about visiting Sabakh back in the 1990s, a time when my blood started boiling just from the possibility of doing a first ascent. During that time the archives of the Russian Mountaineering Federation were not in electronic format, so I borrowed printed reports on the ascents to read at home. Even then very few mountaineers knew of this mountain valley, while the neighboring regions, Ak-Su and Karavshin, were gaining huge popularity. In 1997 our “Russian Way: Walls of the World” project started, and this led me far from the summits of Pamir Alai, but I never forgot about Sabakh.

The first mountaineers in the region were members of the “Spartak” Moscow team, who explored the area in the early 1980s, but did not climb. The huge north face of Sabakh (5,300m) was first climbed in 1985 by a team from Novosibirsk led by A. Plotnikov; a month later climbers from the Spartak team, under the guidance of Vladimir Bashkirov, climbed their own line on the north wall of Sabakh. In the following years Moscow mountaineers did many first ascents, but not all of these achievements had been recorded and graded. Nevertheless, we will try to restore some historical justice. A mountaineer from Spartak, Andrei Komolov, provided the following information about some early climbs, none of which are documented in the Russian Climbing Route Classification Record: West Parus (4,850m), north wall (Kolomyitsev-Komolov-Shibanov, tentatively 5B); Main Parus (5,053m), first ascent from the south (E. Moskovets, leader, tentatively 4A); and East Parus (4,800m), first ascent along the north ridge (S. Shorokhov, leader, 4B).

A team from Saint Petersburg led by A. Moshnikov climbed a beautiful line on the center of Sabakh in 1986. In 1989, Mityukhin and partners climbed a very steep route on the north side of East Parus. Another team, led by Egorov, climbed the southwest ridge of West Parus, and in 1990 a Spartak team climbed the north face of that peak. A team led by N. Petrov did the full traverse of the Ashat wall from east to west. A Ukrainian team with M. Zagirnyak as leader also did a new route on East Parus, but the exact location is unknown.

According to the local guide Nurdin, only two expeditions visited the region between 1990 and 2012: an Italian expedition at the end of the 1990s, and a Ukrainian expedition in 2008. The Italians climbed a beautiful line on East Parus and even published a book about this climb, but the team from Odessa was less lucky: The climbers were caught under huge rockfall on the northeast wall of East Parus and a rescue was required, but fortunately there were no serious consequences.

Both of these teams climbed from the Uryam Gorge, on the east side of these mountains. No mountaineers had visited Ashat Gorge for 22 years, though a large number of commercial groups have trekked from Ashat into Ak-Su along two passes, with the help of the guide Nurdin.

In 2012 I decided to organize an expedition to this area. During our 20-day trip, Vasily Kolisnyk and I ascended a summit located above our base camp and called it Peak Prometheus (3,900m, east ridge, 360m, 3A). On August 5 we climbed seven pitches on the north wall of West Parus (4,850m) but were halted by blank slabs with no ice. (In March 2014, Alexander Zhigalov and Pavel Vlasenko from Krasnoyarsk completed this line.) Six days later we climbed the south-southwest buttress of West Parus (700m, 5A, with free climbing up to VI).

In 2013 I gathered a larger team of six. Four of my young friends planned to participate in the Russian Climbing Championship, while my friend Vasily and I climbed mountains "for the soul." We supported our young friends during their long Sabakh climb and helped them afterward, because one of them was slightly injured.

Vasily and I climbed a new line on the left side of the north face of Peak 4,750m in light style, with two very bad nights on the wall. Our route, Alkonost, was 700m, 5B. I have called the previously unnamed peak Argo because it resembled the ship of Argonauts.

We also attempted the west wall of Main Parus in deteriorating weather conditions. We climbed 10 pitches and then spent two days on the wall waiting for better weather, but then ran out of time as the expedition was ending.

Meanwhile, over five days at the end of July, A. Antoshin, I. Osipov, V Shipilov, and A. Vasilyev climbed a variation to the Plotnikov route on the north face of Sabakh (5,300m). After fixing pitches at the bottom, the four men spent five days climbing the 2,010m route.

Many possibilities for first ascents remain in the Ashat Valley. Mt. Parus alone has three summits and seven worthwhile faces, including the unclimbed northwest wall of Main Parus and northeast wall of West Parus. (Parus means "sail" in Russian.) Some of these walls have close to 1,000m of vertical relief.

The whole north wall of Svarog (labeled Peak 4810m, but definitely higher than 5,000m) is unclimbed. The wall is probably the steepest in the region, with more than 1,000m of relief. Vladimir Bashkirov and his team tried to climb it in 1990, but since then there have been no attempts.

More to the east one can find Mt. Argo with only two routes: N. Petrov's route in the right part of the north wall (6A) and our new route Alkonost along the stern of Argo.

The east end of the Ashat wall is Dioskuri (Pollux on the east and Cator on the west), which is 4,700m according to the maps but definitely higher in reality. There is only one route, following cracks and couloirs up the north wall.

There are many limestone peaks below Parus, along the sides of the Ashat Gorge. They include Peak Ashat, Peak Prometheus, and a number of other mountains, from which one sometimes has to rescue the local hunters, because they know how to ride a horse but not how to climb. In addition, the region has good blocks for bouldering: Vasily and I spent lots of time on these boulders as we watched our friends on Sabakh,

The region has a huge potential for winter ascents. Sabakh is just created for grand winter routes, and the northwest wall of Main Parus is covered with ice build-up, like in Scotland but on a wall more than 1,000m high.

One definite negative of the Ashat wall is that the bases of most peaks are composed of loose shale, though this can often be avoided by climbing snow and ice. Also, the granite of the northern walls is considerably broken by melt-freeze, much more than in Ak-Su or in Karavshin. The Ashat valley also has lots of horse flies because it is pastureland. On the other hand, you can order pita bread, kaymak, and ayran from the shepherds.

The Ashat Valley is to the west of the Karavshin and Ak-Su areas, and like them can be reached from Uzgurush village. It takes 10 to 12 hours to reach a base camp near the terminus of the glacier. This is twice as long as to reach Ak-Su, and donkey drivers ask a double price for the trip. Nurdin, who owns a huge guesthouse in Uzgurush, can arrange everything.

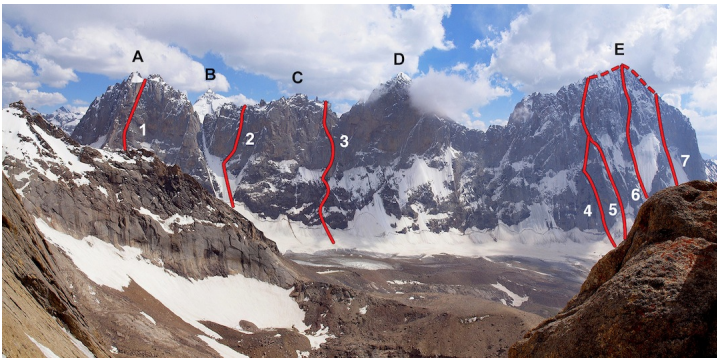
To reach East Parus you head up the Uryam Valley from the main Laylak (Lailak or Lyaylyak) valley before reaching Ashat. The Ashat gorge can also be reached from Ak-Su through Dalnyi Pass into Uryam Gorge, then over Parus Pass. Ashat is a compact area. The hike from our base camp near the source of the Ashat River to the foot of all peaks of the Ashat wall and the west side of Main Parus and West Parus was only one hour.

Yury Koshelenko, Russia, translated by Ekaterina Vorotnikova

Images



The north face of West Parus (4,850m). (1) Vlasenko-Zhigalov, 2014. Black dot marks approximate high point of Kolisnyk-Koshelenko attempt in 2012. (2) Kolomyitsev-Komolov- Shibanov, 1990.



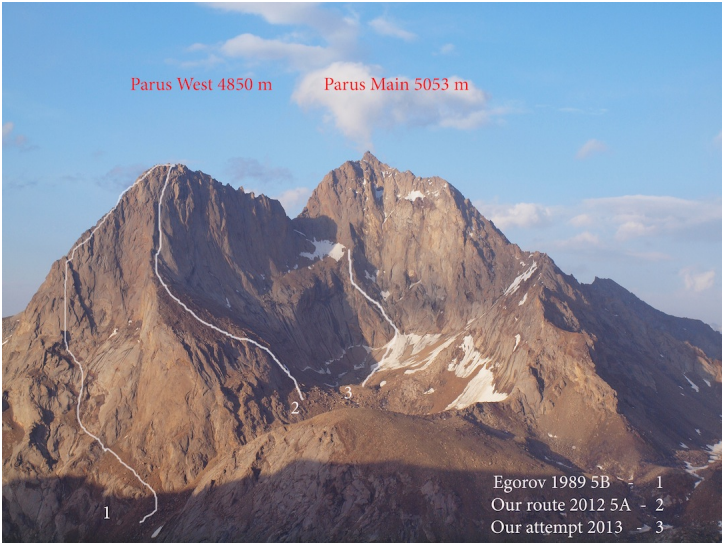
The north-facing wall at the head of the Ashat Gorge. (A) Dioskuri with (1) the peak's only route. (B) Ushbinka (ca 5,010m). (C) Argo with (2) Kolisnyk-Koshelenko, 2013 and (3) Petrov. (D) Svarog. (E) Sabakh with (4) 2013 variation to Plotnikov route, (5) Plotnikov, 1985, (6) Moshnikov, 1986, and (7) Bashkirov/Spartak, 1985.



Sabakh from the Ashat Glacier.



Sabakh.



Routes on Parus West and Main.



The northwest face of Main Parus: unclimbed.



View from Prometheus Peak to the Parus peaks and the main Ashat Wall.



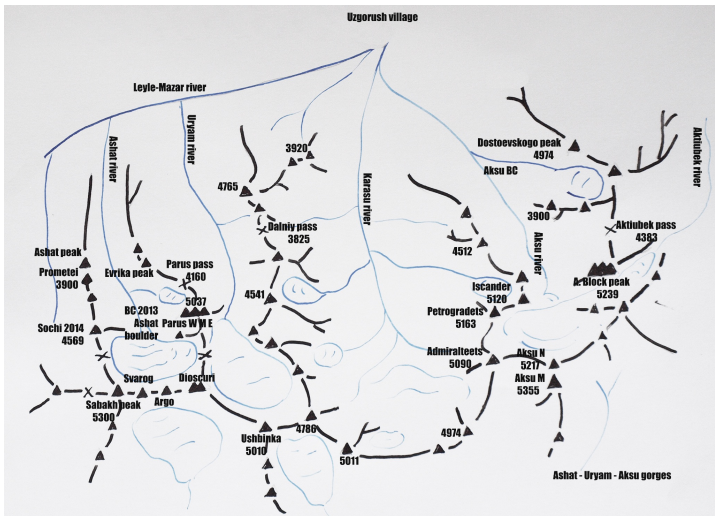
Sochi 2014 Peak, first climbed in the winter of 2014 by a Krasnoyarsk team.



Climbing the new route on the north face of Argo (2013).



Sabakh from the northeast.



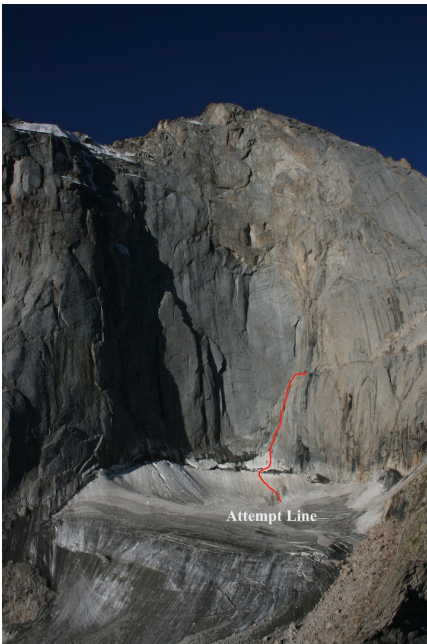
Map of the Ashat, Uryam, Kara-su, and Ak-su valleys



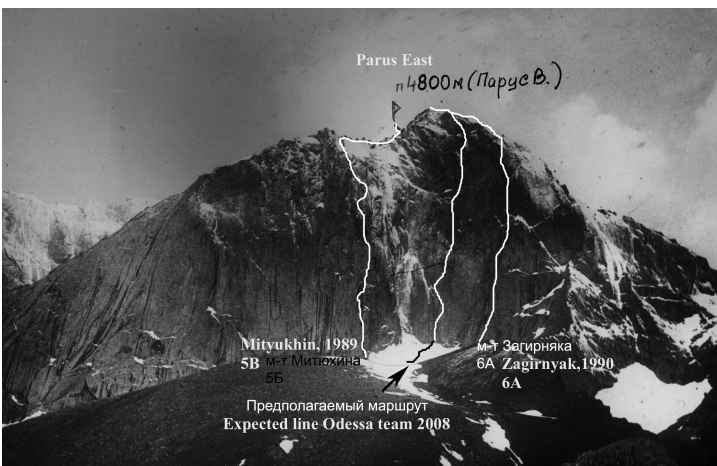
Routes on the north face of Argo.



The only known route on Dioskuri.



Attempt on the northeast face of East Parus by a team from Odessa in 2008.



Routes on East Parus. The center line is the route planned by the Odessa team in 2008. That attempt was halted by a rockfall accident low on the face.

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