



Uli Biaho Tower (6,109m), east face, Russian Roulette

Pakistan, Karakoram, Baltoro Muztagh

Eugeniy Bashkirtsov and Denis Veretenin climbed a new route in alpine style on the east face of Uli Biaho Tower. After previously climbing the Slovenian Route on Trango Tower in one and a half days, the pair approached from Trango Glacier up the same dangerous couloir followed by the 1979 American first ascensionists of the east pillar. This same couloir approach was used in 2006 by Slovaks Cmarik and Kopold to climb the north face.

The two Russians climbed unroped up the first third of the couloir, and then moved together with intermediate ice screw protection. They climbed fast for four hours, and then, when out of significant danger, progressed at a more leisurely pace for a further three hours to the base of the wall. The average angle of this 800–900m approach is 45–50°, and stonefall is a constant threat.

They started their climb up and right from the American route, with no portaledge ("too expensive to bring and no longer stylish"). On each day they climbed as far as weather would allow, although on day four this was only one pitch.

The line mostly follows wide cracks and would have been psychologically easier had the team carried more than one large cam. For the most part, Bashkirtsov would lead, pushing up his only No. 5 Camalot. (Before getting the mountaineering bug, Bashkirtsov was a successful competition climber, with an onsight grade of 8a.) They climbed largely free—only around 10 percent of the route was aided. They were fortunate to find bivouac ledges each night.

Toward the top, the Russian line links with the American route for three and a half pitches (5c/6a), before forcing a more direct finish to the summit. The last section proved to be the crux: wide cracks through vertical or overhanging terrain.

From the top they went straight down the southeast face, rappelling "largely from bolts" (they took 10 in total, using all but three for protection and anchor points). They reached the snow close to the start of the 1988 Italian route on the southeast pillar, and from there crossed a spur to gain the relative safety of the Italian approach couloir, which they downclimbed. Summit to base camp took 16 hours; the round-trip ascent from base camp seven days. Difficulties on the 1,000m east face were graded 6c+ A2.

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Images



Eugeny Bashkirtsov about to tackle one of the many wide cracks on the east face of Uli Biaho.



Bashkirtsov in the large corner system of Russian Roulette, on the east face of Uli Biaho Tower.

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