



AAC Publications

Kyzyl Asker, southeast pillar

China, Xinjiang, West Kokshaal-too

Due to the terrorist attack in Pakistan, we had to change our summer expedition plans. After a couple of weeks' research we decided on the Chinese side of the Western Kokshaal-too. We couldn't find much info, but the little we gained led us to believe there were great untouched objectives. Permits proved slow to obtain and were pretty pricey, and even with them it was not guaranteed we would get there. On our journey we passed seven checkpoints; at each one it wasn't clear that we would be allowed through. Finally, at the end of August, Stéphane Hanssens, Sean Villanueva, Evrard Wendenbaum, and I entered the promised valley. It was a powerful experience. Being a lot more alpine than expected, it was very different from our previous expeditions. [The team approached via the same valley most likely first traveled by foreigners in 2000 (Libeck, AAJ 2001), then took the left glacier branch leading north toward Kyzyl Asker. The head of this glacier has been visited a number of times by parties approaching over Window Col from Kyrgyzstan].

After a week of exploration and acclimatizing, we found what we were looking for: a steep big wall leading to the top of a beautiful mountain. We spent the next 15 days surfing on the southeast pillar of Kyzyl Asker. The climbing was absolutely spectacular, with compact, orange granite, sometimes forming crazy hueco shapes. But there was a lot more to fight up there. The weather was rough, with many snowstorms, and the temperatures dropped to -15°C at night. At the warmest time of the day they barely rose to -5°C . We had to melt snow constantly to have water, and while climbing our water bottles would freeze solid by midday. Taking off gloves and wearing tight rock shoes in these conditions sometimes felt ridiculous. We found it a very tough experience both mentally and physically. But the unique scenery of the surrounding snow-plastered mountains made up for the suffering, helping us to keep going.

On our 13th day of vertical living we made the final push to the summit. Because the rock was too iced, we switched to mixed climbing for the last 400m (which also counts as free climbing, I guess). This was an exciting new experience for virgin mixed climbers like us. The summit was a lot farther than we estimated, and we didn't reach it until 10 p.m., in total darkness and biting cold conditions. It was really hard to enjoy this moment, but we had the satisfaction that soon we would be comfortably tucked up in sleeping bags inside our portaledge. By the time we reached them, Stéphane's toes were hard and cold, like a piece of chicken coming out of a freezer. He had serious frostbite. There is no rescue in this region, so we descended quickly, rushed out of the mountains, and as soon as we reached civilization Stéphane was dispatched to Belgium. The good news is that he should be able to keep all his toes, but he needed around six months for total recovery.

After a new integral start, our climb lay very close to the 2007 Russian Route (6B, mixed free and aid, 30 pitches, Mikhailov-Odintsov-Ruchkin) as far as our Camp 3. We knew about their route and hoped to find a completely independent line to the left. But above Camp 3 it was logical to join their route. The pillar is 1,200m high. We did about 1,400m of climbing in capsule style, all free at 7b+ M6/7.

Images



Kyzyl Asker from the southeast. (1) This ice couloir is the most attempted major line in the Western Kokshaal-too and still awaits an ascent. (2) Southeast Pillar, Belgian Route. (3) Southeast Pillar, Russian Route. (4) Southeast face, Belorussian-Russian attempt, 2009.



After a day of hauling in a snowstorm, the team finally establishes Camp 2. The north face of the Great Walls of China lies in the right background.



Sean Villanueva on a difficult crack pitch directly above the portaledges at Camp 2.



Stéphane Hanssens jumaring the first pitch of the final 250m snow and mixed section of the southeast pillar, with the peaks of China behind. (A) Unclimbed, unnamed peak over 5,500m. (B) Unclimbed peak 5,665m. (C) Unnamed glacier flowing south from Kyzyl Asker, used for the approach. (D) Great Walls of China, highest summit (5,186m). (E) Northern top climbed by Dutch (ca 5,120m) in 2013. (F) Peak 4,622m: no mountaineer is known to have visited the glacier visible in front of this peak.



Nico Favresse climbing between Camps 2 and 3 with Peak Babouchka (5,282m) behind. He is finishing the second-hardest pitch on the route (7b).

Article Details

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