



Climbing Potential in the Alichursky Mountains of Tajikistan

Tajikistan, Pamir

In September 2013, I traveled with British writer Jamie Bunchuk to produce a film, in association with the Murghab Ecotourism Association, about a Kyrgyz-Tajik hunter and herder named Orozbek, who lives in a small settlement just off the beautiful Pamir Highway, overlooking the verdant Alichur Plains of eastern Tajikistan. During the month we spent with Orozbek we had a rare and unforeseen opportunity to explore the unclimbed North and South Alichursky Mountains, which overlook the Wakhan Corridor from the north. Although this was not a climbing expedition, I felt the first ascent and exploration potential we encountered was worth sharing with others.

Our journey toward the Alichursky Mountains began with a two-day overland hitchhike and taxi share from Almaty, Kazakhstan, where we had been resting up after completing a two-month crossing of eastern Kazakhstan on horseback. Our first day in Tajikistan saw us bumping and grinding our way down the Pamir Highway in a decrepit Lada driven by two young soldiers from Dushanbe. Peering out the tinted windows, I watched the Chinese border fence cut an arbitrary line through the expansive wilderness. Amid the pristine, snow-capped peaks and uninhabited plateau, our little car was an absurd microcosm of the modern world as the stench of tobacco smoke and vodka breath slowly mixed with ear-splitting Uzbek techno and the soldier's conversations about missing girls in the capital.

The somewhat surreal journey turned memorably ludicrous when the axle of the Lada snapped in half coming down from Ak-Baital Pass (4,655m), resulting in four screaming men fruitlessly clutching the dashboard, seats, hair, and each other in the irrational hope it might stop our car from rolling over in a ditch. Eventually, after an overnight car nap in the middle of the highway, and with the axle repaired with salvaged wire and zip ties, we spluttered in to Orozbek's farmstead and yurt right off the highway, approximately 5km north of the Kyrgyz settlement of Bash-Gumbaz.

The first prominent area we spotted of interest for climbing was a series of 500m compact rock walls in the North Alichursky range, overlooking the farmstead. We affectionately nicknamed this the Orozbek Massif (Peak 4,984m, 37°50'30.36"N, 73°34'15.39"E) in honor of our host. During our reconnaissance along the base of these cliffs, I speculated that 600m–800m rock routes could be possible. It also has the distinct advantage of being only an hour's walk from the highway.

The second region with considerable climbing potential was presented to us during a visit to the ancient caravanserai and long-abandoned silver-mining settlement of Bazar-Dara. Accessing this area requires a UAZ/4WD from Murghab at a cost of \$250–\$500. The off-road jaunt starts up a northerly running road in an unnamed valley located near the distinct hilly mound of An-Balik (4,196m). Two hours up this valley saw us at the top of the 4,864m Bazar-Dara Pass (37°56'1.23"N, 73°23'55.38"E), followed by another three hours winding down a valley of the same name toward the caravanserai.

According to Soviet maps the nearest peaks to this region that may have been climbed are Peak Trezubets (5,845m) and Peak Skaltssmy (5,781m), 10km to the east within the Uzengyu-Niazek Mountains.

Within the Bazar-Dara sector of the North Alichursky Mountains we encountered five valleys rolling outward in a northeasterly direction. The first two valleys were up to 3km deep and fed a glacial lake that would be ideal for a base camp. Following either of these will lead to approximately four to five

unclimbed peaks, the highest in the region being Peak 5,617m (37°56'56.71"N, 73°19'1.58"E). The three valleys to the north are somewhat drier, shorter, and much less prominent, although there are granite slabs up to 500m high at the head of these valleys, which could make for great multi-pitch rock routes. Alternatively, these valleys would provide ideal access to approximately four unclimbed ridges and summits over 5,000m. It would also be possible to situate a camp near the caravanserai itself and access these peaks via two short glaciated valleys, one of which leads up to the ancient silver mine.

During our final week with Orozbek we headed into the South Alichursky Mountains, north of Zorkul, a lake that separates Tajikistan from Afghanistan. Our primary goal was filming the endangered argali sheep, of which Orozbek and many other Kyrgyz in the region are avid hunters, both for sport and to sell meat within the black markets. Our own jaunt took us on a turn south from the Pamir Highway from Chamyr-Tash following the mostly dry Iri-Yak River up toward Koluchkol Lake (37°35'53.64"N, 73°38'59.24"E).

The most prominent features in the Koluchkol region were the magnificent and unclimbed Peak 5,384m (37°31'1.02"N, 73°36'4.84"E) and an appealing granite ridge line snaking for 9km toward Peak 5,361m, which was out of view up the Chonkaradzhilga River valley. Aside from these two prime objectives, numerous other unclimbed peaks abound within Koluchkol—I estimate up to eight primary summits in the vicinity of these two peaks, as well as within the Chokman and Kyulyuchsurdyu river valleys.

While it was somewhat frustrating as a climber to be visiting these virgin realms without a rack or rope, it felt a real privilege to be able to document these regions and spend time with Orozbek. Should you ever wish to plan your own expedition to the Alichursky Mountains, I strongly recommend paying a visit to Orozbek and liaising with the Murghab Ecotourism Association (META).

Thanks to Malgosia Skowronska for checking Russian to English translations, Gulnara Apandieva and Tony Nelson of the META for their support, and the other 22 sponsors of the "One Steppe Ahead" documentary film project.

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Images



After hunting for marmots Orozbek finishes off the day collecting teresken grass for firewood.



On the way to Bazar-Dara with Peak 5,617 (right) just hidden out of view.



Jamie Bunchuk beneath one of the many big walls in the Orozbek Massif.



Hidden walls offering countless caves and multi-pitch routes await future teams to the Orozbek Massif.



The majestic Peak 5,384 and the rock ridge leading to Peak 5,361, both unclimbed, within the Koluchkol Valley.

Article Details

Author	Matthew Traver
Publication	AAJ
Volume	57
Issue	89
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions