



AAC Publications

Aghil Range, Exploration of the Durbin Kangri Group

China, Xinjiang, Karakoram

In June and July I led a group to explore the peaks north of the Shaksgam River. The aim of the expedition was to establish the climbing potential of the 6,000m peaks on both sides of the Kizil Davan, the 5,700m pass connecting the Shaksgam (via the Kulchintubulak River) to the Zug-Shaksgam ("False Shaksgam") Valley, and also of the peaks on both sides of the upper Zug-Shaksgam. While a significant number of teams have visited the Shaksgam, primarily to climb the 8,000m peaks, and 7,000ers such as Chongtar and the Crown farther down-river, the number to have visited the Zug-Shaksgam can still be counted on the fingers of one hand (Mason, 1926; Shipton, 1930; Lebedev, 2010). Although the last team provided significant photographic and written information, and performed the first crossing of the Kizil Davan, the region had yet to be visited by climbers.

As befits such a remote and relatively expensive region, we formed a large expedition around three, mostly autonomous teams: Rob Duncan, Jesse Mease (both USA), Dmitry Shapovalov (Ukraine), and I (U.K.); Lukas Brexler, Harald Kirschenhofer, and Christof Nettekoven (Germany); and Ales Holc and Peter Mezmar (Slovenia). We met in Kashgar on June 16 and left on the afternoon of the 17th for the now rather quick 250km drive to Kargilik. On the 18th we proceeded south on paved roads over a 3,200m pass in the Kun Lun foothills and a 5,018m pass crossing the main Kun Lun range at its far western end. We dropped to the Yarkand River at Mazar (3,800m) and followed it downstream for 40km on good gravel roads to the Kyrgyz village of Ilik (3,400m). From Ilik, with seven camels, we trekked up the Surukwat River for two days to the base of the Aghil Davan, crossed this pass (4,805m), and dropped into the Shaksgam on the third day, arriving at our base camp (36°02'43"N, 76°41'52"E) at 4,100m on the Kulchintubulak River, some 3km from the Shaksgam, after a short fourth day that included fording half the Shaksgam River to a broad central sandbar, then crossing back.

At this point we separated into our three exploration teams. The activities of the German party may be found in a report by Christof Nettekoven. The Slovenians began by exploring the slot canyon leading northeast from base camp, which curved around to a northwest-draining glacier beneath the north face of Durbin Kangri II (6,755m). We began by making a carry up the boulder-strewn main valley of the Kulchintubulak, which involved significant scrambling and river-hopping to access a flat 4,500m valley and an ice-filled gully below the snout of the glacier. This we passed on loose ledges to the south, continuing up the rather mobile moraines on the true left side of the glacier until we could establish ourselves on it at flatter sections beginning at 4,850m (advanced base camp was set at 36°00'53"N, 76°45'40"E.) On the following day we moved to this camp with 10 days of supplies, and on the next we made a trail in warm conditions and soft snow to the top of the Kizil Davan pass (5,710m).

After a rest day, we moved to an acclimatization camp at 5,600m directly below the Kizil Davan and climbed a peak to the north of the pass (6,184m, 36°00'25"N, 76°48'25"E). On the second acclimatization day we tried another peak, but were turned back by soft snow over slabby rock. While Duncan and Mease rested and sheltered from the heat, Shapovalov and I climbed more soft snow and a little ice to the highest point south of the Kizil Davan (Point 5,858m). After one more night at altitude, we descended to advanced base. Shapovalov joined the German team, while Duncan, Mease, and I prepared to attempt an ice line on the north face of Durbin Kangri I (6,824m) before the obvious heat of the summer days (and direct morning sun) could damage it further. However, our hopes were dashed by impossible (detached, flowing) ice conditions and soft, friable, featureless

rock, which forced a retreat from the first technical pitch at 5,200m.

All nine members were back in base on July 2. The Slovenians had already climbed a 6,200m summit (36°04'22"N, 76°47'13"E), which they named Kamnik Peak after their home village, and left for Durbin Kangri II on the July 3. This was the beginning of two days of rain and cold temperatures, which dropped considerable amounts of snow above 5,000m. The Germans and Shapovalov had to leave for home on the 5th. We left on the same day for advanced base, before deciding on the morning of the 6th, after another snowy night, that the northeast ridge of Durbin Kangri I was much too objectively hazardous.

On the 7th the weather became very warm and remained that way for the rest of our stay. We crossed the Kizil Davan and descended to the Zug-Shaksgam, making camp in much the same place as Mason in 1926. On the 8th we followed the Zug-Shaksgam for 10km, frequently wading through slot canyons in knee-deep water, to the southern side of Kaimuk Kangri (6,952m), gaining excellent views of many 6,000m summits between the two rivers, as well as of the eastern ramparts of Durbin Kangri I. On the 9th we followed a tributary river southward from the Zug-Shaksgam with intent of accessing the east face of Burnag Kangri (6,821m), the dominant peak between the rivers in this section. However, our hopes were dashed after around 1km of wading and scrambling in a seemingly endless, narrow slot canyon, from which we had to retreat before hypothermia and rising waters made our dangerous situation deadly. With a deteriorating weather forecast and no clear route out of the canyons onto any of the surrounding peaks, we began the long return march on the 10th, crossed the Kizil Davan on the 11th, and cleared advanced base and descended to base camp on the 12th, beside an almost unrecognizable, swollen Kulchintubulak River.

On the 13th, we learned from home that the Slovenians had not been heard from since the 5th. On the 14th we tried to follow their footsteps up the valley they had ascended, but it turned into another slot canyon and where they had found ankle-deep water, we found it far above our knees. After another kilometer of freezing, slippery wading in the rushing, muddy ice water at 4,500m, and no sign of a respite in the rock formation, we were again forced to retreat.

At minimum, the Slovenians may have been trapped, and so we invoked emergency procedures, which involved the Slovenian Embassy in Beijing requesting a helicopter (which would be provided by the Chinese military). On the 16th we tried to return to our advanced base, with a view to crossing the east ridge of Durbin Kangri II at 6,200m and looking down into the basin where Holc and Mezmar were last heard from (they reported being at 5,600m waiting for better weather). However, our efforts were thwarted yet again when we found that the river we had crossed at 4 p.m. four days earlier was now not possible safely even in early morning (and even with a rope). We were now forced to wait until the 19th, when our guide and camel drivers returned, but still the helicopter process was ongoing (requiring more reports from on the ground and more diplomatic cajoling). On the 20th we used the effects of a brief cold spell to cross the main Shaksgam on our trek out, before the river could become impassable until late August. On the 21st we continued our wait at the foot of the Aghil Davan.

On the 22nd a helicopter arrived in the morning, planning to take one of us (no camera) on the search. We chose Mease. The pilot was wary of the slot canyon and flew over the Kizil Davan, but then had to return the same way as no alternative could be found within the fuel allowance. Therefore, the intended search zone (north of Durbin Kangri II) was not overflowed. The helicopter returned in the afternoon and this time flew far above the slot canyon, but turned (again due to worries about the narrow basin) some two kilometers short of the zone where we believe the Slovenians were camped. No evidence of bright colors or significant avalanche debris could be seen. On the 23rd the helicopter flew again but did not take any of us; it is thought the search area was overflowed and nothing could be seen. On the same afternoon we were "dismissed" as superfluous to the search and began the walk out. On the 24th the helicopter search was continued to no avail; the search was canceled by the Slovenians in the afternoon. We arrived in Ilik on the same day and continued to Kashgar, ending the expedition with a further debrief there concerning the search.

Ales Holc and Peter Meznar did not reappear miraculously in the days or weeks following these search efforts. They are now presumed to have died in a trekking or climbing accident on or around July 6. Both were experienced climbers with a long track record of difficult ascents in the high mountains. Both were family men, each married with three children aged up to 12. Most of all, both were warm, witty, open, and lively characters whose friendship and love will be missed by many. Members of the Shaksgam Expedition would like to extend their sincerest condolences to the Holc and Meznar families, as well as to all the friends and climbing partners who will miss Ales and Peter.

Bruce Normand, China

[Click here](#) to read an In Memoriam tribute to Holc and Meznar.

Images



Unclimbed Burnag Kangri (6,821m) from the northwest.



Unclimbed Kaimuk Kangri (6,952m) from the west.



Jesse Mease during one of the acclimatization ascents.



Jesse Mease searching in vain for climbable ice on the north face of Durbin Kangri I.



Unclimbed Peak 6,490m and neighbors, seen while looking for access to Burnag Kangri and Kaimuk Kangri.



Unnamed and unclimbed Peak 6,622m in the Zug-Shaksgam.



Dangerous wading on the approach to Burnag Kangri.



Approaching Peak 6,184m.

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