



AAC Publications

Panfilovski Division Southeast, Flight of the Zephyr; Kyzyl Asker, Southeast Couloir, Attempt

Kyrgyzstan, Tien Shan, Western Kokshaal-Too

My mother would probably say that going on a blind date to a foreign country like Kyrgyzstan is a bad idea. However, the signs all pointed toward the potential for a productive partnership with a shared desire for adventure. Ben Erdmann is a 27-year-old, Alaska-based rope access worker, and although we had corresponded for months prior to the expedition, we only met in person on the plane from Seattle to Dubai.

We arrived in Bishkek on August 5, and several days later, thanks to a horrifically loud, orange and green, ex-military truck, reached our 3,800m base camp at the toe of the Komorova Glacier. I had been here once before, in May 2012, when Ryan Johnson and I attempted the southeast couloir of Kyzyl Asker (AAJ 2013). This time Ben and I hoped for less snow and better weather. After nine days of heavy load hauling, we finally arrived at our advanced base camp (4,400m) below the unique and cathedral-like 1,300m southeast face of Kyzyl Asker (5,842m), with a complex and stunning alternating pattern of defined dihedrals and arêtes across its entire width.

Listening to massive avalanches pour off Kyzyl and surrounding peaks during the many storms gave us a lot of motivation to wait for a precipitation-free window to make our attempt. We constantly monitored weather reports sent by friends back home, but each time we received a good forecast and packed for an attempt, a sudden storm would shut us down.

At one point we decided to use a marginal window (read snowstorm) to attempt a line on Panfilovski Division's southeast summit, a peak on the southeast ridge of Panfilovski Division that is ca 100m lower than the main top. This stunning, 600m golden granite spire rose directly from the glacier near our advanced base camp, but at 4:30 a.m, navigating tentatively through the snowstorm toward the base, we laughed at ourselves for having the hubris to leave the tent.

Our blind-date partnership unfolded over initial pitches of moderate Styrofoam ice, as we carefully but quickly raced warming temperatures and falling ice to establish ourselves at the base of the thin mixed system defining the route's upper half. We then embarked on iconic mixed terrain that required all the tricks in the book, until finally a layback with my body horizontal got me through the last of the technical ground. Bodies and mind in tune, we pulled on to the summit. Our line went in 12 pitches at AI4 R M7, without the use of bolts. We named it Flight of the Zephyr, in honor of our Tasmanian friend Kim "Zephyr" Ladiges, who was unable to come with us on the expedition due to an accident. Ben and I concurred that this line could be a classic in another range, showcasing much enjoyable terrain, from moderate ice to technical thin ice and mixed. We began our rappels through alternately decent and shitty weather, with Ben ensuring our safety by placing bomber anchors the entire way down. We arrived back in camp at 6:30 p.m., 14 hours after walking out that morning.

Early on August 29 we decided to make an attempt on the Kyzyl Asker couloir, in what appeared to be an acceptable if not ideal period of moderate diurnal precipitation cycles. Eclipsing my previous high point of 5,300m in only seven hours, I reflected that Ben and I might just have the climbing chemistry required to pull this thing off. We found technical difficulties up to WI5 M6, as well as dangerous melting and hazardous precipitation. Punishing spindrift had us fighting for our lives only 200m above

the point where Ryan and I bivouacked in 2012—yet again an experience of intense awakening. We spent around 50 hours on the face, with the final 36 hours mostly pinned down by the frightening conditions, and reached ca 5,500m before bailing. We believe we have the second-highest elevation attained so far on the route; Ines Papert reached 5,600m on one of her several attempts. It is not enough to have the technical skill, the right partner, the right strategy, or the right conditions. All this and more must combine on a line like this, if one is to complete a successful ascent and return home.

Our trip ended with losing much of our remaining food in a crevasse and multiple delays in our pickup due to vehicle and driver health breakdowns. For xi days we watched our bodies deteriorate, remembering the deeper meaning of hunger. Finally, our transport arrived with four U.K. climbers inside. They had heard about our plight and brought us an enormous cake.

Samuel Johnson, USA

Images



The eastern aspect of Panfilovski Division Southeast with Flight of the Zephyr.



Ben Erdmann on steep ice in the southeast couloir of Kyzyl Asker.



Samuel Johnson entering the crux M7 pitch of Flight of the Zephyr.



Samuel Johnson on a WI3 pitch mid-height on Flight of the Zephyr.



Ben Erdmann starts up a moderate but dangerous pitch (WI4 X) on the southeast couloir of Kyzyl Asker.



On the long approach up the West Komorova Glacier to reach Kyzyl Asker's southeast face.

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