



AAC Publications

Muz Tok, North Face, Attempt

Kyrgyzstan, Pamir Alai, Jiptik Valley

Muz Tok: (1) The attempted line on the north face with the bivouac (B) marked;
(2) The route used in descent. The pyramid behind is Pik Schurovsky (5,490m).

Photo by John Proctor

On July 5, after a two-day walk from Sary Zhaz, Phil Dawson, Ciaran Mullan, and I arrived at base camp near the snout of the Jiptik Glacier, a.k.a. the Schurovsky Glacier. (This was misspelled in past AAJs, the glacier being named after the Russian academic Grigori Efimovich Schurovsky.) Robert Taylor would arrive five days later due to a delayed flight.

The start of the trek to base camp is shared with the approach to the rather more popular Karavshin, but in recent years access by this route sometimes has been impeded. The route used to pass through Vorukh, a Tajik enclave within Kyrgyzstan, and from time to time (e.g. 2014) outbreaks of violent conflict led to the border being closed. The tour operator Batken Travel Service has now instigated a new route into the Jiptik and Karavshin areas that avoids the enclave and so makes these destinations less risky.

In terms of previous climbing activity, the Jiptik saw little during the Soviet era—only a handful of easy routes were climbed. After the collapse of the USSR, this area remained untouched until 1996, when Paul Hersey's New Zealand expedition climbed Kyzyl Muz (5,127m on the Soviet Military Map), Muz Tash (5,040m), Kara-Eet (4,900m), and Pik 4,720m.

In 2009, Hersey returned to Jiptik with Graham Zimmerman and Yewjin Tan. This group climbed a new route on the north face of Kyzyl Muz and identified the north face of Muz Tok (a.k.a. Pik Schurovsky West, 5,066m) as an excellent unclimbed objective (AAJ 2009). Muz Tok was first climbed during the Soviet era via the southwest ridge, and has probably been climbed more than once as a part of long traverses along the ridge forming the frontier with Tajikistan. The north face would be our main goal.

Robert and I set off for Muz Tok at lunchtime on July 15. This was our third attempt, the first two (with Ciaran and Phil) having been abandoned before starting the climb due to it being either too warm or wet. As we waited on the moraine opposite the peak, the temperature fell in a satisfactory manner. It took much longer than anticipated to cross the complex glacier, and I nearly fell into a crevasse.

We began climbing from 4,150m (GPS) at 1 a.m. and continued through the night up névé and ice, past the first bottleneck, then up and across to a long couloir that we hoped would take us to the top. Compared to other faces in the area, the north face of Muz Tok is relatively quiet: We had not seen large rockfall during opportunities we'd had to study the face, and our couloir ended in a ridge, not a collection funnel. We deemed the route safe as long as we could climb the "bottleneck" at night, which we did.

We reached the couloir after daybreak and started up the right branch, then took to the rock rib for safety as the sun was now hitting the snow. The rock was often good. Photos available to us before the trip had shown the Jiptik Valley to be limestone, so it was a pleasant surprise on arrival at base camp to find the rock from the snout of the glacier upward to be primarily granite. Before the rib the angle had been 45–50°, but once on it we found ourselves circumventing steeper ice. By

mid-afternoon I was starting to struggle and insisted on a short power nap.

Looking east along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border at the peaks lying at the head of the Jiptik Valley / Schurovsky Glacier. (A) Pik Andreeva (5,127m). (B) Pik Kshemysh Bashi (5,290m). (C) Muz Tok (5,066m; the original route climbed the right skyline ridge). (D) Pik Turkestan (exact height unknown, but listed at the 5,200m level in the Russian classification table; climbed by several routes during the Soviet era). All altitudes other than Turkestan from the Soviet Military Map. Photo by Ciaran Mullan

In the evening we arrived on the ridge marking the top of the couloir, where we could look down the far side on to what would eventually become our descent route. There was no space to pitch the bivouac tent; the best we could find was a ledge at 4,928m on which we could lie down in a line. After food and drink, we "slept" from midnight to 1 a.m. Robert got cramps in his legs, which he could only relieve by stretching them over my head and chest.

Our plan was to continue up the ridge to the summit and then descend relatively easily to the west. Unfortunately, we were soon wading through deep snow. When upward progress became impossible, we took to the east flank of the ridge, which had sections of 60° ice that took ice screws. But after 50m we were stopped by a rock barrier straddling the ridge. It was only 20m or so, but due to a combination of technical difficulty, looseness (it wasn't granite), and poor protection, neither of us could climb it.

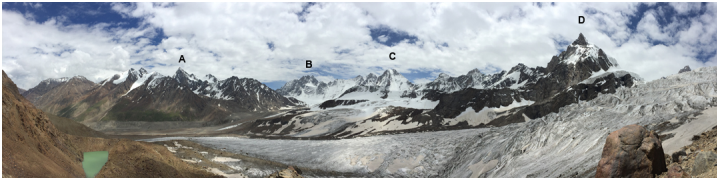
We downclimbed from an altitude of 4,971m, reaching our bivouac site as it was getting light, and then descended the couloir on the west flank of the ridge. Two rappels got us into the couloir, after which we downclimbed, with two more rappels through a steeper section, to arrive on the flat glacier in early afternoon. We felt the 800m line we had followed up the north face couloir to be around TD.

Ciaran and Phil climbed nearly to the top of Kara-Eet (4,900m), one of the peaks summited by the 1996 expedition. We are grateful for the support given by the Austrian Alpine Club, BMC, MEF, and the Chris Walker Memorial Trust.

John Proctor, Alpine Club, U.K.

Download the Mount Everest Foundation report for this expedition.

Images



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Robert Taylor approaching the bottom of the couloir on the north face of Muz Tok.



John Proctor on the lower north face of Muz Tok.

Article Details

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| Author | John Proctor |
| Publication | AAJ |
| Volume | 59 |
| Issue | 91 |
| Page | 0 |
| Copyright Date | 2017 |
| Article Type | Climbs and expeditions |