



AAC Publications

Sairam, North Face, New Variation

Kazakhstan, Tien Shan, Ugam Ridge

Sairam (4,238m, 42°8'16.04"N, 70°28'50.44"E) is situated on the Ugam Ridge of the Western Tien Shan, approximately 150km northeast of Tashkent and 350km west-southwest of Bishkek. The northern aspect is a fine alpine face, with room for new routes. I saw it for the first time in the spring of 2015. I was driving around southern Kazakhstan, looking for walls to climb. With Polina Orendovskaya, I climbed a moderate five-pitch route on a limestone cliff at Boralday, then moved to the mountains south of Shymkent, where we put up a new route on Kyzyl-sau. That evening I went to look at the north face of Sairam, as I knew there were existing Russian routes of 5B—hard enough to be fun, but not so hard that they would involve lots of alpine suffering.

As soon as I saw the face, I was hooked. Back at home I did some research and found that the stunning direct line to the summit was unclimbed. But there was good reason. In summer the lower section is constantly bombarded with rockfall. In winter the access is very difficult, due to the amount of snow in the approach valley. A friend suggested mid-spring would be the optimal time: The avalanche danger would not be too high, but there would be enough ice to bind loose rock.

Max Ten and I reached Shymkent on April 19, and the same day friends drove us to the mountain. Next day we wandered up in thick mist, which later turned to rain. The following day was clear, so we continued. At noon we reached the moraine opposite the face and put up our tent. For the rest of that day and all the following, we watched the gully that formed the initial section of our proposed line, trying to see or hear falling stones. The mountain was silent.

On April 23 we left the tent at 4 a.m., and one hour later were at the top of the avalanche cone, bombarded by constant spindrift. I started up the initial section of vertical, polished ice, having to look at my feet the whole time to avoid a mask of snow building on my face. The ice led to a steep, snowy couloir, interrupted by sections of yellow ice. We climbed together for 150m to a rock section, where, from a nonexistent belay anchor, I headed up toward the huge dihedral that splits the central rock band. Without proper protection it proved too scary, so I downclimbed and Max led out left on a snow ramp. This took us to a steep gully with 2cm of ice over monolithic rock. Much better!

I made another attempt to reach the dihedral but was stopped by a wide crack. Hoping to reach it from farther left, we climbed together for 150m on steep snow to a loose chimney, which, although steep, proved straightforward. I tried to move right again, as I still wanted to climb the central section of the face, but soon retreated when I found myself digging a trench for 30m through chest-deep snow over rock. I rationalized that if it collapsed it would probably not kill me, but would certainly provide me with neither motivation nor pleasure.

Continuing up to the left, the next two pitches were the crux: 70° slabs covered with snow. It took me one and a half hours to lead the first pitch, hooking imaginary holds that miraculously held. By this stage we were probably on the 1986 Bobrov summer route. With rock shoes, these limestone slabs would have been a breeze.

We finally reached the couloirs in the upper part of the face. The snow was deep, we were tired, and the sun was disappearing below the horizon. After a few hours I stood shivering on the northeast ridge as Max, exhausted and moving really slowly, approached. I was nearly hypothermic, and although the summit was only 50m above, we immediately set off down the northeast ridge, hoping

that we were on the normal route (Timofeev, 3B). We weren't, and we had to make four rappels from one-piton anchors to reach the glacier, join the normal route, and then rappel and downclimb a snow couloir to moraine. Twenty-two hours after leaving, we reached our tent.

We didn't climb the direct line planned, we didn't even summit, but we had fun. In that we succeeded. We graded our 700m route 5B, WI5 M7 A0.

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Images



Overview of the approach to the north side of Sairam in May 2015.



The north face of Sairam in April 2016.



The north face of Sairam in "summer" conditions (May 2015). (1) U. Svolik, 1988, 5A. (2) V. Sedelnikov, 1977, 5B. (3) A. Pavelyev, 2001, 5B. (4) A. Bobrov, 1986, 5B. (5) K. Belotserkovskiy and M. Ten, 2016, 5B. (6) V. Starlychanov, 1977, 5B. (7) V. Melnikov, 2001, 4B.



Kirill Belotserkovskiy on easy ground in the middle of the north face of Sairam.

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