



AAC Publications

The Line

Third Time Lucky on Kyzyl Asker's Prized Ice Route

We spend the night half-sitting, half-standing, one butt cheek each, hanging from the anchor. We are freezing and our bivy sack keeps sliding down our bodies; it's impossible to zip it completely, and snow keeps blowing in through a hole at the top.

It had started to snow toward the end of the day, like it always did, eventually turning into hail. The snow began looking for the fastest way down the wall—this was the spindrift I knew all too well from Kyzyl Asker. When the storm eased, Luka Lindič and I kept climbing late into the night. We had found our bivy site, such as it was, on a nearly vertical wall.

Despite the shivering and discomfort, I feel content. We are only about 100 meters shy of the peak. After two previous expeditions to Kyzyl Asker, success is close at hand. We just have to make it to morning. And this is not the first time I have survived a long night on Kyzyl Asker.

Kyzyl Asker, the “Red Soldier,” is a 5,842-meter fortress of red granite straddling the frontier between Kyrgyzstan and China. My first expedition here was inspired by a photo of the peak and the line—soon to become The Line—shared by the German mountaineer Robert Steiner. I was incredibly excited after seeing that photo. The line immediately draws the eye, a perfect formation of water ice on a high mountain, like I had never seen before.

The line faces southeast, which is the reason water ice can be seen at such a high altitude. But the southeastern exposure also significantly increases the difficulty and complexity of climbing the route. In summer the sun is too hot, melting the ice and making the entire climb too dangerous. Later in the season you have a very high chance of getting caught in a snowstorm, and getting in and out of the mountains can be impossible.

Wolfgang Russegger (Austria), Thomas Senf (Germany), and I planned our first expedition in the fall of 2010, hoping to find colder, safer conditions; no other team had arrived so late in the year. At least five expeditions had made their way toward the southeast face of Kyzyl Asker, starting in 1998, and several attempts had been made on the big ice line in the summer or early fall. But warm weather and snowfall had caused each to fail.

When we arrived in Kyrgyzstan, we discovered our plan wasn't foolproof. Early-winter snowfall had made the road from Naryn into the mountains impassable. Was our first expedition to the Red Soldier destined to end in the capital city of Bishkek?

We decided on the only—yet very expensive—option: a helicopter to base camp. Finding a safe weather window for the flight ended up being nearly as difficult as climbing the wall. Finally we made it into the mountains and placed an advanced base camp 30 minutes below the face. After a first attempt and a horrible bivouac, we retreated and waited 10 days before we could try again. On October 19, the three of us climbed the first 900 meters of the wall. The climbing was very difficult (up to M8), and our luck was bad. Three hundred meters below the top, we endured another terrible bivy, with heavy snowfall, high winds, very cold temperatures, and a stove that didn't work. In the

morning we were forced down again.

In 2011, we also tried to approach the mountain from Kyrgyzstan, this time in September, hoping the roads would be clear. Wolfgang Russegger was back for another try, along with Charly Fritzer (also from Austria). Wolfgang Kurz, Franz Walter, and my 11-year-old son, Emanuel, would accompany us to base camp. Emanuel found the entire experience to be a great adventure, but for me it provided endless frustration. To approach the mountains from this side, you have to ride a heavy truck for nearly 120 kilometers. Base camp is at nearly 4,000 meters. Just before camp, the truck bogged down in swampy terrain and could not be moved for several days. At the last minute the driver managed to free it, allowing us to move all our gear to camp, but we still faced a 16-kilometer trek, over a 5,200-meter pass, to reach advanced base.

My son and his two companions left for home, and the real effort began. My two climbing partners were sick, and it took us 10 days to move everything to advanced base. Finally, on September 12, we were ready for an attempt. We climbed rapidly to 5,300 meters, the only decent bivy site on the route, and planned to wait there as ice fell through the heat of the day. But Charly was very sick, showing signs of cerebral edema, and we quickly made the decision to descend.

I was close to despair. But at least I was able to convince Wolfgang to try a new route on the Great Walls of China, a huge line of east-facing cliffs, rising to 5,000 meters, very near Kyzyl Asker. We called our line Quantum of Solace, a beautiful, 600-meter climb but only a small consolation.

Two expeditions to Kyzyl Asker and no success—this was a hard pill for me to swallow. I made a promise to myself: Only when I found the right partner would I make another attempt. Maybe a two-person team would be quicker and therefore more suitable for this route? I carried a picture of the mountain in my pocket and often thought about how it might be climbed, the strategy and logistics that might overcome such complex problems.

But I didn't want to make this wall the story of my life. In the following years I ventured to other corners of the world. I was able to make the first ascent of a 6,719-meter mountain in Nepal, Likhu Chuli I, and the fifth ascent—nearly all free—of Riders on the Storm on Torre Central in Patagonia. I did first ascents of ice and mixed routes and big walls all over—the Alps, Scotland, Norway, and Canada. Still, I had yet to find a line as perfect as the one on Kyzyl Asker. My friends would call me someone who never gives up, who is willing to fight to reach a goal. But as far as Kyzyl Asker was concerned, I found myself hoping another team would succeed. An Alaskan climber, Samuel Johnson, made two attempts, in 2012 and 2015, both ending with the same sudden storms and spindrift that had battered our climbs.

In the meantime, a Belgian and French team opened a new door to Kyzyl Asker. In 2013, they approached from the Chinese side and climbed the big rock buttress to the right of the ice line. We hadn't explored this option because the image resolution on Google Earth in 2010 and 2011 was still very poor, and it was impossible to recognize any roads or other infrastructure in this part of China. Several years later, things looked very different. Though more expensive, approaching through western China has massive advantages over coming through Kyrgyzstan. The roads into the mountains are lower, providing the opportunity to leave later in the season, and the gradual gain in elevation makes for better acclimatization. Yet, from the end of the road, it is only a day and a half of walking to base camp.

Suddenly my desire for Kyzyl Asker is back. I speak to my friend Luka Lindič about the line, and it quickly becomes clear that he is just as enthusiastic about the project as I am. I had met Luka several years earlier at a meeting in Chamonix organized by Arc'teryx, our common sponsor, and we made plans to climb together someday. I knew Luka would be a great partner. His tremendous skills, as well as his sincerity and reliability, are traits I truly treasure. Two weeks before we leave for China, Luka and I climb the north face of Triglav in his home country of Slovenia, and this is enough to confirm that our approach to climbing and life in general are the same.

We are accompanied to base camp in China by Rocker, a Chinese climber and photographer who acts as our guide through the difficulties of language, culture, and navigation in this vast country. Without him we would be lost.

For a warmup and acclimatization, Luka and I repeat a 650-meter route on the Great Walls of China. Border Control had first been climbed by Guy Robertson and Ed Tresidder, during their second visit to the area. On September 21, Luka and I are able to free the climb at WI5 M7, continuing the line to the summit for the first time.

Nine days later we are ready for Kyzyl Asker. We leave advanced base at 5 a.m. The day begins cold but very clear, with stars above. Luka and I simul-climb the first few hundred meters in the dark. We know we have to make progress quickly before the predicted weather window closes and we have to retreat—or get stuck in a snowstorm. When we begin belaying, we stretch the ropes to full length and beyond, gaining height quickly. Soon the sun touches the upper face of the mountain, but it is still too cold to melt the ice. Luka is leading above me, out of sight around a corner, when suddenly I hear a piercing scream. But it is a yell of excitement, not of fear. I'm not sure what is going on—surely he is nowhere near the summit! As I follow the pitch I see what has prompted Luka's howl of joy: Perfect ice lies before us, leading all the way toward the summit ridge. Neither Luka nor I had ever seen such superb ice at this altitude. In 2010 these same pitches had taken much, much longer. This time they seem almost easy. The only burden is our heavy backpack—the person following must carry the pack with everything we'll need for a bivy.

In late afternoon a thunderstorm sweeps over the mountain, sending hail rattling down the gully. It is impossible to climb for a few minutes. Thankfully, the spectacle is soon over, and Luka barely hesitates. He pushes hard up a couple of difficult mixed pitches to get as close to the summit ridge as he can. I can feel the altitude with the heavy pack on my shoulders.

Around 10 p.m., two pitches below the ridge, we decide it is too cold to continue. After some searching, we find a spot for a bivouac. Two hours of chopping with our ice axes creates a seat for a short night, half hanging from the anchor. We are protected from the wind but far from comfortable, with spindrift filtering into the bivy sack. Luka says it's one of the toughest bivouacs he's ever had. I have experienced nights like this before on Kyzyl Asker.

We stay put until around 10 a.m., after the first rays of sunlight help us warm up. Once on the final ridge, we untie from our ropes and leave them and the pack behind, making our way to the peak. Luka gives me a wink and lets me lead: "After all your hardships on the mountain, this is how it should be." I climb the last meters to the cornice, speechless with happiness. Luka arrives and I can see the joy in his face too. It is only noon.

We are aware of the short weather window and so we quickly rappel the route. We are back at ABC at 7 p.m., just before a massive thunderstorm sweeps over the mountain, sending spindrift avalanches down the face. Our climb could not have lasted an hour longer.

Summary: First ascent of Lost in China (1,200m, ED WI5+ M6) on the southeast face of Kyzyl Asker (5,842m), in the Western Kokshaal-Too, September 30–October 1, 2016, by Luka Lindič (Slovenia) and Ines Papert (Germany). During acclimatization, the two made the first free ascent of Border Control (650m, ED WI5 M7, Robertson-Tresidder, 2004) to the summit of Great Walls of China.

About the Author: Born in 1974, Ines Papert was a four-time ice climbing world champion in the early 2000s before focusing on difficult ice and mixed climbs and new routes in the mountains. She lives in southern Germany. Papert says she has replaced that photo of Kyzyl Asker in her pocket with a new photo—another mountain she and Lindič hope to climb.

Translated from German by Simone Sturm.

Images



The line of Lost in China on the southeast face of Kyzyl Asker.



Ines Papert following a pitch in spindrift late on the first day of the first ascent of Lost in China on Kyzyl Asker.



Ines Papert leading beautiful ice during the first ascent of Lost in China on the southeast face of Kyzyl Asker.



Ines Papert (left) and Luka Lindič on the summit of Kyzyl Asker.



Luka Lindič leading dreamy ice through red granite on the first ascent of Lost in China.

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