



Ushba, West Face: Grigorenko-Prigoda Route and variant, first alpine-style ascent, and traverse of both summits

Georgia, Caucasus

Ushba is symbolic of the Caucasus. It is no surprise that this double-summited peak was an emblem of Soviet mountaineering clubs—and of Soviet mountaineering itself. There are many legends, songs, and stories connected with this harsh mountain. There are also more than 60 routes on its flanks.

The Grigorenko-Prigoda Route (5B) on the west face was pointed out to me by my father, Zurab Badriashvili, who, despite the rules of the time, was a pioneer of solo climbing in the Caucasus. On the route's first ascent in 1972, a six-man team took 13 days to reach Ushba's south (main) summit (4,710m). Only two ascents have been recorded since, both in siege style. The route has long sections of mixed terrain and a slightly overhanging rock barrier below the summit. Giorgi Tepnadze and I intended to improve on the style, not only by making a continuous ascent, without fixing ropes, as just a pair, but also by traversing the mountain.

Try as we might, we couldn't get our sacks below 20kg for the climb, due to the uncertainty of the crux sections and not having the best lightweight equipment. On August 8, 2015, we started up the face, slanting left along the "Georgian Shelf." There was some loose stuff before reaching the middle rock barrier, which we climbed for 300m, with difficulties up to 5c. We climbed the last two pitches at night, and after 17 hours finally found a small ledge where we could pitch our tent.

Next day we climbed 200m of 45° ice, a few easy rock sections, and then two pitches on the headwall to a small ledge. Falling water obstructed the panoramic view, but did not touch us due to the overhanging, compact wall above. On day three we aided five pitches up the headwall, finding rusty bolts that gave no incentive to be bold. At the end of the wet fourth pitch we discovered both sheaths of our ropes had been cut badly. The pitch above had a retreat anchor and no in-situ protection above. I decided to go for it; Giorgi started to sing.

There is a fantastic legend about Mikheil Khergiani, the Tiger of the Rocks, one of the strongest Svanetians, climbing a new route on Ushba in 1964. (Svaneti is a mountainous province in northwest Georgia.) Five men are standing on a little ledge in the middle of the wall, with a very poor belay, while Khergiani is trying to free climb a wet, overhanging section with very bad protection and seemingly no holds. Retreat is impossible. Eventually he screams down to his friends to untie from the rope. In response, the Svanetians begin to sing. Khergiani makes it to the top with his inseparable friends.

Fortunately, so did we, receiving sudden applause from Polish climbers descending the Red Corner route to the right. At 8 a.m. the following day we reached the south summit, having climbed one new pitch to the right of the 1972 line. We rappelled four pitches and then downclimbed to the Ushba Saddle, traversed the northeast summit (4,694m), and went down the north ridge, which was in poor condition and had already repelled two parties. After another night out we reached the Ushba Plateau, regained our first bivouac at 2,000m, and made it to the main valley at 11:30 p.m. We graded our 2,300m ascent and traverse Russian 6A, 6b A2 A12. The United Federation of Georgian Mountaineers named this the "ascent of the year 2015."

Summary: First alpine-style ascent of the Grigorenko-Prigoda Route (5B, 1978) on the west face of

Ushba, followed by a traverse of the mountain, August 8-11, 2015.

Images



Climbing through the headwall on Ushba's west face, with Elbrus behind.



On the 45° ice slopes approaching the headwall on the west face of Ushba.



The view down from the second bivouac, at 4,200m, on the headwall of the west face of Ushba, with

the last of the sun's rays on the 45° icefields.



The twin summits of Ushba seen from the southeast. The south (main) summit is on the left. The north ridge of the northeast summit (given 4A, but currently harder due to deteriorating conditions) is the right skyline. The normal route (4A, Almer-Cockin, 1888) climbs the broad couloir to the Ushba Saddle between the two tops.



The 2015 Georgian line on the west face of Ushba, closely following the 1972 Grigorenko-Prigoda Route. (The 2015 party climbed several new pitches to the right of the 1972 line in the headwall.) This is the only route that climbs directly up the west face to the summit; a photo showing lines up the rock wall to the right was published in AAJ 2012.

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