



## Dark Star: Sandbagged Into the First Ascent of a 365-Meter Wall

Uzbekistan, Baisun-tau Mountains, Hodja Gur Gur Ata

**“Misha, p-l-e-a-s-e, l-i-s-t-e-n, c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y,”** I said, holding up the frayed static line to which we were tied. **“I don’t want to climb any higher. If you won’t go down with me, I will untie and solo to the bottom.”** Misha extended his lower lip and, with his brawny arms crossed over his chest, locked me in an icy stare and muttered something unintelligible. We had been arguing on a tiny ledge on the side of Hodja Gur Gur Ata, a 365m limestone wall in a remote corner of Uzbekistan, for nearly an hour. Considering we didn’t share a common language, the situation was becoming ridiculous. One thing was clear: Misha adamantly refused to bail.

Earlier in the day, as we’d surveyed this vertical and overhanging cliff from the base, I realized immediately there was no way we could safely climb it with the motley assortment of old Russian caving gear we had scrounged in camp. I said as much to Misha and thought he agreed, but somehow he had cajoled me two-thirds of the way up the cliff on what I thought would be a few pitches of reconnaissance. Peering down the crumbling limestone we had already scaled, it dawned on me that my threat to downclimb was a bluff—and Misha knew it.

I found myself in this unsavory predicament because I had signed on with a 31-member expedition—led by and comprised mostly of non-English-speaking Russians like Misha—to explore a massive underground labyrinth called Dark Star that one day may become the Everest of caves. Our trip took place from August 3–26, 2014. Of the 22 different entrances that perforate the face of Hodja Gur Gur Ata, most can be reached only via technical climbing or rappelling. At breakfast our first morning in the area, Misha and I were tasked with getting to the top of the cliff and fixing a rope that would be used to establish a high camp on the rim. On the dozen previous expeditions, no one had ever actually climbed Hodja Gur Gur Ata; they had always hiked around the side. While that sounds easier, it’s a good 40km trek, hence their plan to lure me into forging a shortcut. As the token rock climber on the team, I could see the logic in that decision, even if it seemed like Misha was trying to kill me.

The Baisun-tau Mountains are located in Uzbekistan’s Surkhandarya province, near the border shared with Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The range consists of two main mountain chains, Ketmen’ Chaptay and Hodja Gur Gur Ata, the latter with a southeast-facing cliff stretching unbroken for 34km. A similar mountain range called the Surkhan-tau lies 15km to the southeast. The two ranges, which run in a southwest to northeast orientation, form the southwestern end of the larger Gissar Range. These mountains present as a series of wedge-shaped plateaus that rise to around 3,650m and end precipitously in 250–365m cliffs. In the deep valleys lie a hodgepodge of small villages where Tajiks and Uzbeks have lived for centuries. I was told the rugged track we traveled by Soviet transport to access these mountains was the same one used by Alexander the Great’s army on its march to Afghanistan after sacking Samarkand in 329 BC.

When Misha called my bluff, I realized my only option was to go for the top. Though Mikhail “Misha” Rafikov is a world-class caver (and more stubborn than the donkeys that carried our gear into these mountains), he has little climbing experience. This left the dangerous job of leading the upper headwall to me, but I was in Uzbekistan for caving, not rock climbing, so I didn’t even have sticky-soled rock shoes or a proper harness. What followed were three of the scariest leads of my life: rope

stretchers on a static line, with a rack consisting of a handful of Russian bird beaks—none of which I was able to place in the compact rock. However, while I found not a single piece of protection on any of the pitches, I always managed to find an anchor just as I was running out of rope—a juniper bush with a trunk the width of my wrist, a chockstone, and finally a leg and elbow brace on a rubble-covered ledge just below the summit. When we topped out late in the day, Misha just shrugged and gave me a look as if to say, “See, I told you it was no problem.”

Our route, which we named Russian Roulette (5.9 X), tackled the center of the wall, to the right of the entrance to a cave system called Festivalnaya. The rock was mainly choss, but later, while rappelling from the summit plateau in various locations, I discovered there is some solid rock on this wall. The Russians told me they know of no one else that has climbed Hodja Gur Gur Ata.

No trekking or climbing industry exists in this region. The Uzbek government requires foreigners to be registered in a hotel every night. This presents a thorny problem to anyone wanting to explore off the beaten path, but it has some merit, considering the area is the historic home of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). To learn more about the icy caves we explored inside Dark Star, see my article on the expedition in the March 2017 issue of [National Geographic](#).

**Summary:** First ascent of Russian Roulette (365m, 5.9 X), the only route up the southeast face of Hodja Gur Gur Ata in the Baisun-tau Mountains of Uzbekistan.

## Images



The limestone escarpment of Hodja Gur Gur Ata rises 250m to 365m and extends for about 34km in an unbroken line. Entrances to the Dark Star caving system lie in the face below.



Mark Synnott rappelling the steep face of Hodja Gur Gur Ata, with entrances to the Dark Star caving system visible.

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