



Kazbek, East Face, New Route in Winter

Georgia, Caucasus

From February 9 to 13, Giorgi Tepnadze and I climbed a new route up the Dragon's Wall on Kazbek (5,047m, a.k.a. Kazbegi), which rises 3,200m above the village of Stepantsminda. Our route climbs the east face via a steep icefall through the left side of the crescent-shaped rock barrier at around 4,700m.

Kazbek (Georgians call it Mkinvartsveri, which means Icy Peak) is one of Georgia's sacred mountains, and associated with it are many legends and myths. The famous Dragon, visible from the valley as a crescent-shaped rock barrier, had been avoided for years due to its loose rock. One winter in the early 2000s, after several attempts, Georgian mountaineers Gezi Kakhabrishvili, Zura Kuchava, and Levan Tatarashvili made the first successful ascent of Dragon's Wall, grading their route 5B. Our ascent, to the left of this, was dedicated to the front man of the team, Tatarashvili, who was killed a few years later.

We took five days to reach the summit, camping first at 3,000m and 3,660m on the normal route (southeast side). Our third camp was on the east shoulder at 4,350m, and from there we began exploring unknown ground. Being winter, the slopes above comprised hard blue ice, and next day both of us initially had trouble with crampon detachment. We climbed about eight pitches to reach the Dragon, where, at around 4,700m, after two hours of searching, we found a sloping shelf on which we could just pitch our inner tent. The lights of the village could be clearly seen way below.

Next day we followed a logical line over mixed terrain. The second pitch was thin ice over monolithic rock. Protection was psychological. The third pitch was a vertical icefall that Girogi led, and the only pitch where the leader climbed without a pack. Above, we climbed 300m of ice at 45°, closely chasing the sun's trajectory. Finally, at 8:40 p.m., by the light of our headlamps and the moon, we reached the summit.

We descended the long and tedious normal route, making two rappels, and finally reached the site of our Camp 2, by the Betlemi Hut and a disused weather station, at 4:30 a.m. We graded the route Russian 5B, AI5 (90°) M4 60°, with 800m of technical climbing. It is now acknowledged to be the hardest route on the mountain. The funniest memorabilia was presented to me by my younger sister: an exquisite painting of me meeting the dragon.

– Archil Badriashvili, Georgia

Images



The east face (Dragon's Wall) of Kazbek (5,047m) and the line of the 2016 Georgian winter route.



Stepantsminda village, Gergeti Trinity Church, and Kazbek (5,047m), with the Dragon's Wall and its characteristic curved rock barrier on the right. The 2016 Georgian winter route is marked. The normal route, descended by the Georgian climbers, circles around the far side of the peak.



The route through the rock barrier on the Dragon's Wall, with the ca 4,700m camp marked.



Giorgi Tepnadze approaching the steep section of the icefall through the rock barrier.



Giorgi Tepnadze on the rock barrier.



Climbing the rock barrier on the Dragon's Wall of Kazbek. The steep icefall forming the crux of the

route is visible on the left. The previous line on this part of the face climbs somewhere to the right, avoiding the various icefalls.



Archil meets the Dragon.

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