



AAC Publications

The Kurobe Golden Pillar

Japan, Northern Alps

Top alpinists have two main “practice climbs” within Japan to prepare for the Himalaya. “Pachinko” involves a linkup of 200m to 600m walls and mixed ridge climbing in the Mt. Hotaka region. Pachinko means “pinball,” and the climbs are so named because of their zigzagging nature.

The other training climb is the Kurobe Traverse. Starting from the east side of the Northern Alps, climbers first ascend Mt. Kashima-yari (2,889m) and then continue west to the bottom of the Kurobe Valley and across the Kurobe River. They then traverse a precarious snow ridge to reach Mt. Tsurugi (2,999m), which can be ascended via various ridges. The Japanese Northern Alps are not particularly high, but winter conditions present formidable challenges. The proximity to the sea brings harsh winds laden with moisture, and nighttime snow accumulations of a meter or more are common. Completing the Kurobe Traverse in winter is like a graduation test for Japanese alpinists.

In February, Koji Itoh, Kimihiro Miyagi, and Yusuke Sato made the first ascent of the “Kurobe Golden Pillar” during a 32-day winter traverse of the Kurobe Valley. This steep 380m formation is in the middle of the rugged traverse, near the Tsurugisawa waterfall. The name is a reference to the Golden Pillar of Spantik in the Karakoram, which Sato climbed in 2009.

Koji Itoh, a veteran climber with ascents of the north face of Kwangde (Nepal) in 2002 and a new route on the west face of Mt. Rishiri (Japan) in winter, had twice before done the Kurobe Traverse in winter. However, he was still hoping for the right conditions to attempt the Golden Pillar.

The team started on February 3 at Otanihara, on the east side of the Northern Alps. They reached the summit of Mt. Kashima-yari on February 5 and descended the Ushikubi Ridge toward the Kurobe River, waiting in a snow cave for avalanche conditions to improve. (In all, the climbers spent 19 nights in snow caves because of massive snowfalls.) They would need a three-day window of good weather to attempt the unclimbed Golden Pillar. When the time came, they stripped naked and swam the icy river, hauling their gear across in dry bags, and then approached the buttress through an avalanche-prone gorge. They began their climb at 3 p.m. on February 25, three weeks after leaving the road.

The Golden Pillar is a very steep mixed wall, yet brush-covered and laden with snow. Nine hanging belays were required. After climbing three pitches, they reached a small snow terrace, set up their tent, and continued climbing in order to fix two more pitches. The next day they pushed to the summit through deteriorating weather, completing the Kurobe Golden Pillar (380m, 11 pitches, IV ED2 V+ 80°). They descended by rappelling the route.

The team had seven days of food remaining, so they decided to go for the summit of Mt. Tsurugi. However, a spell of bad weather forced them to wait until March 4 to climb the peak, via a long ridge. The next day they descended the Hayatsuki Ridge to Banbajima and finished their 32-day expedition.

Summary: First ascent of Kurobe Golden Pillar (380m, IV ED2 V+ 80°), during a 32-day winter traverse of the Northern Alps, by Koji Itoh, Kimihiro Miyagi, and Yusuke Sato, February 2016.

Images



Yusuke Sato, Koji Itoh, and Kimihiro Miyagi (left to right) at the start of the Kurobe winter traverse. Each climber began the month-long expedition carrying, among other things, 11 kilograms of rice.



First pitch on the Kurobe Golden Pillar.



The 380-meter Kurobe Golden Pillar.

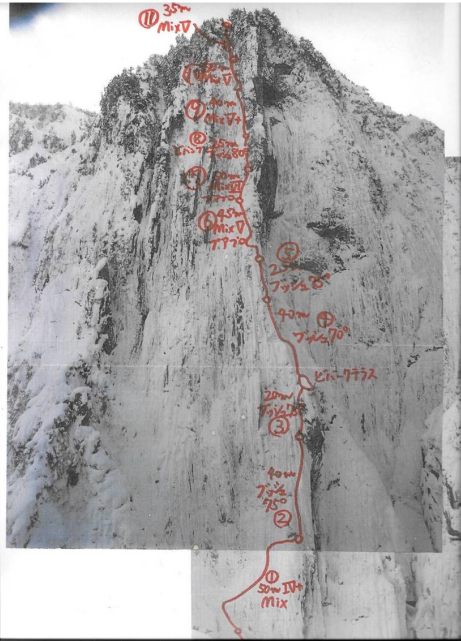
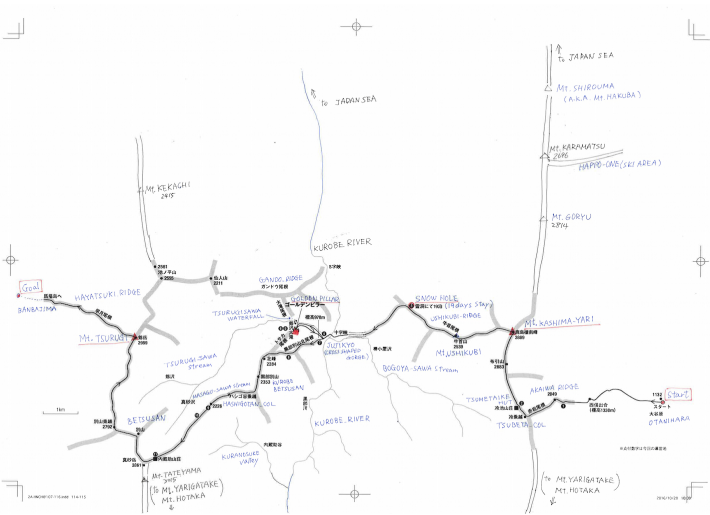


Photo-topo of the Kurobe Golden Pillar.



Map of the 32-day crossing of the Northern Alps of Japan, including the first ascent of the Kurobe Golden Pillar.



Yuke Sato makes his way across the Kurobe River en route to the first ascent of the Golden Pillar.



Yusuke Sato leading steep snow- and brush-covered rock on the ninth pitch of the Kurobe Golden Pillar.



The extremely rugged Kurobe River Gorge, with the 11-pitch line of the Golden Pillar in center and Mt. Tsurugi (2,999m) in the background. The Tsurugisawa is just to the right of the pillar.



Kurobe Golden Pillar

Article Details

Author	Hiroshi Hagiwara
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	91
Page	349
Copyright Date	2017
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions