Central and Western At Bashi: Pik Rhianydd and Other Ascents

Kyrgyzstan, Tien Shan, At Bashi Range

Kyrgyzstan is rich in little-explored mountains. One example is the At Bashi, a beautiful range of snowy summits and technical rocky peaks near and parallel to the Chinese border. The range is more than 100km in length, and the highest peak rises to 4,801m. Vladimir Komissarov, in the 2017 edition to his guide Mountaineering in Kyrgyzstan, states that there are more than 60 unclimbed mountains over 4,000m in this range. The objective of our expedition, which was organized by the International School of Mountaineering (ISM) and led by Adrian Nelhams, was to explore some of these unclimbed peaks via an approach from the south.

Approaches to the At Bashi from the south were first made in 2010 by two ISM expeditions led by Pat Littlejohn and Nelhams. The first team went up the Mustabbes Valley and completed several first ascents of peaks from 4,480m to 4,690m, graded PD–AD. The next team went up the Kensu Valley and climbed 11 new peaks/routes at grades ranging from F to D. Two further ISM expeditions, in 2012 and 2014, again led by Littlejohn and Nelhams, and one from the Alpine Club in 2014, resulted in climbs on more than 26 previously unexplored peaks. A year later Emily Ward made a solo trip to the Kashkaratash Valley.

Our expedition traveled into the central part of the At Bashi Range in August, approaching via the Kashkaratash Valley. Base camp was established at 40°55'18.4"N, 75°47'32.5"E, at an altitude of 3,680m, and an advanced base later established at 4,012m, near the Kashkaratash Glacier, at 40°57'00.8"N, 75°47'22.3"E. After eight days climbing in the central range, we relocated to the western part of the At Bashi, establishing base camp (3,762m) at 40°50'50.1"N, 75°36'01.8"E.

We were delighted to summit a total of 11 peaks between 4,000m and 4,801m. Ten of these were confirmed as previously unclimbed. Our most captivating first ascent was Pik Rhianydd (4,801m). This involved a long approach up the Kashkaratash Glacier, followed by a snow climb up the east face to about 4,600m. Our route then went up steep snow and ice (up to 60°) on the northeast ridge to gain the summit (AD). Prior to our ascent, the highest summit in the entire At Bashi Range had been thought to be a 4,788m peak at the southern end of a 2km ridge leading to Pik Rhianydd. Our ascent of Rhianydd confirmed that it is the highest known summit in the At Bashi.

The first-ascent route on the east face and northeast ridge of Pik Rhianydd (4,801m). Photo by Mark Aitken

The team comprised the guides Max Cole (MC), Vladimir Komissarov (VK), Stuart McAleese (SM), Adrian Nelhams (AN), and Aleksey Potockiy, along with team members Mark Aitken (MA), Tarni Duhre (TD), Lisa Ferrero (LF), Ewan Jones (EJ), David Kennaway (DK), Walter Robison (WR), Jason Sheldrake (JS), Stephen Taylor (ST), Richard Walker (RW), and David Woods (DW).

We climbed the following peaks (useful maps, though of limited accuracy, are the Russian 1:100,000 k43-105, k43-106, and k43-116). All were first ascents apart from Arie Gabai (climbed once previously, in 2014, by an ISM expedition).

Pik 4,032m (40°55'12.5"N, 75°48'44.7"E), easy walk up a minor top (F), AN, SM, LF, WR, and DK, August 23

Pik 4,239m (40°56'11.2"N, 75°50'20.6"E), a rocky but easy angled ridge (F+), SM, TD, MA, AN, ST, JS, RW, MC, DK, DW, EJ, AP, LF, and WR, August 24

Pik 4,249m (40°56'00.9"N, 75°50'15.3"E), a mostly easy angled rock ridge climbed after summiting Pik 4,239m, SM, TD, MA, MC, RW, WR, LF, AP, ST, JS, DK, and EJ, August 24

Pik Rhianydd (4,801m, 40°58'27.5"N, 75°45'48.6"E), east face and northeast ridge (AD), SM, MA, RW, AN, ST, JS, DK, MC, TD, EJ, AP, LF, and WR, August 26

Pik Arie Gabai (4,530m, 40°58'54.6"N, 75°47'03.1"E). One party climbed a new route via the south face (AD), while an other made the second ascent of the west ridge (PD), SM, MA, RW, AN, JS, DK, ST, AP, LF, WR, MC, TD, and EJ, August 27

Pik Ordo (4,612m, 40°56'57.9"N, 75°48'33.4"E). South summit climbed via its west face with long stretches of steep scree, then south ridge traversed to north summit (PD), VK and DW, August 27

Pik Volchitsa (4,461m, 40°56'07.8"N, 75°46'22.0"E), substantial loose scree on the east face, followed by very easy scrambling north along the main summit ridge (PD), SM, MA, RW, AN, ST, JS, MC, DK, DW,TD, EJ, AP, LF, and WR, August 29

Pik 4,557m (40°56'26.5"N, 75°46'22.8"E), via the rocky south ridge (PD), MC, TD, and EJ, August 29

Pik 4,516m (40°53'17.1"N, 75°35'09.9"E), via southeast ridge and south ridge (PD), SM, MA, RW, AN, ST, JS, MC, DK, DW, TD, EJ, AP, LF, and WR, August 31

Pik 4,536m (40°53'27.0"N, 75°34'48.1"E), from Pik 4,516m via the connecting southeast ridge (PD), SM, MA, RW, AN, ST, JS, MC, DK, DW,TD, EJ, AP, LF, and WR, August 31

Pik 4,152m (40°50'45.3"N, 75°34'53.2"E), an easy walk up scree, vegetation, and rock (F), AN, SM, MC, ST, JS, RW, MA, DW, EJ, and TD, September 1.

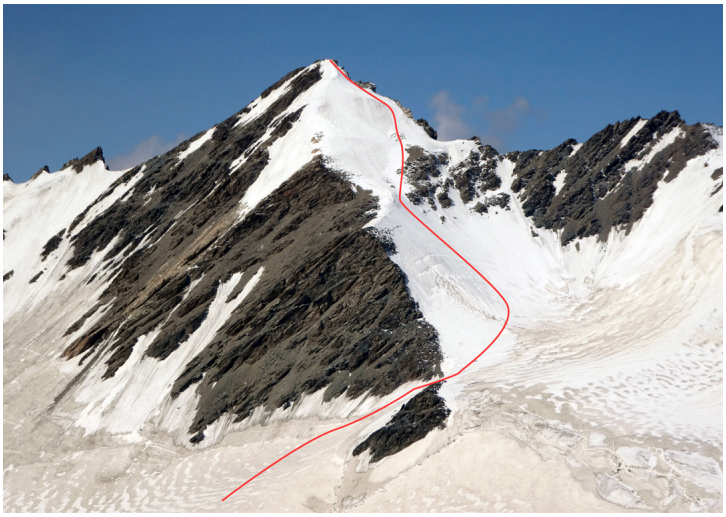
– Mark Aitken and Adrian Nelhams, U.K.

Images

The Pik Rhianydd group and Kashkaratash Glacier (left) in the Central At Bashi, as seen from the west ridge of Pik Arie Gabai.

Looking south from the summit of Pik Rhianydd (4,801m) in the Central At Bashi. Pik 4,788m, previously believed to be the highest summit in the range, is at far end of the 2km ridge. The Kashkaratash Glacier and lake are on the far left. The 2017 advanced base was slightly downstream of this lake.

Pik 4,516m in the Western At Bashi (smaller peak in right foreground) seen from the northwest ridge of Pik 4,536m. The 2017 base camp was close to the river on the far right.



Pik Rhianydd (4,801m) in the Central At Bashi from the west ridge of Pik Arie Gabai. The route of the 2017 first ascent up the east face and northeast ridge is marked.

The view northwest from Pik Volchitsa (4,461m) to unclimbed peaks in the Central At Bashi.

Western At Bashi, looking east toward unclimbed peaks from the southeast ridge of Pik 4,557m.

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