



AAC Publications

Halgurd, First Complete Ski Descent

Iraq, Zagros Mountains

In late February, in partnership with Dutch guide Jan Bakker, I led a small team of American skiers on what we believe to be the first complete ski ascent and descent of the highest mountain lying fully in Iraq: Mt. Halgurd (3,606m, 36°44'27.75"N, 44°51'42.20"E; on a previous attempt, in 2012, Norwegian Kit Mosen had skied from about 3,500m). Three members of our team had served in Iraq during our time in the U.S. Army.

Halgurd is close to the Iranian border, and during the hours of darkness in base camp and along most of the climb we could see lights from Iranian border posts on ridges and mountaintops. There is an Iranian border post just on their side of the tallest mountain in Iraq, Cheekha Dar (3,607m, 36°46'26.74"N, 44°55'5.24"E), 6km to the northeast of Halgurd.

Halgurd is a popular local and regional objective for many mountaineers. The week prior to our visit, a large contingent of Kurds, hailing from Syria, Iraq, and Iran, all made a summit attempt. About a month earlier, the first commercial ski expedition took place on the lower flanks of the mountain but did not make it to the summit. With good weather and appropriate levels of health and fitness among the party, Halgurd likely could be skied from car to car in a day. Unsure of the weather, and not trusting local forecasts, we planned for a maximum of five days on the mountain.

We accessed the peak from the south via a dirt road outside the small Kurdish town of Choman, a place that, given its proximity to incredible mountain recreation opportunities, we nicknamed "Chomanix." Eventually the road became too choked with snow for our two 4WDs, and at this point we strapped on our skis and began skinning about 11km up the rest of the road, then further on to base camp.

We were careful to stay on the trail at all times, as many surrounding mountains and slopes, several of which have fun-looking ski lines, remain covered in land mines from the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Once on Halgurd, some skiers might opt to rope up for the ca 300m climb to gain the summit ridge. We made the decision not to, but crampons and at least one ice axe felt like essential gear. Depending on the route taken, there may be a tricky 45–60m traverse (where I nearly lost a crampon) about 100m from gaining the ridge.

We summited on a clear day and had a fantastic panoramic view over both Iran and Iraq. There are two couloirs that give exciting, steep skiing options for descent. Our team only had time for the couloir on skier's right. As far as we know, the couloir on skier's left has never been skied and is a worthy objective. Robin Brown, Matt Griffin, Max Lowe, and I skied from the summit, while Jan climbed up and down on foot.

The real skiing gem of the region appeared to lie above Sakran, a summer herding village that lies about 30 to 40 minutes' drive southeast of Choman and is empty in the winter. We rented a house there from a family member or friend of our local outfitter and were able to drive all the way to the village. Had the snowpack been deeper, or the weather colder, we may not have been able to drive this far, but then we also may have been able to ski. As it turned out, what we had hoped would be a snowstorm developed as rain, and while we were observing three couloirs that looked like fantastic ski lines, we witnessed a natural avalanche in each one. We quickly skied out on flat, snowy terrain

until we hit a dirt track, took off our skis, and walked home.

The culminating point of the Sakran (a.k.a. Hassar) Range rises to 3,458m (Russian map, approx. 36°32'49.52"N, 44°55'34.36"E). This area has seen no ski descents, and in the right conditions, likely to be found in late January or early February, it would provide fantastic opportunities for ski mountaineering, winter mountaineering, and dozens of first ski descents from moderately difficult to extreme. However, the angle of the north-facing slopes (largely 35–45°), and the amount of snow they receive, makes the area quite prone to avalanches. An attempt in 2015 to climb this mountain in winter was stopped by unstable snow conditions.

During our two-week visit to the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq we also saw numerous opportunities for making firsts in rock climbing and other mountain sports. Despite at one point being only 40km from where the Iraqi government, with support from the United States, started the decisive battle to drive ISIS from Mosul, we never felt unsafe.

Stacy Bare, AAC, with additional information from Jan Bakker

Editor's note: Halgurd lies more or less north of Choman, and for the 2017 winter ascent, base camp was placed above the village at 2,600m. The mountain was climbed from the southeast to gain, eventually, the north-south-oriented summit ridge from the east. This is considered the normal route and is mainly snow/névé up to 45°, with a little mixed terrain. Halgurd has two summits, with the north slightly higher. The route taken by the skiers in descent was farther north than the route of ascent and a more direct line from the summit.

The winter season in this area runs from December until March, although conditions can be fickle in March. Jan Bakker notes that the group experienced thaw conditions in early March, whereas a couple of weeks later the freezing level was below 2,000m and around a meter of snow had fallen. (A group attempting the summit at this time was thwarted by deep snow.) The best winter climbing conditions would occur in January and February, with the greatest potential for both climbing and skiing probably on the northwest flank (up to 800m of descent).

Adventure Not War from Nimia on Vimeo.

Images



The east face of Halgurd (3,606m) leading to the summit ridge well south of the main summit. Red is the line of the 2017 ascent, while green marks the first complete ski descent.



The northwest aspect of Halgurd seen in 2014 from Mamur (3,365m) during what was likely the first winter ascent.



The route of ascent on Mamur (3,365m, F), northwest of Halgurd, climbed in 2014 for likely the first winter ascent.



The north side of the Sakran Range, rising to nearly 3,500m, from Choman.



On the ski descent from Halgurd, looking approximately east-southeast.

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