



Sauyr Zhotasy East, First Known Ascent

China, Xinjiang, Tien Shan, Sauyr Range

THE GOAL OF MAKING the first documented ascent of Sauyr Zhotasy (a.k.a. Muztau), a remote 3,840m peak on the Xinjiang-Kazakhstan border, has been discussed for years. Although its technical difficulties and altitude are not great, its topographic prominence of 3,250m is perhaps the highest of any unclimbed peak. [Previously, this accolade probably fell to Mt. Boising, the highest peak of the Finisterre Range in Papua New Guinea. That mountain's first known ascent was in 2014.] In addition, the small Sauyr Range and its glaciers hold the distinction of being the farthest from any ocean on earth. The hundreds of square kilometers of steppe and desert that surround the range only add to its obscurity. Information on the peak was nearly impossible to find—only hearsay with no reliable photos. Satellite images proved to have snow covering much of the terrain we wanted to see.

Months of attempted correspondence with Chinese authorities and expedition companies resulted in disinterest and a certain paranoia on their behalf, due to the hazy security matters surrounding Xinjiang's borders. The Xinjiang Mountaineering Association was not interested, as the summit lies below the height—4,000m—for which permits are required. Taking matters into our own hands, Eric Kowalski, Dr. Alex Mathews, Mitch Murray, and I decided to go ahead with a trusted friend, expedition collaborator, and logistics genius, Alex Tang from Chengdu.

From the razor-wire-girded Uighur restaurants and exotica of Urumqi, we crossed the Dzungar Basin to Hoboksar, a camel-trading outpost nearest the Kazakh frontier, deeply locked down with border paranoia, including Soviet-like security checks at every step. The Sauyr Range loomed beguilingly beyond the hotel windows, with only 25km of Gobi between us and it, but we took pains to conceal our interest, stating we were camel-watchers.

Prepared for anything, we crossed the expanse of endothermic Gobi to find intimidating patrol posts at the head of each valley, beyond which alpine walls, glaciers, huge buttresses, and snowy plateaus beckoned. Through binoculars we considered options ranging from the conservative to the cavalier, and then retreated to Hoboksar for permits, only to be blocked by military personnel wishing we would simply just go away.

Paranoid about being detained for any display of bravado, we gambled on attempting Sauyr Zhotasy's glaciated main peak via a distant valley system, the only one in striking distance without a border post at the entrance. This would entail first summiting the most easterly main top of the range before embarking on a 7km traverse of the exposed connecting ridge.

With supplies for a week, we walked 8km, with a height gain of 1,800m, to a launch camp below the snowline at around 3,500m. A second day of endless scree and boulder fields, merging into 50° snow, bought us to the base of the east peak's headwall, a crumbly mass of unstable rock and ice with no safe bivouac spots. However, there were great views back down the valley toward the Tarbagatai Desert and its strange ranges of eroded mountains.

Murray and I continued unroped along a rising traverse around the headwall, emerging onto the summit plateau, where I carried on for 1km through knee-deep snow to reach the true summit of the east peak (ca 3,710m, 47.055189°N, 85.651908°E, Google Earth). Meanwhile, Murray surveyed the northern aspects, gaining views far into northern Kazakhstan. Despite the summit's highest point showing no sign of previous visits, we saw blatant signs of human activity up to around 3,500m and a

series of three possible ancient cairns on a feature at about 3,600m that may be visible from other vantage points. Though we claim the first documented ascent of Sauyr Zhotasy East, a previous ascent is possible.

It was clear the 7km ridge running westward to the main summit was punctuated by at least two technical ascents and descents, and a large section of the route was invisible to us. Although within our ability, the 14km round trip was deemed too risky at the time; any unplanned descent into the flanking valleys to the south would have resulted in detainment at their exit.

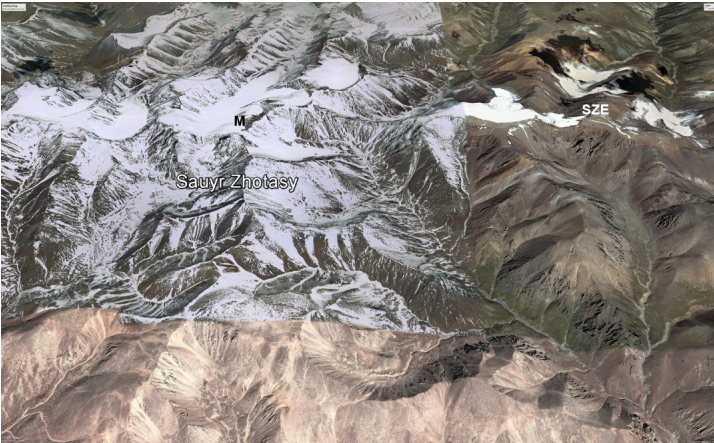
Leaving the summit plateau, Murray and I met Kowalski, who had climbed a variant on steeper snow in order to get a view from an adjacent ridge. We descended together to where Mathews and Tang had sought shelter from debris shed by the south-facing headwall in the afternoon sun.

We had determined that the main peak would be possible to climb, once security and alpine problems are surmounted. Approaches from other valleys would be shorter and more dramatic, but would demand a plan for the ever-watchful border posts. It's fair to say time in a Xinjiang prison wouldn't be much fun. Opportunities exist for pirate ascents, as per the tradition of Central Asian alpinism, but you didn't read that here.

– Ed Hannam, Australia

Editor's note: The Chinese and Soviets most likely surveyed these peaks, as much of the range lies on the border, and there is hearsay of Soviet engineer-surveyors visiting the ridge in former times. However, there is no documented ascent of the highest summit, commonly known on the Kazakh side by the name Muztau. Locals on both side of the range will have been quite high on the flanks, possibly crossing the frontier at points. In 2008 a Russian expedition comprising Zhenya Demidov, Sveta Ivanova, Misha Larionov, Oleg Mitryasov, and Masha Nikulin made a self-supported trip along the western ridge, climbing the border summits Piks 3,537m, 3,526m, 3,722m, and a northwesterly foresummit or shoulder of Muztau (Sauyr Zhotasy). Starting from the valleys to the north, they made 11 camps before exiting the range. However, they didn't reach the main top. No other records of climbing activity exist in the Russian Mountaineering Archives. Thanks to Elena Dmitrenko for painstakingly uncovering this information.

Images



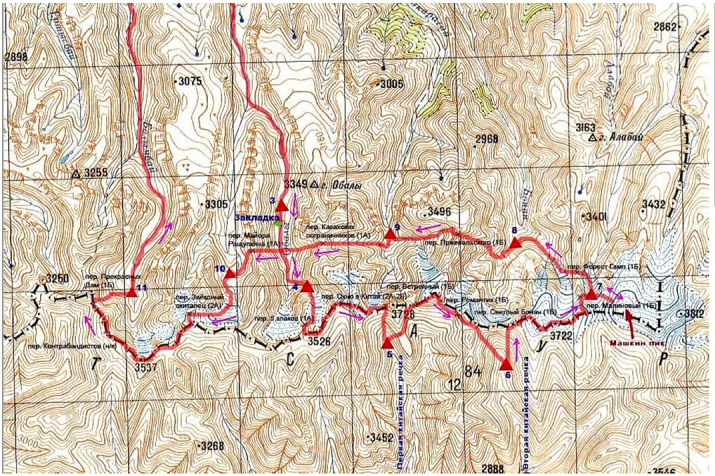
The eastern end of the Sauyr Range. (M) is Muztau (Sauyr Zhotasy), the highest summit of the range. (SZE) is Sauyr Zhotasy East, climbed in 2017 via the valley to the south.



High camp at the base of Sauyr Zhotasy East.



The approach from the south to Sauyr Zhotasy East.



The route of the 2008 Russian expedition along the crest of the Sauyr Range. Muztau (Sauyr Zhotasy), the highest summit, is on the right, where the border turns 90° abruptly.

Article Details

Author	Ed Hannam
Publication	AAJ
Volume	60
Issue	92
Page	0
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions