



AAC Publications

Latok I, North Ridge, Attempt

Pakistan, Karakoram, Panmah Muztagh

We would have done it, I'm certain, but the weather was constantly against us. Our sirdar told us he couldn't remember such weather in August. It snowed for all but the first two days of our 15-day attempt on the 2,400m north ridge of Latok I (7,145m). The north ridge is complex and grueling, but the snowfall did not make it dangerous; through all the storms, avalanches passed to either side of us.

Anton Kashevnik, Valery Shamalo, and I arrived at base camp on August 6. During the approach an incident occurred that would play a significant part in the outcome of the expedition. While crossing a stream, Valery slipped and fell head first into the water, eventually leading to a cough that would plague him on the climb. The rope came in handy, and Anton dragged him out a few meters downstream.

Over the next few days, we tried to acclimatize on an unnamed 6,000m peak, though we were all quite well acclimatized already—Valery from Elbrus, Anton from Trango, and myself from Denali. Snowfall kept us at base camp until the 17th, when things started to improve and a forecast predicted 10 days of fine weather.

We started that day up the couloir on the left side of the lower rock pillar of the north ridge, but on that day only managed 10 pitches. On the 18th we decided not to continue in the couloir but cross onto the right side of the ridge. It looked like three or four easy pitches to reach the crest, but it turned out to be six, and two of these required aid. We bivouacked in a notch without erecting our tent. Next day we climbed the right flank of the ridge in worsening weather, aiming for a good campsite that Valery believed we would find atop a serac. (Shamalo had attempted this route in 2012 with Slava Ivanov, Ruslan Kirichenko, and Oleg Koltunov, reaching about 6,400m.) We climbed 10 pitches, realized we weren't going to make it, cut up to the crest, and spent many hours excavating a site, eventually getting to sleep at 3 a.m.

On the 20th it snowed all day and we stayed put, enjoying the rest after the previous day's exertions. Next day we rappelled back to the right flank and started working up ice. Imagine our surprise on reaching the end of this section to find no serac. "It must have fallen off," Valery said. On the 22nd, Anton spent three hours working through the first 50m pitch with a shovel. A few pitches higher and it was time to look for another campsite, but it took three more hours until we reached a suitable spot.

Next morning brought serious work, overcoming a wall with horrendous, sometimes vertical ice. After five pitches we camped atop a slim serac, both sides of the tent hanging into the abyss. On the 24th we managed another six pitches until we reached a cave. Even though water dripped on us all night and our sleeping bags had long ago morphed into soggy lumps, there was a lot of space to stretch out. It snowed all the following morning, making us reluctant to leave. However, by lunchtime Anton and I decided to put up a few pitches, while Valery enlarged the cave for a second night. In the end we only managed two.

On the 26th we climbed another four pitches on snow, ice, and verglased slabs. While Anton was climbing the last pitch, I excavated a cave and we passed a relatively comfortable night. On the 27th it was still snowing and we only climbed four pitches. We couldn't see the top and were tired of guessing how far there was to go.

The 28th was our 12th day on the face. (We think the route could be climbed in 10 days, but no less. We had to spend three to four hours most days chopping out tent platforms.) We had only a little porridge and the tail end of a gas cylinder remaining. Almost every day we got a forecast by phone that gave us hope it might become sunny and warm. But it continued to snow. That day Anton climbed one and a half pitches up the vertical snow wall of a serac—how he climbed it I will never understand. After I jumared to him, I could see a large serac, above which we knew a terrace led to the west ridge. Relative to what we had done, it was not far—maybe three days to the summit in good weather. We were at around 6,700m and didn't want to die of hunger and fatigue. Also, Valery had developed a bad cough due to his immersion in the stream. Every day his health was getting worse—we had to go down.

On the morning of the 29th, we started the first of what we estimated would be around 40 rappels. Early that day I made a mistake. I was belaying Valery while he rappelled, and suddenly I heard a shout that I interpreted as him having reached an anchor. I clove-hitched the belay rope to my anchor and began to set up my own rappel. The belay rope suddenly went very tight. There was shouting and I realized that Valery had not made the anchor but was in fact dangling over an overhang. He couldn't get his weight off the rope; I couldn't release the clove hitch. In order to extricate himself from this situation, he cut the belay rope. The resulting jerk tore his pack from his shoulders, taking with it our tent and sleeping bags.

We made 14 rappels that day and spent the night with no bags, sheltering under a small hammock we had brought along to supplement our bivouacs. Unfortunately, we didn't take off our boots, nor change our wet socks, and this almost certainly led to the start of the frostbite suffered by Anton and Valery. All our gas was now gone.

On the 30th we continued our descent, and at 5 a.m. on the 31st we made it to the glacier: I counted a total of 42 rappels, so I had nearly been right. We had planned to descend the south side of Latok I if successful, and five days before we estimated we would be starting our descent, we had phoned our sirdar and asked him to call the porters, break camp, and head down to Askole with everything. Maybe I entered the wrong number, but he never got the message. We were overjoyed to see our camp still in place.

Getting to it was another matter. We were amazed by the amount of new snow on the glacier. In a normal state, we would have reached camp in a couple of hours. It took eight hours, even after we abandoned all our gear. It was now clear Valery had serious frostbite to both fingers and toes, and Anton also had frostbitten feet. Valery also had a bad lung infection. But we were heroes, weren't we? We didn't need helicopters—couldn't we walk out?

We all tried walking out the next day, but in the end Anton could not continue, and from then on was carried by horse. Valery held out well at first, but on the second day he too found he couldn't walk; his pneumonia was progressing quickly. We tried to call a helicopter but didn't succeed, as it was the weekend. With some difficulty we found another horse, and with two dexamethasone Valery made it to civilization.

In the end, Anton lost a few toes. Valery eventually recovered from pneumonia but lost all his toes and parts of some of his fingers. It was a good try, though I haven't pushed myself as hard on a climb for a long time, and I don't remember ever being so tired. Though we didn't summit, I'm confident I have a good chance next time, inshallah.

Editor's note: There have been more than two dozen attempts on the north ridge of Latok I. This is believed to be the highest point attained since the American attempt in 1978, which reached a point approximately 150m below the summit before storm and illness forced a retreat.

Alexander Gukov, Russia, supplied by Elena Dmitrenko, Risk.ru, and translated by Emily Laskin

Images



The magnificent and still unclimbed north ridge of Latok I from the Choktoi Glacier, with the 2017 Russian attempt and high point.



The 2017 Russian attempt and high point on the north ridge of Latok I.



Valery Shamalo on the north ridge of Latok I during the Russian attempt in 2017.



On a narrow corniced section of the north ridge of Latok I during the 2017 Russian attempt.



High on the north ridge of Latok I in bad weather during the 2017 Russian attempt.



Precarious climbing across the flanks of a mushroomed arête on the north ridge of Latok I.

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