



Shkhara West, Southwest Couloir (Not to Summit) and Ski Descent

Georgia, Caucasus

Browsing Google Earth, I came across an impressive wall of 5,000m mountains on the Georgia-Russia border. By searching the AAJ, I soon learned this was the 13km-long Bezengi Wall (named after the glacier on its north side). There was a proud couloir dropping southwest into Georgia from the crest of the ridge, slightly west of Shkhara West (5,068m). With more searching, I learned that this couloir, obvious even in satellite imagery, had seen two attempts, both with hopes of making a ski descent.

In 2008, Americans Jason Thompson, Tyler Jones, and Seth Waterfall visited Georgia's Svaneti region and attempted the first known ascent and descent of the couloir. [Editor's note: During the Soviet era, when many routes in this range first were climbed, the Soviet mountaineering competition system usually prompted climbers to target harder pillars and faces, leaving relatively tame couloirs untouched.] The Americans retreated at about two-thirds height when they encountered ice above a narrow rock choke. They stayed in the area and climbed and skied a different couloir system. Thompson returned in 2015 with Canadians Forrest Coats and Chad Sayers, only to be thwarted again by ice, this time filling the line from bottom to top. A partial ski descent of neighboring Shkhara Main was made in 2010 by German Peter Schön (see report here), who, together with Jason Thompson, provided valuable information prior to my departure.

Mary McIntyre (USA) and I arrived in May and eventually made a base camp at 42.982857°N, 43.066802°E on a relatively flat part of the Xalde (Zalde) Glacier, seemingly the best position to avoid nearby avalanches. We spent eight days there waiting for decent weather. Most days, between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m., there would be a short break in the clouds, providing less than a half hour of clear sky, though the summit and the couloir usually remained enshrouded. On day four we made a short reconnaissance, climbing across the glacier and up the couloir for about 600m. This enabled us to suss out some details that would help streamline our summit day.

Day eight featured mostly clear skies, but a powerful lightning storm the following night produced a new covering of hail and snow. We felt our last opportunity had vanished, as we needed to leave in less than 48 hours, but at 2 a.m. on day nine we dug out the tents and decided to walk up to the couloir. The snow was isothermal garbage, and our ski poles sank nearly to the handgrips. But as we climbed into the couloir, the snow became firmer. We unroped, and just above the bergschrund, about 500m above camp, we transitioned to crampons as the snow became consolidated. Once in the main part of the couloir, the snow was extremely firm, with patches of ice. I only measured the steepness once—the middle of the couloir was a reasonable 53°.

Mary decided to turn around just past the choke at around 4,200m while I continued. My altitude watch read 4,886m at the top of the couloir. I'd had back-of-mind aspirations to continue up to the right to reach the nearby summit of Shkhara West. (Just days prior to my departure, at an AAC event in Washington, D.C., called Climb the Hill, Alex Honnold joked that I'd better climb to that summit—why else would I go there?) But the ridgeline appeared too difficult and corniced for me to feel comfortable soloing.

The ski descent was largely anticlimactic, with steepness and ice being my primary concerns. While fully prepared to build anchors and rappel tricky sections—particularly at the steep crux—I was able to leave my skis on and the rope in my backpack throughout the entire 1,400m descent back to camp.

No fixed gear was left on the route. I reunited with Mary less than 10 hours after we set out that morning, and we were back in Ushguli about 24 hours after skiing the couloir.

– Brody Leven, AAC

Images



The Shkhara Massif—part of the Bezengi Wall—from the southwest. Shkhara West, in the center of the picture, appears as the highest point, but the main summit of Shkhara is near the right end of the ridgeline. The curving southwest couloir of Shkhara West is obvious in this photo.



Mary McIntyre partway up the southwest couloir of Shkhara West.



Mary McIntyre heading toward the "narrows" in the southwest couloir of Shkhara West.



A skier's view from the upper part of the southwest couloir of Shkhara West.



The southwest couloir of Shkhara West (5,068m) from the Xalde Glacier.



The southwest couloir of Shkhara West (5,068m); the summit is the snow-capped peak to the right.



The view down the southwest couloir from high on Shkhara West.



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