



AAC Publications

Latok I: The North Ridge

A Famous Line is Finally Climbed, But With No Summit And A Heavy Cost

THE ORIGINAL PLAN was for three of us to attempt Latok I: me and Glazunov brothers, Evgeny and Sergey. We had never climbed together, but we knew one another. I thought we would make a great team for a mountain like this. Although I'm already old compared to them, I believed that with their speed and my experience and knowledge of the route, we would quickly get to the summit. I had attempted the north ridge the summer before, reaching about 6,700 meters with Anton Kashevnik and Valery Shamalo, the highest anyone had climbed since the famous first attempt in 1978.

But at the last moment Evgeny could not go. Everything was ready, but now there were only two of us. Sergey was in a fighting mood. But me—I'm not a superstitious person, but somewhere deep in my soul something was off. It didn't feel right to take on such a route as a pair. Yet what if I was wrong? What if everything was not so bad, what if Sergey was ready and we would make a great team? Who can answer these questions in advance?

So, we decided to go together. Some friends from Russia arrived at the base camp a week before us, but they were planning to draw another line to the summit, directly up the north face. On July 7, two days after Sergey and I arrived at BC, we started acclimatization. There was an uncomplicated snow shoulder nearby at 5,875 meters. We spent one night at 5,200 meters and two nights on the shoulder. We realized this was not enough, but we didn't know any easy way to reach a higher point to acclimatize in that area.

On July 10 we were back in base camp. The weather was perfect, but at the same time it was too warm and sunny, and the mountains came to life. At first Sergey and I planned to start on July 12, the same day as the guys from the second group, but in the morning we realized our packs were too heavy and we would never get to the summit.

We went through everything and set aside the third ice tool, a couple of pitons, a couple of cams, and one ice screw. We took no spare clothes except for mittens. I cut down my wide Ther- marest pad so it was the same as Sergey's, removed the central anti-balling plates on the cram- pons, shortened the toothbrush handles, cut off extra packaging from our Mountain House food and poked holes in it with a needle to avoid inflation at height. We removed a Tibloc, part of the shovel handle, the only snow picket, one gas canister, and some dried fruits and peanuts. In this way we stripped about six kilograms from the loads, leaving backpacks that weighed 20 kilograms each, including food for 10 days and five 240-gram gas canisters.

Meanwhile, we kept looking through binoculars all day long for the guys who had approached the north wall that morning. It was in the evening, just before sunset, before I saw them again, heading back down. "So things are pretty bad up there," I thought.

In the morning of July 13 I chatted with them before leaving. "There was rockfall all day long, no chance of getting out of the bergschrund," the guys said. "What are your plans?" I asked. "We'll think about it, maybe we'll follow you later," they answered. Although the thought of all five of us joining forces for the north ridge crossed my mind, I did not mention it. We were all geared up to go as a pair. We were ready to go.

We started our route in the same way I had the previous year, on the left side of the ridge. The higher the sun rose, the more wet avalanches descended. We mostly managed to hide from them, but by the end of the day all the equipment and clothes were wet. We spent the first night at 5,360 meters.

The next day we crossed over the north ridge, but we could not reach the bivy spot at 5,800 meters as I had planned. We had to traverse over a lot of snowy ridges, which took quite a while. However, we found a good serac at 5,640 meters where we spent the night. We finally reached the planned bivouac at 5,800 meters, where a snow ridge butts into the steeper face, at 3 p.m. the next day. Here we decided to stop for a day, dry out, and try to make our packs even lighter. We counted out a daily supply of food, ate the extra, and dropped one gas canister, the extra mittens, Sergey's wet pants, and some other trifles. In all we were down two kilograms.

(A) Latok I (7,145 meters) from the north. (B) Latok II. (1) Russian attempt to the top of the north ridge at approximately 7,050 meters (2018). (R) Approximate site where Alexander Gukov was stranded and eventually rescued by helicopter. (2) Slovenian-British Route (second ascent of Latok I, also in 2018), passing through the col between Latok I and II to finish by the southern slopes. Photo by Sergey Glazunov

Over the coming days, we continued directly up, either right on the ridge or on the face to its right. We worked in turns: One day I was the leader, the other day Sergey led. Much of the time we were simul-climbing, if there were no traverses. But there were a lot of them. Compared with the previous year, the route had melted out a lot, but our line was relatively safe from rockfall and avalanches. There were two scary falls on vertical snow, first by me and then Sergey. Everything turned out OK, but Sergey lost his GoPro camera with the footage we had managed to shoot.

On July 19 we reached the huge snowy "flatiron" at 6,800 meters. I hadn't climbed any higher than this—we did not know what would come next. We had tried to study this section through the binoculars during acclimatization, and it didn't look too bad. It seemed we might summit within a day. But there was a nasty turn in the weather in the evening, and the wall above was no longer visible.

For three nights we were stuck on the "flatiron" because of the bad weather. Sometimes the fog cleared, but not long enough to study the line ahead. Finally, it cleared up in the evening and we managed to see what was ahead of us, although part of the wall was concealed by a serac. We ate only one freeze-dried dinner over two days, leaving us with only one breakfast packet as a full meal.

On July 22 we reached the top of the snowy "flatiron" and saw there was no simple way through the wall above. We climbed two pitches (one of which required aid climbing), fixed our ropes, and descended for the night.

The next morning we decided to leave all the bivouac equipment, try to reach the summit, and return. It was a bad idea, in my opinion. But it was Sergey's turn to lead, and he convinced me that he could do it. We ate the last pack of food and started our summit push.

The rocks were technically hard and the weather started getting worse, so our progress was slow. The last position I registered on our satellite tracker was at 6,980 meters, at 2:40 p.m., approximately 70 meters below the top of the north ridge. After that the tracker turned off by itself because its battery was low.

By 4 p.m. I began to realize that we might not make it to the summit on time and that we needed to descend. The weather was getting worse and worse. But we really wanted to reach the top, so we delayed our turnaround. At 7 p.m., Sergey climbed up to a tiny col between a snow-covered rock buttress and a serac. I was standing ten meters below him. The snow was almost vertical. I started shooting video, commenting for the camera that we had climbed up "somewhere."

"What do you mean 'somewhere'?" It's Latok I, Sanya," Sergey shouted.

"Bring me up!" I shouted to him.

"It's unrealistic, Sanya. It's nothing but ice mushrooms and debris," he answered and started to descend.

In such terrain, and not able to see anything higher around, we declared this to be the top, got everything on camera, and started down together. I am not too good at navigation at nighttime, but Sergey assured me he would find the way. And he did. We descended straight to our tent late at night.

I do not remember what happened the next day. I remember that the weather was good when we woke up and we spent half the day at our high camp. I think we may have descended a bit before bivouacking again on the night of July 24. I remember sharing my doubts with Sergey as to whether he'd actually been on the summit. I am still in doubt today. Perhaps some- one would bend the facts and say that he had been there, but not me. I don't remember the pre-summit ridge; we did not stand together and hug one another as I had dreamed. I think that it was the top of the north ridge or the western "top" of Latok I. Today I can see on Google Earth that the main summit was only about 360 meters away and a little higher, but we could not see this in the fog.

Sergey and I decided that we would not lie. He believed it was the summit, I believed it was not. If we had taken the tent with us and bivouacked near our high point on the mushrooms, we might have found out for sure the next day. But we did not take the tent.

On July 25 we began to descend again. We saw a helicopter and thought that it was aiding the other Russian team, as we knew they had been injured by rockfall during their attempt. As we found out later, those guys were okay and the helicopter was search- ing for us, with Victor Koval from the other Russian team on board as a spotter. They saw us and threw off some food and a gas can. How Sergey caught it, I have no idea. There wasn't much, though.

After that we rappelled a few more times, Sergey going first and making anchors with an ice screw and Abalakov threads. So far, there had been enough ice for Abalakov anchors using 6mm cord. I would rappel to him, back up the V-thread with the screw, give him all the extra equipment, and pull the ropes.

On our last rappel, one rope was fixed to the Abalakov cord, and the second one was backing up Sergey with the ice screw. He used a Grigri to rappel the single strand. Below was a snow and ice slope, which ended with a rock face. Sergey rappelled over the rock and that was the last I saw of him.

The backup rope fixed to the screw went tight, and I yelled down to Sergey that he was at the end of the rope. One rope seemed to be unweighted and free, the other one didn't. I shouted to Sergey several times, but there was no answer.

I rearranged the ropes to rappel on both strands, left the ice screw combined with the cord just in case, and started down. When I reached the edge I saw that Sergey was gone. There was one poorly hammered, beak-style piton, and the ends of both ropes were secured to it. Nothing else. I hammered this piton as hard as possible, but I was not confident it was enough.

Now what? I was alone at somewhere around 6,300 meters, still about 1,700 meters above the glacier.

The rock where I found myself ended about five meters below, and then there was another snow slope, continuing a long way down. I couldn't see Sergey anywhere. He probably had fallen over the next rock wall. Later, looking at the photos and the estimated scene of the accident, I could see that Sergey likely fell over a huge wall below. But I did not know it at that time.

Sergey had fallen with almost all of our gear. I had the bad piton at this anchor and one short ice screw at the anchor above. I thought, You can ascend the rope to get the screw. But would the 6mm cord rub through and break as I ascended? Had I used the ropes or the cord to connect the V-thread to the screw? I think it was with the cord. Fuck. And even if I could retrieve the screw, what would it give me? I still wouldn't have nearly enough material to rappel 1,700 meters.

OK, keep thinking. The satellite tracker's battery was down to two percent, but maybe the SOS button would still work? I took it out, pressed the button to trigger the SOS, and sent a message that I was stranded and needed help.

Soon, my friend Anna Piunova in Moscow sent a message that a helicopter had taken off, and Julia Krisanova, my wife, advised me to find a ledge nearby where I could wait. Yes, I thought, hanging here is really not an option.

There were a couple of rocks on the snow slope a little lower, and I thought I could arrange a place there to wait for a helicopter. I had a piece of cord that was tied to the food bag they had thrown to us. It gave me just enough of a tether to get to those rocks. I hung the tent from the cord like a sack and got inside. And I began to wait. My satellite communicator stopped working completely in three days. The weather was awful throughout. I was constantly digging out from avalanches. It calmed me down to think that if there was a big avalanche it would fly over me, and that tomorrow the weather would be fine and the helicopters would reach me. But the helicopters were only able to get up in the air and rescue me after six days. But you already know that.

To be honest, it does not matter to me whether we climbed to the summit of Latok. I am sure that we climbed the north ridge to its top. It was a good climb. We took turns leading and worked well together, even though this was our first climb together. You were a good person, Sergey! I'm very sorry that it all happened on the descent, when most of the work had already been done. Please forgive me if I did something wrong.

Summary: Ascent of the north ridge of Latok I (7,145m) in the Panmah Muztagh of the Karakoram, reaching the top of the ridge at approximately 7,050 meters, by Alexander Gukov and Sergey Glazunov, July 13–23, 2018. During the descent, Glazunov fell to his death. Gukov was rescued six days later.

This account is adapted from a story originally published at Mountain.ru and translated by Maria Samsonova and Dmitry Zagorovskiy, with additional assistance from Emily Laskin. In early 2019, Anna Piunova, editor of Mountain.ru, published a multi-part account of Gukov's rescue, available in English at that website.

About the Author: Born in 1976, Alexander Gukov lives in St. Petersburg, Russia, and works as chief mate aboard oceangoing ships. He recovered from his ordeal and married his partner, Julia Krisanova, soon after returning home from Pakistan.

Images



(A) Latok I (7,145 meters) from the north. (B) Latok II. (1) Russian attempt to the top of the north ridge at approximately 7,050 meters (2018). (R) Approximate site where Alexander Gukov was stranded and eventually rescued by helicopter. (2) Slovenian-British Route (second ascent of Latok I, also in 2018), passing through the col between Latok I and II to finish by the southern slopes.



Looking up at the difficult climbing above the “flatiron” bivouac at 6,800 meters.



Sergey Glazunov nearing the finish of his last lead atop the north ridge of Latok I.



Rescue helicopter approaching the perch at nearly 6,300 meters where Alexander Gukov (in red) was stranded for six days.



Sergey Gukov relaxing during the ascent of the north ridge of Latok.

Article Details

Author	Alexander Gukov
Publication	AAJ
Volume	61
Issue	93
Page	34
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Feature article