



AAC Publications

Ailama, Southwest Face

Georgia, Central Caucasus Mountains

Levan Lashkarashvili (left) and Archil Badriashvili at the first bivouac site during their ascent of the southwest face of Ailama in early September 2020. Their route continued up the headwall above and a little to the right of the two climbers. Photo by Giorgi Tepnadze

Ailama (4,547m, 4,560m GPS, 42°57'27.54"N, 43°10'43.75"E) is the highest summit in Lower Svaneti, and one of the outstanding peaks in the Caucasus, lying on the frontier ridge around 7km southeast of Shkhara. It was first climbed in August 1889 by Christian Jossi and Hermann Woolley via the north face. The broad 2,000m southwest face is dominant.

In the 1960s and '70s, the legendary Mikheil Khergiani and mountaineers of his generation made major ascents of the southwest wall. In the 1980s there were fast repetitions. But the closing of the famous (in Soviet times) Ailana Training Camp in the late 1980s, and the consequences of the Russia-Georgia war, left the region almost uninhabited and wild, and only a handful of ascents have been recorded since, the last almost 20 years ago. Icefalls have melted and pathways through glaciers have been swept away.

Giorgi Tepnadze and I had big ambitions when we arrived in Svaneti. First was a new route on Ailama's southwest face and after that Ushba and a long-awaited dream to climb a new route on the crown of the Caucasus. We invited Levan Lashkarashvili to join us for the first adventure.

One and half days of driving from Tbilisi and a few hours of approach brought us to the foot of the face on September 2. We decided to try a direct route in the lower section, instead of the dry icefall to the left.

We started at 2,460m with light packs, following a rarely climbed direct route to the upper face. Even though this start is a logical line, it is too loose to enjoy. That day we bivouacked at around 3,500m.

Early next morning, when the face was free from rockfall, we started up a line between the Central and Third Pillars. The Central Pillar was climbed by Shota Mirianashvili and team (5B), and the Third Pillar was first climbed by Shalva Margiani and team, also at 5B; this is the line that the last mountaineers to visit the face (Georgians Levan Chikovani, Giorgi Dzagnidze, Vano Imnaishvili, and Zura Kutchava) chose to repeat in 2001. All of us mostly climbed free, enjoying steep, varied, and sounder granite than the previous day's crumbling terrain. We had to move fast, as this lower part is threatened by objective danger; it was fun until Levan broke a big hold, which took off the nail of his little finger. He patched it up and then, to our surprise, continued climbing at the same pace. The day ended with a steep headwall and a mixed exit to a bivouac site we dug into ice. We had climbed 13 pitches that day.

The following day involved more ice than rock, and more simul-climbing leading directly to the wide, snowy summit. It was September 4, and the weather was perfect; the vast panorama of the surrounding mountains in both Georgia and the Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria gave the impression of isolation. We spent one hour there and then began our descent by the northwest ridge. This is complex 4A/4B: at first steep snow and ice to a saddle, where we found it too dangerous to rappel into the wide couloir below, then onward, passing a pinnacle on the north flank, to a second saddle, where we rappelled to the southwest. We bivouacked partway down, after spending three hours, ending at midnight, to construct a good spot in the rock.

On our fourth day we made three more rappels and then crossed a glacier, luckily finding a break between the remains of an old path and the melted icefall on the southern slopes. Anchors were impossible to construct due to the glacier-smoothed rock. Eventually we reached the base of the mountain, where we were able to have a cold bath in a spring, looking up at the southwest face.

It is a special kind of adventure to climb neglected mountains, re-exploring their high faces and lines, and experiencing their energy. Ailama was indeed worth the wait. Our route gained 2,000m, 5B V/V+, with 850m of new ground.

– **Archil Badriashvili, Georgia**

Images



The 2,000-meter southwest face of Ailama. (1) 5A, Benkin-Bochkov-Djaparidze-Leontev, 1966. (2) Second Bastion, 5B, Margiani-Serebriakoff-Shamakhov-Park, 1968. (3) Third Bastion, 5B, Dadeshkeliani-Gugava-Kakhian-Margiani, 1969. (4) The 2020 Georgian Route (Badriashvili-Lashkarashvili-Tepnadze). (5) Central Bastion, 5B, Dangadze-Glonti-Mirianashvili-Tevdorashvili, 1965. (6) Gugava-Gugava-Gulbani-Nemsitsveridze, the original route on the southwest face (5A), climbed over three days in 1956. There are at least three more routes (not shown), two of them on the right side. The left skyline, followed by the 2020 team in descent, was formerly called the Classic Route, though today is rarely climbed from Georgia (4A/4B, Chartolani-Khergiani-Marr-Zurebiani, 1947).



The 2,000-meter southwest face of Ailama, showing the new Georgian route and bivouac sites. Other routes to the left and right are not shown in this photo. Descent was via the left skyline.



On the summit (northwest) ridge of Ailama, with Shkhara (left) and Dykh-tau in the distance.



Levan Lashkarashvili and Giorgi Tepnadze on the upper headwall of the southwest face of Ailama.



Levan Lashkarashvili (left) and Archil Badriashvili at the first bivouac site during their ascent of the southwest face of Ailama in early September 2020. Their route continued up the headwall above and a little to the right of the two climbers.

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