



AAC Publications

Western Zaalayskiy Range, Various Ascents

Kyrgyzstan, Pamir, Trans Alai

Andy Vine descending the southwest glacier (Deception Route) on Ak Chukur. At distant left is Bel Uluu Mont Blanc (5,402m), while in the center is Pik 5,284m. Photo by Stuart Hurworth

The Trans-Alai mountains delineate part of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with the Western Zaalayskiy (various spellings) subrange about 75km west of Pik Lenin. Our research showed this subrange to be nearly unexplored by mountaineers, offering around 20 potential objectives between 4,500m and 5,500m.

In August 2019, our team of six—Steve Graham, Stuart Hurworth, Jared Kitchen, Emily Thompson, Andy Vine, and I—flew to Kyrgyzstan's second city of Osh and met local support organized by ITMC: two cooks/fixers and a driver. We approached the Altyn Daria Valley in the Western Zaalayskiy by 6WD in two days, establishing a comfortable base camp (3,170m) on August 13 at a dusty nomad pasture.

Google Earth and Soviet military maps had been used to identify possible approaches to advanced base camps and viable peaks in three subvalleys to the west of the main Altyn Daria. After a few days, the fixers had not yet located suitable animal transport, so all six of us carried loads up to 30kg to a moraine camp at 3,950m in the Bel Uluu Valley. [This valley was visited in 2019 by a French-Russian pair of climbers; see AAJ 2020.] Graham, Hurworth, Vine, and I carried on to an advanced base on a rubble-covered glacier at 4,450m, and from there, on the 19th, completed the first ascent of Ak Chukur (4,970m GPS, 39°17'48.110N, 72°12'54.996E), via Deception Route (PD). This was an easy glacier ascent with a final pitch of mixed climbing to a two-meter-square rock platform overlooking a precipitous 1,500m drop to the Altyn Daria. [This mountain is directly north, across the valley, from the peak climbed in 2019.]

Looking southwest over base camp to Ak Chukur (4,970m GPS). The approach went up the valley behind this mountain and then climbed it from the far (southwest) side. This area is normally dry; the photo was taken after heavy overnight snow. Photo by Emily Thompson

The other two western valleys identified from advance research—Kaska Suu and Min Terke—proved challenging to access due to several dangerous river crossings. The team therefore looked to the east of the Altyn Daria, where Kitchen and Thompson undertook vital reconnaissance, and by the time the Ak Chukur team returned, two further objectives had been identified.

On the 23rd, Graham, Kitchen, and Thompson made the first ascent of Pik a-boo (5,122m GPS, 39°18'47.938N, 72°18'42.938E, so named as it remained hidden for most of the climb) in an unnamed side valley 2km northeast of base camp. The climb followed the north glacier (AD-), with several mixed and ice sections, to a snow arête, then a small rock pinnacle summit.

Meanwhile, in order to establish advanced camps for our climbs further to the northeast of base camp, our fixers had succeeded in arranging for donkeys and a horse from a nearby village.

On the 25th, from an advanced base at 4,005m in the Kok Kikki Valley, Hurworth and Vine made the first ascent of Broken Peak (5,122m GPS, 39°21'28.28"N, 72°22'28.02"E) via the Golden Tower Traverse (at PD+), the only rock ridge climbed during the expedition.

On the 27th, from a second advanced base in a southern side valley of the Kok Kikki, Graham and Kitchen forced a route through difficult crevassed terrain, much of the time on steep bare glacier. Using dozens of ice screw placements, they eventually summited Ak Kalpak (5,112m GPS, 39°19'23.123N, 72°20'04.868E) via a route they named North Ridge Chasm Route (D) due to the complex crevasse system on the final summit approach. On the same day, Hurworth, Vine, and I attempted a similarly steep route directly up the north face of the glacier below Pik 5,084m. We retreated at 4,480m, having moved too slowly on bare glacier ice.

There is significant potential in the Western Zaalayskiy, but future expeditions should note that, apart from glacial retreat, two factors need to be considered carefully. The first is river crossings, which can be extremely hazardous in these parts; a large team from the International School of Mountaineering (ISM), with significant experience, expertise, and equipment, were forced to turn back from their approach up the Min Terke valley in 2019. The second will be the interpretation by the resident army commander of the extent to which a border permit allows access to certain areas. We were barred access to the upper reaches of the Altyn Daria (as was the ISM team) and the side valleys toward and beyond Tersager Pass.

The Min Terke group appears to have excellent objectives between 4,900m and 5,300m. From our limited information and first-hand views, we speculate there is potential for a small expedition to access it via a northern approach using animals rather than vehicles.

Our team had a rich mountaineering experience in a remote area, which, given the often-difficult access to unexplored areas, was remarkably easy to reach within three days of leaving the U.K. Sadly, this proved to be the last expedition for Andy Vine, who in February 2020 died in a Scottish avalanche.

— **Andy Stratford, U.K.**

Images



Andy Vine descending the southwest glacier (Deception Route) on Ak Chukur. At distant left is Bel Uluu Mont Blanc (5,402m), while in the center is Pik 5,284m.



The northwest slope and north ridge of Ak Kalpak.



Stuart Hurworth below the northeast face of unclimbed Pik 5,402m (dubbed Bel Uluu Mont Blanc), situated on the Tajik border toward the head of the Bel Uluu Glacier.



Looking southwest over base camp to Ak Chukur (4,970m GPS). The approach went up the valley behind this mountain and then climbed it from the far (southwest) side. This area is normally dry; the photo was taken after heavy overnight snow.



The view southwest from Broken Peak to (A) Pik 5,084m (unclimbed), (B) Ak Kalpak, and (C) Pik Korzhenevskaya (7,105m). (1) marks the slope climbed to around half-height in an attempt to summit Pik 5,084m. Andy Vine

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