



AAC Publications

Western Torugart-Too, Various Ascents

Kyrgyzstan, Tien Shan

Dawn on the northwest ridge of Pik Ketiley (4,710 meters). Photo by Derek Billings

Few of us had heard of Kyrgyzstan, let alone considered it as a climbing destination. Tommy Caldwell had made it famous, right? Or was that Kazakhstan? Wait, no, that was Borat. Outside of climbing circles, the reactions of friends and family varied across a puzzled-nervous spectrum. Anything with "stan" at the end seems to do that.

Jenna and Rob Hughes-Game, Robin Ohlsson, David Ryan, and I arrived in Bishkek during an August 2019 heat wave. Between us we could boast heritage from seven different countries and four continents. Vladimir Komissarov from ITMC—our local support—informed us that the freezing level was much higher than in previous years. One of our concerns about climbing late in the season was that we might be resigned to snowless peaks. However, at the end of our two-day transit south, as we rounded the last corner and passed the military checkpoint, the much-envisioned Torugart-Too came into view: snow-capped, but only just. Two years of planning and now we could breathe.

In 2007, Pat Littlejohn and the aforementioned Vladimir were probably the first to explore this small range on the Chinese border, where the largest peaks rise to over 5,000m. To put our objectives in perspective, none of the team are elite-level climbers. We are in the moderately fit, height loving, heavy-breathing category. Thus, when this expedition was still an embryonic pipe dream, our Google searches probably had been something like "unclimbed non-technical peaks in Central Asia." Our goals were peaks around 5,000m, so remote and obscure that others might not have considered them worthwhile for an expedition.

We had 15 days at base camp (40°32'49.21"N, 74°57'36.73"E; this area is about 10km to the southeast of that visited by a U.K. team in 2008; see AAJ 2009) to acclimatize and attempt at least one summit. Hoping for straightforward approaches, the plan was to hike to advanced base, wake for an alpine start, ascend a ton of scree, hit the snowline, and plod/front-point our way to the top for pseudo flag planting and photos.

Our first ascent, on August 30, was on a peak behind base camp. Robin and I made an early start on the northwest ridge, as it looked the most amenable from the maps we'd collated. The rock quality proved to be extremely poor (as we discovered on subsequent climbs as well), which meant gendarmes were not easily passed. We found solid snow/ice at 4,400m and climbed 50° slopes to the summit, which we named Pik Ketiley (4,710m, 40°31'17.74"N, 74°57'5.29"E, AD).

The northeast ridge of Pik Jaksi Adamdar (4,766 meters). Photo by Derek Billings

With one peak in the bag, and psyche high, the next day Dave, Jenna and Rob attempted the most westerly of our objectives. They turned around at 4,300m due to altitude sickness and an encounter with unpassable, shattered, rock buttresses.

On September 3, all but Jenna ascended a high point along a border ridge southwest of Pik Ketiley. An extremely long and arduous walk-in was rewarded with easy climbing on the finest of scree (yes, easy scree!) on the most westerly of three north-facing spurs. This led to a steep, rocky summit that we named Nomad (4,622m, 40°29'34.58"N, 74°55'20.08"E, F/PD-).

With the weather holding, and Jenna having now been at base camp for five days straight, talking to grazing cattle, it was decided to make another attempt on the western peak that had eluded her, Rob, and Dave earlier. On the 7th, these three hiked up a different valley in order to give a closer approach to the snowline. They gained the northeast ridge and pitched hard ice until it eased, then continued together to the top. This was named Pik Jaksi Adamdar (4,766m, 40°29'57.80"N, 74°54'23.42"E, PD-).

For our final attempt, we headed for a more easterly rocky peak that wasn't initially on our radar. Due to the rock quality previously encountered, we were hesitant to press our luck. However, with only days to spare, on the 9th Robin and I decided to "have a look" at the north-northeast ridge. In the most bitter conditions met on the trip, we managed to stand on our fourth previously virgin summit, which we named Pik Burkut (4,737m, 74°54'23.42"N, 75°1'5.10"E, AD+). A huge snowfall the following day prompted an early departure from base camp, and we were back in Bishkek on the 11th.

As mediocre climbers, standing atop four previously unclimbed peaks was far beyond our expectations, helped immensely by near-perfect weather. None of the ascents was going to stun the climbing world, but for us a challenge was accomplished, friends impressed, families proud, and we had the privilege of naming our peaks.

— Derek Billings, U.K.

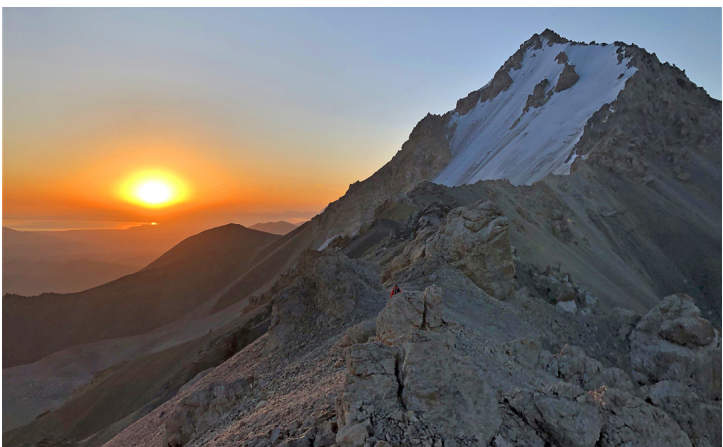
Images



Looking south on the approach to Pik Burkut, the prominent pyramid left of center on the Kyrgyzstan-China border.



The north-northeast ridge of Pik Burkut.



Dawn on the northwest ridge of Pik Ketiley.



The northeast ridge of Pik Jaksi Adamdar.



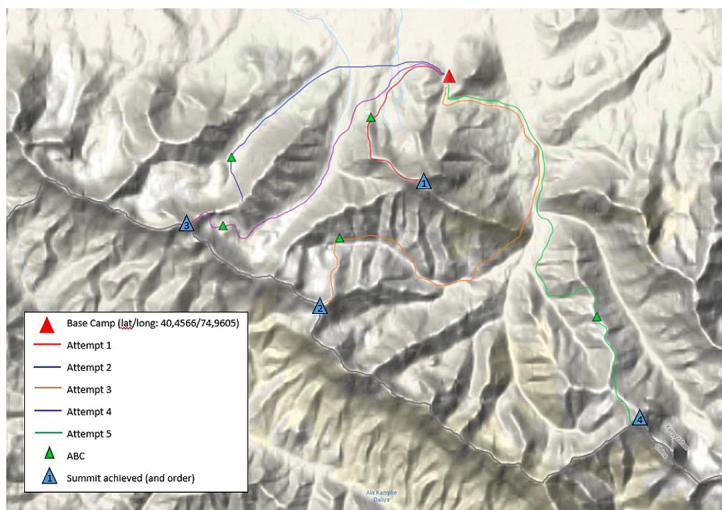
The northwest ridge of Pik Ketiley.



Looking south, over the area used for base camp in September 2019, toward Pik Ketiley, after heavy snowfall. The ascent of this peak was achieved via the right skyline ridge.



The north spur of Nomad (4,622 meters).



Map showing base camp, intermediate camps, and the four peaks climbed in the Western Torugart-Too in September 2019.

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