



AAC Publications

Ushba, Southwest Spur; Gulba, South Face, Khachapuri

Georgia, Caucasus Mountains

We had a fantastic trip to the Caucasus in June, undoubtedly helped in our goals by some very good weather. Our primary objective was to climb the main (south) summit of Ushba (4,710m), starting from the south via the Ushba Glacier. Our group consisted of four members of the Equipo Español de Alpinismo (Spanish Mountaineering Team)—Javier Guzmán, Mikel Inoriza, Rubén Sanmartín, and Bernat Vilarrasa, along with Roger Cararach, Alberto Fernandez, and team director Mikel Zabalza. In the Caucasus there is very little infrastructure for climbing, with no lifts, so everything must be carried up from the valley. Logistically, it was interesting preparation for future expeditions.

With a lot of recent snowfall and warm temperatures, we found that some of the routes we had considered climbing on Ushba were running with water. We had to come up with another goal. We saw a very long spur on the southwest face that apparently was dry, and we decided the whole group would try the same route in three independent rope teams. Without any information other than our own intuition, we began to climb on June 19, always seeking out the weaknesses of the wall.

In the first 400m or more of ascent, we didn't find any evidence of previous climbers. [The Spanish line was to the right of earlier routes on the lower southwest face; they likely intersected other routes in the vicinity of the upper ridge.] **The leader wore climbing shoes, while the seconds wore boots and carried the heavy packs.** The rock was good in general, with decent protection except in a few sections. When we moved around the spur, we discovered a piton in an overhang, 500m above the glacier. We finished the day in a perfect spot for a bivy at around 4,000m. We were all able to unrope and lie down—a total luxury.

We started very early the next day and traversed left through snow and ice in search of weaknesses. Here we climbed three magnificent pitches of nearly vertical rock and another mixed pitch before reaching the final ridge, which was covered in variable snow and corniced. With great caution, we got through this section and reached the summit at midday.

We descended via the Gabrieli (south ridge), which is the most common summit route. It wasn't easy to find the descent, since many of the rappels were covered in snow. On the way down, we met up with a team of Kyrgyz who were climbing the Gabrieli. They had a tent and were very surprised that we had climbed without one. We bivied lower than them under a rock that sheltered us from the annoying wind. The next day, with more rappels and downclimbs, we reached the Guli Glacier and then the village of Mazeri. The Espolón Sur-Oeste (Southwest Spur) was 1,500m, 6b+ M5.

We rested for two days and prepared for our next climbs. The weather continued to be excellent, but we knew change was brewing. One of our teams, Mikel Inoriza and Bernat Vilarrasa, went to the head of the Guli Glacier, where they completed a magnificent and difficult rock route on the south face of Gulba (3,725m). [The history of climbing on Gulba is not well-documented, and it is possible this was the first route up the south face.] Their route, Khachapuri, named for a Georgian cheese bread, was about 700m long (14 pitches plus scrambling), on solid rock, with difficulty up to 7b; they climbed completely clean.

The rest of the group decided to finish the trip by climbing Shkhelda (4,360m). The main peak of this complicated mountain appealed to us because of its big rock tower, which we approached via the southern flank. Toward the top we found a lot of old pitons and had to climb about 300m of rock

with difficulties up to 6a/b. It seemed to have been many years since this peak had been climbed.

Visiting Georgia had been a great success. It felt a little like what climbing in the Alps might have been years ago. Without a doubt this was a fantastic experience on all levels.

– **Mikel Zabalza, Spain, translated by Pam Ranger Roberts**

Images

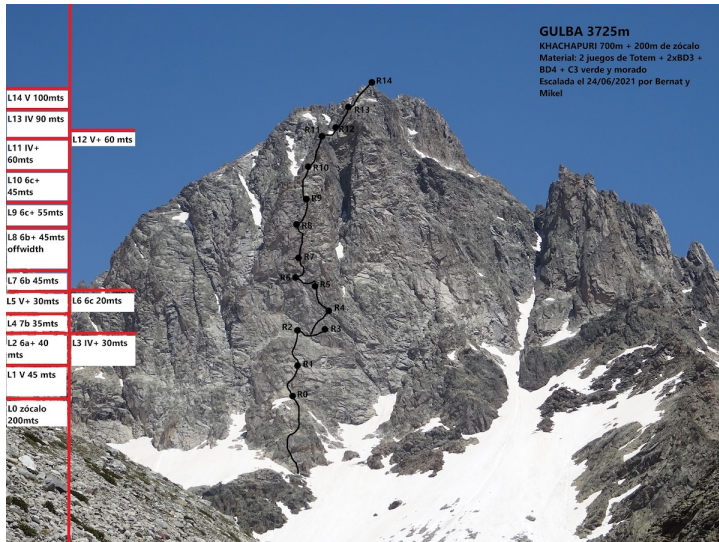


Photo-topo of the route Khachapuri on the south face of Gulba.



Photo-topo of the Spanish route on the southwest spur of Ushba's South Summit.



Summit ridge on Shkhelda, with the west side of Ushba in the background.



Summit ridge of Ushba's south peak.



Bernat Vilarrasa leads the crux 7b pitch on the south face of Gulba. Part of Ushba is seen behind.



Searching for the exit pitches high on Ushba during a Spanish team's first ascent of the Southwest Spur. In back is Mt. Elbrus, the highest peak in Europe. The rock tower in the background, directly above the climber, is the main top of Shkhelda (4,360m), also climbed by the Spanish group.



Descending Shkhelda, with the west side of twin-summitted Ushba in back.



Climbing on Ushba during the first ascent of the southwest spur.



The line of Khachapuri (14 pitches plus scrambling), possibly the first route up the full south face of Gulba.



The line followed by the Spanish team in 2021 on the south side of Shkhelda (4,360m).



Final pitches on Ushba's south peak after climbing the southwest spur.



The upper rock tower on Shkhelda (4,360m).



The final pitch on the south face of Gulba.



Rubén San Martín on a steep traverse during the first ascent of the Southwest Spur, a significant new start to the 1903 Schulze Route on the south peak of Ushba.



Climbing on Ushba's south peak during the first ascent of the southwest spur.



Bivouac during the first ascent of the southwest spur of Ushba's south peak.

Article Details

Author	Mikel Zabalza
Publication	AAJ
Volume	64
Issue	96
Page	243
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions