



## AAC Publications

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### Recon: Ushba

#### The Crown of the Caucasus

Beautiful view of Ushba from the northwest, with the North Peak on the left and South Peak on the right. Photo by Archil Badriashvili.

**USHBA RISES near the west end of the South Caucasus Mountains, about 30 kilometers from Mt. Elbrus and entirely within Georgia, just south of the frontier with Kabardino-Balkaria (Russia).** It is an extremely complex mountain, with two prominent summits and more than 50 different routes and variants. Both of Ushba's summits (South Peak, 4,710m or 15,453 feet; North Peak, 4,690m) have no easy access. The higher South Peak is considered the most difficult summit in the Caucasus, though it is not even in the top ten by elevation.

Ushba is associated with mystic legends and sacred spirits of the Svan, the people native to the mountainous region of Svaneti. The meaning of the name is unclear, even to locals, but it generally refers to a dangerous place.

The mountain has four flanks of steep granite and others of ice and mixed terrain. The microclimate is unstable, and objective danger is nearly always present. The mountain experiences a high incidence of accidents and fatalities, mainly due to objective hazards and the complexity of the climbs and descents, lack of detailed information about climbs or current conditions, global warming, and the failure of some parties to grasp the scale of the routes and their seriousness.

Ushba's dramatic appearance and huge relief made it very alluring to 19th-century European mountaineers beginning to look beyond the Alps. The English climber Douglas William Freshfield, just 23 years old, along with two English companions and a Chamonix guide, Francois Joseph Dévouassoud, visited the Caucasus in 1868, when few useful maps and no detailed descriptions of the mountains in English were available. They made the first recorded ascent of Kazbek (5,054 meters) and then undertook a long high-level traverse along the range to the west. In his subsequent book about the trip, *Travels in the Central Caucasus and Bashan*, Freshfield described twin-summitted Ushba as the Caucasian Matterhorn, "Only here we had one Matterhorn piled on another, and then multiplied by two." Climbing either peak, he wrote, "seemed too insane to be as much as suggested." Nonetheless, Ushba's first summit route came just two decades later.

### THE EARLY CLIMBS

In September 1888, Swiss guide Ulrich Almer and Englishman John Garford Cockin made the first ascent of Ushba's North Peak by climbing to the Saddle, between the two summits, from the Guli Glacier to the east. Cockin and his British companions, along with their two guides, had already had a hugely successful season in the range, making the second ascent of Dych-tau (ca 5,203 meters), the first ascent of Shkhara (ca 5,203 meters), and other climbs. After two previous attempts on Ushba—one cut short by guide Christian Roth's "severe arthritic pains" from all the step-cutting on the expedition, and a second attempt that ran out of time on the complex Guli Glacier—Cockin and Almer returned for a third try and reached the col between Ushba's peaks after 10 hours of work. "We were near to the south peak, but as the ridge heading to the top of this had much frozen snow and ice on it, whilst the rocks of the northern peak looked easy, we turned at once to our right," Cockin explained in the *Alpine Journal*. They were on top at 3:45 p.m. and returned to their tent at 11:20 "by lantern light."

Cockin and Almer's line only saw its first repeat 57 years later, during a tragic attempt to traverse the peaks in 1945. In the spring of 2017, this avalanche-prone route was followed to achieve the first ski descent from the North Peak, by Slovakian Miroslav Pet'ó.

The South Peak of Ushba is only about 20 meters higher than the north summit but was much more difficult to climb. Early probes discovered that steep rock barring access to the summit snowfields was likely to be the crux.

After two previous visits to the range, including an attempt on Ushba in 1895, Willi Rickmer-Rickmers from Germany brought a large international team of well-prepared mountaineers to tackle the problem in 1903. In July, three of these climbers and a local hunter quickly reached Mazeri Col on the south ridge, following a couloir on the southeast side. The next day, a larger group returned to the col, bivouacked, and then worked up the southwest face to a prominent rock wall, the Red Corner. Above this, 23-year-old Adolf Schulze, who had done numerous first ascents in the eastern Alps, was leading the way when he fell off and plunged the length of their rope to a ledge. He lost consciousness, but his teammates were able to lower him all the way to their bivouac, and the next day they returned to base camp.

Four days later, amazingly, Schulze had recovered sufficiently to lead the final ascent, along with the German-Swiss team of Robert Helbling, Fritz Reichert, Oskar Schuster, and Albert Weber. This time, Schulze headed left where he had tried to climb to the right, and after surmounting an overhang he reached easier ground and brought the team up. They summited at 8 p.m., only to be trapped by a thunderstorm just as they started down. In the morning they staggered down to their camp, having completed what was certainly one of the hardest alpine routes climbed before World War I. Their route is graded Caucasian 5A today (roughly the equivalent of TD-/ TD) and is very rarely repeated because of rockfall danger.

Climbing the Red Corner headwall on the southwest side of the South Peak. This passage was the key to the first ascent of Ushba's highest point in 1903. Photo by Archil Badriashvili  
Less than three weeks later, Ludwig Distel, Georg Leuchs, and Hans Pfann (Germany) made a five-day traverse over the north and south peaks, starting from the Ushba Glacier on the west. The trio climbed a new route to reach Ushba's north summit, then crossed the Saddle between the peaks, followed by difficult new ground up the south peak, before descending the Schulze route.

In all, during the three decades since the South Peak was climbed twice in a single season, there were two dozen attempts on the mountain, but only two teams were successful: German Willi Merkl and two other climbers, who made the second ascent of Schulze's "Red Corner" route in 1929, and Swiss climbers Lorenz Saladin and Werner Wickert, who in 1932 followed the same route.

August 1934 marked the first time an ascent was achieved by local climbers. Pioneering Georgian mountaineers and siblings Alexandra and Alexander Japaridze, together with Igor Kazalikashvili, a guide from Stepantsminda, and Svanetian hunter Giorgi Niguriani, repeated Schulze's Route, climbing a variant to the Red Corner. After a cold open bivouac under the headwall, the team found themselves to the right of the original line. After several tries on the hardest section, Niguriani decided to climb in bare feet for more grip on the vertical granite—he managed to place a piton and overcome the headwall. The Georgians lit a fire on top to prove to residents of the Becho Valley below that it was indeed reachable. And with that, Alexander wrote later, "the last of local superstitions were burning in those flames."

The Japaridze family was marked both by great climbing successes and by tragedy. Simon, another sibling and a promising climber, died in 1929 during an attempt on Tetnaldi (4,858 meters), when one of his climbing partners slipped in a steep gully and Simon tried to grab him. Alexander and Alexandra made various first ascents in the range, and in the late 1930s and early '40s, they pioneered bold traverses—endurance climbs that seem barely doable even today.

Alexandra lived until 1974 and is considered one of the great figures in Georgian sports history. Alexander was killed in 1945 while attempting a complete traverse of the Ushba and Shkhelda summits, after a previous attempt two years earlier. After repeating the Cockin route to the North Peak, Japaridze and two friends were trapped by prolonged bad weather on the ridge and disappeared. Strong mountaineers united in a prolonged search for their bodies. Three of the team's letters—tradition required leaving detailed accounts of ascents inside summit cairns—were found, and one on the North Peak described their ordeal in an eight-day blizzard inside a tent. The note said they planned to descend the north ridge, but later evidence emerged that they had attempted to retreat by their ascent route and perished, likely in an avalanche.

It wasn't until 1950 that Georgians completed this demanding traverse. Led by Georgian climber Ivane ("Kako") Marr, the team took 26 days to traverse over Shkhelda's six summits and Ushba's two peaks, during which time the main avenue in Tbilisi, the nation's capital, sported a diagram updating the team's progress.

## **MODERN CLIMBS: THE NORTH PEAK**

The classic and most frequented route to the North Peak is the north ridge, first climbed in 1935 by Boris Aleynikov and Vladimir Kiesel, who approached via the Ushba Icefall and the Ushba Plateau. The route is 4A (considered at least French AD+, but long and serious), and favorable conditions on the long summit are crucial to success. Previously, parties frequently approached this route from the North Caucasus, but the border crossing is no longer legal and the constant collapse of the Ushba Icefall makes this approach unviable. The north ridge is now approached via the Ushba Glacier, starting from the village of Mazeri in Upper Svaneti. A long glacier climb leads to a camp at the Ushba Plateau or the shoulder called "The Pillow," below the final ridge.

Other than the avalanche-prone original route and the now-standard north ridge, all of the other routes to the North Peak are very difficult.

The northwest face (a.k.a. "West Face") of the North Peak is a 1,500-meter-high ice and mixed wall, which has attracted very few suitors. Descriptions of the routes here are sparse. The first ascent was probably along the leftmost ice on the face, followed by exploration of logical lines on the right in the 1980s. Among hard the routes, the Kolomitsev Route (5B, 1982) has seen the most repeats, including at least one winter ascent.

The broad snow and ice lines leading directly up the west face to the Saddle were climbed many times, sometimes as part of a famous challenge called the Cross: ascending the Saddle from one side, climbing both summits of Ushba, and descending by the other side of the Saddle. Nowadays, the avalanche risk is too high.

The North Peak's 1,300-meter-high east wall, accessed by the demanding Chalaadi Glacier, is similarly unfrequented. The granite face looks impressive, but it is washed by rockfall in late summer. There are around five routes, from 5B to 6A. The first route, in 1960, was climbed by a team of six led by Andrey Snesev. The Grishchenko line (6A), established by an eight-man team in 1982, was repeated in summer 2014 over five days.

The right part of the east face—the northeast wall—is named the Mirror and is the most remote part of the mountain. It was first climbed in 1964 by a strong Georgian team led by Mikheil Kherghiani.

Mikheil, part of a distinguished family of accomplished climbers (see below), was the most renowned climber of Georgia. His broad range of interests included technical rock climbing and high-altitude mountaineering, as well as traverses, instruction, and, most importantly, numerous serious rescue operations. He was awarded many first-place prizes in the climbing championships of the USSR, and climbed on major peaks of the Tien Shan, Pamir, and the Alps. In North Wales,

where he paired with Joe Brown, he was dubbed "Tiger of the Rocks."

The Khergiani Route on the Mirror, the northeast face of the North Peak, climbed in 1964. Photo by Archil Badriashvili

Writing about the first ascent of the Mirror in his diary, Khergiani described a key moment when he was trying to free climb a wet, overhanging section with bad protection and few holds, with the rest of his team below at a poor belay. With retreat impossible, he shouted to his friends that they should untie from the rope. Instead, they began to sing a Georgian folk song, and, thus inspired, Khergiani continued to the top. The route was credited with bringing a new level of wall climbing to the Soviet Union, and it was done in great style. Sadly, in 1969, at age 37, Khergiani was killed by rockfall on the northwest face of the Cima Su Alto in the Dolomites.

There are five routes on the Mirror, and most have been repeated, but none has been free climbed. The direct routes have around 650 meters of climbing, and the wall is topped by "The Roof," an area with loose rock that requires excellent snow and ice conditions for safe progress. In August 2004, while attempting to complete a possible new line, an entire team of three from St. Petersburg, Russia, disappeared at or near the Roof. The wall has seen little activity since.

## **SOUTH PEAK CLIMBS**

In August 1937, British university students Bob Beaumont, Robin Hodgkin (a noted educator who was one of the best U.K. rock climbers of his generation), and Michael Taylor climbed the south ridge of Ushba from Guli, though at the steep section in the upper part they made a traverse across the east face to a large corner system leading back to the ridge, above the main difficulties.

A month later, Gabriel Khergiani, in a four-man team, climbed the south ridge directly, and their line (commonly called the Gabrieli) has become the standard route to the highest point of Ushba. Gabriel Khergiani was a renowned Svan mountaineer and one of several illustrious climbers in the family, including Mikheil (a distant cousin), and cousin Beknu, a mountaineering instructor and rescuer with many important first ascents, including the south pillar of Shkhara (5,203m) and the Shkhelda-Ushba traverse. They, along with other alpinists, played important roles in defending against the German army in the Battle of the Caucasus during World War II. The Gabrieli is no pushover, at 5A or 5B, with the crux section generally climbed at UIAA V/VI and cracks that often are icy. The climb is usually started from a camp at the base of the peak, with two nights at a bivouac site high on the route.

The west side of the South Peak, comprised of walls with three aspects (northwest, west, and southwest) has the most routes and variants of any of Ushba's walls. Access to these faces is long and moderate via the Ushba Glacier.

The first route here (starting on the west face and finishing on the northwest) was in 1946, climbed by a Georgian team led by Kako Marr. They were looking for the Japaridze party, which had disappeared the previous year. No detailed description of this impressive alpine-style ascent has been published, and the route may be unrepeatable.

The first ascent of the famous west face was made in 1960 by Oleg Kosmachev and Lev Mishlaev, one an exceptional rock climber and the other a visionary alpinist and author of many hard classics. They took 18 days in July to complete the line (the Mishlaev Route), which has become the most frequented on the face, being climbed more than two dozen times, several times free. In an era of grandiose ascents by very large groups, Mishlaev climbed in small teams, choosing obvious, beautiful, yet very difficult lines. On Ushba, Mishlaev and Kosmachev followed an obvious corner and overcame long barriers of difficult, wet, and broken rock, often with poor protection (including wooden wedges). The 1,700-meter route is graded 5B (TD+/ED), with pitches of F6/5.10 or above. The steep rock section must be completed before snowmelt from the upper face soaks the wall; two experienced Georgian mountaineers died here due to hypothermia in July 2005.



Starting in the 1960s, the motivation for many teams was to win prizes in the annual Soviet climbing championships. The central mountaineering committee studied the goals and experience of each member and gave permission to attempt specific lines. Apart from routes by climbers like Mikheil Khergiani and Lev Mishlaev, these climbs involved large teams, and many bolts were placed in hopes of winning “gold.” (Many of these bolts were tiny and intended only for progress over blank rock, not for protection; they are now very old and untrustworthy.) Many of the climbers were Ukrainian and Russian, and included well-known activists such as Kensitskiy, Kustovskiy, and Monogarov. None of their routes on Ushba has been climbed free.

The South Peak’s northwest aspect is about 1,700 meters high, with routes of 5B to 6A/B. The face has a very steep capping wall called the Rockband. All routes avoided the barrier until 1971 and ’72, when large teams making two-week siege ascents overcame the Rockband—first a team led by Jury Artsishevskiy, and a year later the Grigorenko-Prigoda route. In 2015, Giorgi Tepnadze and I climbed a new variant to the Prigoda, made the first alpine-style ascent, and traversed both summits (AAJ 2017). In 2020, over five days, we returned to the wall and opened a new 6A/6B route by climbing directly up the center of the upper barrier (see AAJ 2021).

The southwest face was climbed completely for the first time in 1960 by Kavunenko, Kensitskiy, Monogarov, and Subortovich. There are few routes and equally few repetitions on this face, probably because of the vast, exposed nature of the wall and significant danger from rockfall. In the summer of 2021, a Spanish team unexpectedly opened a long variant on the right side of the southwest face to join the original Red Corner route.

Routes up the rocky east side of the South Peak, between the normal route (Gabrieli) and the Saddle, are even less frequently done. This face is exposed to the sun, resulting in serious objective dangers and making speed essential when the conditions allow an ascent. The long approach on snow and ice is also objectively dangerous.

Winter climbing on Ushba was not encouraged during the Soviet era, and few climbers received the necessary permission to make winter attempts. The first ascent of Ushba during winter conditions was on November 8, 1943, a year when winter arrived early in the mountains. Alexander Japaridze and a five-man team (from scientists to talented local hunters) attempted the Ushba-Shkhelda traverse, and after a heavy effort the team reached the South Peak, where they were trapped on top for seven days by a storm. They descended successfully, but one climber died from cold injuries in a Tbilisi hospital.

In 1965, Russian alpinists led by Vladimir Shatayev made the first calendar-winter ascent of the North Peak, after an unsuccessful attempt and fatality the prior year. Two Georgian teams separately climbed the Gabrieli route in February 1984, reaching the summit on two successive days. However, the first group, a team of six led by Irakli Geldiashvili, died in an avalanche during the descent. Irakli was among the most talented Georgian mountaineers from the late ’60s to mid ’80s, a champion of the USSR in rock climbing, and a young partner of Mikheil Khergiani.

Ushba from the Becho Valley to the south. (Left) Original Schulze (Red Corner) Route, 1903. (Right) Khergiani Route ( a.k.a. The Gabrieli, 1937), now the normal route up the South Peak. Photo by Archil Badriashvili

## **USHBA TODAY**

Most climbers in the 21st century focus on the normal routes—the north ridge to the North Peak and the Gabrieli to the South Peak—or on faster ascents of the more difficult routes, with more free climbing. Many of Ushba’s routes remain unrepeated or have been climbed only a few times. It is difficult to find independent new lines, but there are hard routes that have not received alpine-style or even capsule-style ascents, and most of the hardest lines have not been climbed completely free or in winter. Yesterday’s testpieces offer up-to-date challenges today.

A series of interesting climbs occurred in the early 2010s. A Ukrainian team led by Mishel Voloshanovskiy climbed a partial new route on the west face of the South Peak, and a year later another Ukrainian team added a longer variation in this same area: Harakternik (6A, AAJ 2012). As of 2017, this line has seen two repeats by Georgian and Ukrainian teams. In the winter of 2011, a large expedition from Krasnoyarsk, Russia, came to Georgia with ambition to climb a winter route up the west wall of the South Peak—they made first repeat of the Moshnikov Route (6A, 1986), reaching the summit in February.

In addition to the Georgian and Spanish first ascents mentioned above, Denis Urubko and Maria Cardell found a new route to the South Peak in 2018, climbing the far right side of the western couloir leading to the Saddle and then continuing to the summit.

The mountain has kept its dignity and its reputation for difficulty. If we look at the last two decades, even as interest in mountaineering in the Caucasus has grown, the number of serious climbers remains quite small and the failure rate is still very high. Published information on all but the normal routes is scant. There is no comprehensive guidebook, and Soviet-era books with diagrams of many earlier routes have never been translated. For success, one must rely on his or her own gut, experience, reasonable prudence, sufficient weather windows, and strength.

Patience is required: Ushba is not famous for its good weather. The mountain is mostly climbed in the summer season, from June through September. A relatively dry, cold autumn can offer great opportunities for mixed climbing. In spring there's usually too much snow. The mountain is dangerous throughout the year. Climate change has affected the season for many routes; nowadays, the east, south, and southwest aspects of both peaks are very dangerous in August, mostly because of falling rocks.

To gain access to the Ushba Glacier (a border zone), one must register in Becho's border police station or in Mestia; usually it takes one to two hours to complete the procedures. No other permits are required for climbing. It would be helpful to leave a note about intended climbs in the rescue office of Mestia, in case of an emergency.

Due to several disgraceful cases of thievery below the mountain in recent years, it is advisable to be attentive and not leave your equipment and other belongings unattended in camps near civilization and popular paths.

One should always remember: There are no easy ways up Ushba. In planning for any climb, one needs to pay great attention and respect to route selection (both ascent and descent), timing and conditions, and the readiness and composition of the team. The right partners are a must (as usual) in order to face the seriousness of the climb together and to share the joy of a true adventure.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Born in 1990, Archil Badriashvili lives in Tbilisi, Georgia, and is a medical doctor, guide, climbing historian, and board member of the United Federation of Georgian Mountaineers. In addition to exploring the far corners of the Caucasus, he has helped organize many international expeditions, including one in 2021 to the Hindu Kush in Pakistan—see his report [here](#).

## Images



A distant Ushba from the northwest, with the Ushba Plateau visible left of the North Peak.



The Khergiani Route on the Mirror, the northeast face of the North Peak, climbed in 1964.





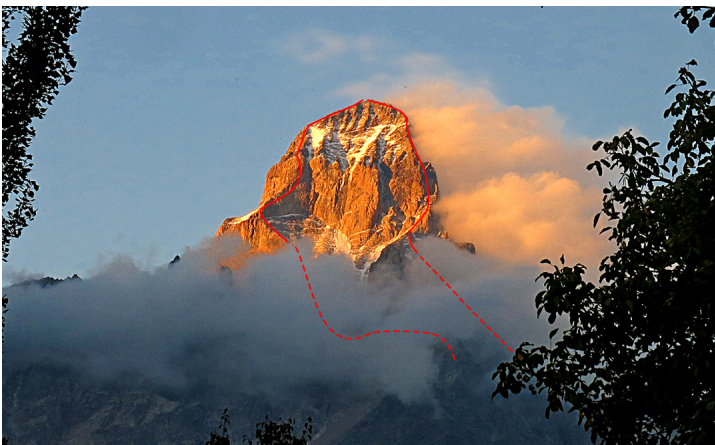
In her long climbing career, Alexandra Japaridze completed many difficult routes and traverses in the Caucasus.



From a camp on the Ushba Plateau (left) or the Pillow in center, the classic north ridge route finishes up the beautiful long arête near the right skyline. The rock wall on the left is the Mirror.



Ushba's South Peak (4,710m, left) and North Peak from the east in April. (1) Khergiani Route (a.k.a. The Gabrieli, 1937). (1a) British Route (1937). (2) Cockin-Almer Route (1888). (3) North Ridge. In back is Mt. Elbrus (5,642 meters) in Russia.



Ushba from the Becho Valley to the south. (Left) Original Schulze (Red Corner) Route, 1903. (Right) Khergiani Route ( a.k.a. The Gabrieli, 1937), now the normal route up the South Peak.



The twin summits of Ushba from the east.

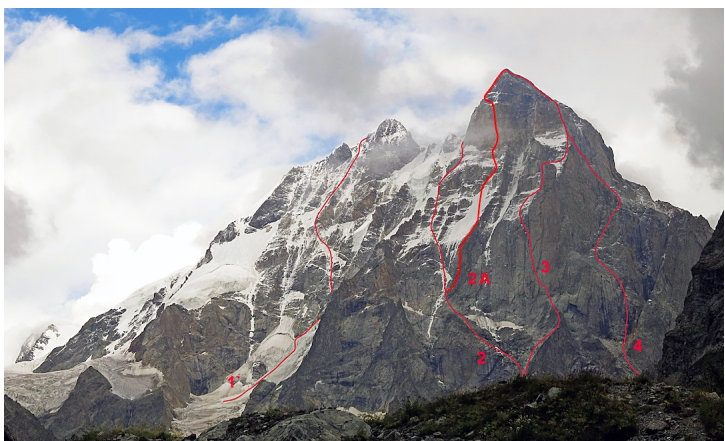


Ushba from the east in dry conditions. (ST) South Top. (NT) North Top. (UP) Ushba Plateau. (C) Upper Chalaadi Glacier. (M) the Mirror. (1) the start of Schulze's Route. (2) Khergiani's Route. (3) Tkachenko Pillar (1966). (4) Bitniy (1959) and Xatskevich (1975) routes. (5) Georgian Route to South Top. (6) Original Cockin Route to North Top. (7) Staritskiy Route (1956). (8) Monogarov (1964) via Chalaadi Glacier. (9) Grischenko finish to Route 10 (1982). (10) Snesarev Route (1960). (11) Suponitskiy Route (1961). Some routes are not shown.





Mikheil Khergiani.



Ushba's west side, with the classic north ridge of the North Peak on the upper left skyline. (1) Kolomitsev Route (1982). (2) Georgian Route (1946, the original line up the west face of the South Peak). (2A) Grigorenko-Prigoda (1972). (3) Mishlaev-Kosmachev (1960). (4) Monogarov Route (1960), finishing up the Red Corner. The 1973 Khergiani Route is near the right skyline. Other routes not shown.



Archil Badriashvili following the first part of the Rockband, Ushba South's northwest face.



Members of the team that made the first Georgian ascent of Ushba's highest top, in 1934, with some friends: siblings Alexander (far right) and Alexandra (center) Japaridze, with lagor Kazalikashvili and local hunter Giorgi Niguriani (carrying a rope) on either side of Alexandra.



Climbers on the Khergiani Route, the south ridge of the South Peak, first climbed in 1937.



Climbing through the headwall on Ushba's west face, with Elbrus behind.

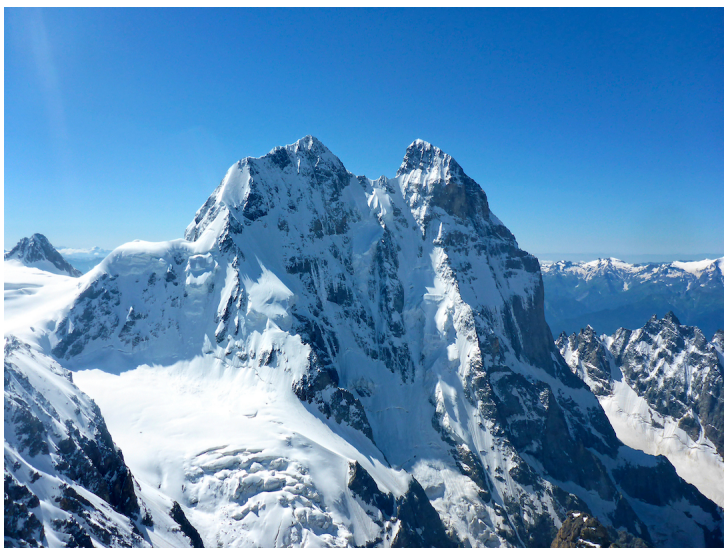




Climbing the Red Corner headwall on the southwest side of the South Peak. This passage was the key to the first ascent of Ushba's highest point in 1903.



Ushba in winter, seen from Guli.



Beautiful view of Ushba from the northwest, with the North Peak on the left and South Peak on the right.





Beautiful view of Ushba from the northwest, with the North Peak on the left and South Peak on the right.

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