



AAC Publications

Shkhara, Traverse Via Beknu Khergiani and Rolleston-Longstaff Routes

Georgia, Caucasus Mountains

(A) Shkhara's main summit (5,203m) from the south. The six-day traverse began with the Beknu-Khergiani Route (1), continued along the ridge to the west summit (B), and descended the Rolleston-Longstaff Route (2), passing over the south summit (C; hidden in clouds). Photo by Guillaume Vallot.

At 5,203m, Shkhara is the highest peak in Georgia. This broad-shouldered mountain boasts a long, narrow ridgeline running east to west, and various traverses of the peak and its neighbors have long been among the most significant mountaineering feats in the Caucasus. One of the earliest traverses on Shkhara was completed under the leadership of siblings Alexander (1899–1945) and Alexandra (1895–1974) Japaridze, renowned pioneers of technical mountaineering in the Caucasus and former Soviet Union.

On the Georgian (south) face of Shkhara, two routes outshine any others: the Beknu Khergiani, or south pillar, leading directly to the main summit, and the Rolleston-Longstaff Route to the lower west summit (5,068m).

The Beknu Khergiani

The Beknu Khergiani (2,200m, 5B ED, 1950) is a massive “golden” classic. At 2,200m, the line is Himalayan in scale, usually requiring four bivouacs up and down. The Beknu witnesses at least one attempt every other year or so. The last known successes were in 2021 and 2022.

It was first climbed by a very strong local team led by Beknu Khergiani (1912–1990). Many of the team, including Khergiani, had participated in first ascents led by the aforementioned Alexander Japaridze. The route is long, complex, and logistically demanding. The pillar it follows is wide and the terrain never easy, but the route-finding is clear and logical, particularly in the upper half.

Shkhara is famous for harsh weather spells. During the months of July to September (when most attempts occur), it's common for weather to severely worsen during the second part of the day, and climbers have become stranded high on the face for numerous days due to these storms. Luckily, few fatalities have occurred on the Beknu, despite the route having a few stretches of considerable objective danger. The route has also been attempted in winter at least three times without success, most recently in January 2024. (Shkhara's south face has seen only one successful winter ascent so far, made by myself and Giorgi Tepnadze in 2018 (see AAJ 2018). Our line entailed around 60 pitches of climbing over 2,500m and went at 6B [ED2] M5 WI5 75–80°.)

The Rolleston-Longstaff

The Rolleston-Longstaff (2,000m, 5A or TD+, 1903) follows a curving line up the south-southwest ridge, crossing over the south peak (4,320m) along the way. By the numbers, it is one of the easiest ways up the south face; nevertheless, the route is wild and tricky. Longstaff—who climbed extensively in the Karakoram, Himalaya, and Rockies, and made several Arctic expeditions—called the route “the finest climb I have ever had” (*Alpine Journal*, 1964).

Climbing quality varies from season to season; it can be very snowy in August and then extremely loose once dry. The route is logical, however, and like the Beknu it usually takes three to four bivouacs

up and down. For experienced teams, simul-climbing most of the route both ways is often more convenient, faster, and sometimes safer. There is plenty of opportunity for solid protection, but existing anchors and pitons are rare. The last known ascent of the route was in August 2018, by myself, Marko Prezelj, and the Slovene-Georgian “Young Alpinists” team.

In August 2023, Temo Qurdiani and I aimed to traverse Shkhara’s main, central, west, and south summits in a grand way: combining three hard routes in a fast and light style. We’d link the Beknu pillar, an east-to-west traverse of the ridge, and a downclimb of the Rolleston-Longstaff. This link-up had never been done—it would be a serious feat for a small team.

Astride the Shkhara Ridge, "in the north and south Caucasus at the same time," climbing toward Shkhara's central summit. Photo by Temo Qurdiani.

A Long History of Traverses

The first traverse of the Bezengi-Khalde Wall, the most prominent aspect of the Caucasus’ Central Ridge, occurred in August 1931, and Shkhara was naturally the highlight of the journey. An Austrian team (Poppinger, Moldan, and Schintlmeister) climbed the huge ridge from west to east in six days, from Lyalver (4,350m) to Shkhara. The first known east to west traverse happened seven years later, by a four-man Soviet team over eight days.

Some “smaller” climbs also happened during those years. Stylistically, these traverses were different from those of today. It was typical for extensive stashes of provisions to be left at some of the saddles, and tired climbers from traverse teams were often swapped out at intervals.

In October 1940, Alexander Japaridze accomplished the idea of bringing traverses to a new level. For starters, they would climb not in the summer, but in autumn. Winter ascents were banned in earlier Soviet times, but in the biography of Alexander, we see his passion for completing ascents as close to winter as possible. He and his team also decided to cover the ground between summits with hardly any stashes, and without swapping team members. (Japaridze wrote that when their rucksacks became “light” at the end of the trip, they weighed 25kg).

After 19 days of climbing, despite cold, complexity, and bad weather spells that trapped them in a tent for numerous days, the team of four men and Alexandra completed their massive traverse from Tsurungala (4,250m) through all the major Shkhara summits, descending in a raging storm. This story of the traverse in Alexander’s book has become an inspiration for other epic journeys for his friends and next generations.

In 1952, another Georgian team, including some teammates from 1940, prolonged the traverse and covered the then unimaginable distance from Tsurungala all the way to Tetnuldi (4,858m), a distance well over 20km as the crow flies.

First full day on the ridge, traversing from Shkhara’s main peak (in back) toward the central summit. Photo by Archil Badriashvili.

The Express Traverse of 2023

Our 2023 traverse of Shkhara’s main, central, west and south summits had to be grand in another way: combining three hard routes in a fast and light style.

Temo and I started the climb on August 4, maintaining fast and flexible dynamics on constantly changing terrain that felt like it lasted forever. The climb was mainly on ice and rock— snow was lacking. We climbed mostly during the first part of each day, as clouds, snow, and wind picked up every day around 1 p.m., transforming the climbing experience into pure punishment.

We completed the Beknu Khergiani at 4 p.m. on August 6, celebrating the first phase of our three-part

traverse at 5,203m. We bivouacked near the summit, throwing aside all of our steel tools as thunderstorms neared.

In the tent, Temo revealed to me that he was experiencing severe pain in both of his knees, aggravated by a high season's work in the mountains. I gave him an analgesic and later an injection of diclofenac. Unfortunately, it did not help. He had to bear the pain during the remaining climb, but he held strong.

The traverse of the ridge proved to be very tenuous. We moved on frontpoints for hours and finally progressed to the central summit, just above 5,000m. Beyond that, we bivvied on a small plateau near a huge serac, in a total whiteout. The fifth day started cold and with a stunning panorama. Just before 10 a.m., Temo and I were rewarded with the west summit at 5,068m.

We then downclimbed icy and loose terrain on the Rolleston- Longstaff pillar to approximately 4,500m in rain and lightning. We rappelled as little as possible to avoid leaving gear and to keep the rope safe, in order to ensure it would be intact when rappelling was absolutely necessary—such as a three-pitch stretch of M5, one of the route's cruxes. Despite our caution, a stone cut one rope in the middle of our descent.

At 4,500m we renovated the very same bivouac site built by a young alpinists' team led by Marko Prezelj and me in 2018 (the last time this route was known to have been climbed), ate the last of our food, and on the next day reached the refreshing Enguri River near Ushguli, after a descent that was quite painful due to big boots and rapidly rising temperatures. We returned to the village of Mestia that night, then drove to the Black Sea to heal our wounds.

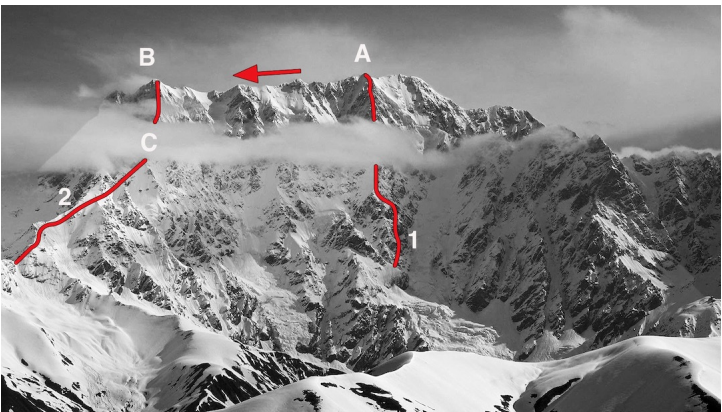
The Express Traverse combined routes of 5B, 5B, and 5A (ED+); the traverse spanned August 4–9.

— **Archil Badriashvili, Georgia**

Images



Shkhara (5,203m), the highest peak in Georgia, from Ushguli.



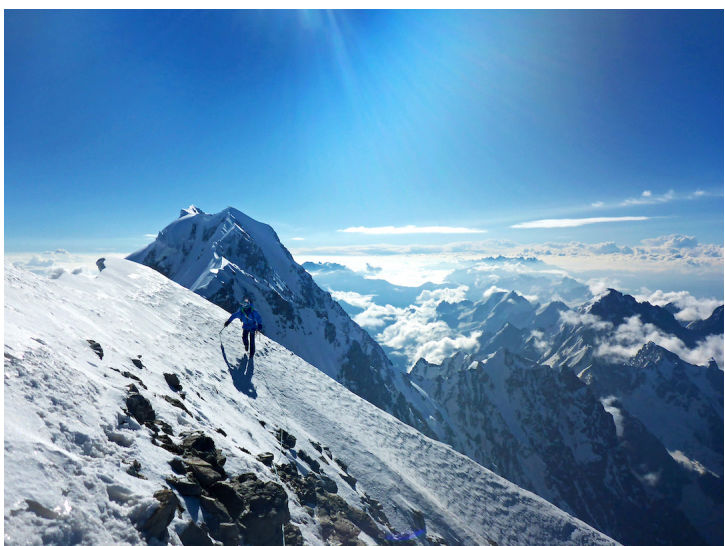
(A) Shkhara's main summit (5,203m) from the south. The six-day traverse began with the Beknu-Khergiani Route (1), continued along the ridge to the west summit (B), and descended the Rolleston-Longstaff Route (2), passing over the south summit (C; hidden in clouds).



First full day on the ridge, traversing from Shkhara's main peak (in back) toward the central summit.



Astride the Shkhara Ridge, "in the north and south Caucasus at the same time," climbing toward Shkhara's central summit.



Approaching the west summit of Shkhara, with the main summit in back.



Temo Qurdiani (left) and Archil Badriashvili on Shkhara's main summit.

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