



## AAC Publications

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### Ak-Sai Horseshoe in Winter

Kyrgyzstan, Tien Shan, Ala-Archa

**A traverse of the Ak-sai Horseshoe, an arc of 15 peaks encircling the Ak-sai Glacier, has long been considered one of Central Asia's most elusive alpine objectives.** With many difficult summits and ridgelines known for their sharp exposure and technical difficulty, the traverse had defied numerous attempts over decades. Though teams had tried in both summer and winter, no one had managed to link all the peaks in a continuous effort.

The traverse, seen here from the Korona ridge between towers two and one, crosses the line of peaks in shadow in the middle distance, starting with Box Peak, the farthest summit in right center. Photo: Roman Abildaev.

In February 2023, a three-member Russian team—Egor Matveenkov, Roman Abildaev, and I—set out to change that. We planned to attempt the traverse in winter, knowing the cold would stabilize the snowpack but also add extreme temperatures and high wind to the already daunting task.

Starting on February 17, we climbed the Mikhaylov Route (5B) on the north face of Box Peak (4,293m). Carrying loads that exceeded 30kg, we worked through deep snow and overhanging mixed terrain. The technical face took two and a half days to ascend. Reaching the ridgeline was a relief, but it was only the beginning of our effort.

The traverse stretched approximately 27km, with a total elevation gain of nearly 5,000m across peaks such as Teke-Tor (4,441m), Ak-Too (4,612m), Svobodnaya Korea (4,778m), and Korona (4,860m). On the exposed ridge, severe weather was a constant companion, with temperatures routinely dropping to -25°C and wind gusts reaching 100 kph. Storms frequently obscured visibility, forcing careful navigation.

On February 22, we summited Svobodnaya Korea, where the seldom-traveled eastern descent presented a critical technical challenge. The following days brought us to the six towers of Korona Peak, which were particularly grueling, with icy, unstable rock and minimal opportunities for protection. Temperatures hit -39°C on February 25, our coldest night. By this point, more than a week into the expedition, exhaustion was a constant companion.

The final push began with the ascent of Semenova-Tyan-Shanskogo Peak (4,895m), the highest summit in the area, on February 26. The heavily corniced summit ridge required careful climbing. The descent was slow, involving multiple rappels and cautious route-finding down icy slopes. At 11:45 p.m., after ten days on the ridge and 93 hours of climbing, we reached the Ratsek Hut, completing the first winter traverse of the Ak-sai Horseshoe (Russian 6B)—a symbol of all that alpine climbing in Kyrgyzstan represents: beauty, danger, and always the possibility of failure.

—Tikhon von Stackelberg, Russia

## Images



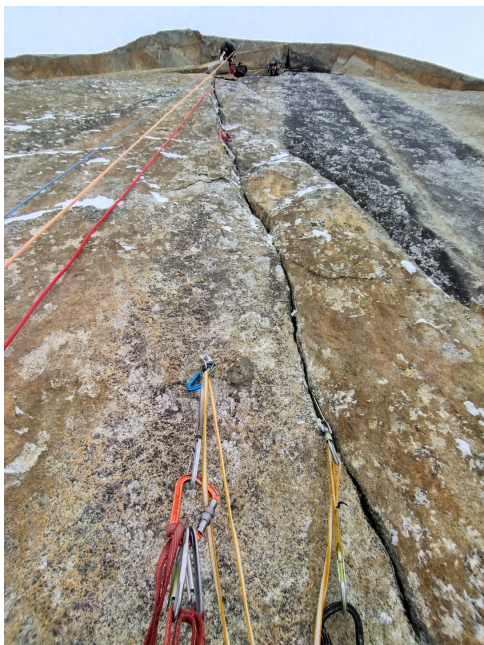
Seen from Korona Peak, across the Ak-sai Glacier: the north face of Svobodnaya Korea (4,778m), with Ak-too Peak on the right and a shoulder of Simagina on the left.



Egor Matveenکو leads below the main tower of Dvurogaya Peak (4,814 meters) on the Ak-sai Horseshoe traverse. Starting up from the shoulder between Kosmonavtov Peak and Dvurogaya.



The saddle between Dvurogaya and Korona's sixth tower. Tikhon von Stackelberg belays as Egor Matveenکو climbs through harsh wind.



The Ak-sai traverse began with a two-and-a-half-day big-wall ascent via the Mikhailov Route on Box Peak.



Jumaring fixed ropes beneath a roof on the Mikhailov Route, Box Peak.





Self-portrait of the team on the summit of Semenova-Tyan-Shanskogo Peak.



The traverse line seen from the Korona ridge between towers two and one, starting at the farthest peak in the middle distance and traversing the shadowed ridge toward the camera.



The view from the summit of Ak-Too Peak, looking generally east across the Ak-sai Glacier, with the rocky towers of Korona prominent on the left and the rounded summit of Baylyan Bashi in shadow on the right.

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