



AAC Publications

Koh-e-Wakhan Range, various attempts

Afghanistan, Big Pamir

Ben Mitchell, Cecelia Mortenson, Danny Uhlmann, and I traveled to the Big Pamir in May to explore the potential for ski mountaineering and alpinism, and make first ski descents of unclimbed or rarely climbed peaks. We chose the Koh-e-Wakhan because of the relative lack of interest it has received since climbers began visiting Afghanistan again in 2003 after 25 years of absence. We chose May because we wanted a thick snowpack yet tolerable temperatures and spring conditions.

The Wakhan has heaps of potential for alpinism and trekking, and visiting tourists in the poverty-stricken Badakshan province are providing a significant infusion of badly needed revenue. Security is resonantly good in most of Badakshan, though there are naturally some exceptions. In common with previous parties we entered Afghanistan through southern Tajikistan; this country is not without its own set of serious security problems and political instability. For assistance in planning a visit to the Wakhan, we recommend contacting Adab Shah in Ishkashim. He knows the area intimately, but expect to pay hefty fees for vehicle transport, fuel, guesthouses, and Mr. Shah's assistance.

We traveled two days in a Toyota Hilux up the Corridor to the village of Ptukh, where we hired porters for an easy two-day hike northwest to base camp on the lower Issik Glacier, a little above 4,000m. We then developed plans for three 6,000m peaks: Koh-e-Seh Aspe Safed (6,101m); Koh-e-Zemestan (6,092m), and the highest in the range, Koh-e-Pamir (6,320m, Austrian Map; 6,288m Polish Map; 37°08'07" N, 73°15'42" E Google Earth). [There are two useful maps to this area: a Polish sketch map produced after a 1971 expedition, and an Austrian contour map published in 1978. Where heights differ, both are recorded.] However, we were plagued by stormy weather and a tricky snowpack. We turned back no more than 100m from the summit of Koh-e-Seh Aspe Safed East (6,040m) in whiteout and heavy snow, but the ski descent was fun. We climbed a striking 1,000m couloir toward the left side of the southwest face of Koh-e-Pamir, but searched futilely for a reasonably safe line up the continuing summit (northeast) ridge, which was 50° ice covered with a thin slab of rotten snow. Our aluminum crampons and short ski-racing axes did not inspire enough confidence to commit to such terrain, so we bailed and skied the couloir instead.

Our final attempt went little better. We didn't like the look of the teetering seracs threatening Zemestan's north face, so we turned our attention to a more aesthetic, unnamed 5,538m peak (Austrian; 5,568m Polish map) on the ridge to its east. We attempted the north face, but conditions toward the top forced us down and around onto the northeast face. Here, the 50° couloir exit was guarded by slabby rotten snow, so once again we were obliged to wave the white flag, this time a painfully close 50m below the summit. I believe my GPS had us near 5,700m at this point, but my confidence is low both in the map and data we recorded. The topography around Zemestan and on the upper reaches of Koh-e-Pamir was quite different from the (Austrian) map.

We probably found worse weather in May than most Wakhan visitors experience during summer. (One may not want to visit in the month of August, during which Ramadan is observed by much of the local population.) Feel free to contact me at taylorfoto@gmail.com with questions about logistics and visiting Afghanistan as an "American tourist." For more images of the region visit www.tayloralpine.com.

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Images



Koh-e-Pamir (6,320m Austrian map; 6,288m Polish map) from the southwest, showing the line of the 2012 attempt. The Italian Carlo Pinelli made the first ascent of this peak in 1971. It was climbed again by Austrians in 1975. The skyline ridge on the right leads toward unclimbed Peak 6,009m (Austrian; 5,950m Polish).



Ben Mitchell at the turnaround point on the north face of Peak 5,538m. (A) Koh-e-Zemestan (6,092m, both maps), thought to be unclimbed. (B) Koh-e-Zemestan East (6,080m, climbed in 1971 by Poles via the east ridge). (C) Kotal-e-Zemestan (5,650m pass). (D) Koh-e-Moshkel (6,063m Austrian; 6,103m, Polish), thought to be unclimbed. (E) Zemestan Glacier (Austrian map; Barabar Glacier, Polish map).



Looking northwest across the Northern Issik Glacier at (A) Peak 5,842m (Austrian map; 5,857m Polish map), thought to be unclimbed. (B) Koh-e-Seh Aspe Safed West, a.k.a. Koh-e-Maghrebi (6,040m), first climbed in 2005 via an approach from the north by Spanish. (C) Koh-e-Seh Aspe Safed (6,101m, thought to be unclimbed). (D) Koh-e-Seh Aspe Safed East (6,040m) and route of 2012 attempt. Well behind A and opposite B is Koh-e-Barbar (6,110m Polish map; 6,078m Austrian map), first climbed in

2005 from the south by Americans.



Peak 5,538m (Austrian; 5,568m Polish). The 2012 team attempt, initially up the north face, and then the northeast face, is marked. Koh-e-Zemestan is off picture right.



On route to the Pamir. No comment needed.

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