



AAC Publications

Muztagh Tower (7,284m), northeast spur, Think Twice.

Pakistan, Karakoram, Baltoro Muztagh

The pioneering photographer Vittorio Sella took his famous picture of the Muztagh Tower in 1909. Since then only five expeditions have climbed one or both of the twin summits [the east is the main top, the west several meters lower]: British and French climbers in 1956; British in 1984; Swedish in 1990, and our Russian team in 2012.

To research our route, I talked with Vadim Geshkenbein, who was there in 1994. He gave me much interesting information regarding the southern side of the peak and advised me to contact Bruce Normand, who had visited the northern flanks in 2005. Bruce too gave us invaluable information. It was he who consulted with Pavle Kozjek before his ill-fated expedition to the mountain's northeast face in 2008. [Editor's note: From the summit of 6,001m Tsetse, above the Moni La, Normand saw that an active band of seracs threatened both the true north face and north ridge, and that the unrepeated southeast ridge sported gargantuan cornices. This left two viable lines: the poorly defined northeast spur, which falls directly from the main summit and has a very steep rock barrier between 6,600m and 6,900m, and an easier, predominantly snow/ice line on the far left of the northeast face, leading toward a col on the southeast ridge between the main summit and a distinctive sharp top named the Black Tooth (6,702m). It was the latter line that Slovenians attempted in 2008 before Kozjek fell to his death].

After a five-day walk from Askole, Sergey Kotachkov, Alexander Lange, Sergey Nilov, and I arrived at base camp (4,600m) below Muztagh Tower. Once established we reconnoitered the approach to the ca 2,000m northeast face. This was easy at first, but later proved more difficult due to a maze of crevasses on the Younghusband Glacier. For a better view of the face, we climbed to 5,500m on the flanks of the Skilbrum massif opposite the peak. We had a pleasant surprise: no avalanche or icefall visible for the 20 hours we were there. The northeast spur, which Bruce had recommended, looked beautiful and safe. We dubbed it "the saw" due to its appearance.

Next we reached the Moni La (5,566m) at the head of the glacier and inspected the north ridge, which rises from it. We also looked at the British route on the northwest ridge, hoping to see a feasible descent. The north ridge appeared more difficult than it had looked in photos we had seen. It was also considerably more dangerous than the northeast spur. The British route looked long and not at all easy. We spent a night on Moni pass and then descended to base camp, where we were stuck for almost a week, amusing ourselves with slacklining, playing dominos, and washing.

On August 9, Alex, Sergey Nilov, and I crossed the bergschrund below the spur at 5,250m, carrying two rucksacks and a 70L haulbag filled with food and gas. We anticipated spending 14 days on the mountain. At first we ascended 50-60° snow slopes right of the spur. Alex and I led, saving Sergey for the headwall. On our first day the sun was strong, the snow was wet, the packs were heavy, and we were thirsty. From time to time we prayed for clouds. Our shy requests were fulfilled. Next day it started to snow and continued for a week. During this period we ascended slowly to ca 6,200m, and then sat in our tent for a couple of days.

The weather finally cleared on the 17th. After drying gear we set out to reach the headwall. There we found amazing snow formations, where warm southerly winds had blown snow and ice over the north side of the mountain, plastering it to vertical rock walls. It looked horrendous, so we decided to make a long, rising, rightward traverse to the north-northeast ridge. This proved challenging and time consuming, and was led entirely by Nilov: 600m of free climbing up to 6a/6b with one pitch of A2.

On the 23rd, one day before reaching the ridge, we ran out of food save for a few sweets, and once on the crest someone turned off the good weather. On the morning of August 24 we finished the remaining gas, and by evening had climbed to within 300m distance of the summit. Strong wind pinned us down for the night in a crevasse, but we struggled to the east top, the highest summit of Muztagh Tower, at seven the following morning—the 25th—17 days after beginning the route.

Our plan now was to retrace our steps a little, and then turn left and traverse snow slopes below the crest to reach the northwest ridge, then cross it to northwest face, descending the British Route. However, the weather was bad, visibility poor, and by midday we found ourselves blocked by an icefall. We either had to reascend and find another way, or rappel directly downward. Opting for the latter, we continued down the objectively dangerous north ridge/face, battered by spindrift and narrowly missed by large avalanches. We carried on through the night, even after our headlamps gave out, and 23 hours after leaving the summit we were safely standing on the Younghusband Glacier.

We took only two climbing ropes plus two static ropes that we used occasionally for moving gear. We took a hand drill and placed eight to ten bolts, nearly all at bivouac sites. Apart from these, and inadvertently dropped ice gear, nothing was left on the mountain. We named our route Think Twice (3,400m of climbing, ED 6a A2 M6).

Dmitry Golovchenko, Russia, supplied by Anna Piunova, mountain.ru

Images



The 2,000m northeast spur of Muztagh Tower showing the Russian line Think Twice.



Misty conditions on the headwall. Youngusband Glacier far below.



Sergey Nilov on the big rightward traverse in the upper part of the headwall. Changtok peaks behind.



Upper slopes of the Muztagh Tower from the north-northeast. The last camps on the headwall of the northeast spur, and summit plateau, are marked. The black line marks the descent of the north face and north ridge (the latter continues off picture to the right). Right skyline is upper northwest ridge.



Precariously placed camp on the headwall of the northeast spur, with the Gasherbrum Group behind.

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