



AAC Publications

Talgar, West Face, Partial New Route and First Ski and Snowboard Descent

Kazakhstan, Tien Shan, Zayliyskiy Alatau

The Zayliyskiy Alatau is the most northerly system of the Tien Shan (see note below). It extends around 350km and reaches its maximum elevation on Pik Talgar (4,973m, 43°7'5.18"N, 77°20'21.34"E). The region has a rich climbing history, beginning 100 years ago with the boom of mountaineering in the former Soviet Union. A large mountaineering camp was established in the Middle Talgar Valley, south of the town of Talgar, but this was destroyed by a mudslide in 1979. Later, the government created the Almatinsky Nature Reserve in the Middle Talgar Valley and climbers began visiting the mountains less often. Today, despite the close proximity to Almaty, these wild peaks are difficult to access and see only a few parties each year. (AAJ 2011 reported a new route on the southwest face of Talgar.) There are many attractive peaks besides Talgar, offering both simple and difficult routes, but as these are located within the nature reserve, special permission is normally required, and this can be hard to obtain.

Talgar was first climbed in 1938, and the ascent usually takes five to seven days. The normal route climbs the south side of the mountain, but the most beautiful and complex lines lie on the kilometer-wide northwest face, clearly visible from Almaty. The traditional approach was via the nature reserve, but now there is an alternative route from the Chimbulak (Shymbulak) ski resort. The idea of skiing from the summit had been rooted in many minds, but the insidious weather, avalanche-prone slopes, a multiday approach, and the steepness of the descent, where a fall would probably be fatal, had deterred all.

In June 2016, I joined Americans Robin Hill and Brody Leven for an attempt to climb the northwest face and descend by ski and snowboard. We first climbed and skied Tuyuk-su, Molodezhny, and Ordzhonikidze in the Small Almaty Gorge. Then, on June 2, we hiked up the closed ski resort of Chimbulak, and, with the help of two friends acting as porters, traveled four days, via the snow-covered Talgarsky and Teu passes, to reach the upper section of the Middle Talgar Valley and the beginning of the South Talgar Glacier. We were lucky with the weather (it rained on only one day) and also lucky to see snow leopard tracks while crossing Teu Pass on the third day.

At 2:30 a.m. on day five we started up the South Talgar Glacier, then continued in a 35–40° névé couloir to reach a west-facing ridge on the face. Once on the crest, we roped up and I led a steeper section in the icefall between the main and south summits. In places we had to bypass dangerous seracs and bridged crevasses.

After ascending nearly 900m, we came to the crux, a steep 400m face. The simplest option, a wide couloir between the south and main summits, was very icy; to the left, a possible alternative followed a 50°, heavily snow-covered rib. We opted for something in between: a gully left of the main couloir.

With Brody in the lead, we climbed quickly up 50–70° ice, covered with 10cm of névé, then crossed numerous gendarmes and did a bit of dry-tooling. Robin, in soft snowboarding boots, sometimes found it difficult to drive his crampons into the hard ice. Finally, ice-covered rocks led to a cornice and, above this, the broad south ridge. This last part of the ascent followed previously unclimbed terrain: 60° ice and 75° mixed, with a few vertical mixed steps of 5m to 7m. At 11:30 a.m. we were on the summit. The weather was perfect, and I was convinced that, as legend says, you can see from this top to Khan Tengri and Pobeda (about 250km in a straight line).

Our main goal was the descent, so more difficulties were still to come. After regaining our exit point onto the south ridge, we made one rappel down mixed ground (M2) and then slowly descended a line close to, but south of, our path of ascent. At times, a thin covering of snow over hard ice ruled out any possibility of safe falls. By making hop turns between rocky ridges and the icy face, we only had to make that one rappel. Once down the main face, we relaxed a little and allowed ourselves to adopt a more aggressive approach.

It didn't end there. During our access from Chimbulak, we had descended a glacier that we felt would be impossible to ascend safely. We therefore had to exit through the nature reserve, making our way through real northern jungle, down the Middle Talgar Gorge, and then, annoyingly, over a high pass. It was hard: We found ourselves covered with ticks, and a recent mudslide, which had demolished any flat ground or trail, left us traversing a steep hillside above the gorge for more than 20 hours and 30km.

Throughout the expedition, we met not a single person and were extremely lucky with the weather; good planning, help from friends, and selecting the right equipment and food all played key roles. At the end we were exhausted: The mountain took everything from us, but in exchange gave back something more.

– Vitaly "Rage" Komarov, Kazakhstan, with help from Brody Leven, AAC

Editor's note: The **Zayliyskiy** Alatau (also sometimes spelled **Zaylyiskiy**, **Zailiiskii**, or **Zalisky**) should not be confused with the **Zaalayskiy**, a subrange of the Pamir, far to the south, along the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; **Pik Lenin** (7,134m) is the highest summit of the **Zaalayskiy**.

Images



Vitaly "Rage" Komarov belays Robin Hill through new ground on the upper section of the west face of Talgar.



Vitaly "Rage" Komarov on the upper plateau of the west face of Talgar. The route climbed through the rocky section left of the wide couloir, and between this and the narrower ice gully.



Brody Leven during the tick-ridden walk out the Middle Talgar Gorge.



Vitaly "Rage" Komarov rappelling the final pitch of mixed ground below the summit plateau of Talgar. This was the only section rappelled during the descent.



Robin Hill on Talgar. The peaks behind are on the west side of the Middle Talgar Valley.



Robin Hill (behind) and Vitaly Komarov on the west face of Talgar.



Talgar from the south-southwest. The distant summit on the left is Pik Kopr (ca 4,750m). The 2016 ski and snowboard descent is marked. The 2010 Vitaly Komarov–Denis Urubko route, reported in AAJ 2011, is farther left on the same face.

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