



Thirteen Days on Shkhara: A New Route and First Winter Ascent From the South

Georgia, Caucasus

Shkhara (5,203m) is Georgia's highest mountain—about 500m higher than well-known Ushba—and according to experienced mountaineers from our country, "It is better to climb Ushba in the worst conditions than to go to Shkhara in winter." Despite this, several attempts had been made to reach the summit from the south in winter. [Shkhara previously had been climbed from the north in winter—the first time was in 1986—and via a ridge traverse, but the complex south face had never seen a winter ascent.] In 2016, Baqar Gelashvili, Giorgi Tepnadze, and I tried the south face but turned back after five days, acknowledging that we needed a different strategy.

In January 2018, Giorgi and I acclimatized in the Kazbek region and then, on February 2, with the help of friends, walked to an advanced base camp below Shkhara at 2,670m. The snow was much deeper than during our previous attempt. On the next day our friends helped us carry loads partway up the Shkhara Glacier toward the central couloir on the southwest face of Shkhara Southeast (4,620m), a prominent summit on the south-southeast (frontier) ridge of Shkhara Main. We took food and equipment for around 10 days and started climbing that day.

Over two days we climbed 1,000m up the couloir. During the afternoon of the second day, the weather deteriorated and small avalanches came down the couloir. We moved left onto a ridge, alternating between dry tooling on compact rock and climbing 70° snow, until we were able to dig out a tent platform at about 4,000m.

A blizzard kept us confined to the tent throughout our third day. On day four we climbed snow-covered rock to reach the most continuous technical section of our route, a narrow gully with climbing up to WI5. Avalanches and spindrift filled our mouths and eyes and froze our equipment. We built a bivy ledge just big enough for two, and next day traversed up and left across an icefield, bypassing Shkhara Southeast, to reach a col on the south-southeast ridge below a large gendarme. Despite having now ascended 2,000m from advanced base, there was still a long way to go.

To outflank the gendarme, we descended the far (northeast) side of the ridge to reach a high glacier basin where, in 2013, I had spent four days in a tent with Austrian colleagues due to bad weather. (We had climbed an established route to Shkhara, finishing up the eastern ridge, and got stuck while descending.) The next day, Giorgi and I climbed back to the crest of the ridge, well beyond the gendarme, and, according to a topo, to the right of the couloir climbed by the Gvalia Route (Cheishvili-Gvalia, 1933), which reaches the basin from the Nankvan Glacier. We camped on the crest at 4,620m.

Next day, our eighth of the climb, we cached the inner tent, took the fly, and started up the frontier ridge, following the Gvalia Route toward the main summit. We began by simul-climbing and then opened a new variant via a rocky pyramid with some fun mixed climbing. After this Giorgi led 10 pitches of ice to reach the summit ridge in a blizzard. The forecast had been for -38°C and 55km/h wind, but it felt worse—not least because by now it was dark. At 8:40 p.m. on February 10 we were standing on the summit: For the first time Georgians had climbed their highest peak in winter. We started to descend the same way, but at 5,000m decided to cover ourselves with the fly sheet and wait until dawn.

It took all of next day to get back to the tent. At one point, during a traverse, Giorgi took a 15m fall on blue ice and lost a crampon. That night the gas was almost gone, we had little food, and there was no chance to dry our clothes.

On our tenth day above advanced base we regained the glacier basin, where the snow was so deep we had to resort to an improvised crawling technique to cross it. It took half a day to reach the base of the couloir leading back up to the ridge. We camped again and spent the whole of the following day climbing just three pitches of 80° snow. At the crest we got a signal on our satellite phone and were able to call anxious friends. We rappelled the ice face on the far side, rejoined our ascent route, and next day were able to cross the rocky terrain and descend the central couloir. Our gas and food were now long gone, but by the end of the day we were safely at the bottom.

Unfortunately, we were faced with another surprise: An avalanche had stolen our poles and snowshoes. We decided to keep going and descended for another eight hours, through the night, to reach a hut in the valley, where we enjoyed a fire. Continuing down next day, we met with another surprise, this time most welcome: Our friends had organized a small helicopter to take us to the town of Mestia.

All of Giorgi and my previous expeditions, including the first ascent of Larkya Main in Nepal in 2017, had provided us with the experience and resilience to stay mobilized and enthusiastic for what is probably one of the longest routes in Georgia.

Summary: First winter ascent of Shkhara from the south, by Archil Badriashvili and Giorgi Tepnadze. The route involved 2,500m of climbing (60-plus pitches) and was graded 6B (ED2) M5 WI5 75–80°.

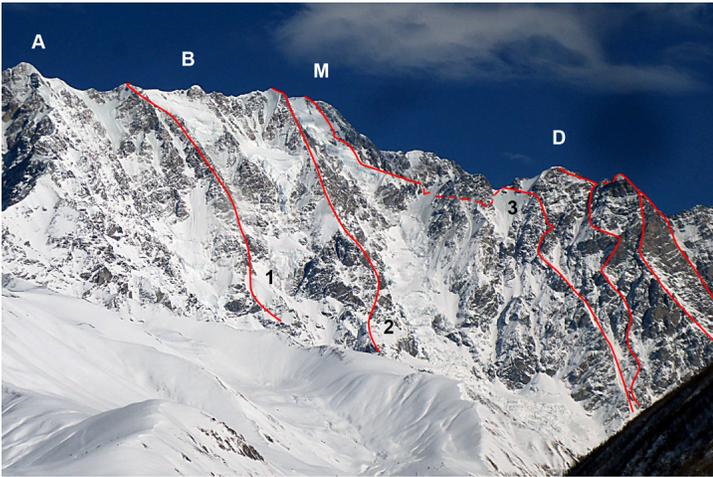
Images



Archil Badriashvili and Giorgi Tepnadze enduring harsh conditions during the first winter ascent of the south face of Shkhara.



Giorgi Tepnadze on the south-southeast ridge of Shkhara. To bypass the large gendarme behind him, the climbers descended into the glacier basin to the right (northeast), then climbed back up to the crest and on to the summit via the route marked.



Shkhara seen from the southwest during the first winter ascent of Shkhara South in 2017. (A) West summit. (B) Central summit. (M) Main summit (5,203m). (D) Pik 4,600m. (1) South Pillar of central summit (Tevdorashvili Route). (2) South Pillar (Beknu Khergiani Route), the “normal” route from the south. (3) Badriashvili-Tepnadze Route (2018) for the first winter ascent of the south face. Not all routes on the south face are shown. All lines to the right (including one not drawn) are Georgian routes to Shkhara Southeast (Pik 4,620m).



Climbing the final section of the south-southeast ridge (Gvalia Route) leading to the main summit of Shkhara. The 2018 climb began on previously unclimbed terrain off-picture to the right, crossed the ridge line to the sunlit glacial basin at left, then reascended to the ridge to reach the summit. The round trip from advanced base camp took 13 days.



Giorgi Tepnadze ascends a narrow ice gully on the fourth day of the first ascent of the south face of Shkhara in winter.



A Google Earth view of the south side of Shkhara. The left-hand red line (G) is the route used for the first winter ascent from Georgia (2018). The right-hand red line (H) is an older route that was repeated by Archil Badriashvili and team in 2013. The green line is the upper section of the Gvalia Route, while the yellow line marks the frontier ridge between Georgia (to the south) and Russia.

Article Details

Author	Archil Badriashvili
Publication	AAJ
Volume	60
Issue	92
Page	256
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions