



AAC Publications

Kyzyl Asker Massif, Dry Ice Queen

Kyrgyzstan, Tien Shan, Western Kokshaal-too

In 2021, Lukás Bulla, Marek Radovský, and I had planned to repeat the Polish route on the northwest face of Pik Vernyi (4,850m), near Kyzyl Asker, but instead we established our own route, a little bit left on the same face. The 650m route (WI5 M7-) ended below the most prominent tower visible from the valley.

Marek and I returned in August 2022. Unfortunately, the conditions were deplorable, and a line we had seen the previous year had melted. We looked for other options but eventually returned to base camp and stared blankly at the bottoms of our cups of buckthorn tea.

After two days in camp, we hiked up again with two ideas in mind. The glacier was like a big swamp. Our first option was a rock wall with a glacier finish, and we started up that same evening, but apparently one pair of climbing shoes and one set of cams were not enough. So we opted for the second possibility, the east face of the big spur on the northeast flank of Kyzyl Asker. [Editor's Note: In AAJ 2023, the author identified this face as being on Pik Zabor (Sabor, 4,850m), "just opposite Pik Vernyi." The face in question does indeed rise opposite the northwest face of Vernyi, but the identity is confusing because Sabor is the name previously used for Vernyi. It was given that name by the British expedition that climbed the north ridge in 2003, believing the peak was unnamed. A report in AAJ 2005 as well as a map published by the AAJ also used the name Sabor. However, the mountain was named Vernyi back in the Soviet era, when the peak was first climbed, and it's the name the AAJ has used in reports since 2005. It's not clear if the formation on the northeast side of Kyzyl Asker, described in this report, has any name of its own.]

We planned to carry no bivouac gear or stove, just one liter of water per person and a drill in case we needed to place any bolts.

August 13 was supposed to be clear, which worried us as the wall would be in sun the whole morning. Fortunately, the sky was cloudy. We simul-climbed the first 150m and set our first anchor under an unusual ice overhang that the warm temperatures had created. To climb it, we first needed to crawl beneath it, as if into a cobra's mouth. Then it was only up to our climbing skill to get on top of it. As I was taking pictures of Marek a huge chunk of ice landed on my hand. Fortunately, apart from some blood and a couple of scratches, I was fine and we were able to continue, but my hand hurt and I did not feel confident to lead.

Marek took it upon himself and fought like a tiger, leading one sketchy pitch after another. When I reached the crux, which we had studied carefully from below, I just stared in disbelief at the endless slab and the overhangs above it. Marek brought me back to reality, saying, "I know how to do it, just tell me if you can see a crack in that corner." This is where me and Marek really connected. We knew how to encourage each other in difficult moments. It was very important for us to trust each other. "Marek, there is a crack, I think it's doable, even in crampons, though it won't be easy." I wanted to help, but my hand was still hurting, so Marek pushed on without hesitation. He managed to place protection, which was the important part, but he couldn't reach the corner where I saw the crack.

"Marek, grab the undercling with your ice axe and try to stand up." Marek managed this and reached the crack in the corner and placed protection, but the fight was not over. After an hour, Marek was setting an anchor, but there were still a couple of pitches left before we reached the upper section, where we expected to find ice and névé.

Marek led another two gnarly pitches. We still had to figure out how to get past another crux, as the corner we wanted to climb was glazed with ice and had water running down it. Marek tried to look around the corner, as it seemed like there could be a platform above us, leading to the ice section. "It looks like there could be a way, but you try it." I got to the end of the platform and just needed to climb down a bit to reach the ice section. It would have been a beautiful pitch if the conditions were right. The ice didn't hold, and there was nowhere to place protection. But Marek made it just before darkness set in.

We were thinking about our next steps because we had run out of water a long time ago and we only had one bar left. We were physically and mentally exhausted. I switched on my headlamp and headed up a beautiful steep firn corner, but then reality set in. I was climbing on a thin, chossy "waffle." And then another surprise: At the end there was no more waffle, just whipped cream. That feeling when you're standing on nothing and digging your way up snow, 700m above the ground, is not very appealing. So you turn on the rescue mode and somehow soldier on. Hurrah, found a place for an anchor.

One more annoying steep ice climb—in the light of headlamps, it looked unclimbable. After the ice section, there was only one question left: Could we make it to the ridge? There was a chossy corner with an offwidth, and we thought we were close to the ridge. Based on the photos, maybe one to two pitches away, but the terrain was loose and we were fed up with it. We could probably make it in one pitch but decided for two shorter ones. We eventually made it onto the ridge, but then came the reality—again. We needed to descend.

We started rapelling, which went pretty well—the drill worked great. The ropes didn't get stuck, and after a couple of hours we made it down. Slowly we reached the tent, boiled water, drank, and lay down, almost at daybreak. A few hours of sleep were enough to recharge batteries for the trip to base camp. There was also beer waiting for us, which kept me afloat. We ate, drank, and slowly realized what we had achieved. What an amazing feeling. We called our route Dry Ice Queen and graded it WI6+ M9- (920m of climbing distance).

Then we decided that it would be nice to summit [the wall] in broad daylight. There was a glacier on its west side, and though it did not look very appealing from below, it could be a relatively quick climb to the top. It turned out to be a maze through bus-sized crevasses and a couple of pitches of climbing, but it did work out and we reached the summit. The original plan was to go down the glacier, but we didn't want to risk it again, so we rappelled the wall, which would have been pleasant had it not been for the storm. In the end, a short hike on the glacier turned into a 12-hour cardio session. When we crawled back to our tent it had stopped snowing, so we made a cappuccino and quickly packed.

Three hours later we were back at our base camp tent and it was time to celebrate with our second watermelon. After waiting for an hour, we got up to look for our ride. It seemed like a futile exercise at first but eventually our van arrived. Hurrah, we are safe!

I would like to thank everyone who supported our expedition in Kyrgyzstan. We thank our loved ones and families for being patient with us, and everyone else who has helped. A big thank you goes to our sponsors, especially to SHS James. And thank you to my oldest daughter, who forgave me for not attending her birthday party, though I know it will cost me dearly.

— Juraj Švingál, Slovak Republic

Images



The line of Dry Ice Queen (920m of climbing, WI6+ M9-) on the east-facing wall of the spur on Kyzyl Asker's long northeast flank.



Marek Radovsky leading one of the crux passages on Dry Ice Queen.



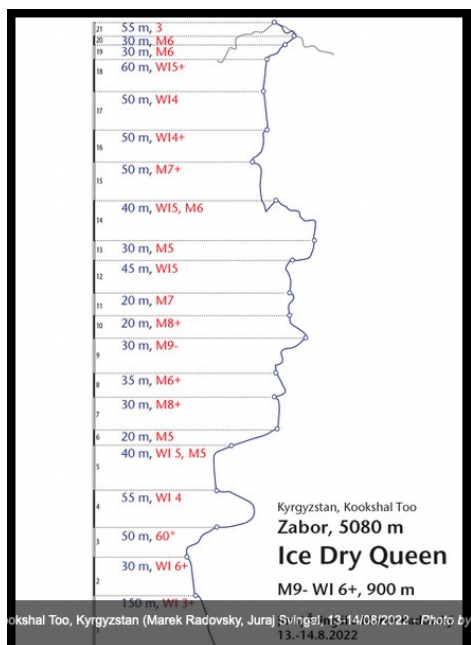
Ice climbing on Dry Ice Queen.



Juraj Švingál bypassing steep, rotten ice on Dry Ice Queen.



Demanding crack climbing on Dry Ice Queen.



Topo for Dry Ice Queen, climbed in August 2022.

Article Details

Author	Juraj Švingál
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	97
Page	275
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions