



AAC Publications

Pik Ulun, First Ascent, South Face and Southwest Ridge

China, Xinjiang, Western Kokshaal-too

Embarking on a mountain expedition is akin to taking a plunge into cold water: No matter how well you prepare, it still takes your breath away.

Our team from St. Petersburg chose to spend summer vacation along the Kyrgyzstan-China border. The approach to base camp took a total of seven days, at first with jeeps and an off-road vehicle, then by a strenuous trek with 50kg loads, including food for 18 days, using sleds on the glaciers.

We followed the same approach as a team in 2021: up the Dzhirgagaktu Glacier and then across the Uygrskiy Pass (Uighur, ca 4,630m, 1B), followed by a traverse southeast to Kechiksu Pass (ca 4,780m, 2B), and finally a descent to the east onto the Synarjar Glacier in China. [This name for the glacier was used by the 2019 Russian trekking team, led by Ilya Mikhalev, that first completed this approach from Kyrgyzstan, but the origin is not clear.]

This area has many beautiful peaks and so many unclimbed routes, but the weather here is a gamble. The night before crossing the second pass, we were struck by an electrical storm so vivid that it illuminated everything around, and the thunder was so powerful that it seemed the lightning would reach us any moment. While we occasionally glimpsed the sun, we weren't prepared for the wintry conditions we experienced in August. We chose to start with Pik Ulun (Oolong, 5,588m, 41°0'44.96"N, 77°18'44.27"E) because its south face was the driest around. At the time we considered it a warm-up, expecting to climb other peaks. How wrong we were.

There were seven of us, split into two teams. Evgeny Murin would climb with Olga Lukashenko and Ilya Penyaev, while the second team comprised Andrey Panov, Sergey Seryanov, Ilya Zhdanov, and me. In our group, Andrey was the leader, having done several significant first ascents, Sergey was the strongest and calmest of us, while Ilya was the most positive and cheerful. Evgeny had tried this face on Ulun in 2021 (AAJ 2022) and wanted to complete his route. We opted for a line farther left. We expected the ascent to take two to three days. It took six.

Both teams started on August 23. From the base of the wall at 4,793m, we climbed the steep lower rock with two camps. This section involved thin ice climbing, followed by a three-pitch chimney. Its walls were vertical, the left covered with a thin layer of ice that we climbed very carefully. (On one pitch, the leader had to ascend more than 30m before getting ice screws to engage halfway—this was the psychological crux of the route.) Then it began to snow and didn't stop until after the climb. We reached the southwest ridge on August 25 and then were stuck for two nights because of bad weather. We had taken one lightweight tent that could accommodate four people.

On the 27th we moved up the ridge and made our top camp only 15m below the summit, although at the time we didn't realize we were so close. The wind howled and we awoke to find the tent mostly buried in snow. Someone mentioned it was difficult to breathe. The tent zipper was under the snow, and we couldn't dig it out, so we were forced to use a knife. Crawling outside, we dug out the tent with our helmets, and after a couple of hours, exhausted, we were able to sleep until morning.

Next day, the sun was shining and we went to the summit. On the way back, we received a message that a strong storm would hit shortly and last for three hours. In fact, it lasted eight hours. We tried to

shelter in the damaged tent, holding the fabric together to minimize the amount of snow coming inside.

On the following day, with no more food or gas, we would have to descend, and we opted to head east and then down to the glacier, rather than reverse our ascent route. We quickly crossed over the summit and then drilled our first Abalakov anchor. We made 20 to 25 rappels, which went relatively smoothly, and finally reached the glacier around 9 p.m.

It was only 2.5km to base camp (fortunately placed much closer to the wall than it had been in 2021), but the considerable amount of new snow made it impossible to progress unless we moved on all fours. We crawled for four hours, with our packs and duffels strung out behind our harnesses like tails. Each of us went through stages of denial and acceptance. I thought only about one thing: Keep moving my limbs and eventually it will end.

It did end, but base camp was nowhere to be seen. Everything was buried, and we had to dig again. We finally found the food barrel and ate all the dehydrated meals inside.

The 800m face had given us 1,200m of climbing with technical difficulties of F6a A2+ WI4 M6 and an overall grade of 5B.

Evgeny's team reached the summit a day after us, having climbed the south face with the same start he used in 2021. Once on the southwest ridge, they followed our line to the top to complete Crack of Doom. This 760m route (climbing length 960m) was graded Russian 6A (6b A3 WI3 M6). Like us, they descended to the east.

Without my climbing companions, those weeks of summer-winter would not have been so awesome. Thank you, guys!

— **Oksana Kochubey, Russia**

Images



Climbing on the lower south face of Pik Ulun.



Olga Lukashenko during the first ascent of Crack of Doom on the south face of Pik Ulun.



Day two on Crack of Doom: the great roof of pitch 16.



Sculptured rock on the south face of Pik Ulun, characteristic of this area of the Western Kokshaal-too.



The unclimbed southwest face of Kyzyl Asker (center) seen from the summit of Pik Ulun. To the left is Pik 5,632m.



The south face of Pik Ulun and (1) the Kochubey-Panov-Seryanov-Zhdanov route. (2) Crack of Doom. The descent followed the right skyline of the peak before descending to the glacier.



Climbing towards the chimney that formed the crux section of the Kochubey-Panov-Seryanov-Zhdanov route.



The off-road vehicle in the Kyrgyz Western Kokshaal-too, here on its way to the start of the approach trek.



Day two on the first ascent of the left-hand route on the south face of Pik Ulun.



Rappelling the final part of the descent from Pik Ulun.

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