North Muztagh: Xinjiang's Forgotten Peak

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The 'Pamir Knot' is a term used by geographers to describe a knot of mountain peaks in the centre of Asia rimming the uplifted plateau called Pamyi-Dunya ('Roof of the World'). Like the folds of a huge circus tent with the Pamir Knot as its centre, the great mountain ranges and deserts of Central Asia spire out in alternate extremes to the edges of the earth's largest continent, forming the natural boundaries between China's Tibet and Xinjiang, Mongolia, Siberia, Soviet Kirgiziya and Tadzhikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

In the centre of the Pamir Knot is a small circle of mountains, some 70km wide and 150km long, forming a contiguous ring around the Pamyi-Dunya. The huge massif of Kongur (7719m) to the north forms the most impressive side of this ring, whereas to the south the barrier is not skyward but hell-bound, dropping straight into the 'Valley of Blood', the Kunjerab. Inside the walls of the Pamir Knot are two high valleys separated by a solitary mountain that stands alone in the centre: Muztagh Ata, the Father of Ice Mountains.

The entire mountain above 6000m is a giant dangling glacier splayed out conically to the north, west, and south like a volcano, with a half-dozen glacial canyons slicing outwards from the centre like spokes, dividing the mountain into three distinct peaks with eight separate faces. Indeed, one might have concluded that Muztagh Ata is an extinct volcano, were it not for the massive and still unexplored E face, a 3000m vertical bisection of jagged rock pinnacles and cliffs plunging into a tangle of glaciers below.

At 7427m the north summit of Muztagh Ata (hereinafter dubbed 'North Muztagh') is arguably the highest unnamed peak in the world. Indeed, though it had already been climbed – albeit only once prior to 1987 – it remains virtually unknown, bypassed in favour of its two legendary neighbours, Muztagh Ata and Kongur.

Muztagh Ata, only 119m higher, is a skier's peak, still the highest to have been ascended on ski but not a technical challenge (though its sheer E face has yet to be attempted). On the other hand, Kongur is the more serious challenge to hard climbing circles; the sole successful ascent was made by Chris Bonington in 1981, after having led a full reconnaissance expedition the previous year. That there has been no successful ascent since – despite attempts every year – is a lasting tribute to the other three members of Bonington's party who made the ascent: Joe Tasker, Pete Boardman, and Al Rouse.

North Muztagh falls somewhere in between. Its main bulk is cut off from Muztagh Ata by the Yambulak Glacier which gouges a 1000m cliff-lined chasm between the two from summit to base. The only obvious non-face route to the

summit is the windy N ridge, which a small Japanese party of four climbed in 1981. Our plan was to see how high we could reach on the same ridge, on ski, to acclimatize in preparation for making a quick, nonstop ski ascent/descent of Muztagh Ata.

Dick Renshaw, who had taken a season off from 'serious' climbing to join our party, referred to the N ridge of North Muztagh as 'similar to the N col route on Everest'. For him this was probably a dismissal, but for the rest of our group of office hermits and weekend mountaineers it suddenly put the N ridge into alarming perspective: questionably attainable even under ideal conditions, given our level of experience; an incalculable risk under anything less than the ideal – as we were soon to learn. Observing the ridge from the calm of the Karakol Lakes far below, one of our members, Anthony Willoughby, put it succinctly: 'I have a feeling I want to make friends with the mountain. In some funny way I find it like looking at a dog and wondering if it is about to wag its tail or bite my leg off.'

From most angles, North Muztagh appears to be the higher of the two peaks. It is much steeper and can be seen in its entirety from base to summit, a giant North Face VE-24 dome tent, with its own N face as the entrance. On the other hand, the crested main summit of adjacent Muztagh Ata flattens out at 7000m and stretches interminably towards what must be the world's highest horizon line. Like the earth before Columbus, however, this literal 'Roof of the World' drops off radically down the E side.

For this reason, North Muztagh attracted early attempts by such explorers as Sven Hedin (1894) and Sir Aurel Stein (1900). Neither of these two were accomplished climbers – we were definitely in a similar fraternity – and thus they could both be forgiven for choosing the wrong route on the wrong mountain: a low-angled ramp with even plane rising eastward out of the lower slopes at 4000m up to about 6000m, at which point it begins to yaw to the north, its S side twisting skywards whilst the north drops away into the vast amphitheatre of the Chodomak Glacier. By about 6600m it has contorted into a corniced knife-edge, its S windward side a sheer plunge nearly 2000m straight into the ice-toothed jaw of the Yambulak Glacier – a very effective barrier between North Muztagh and the main summit. Stein did not make it beyond c6000m, but his Kirghiz guides went on to report the impassable ridge which subsequently became known as 'Stein's Gap'.

Our party opted instead for the N ridge, the same as the 1981 Japanese party, but approached it from the opposite direction – the Chodomak Glacier which parallels the ridge to its south. This glacier represented the most direct access to the upper mountain: unlike the Yambulak, it is a relatively smooth freeway leading straight into a giant amphitheatre flanked by the N and NW ridges. From the NW ridge – impassable at Stein's Gap – hung huge seracs which would sometimes break off at night. During the day avalanches cascaded, catalysed by only a few hours of constant sunlight.

From our Base Camp at 4750m on the S side of the glacier, our route to Camp 1 at 5600m on the N ridge was long and varied. On ski we followed an inclined snow-gully up to the edge of the glacier, crossing on to it at a snow-bridge at 5000m. Atop the glacier we followed it straight into the amphitheatre,



47. Marti Martin-Kuntz exchange skis for crampons below the headwall at 5300m on N Muztagh.



48. A lone camel approaches Jambulak village at 4000m, beneath N Muztagh (L) and Muztagh Ata (R).



49. Crossing the Chodomak glacier at 5000m on N Muztagh, summit in background.



50. Dick Renshaw heads up the 'freeway' of the Chodomak glacier on N Muztagh. The headwall is on L, below the ridge.



51. Ruwenzori: Lake Kitandara and McConnell's Prong.

gradually crossing to its N side at 5300m, from where the glacier bucked skywards in a series of broken ice-falls straight to the summit dome. At this point, exchanging skis for crampons, we opted for a steeper but safer headwall leading up the flank of the N ridge. The trick was to set out from Base early enough to reach the headwall before first direct sunlight – 6.30am local time – before the frozen snow on its S face softened. Crossing the Chodomak Glacier roped to Dick was like being handcuffed to a runaway rope-tow. However, it did have its advantages: we arrived at the base of the headwall before first light, and were able to walk up its 300m face atop sparkling crisp snow in just an hour. The others, arriving less than two hours later, found crampons an impediment and took more than two hours to wade up in crusted knee-deep cement.

Our Camp 1 sat atop a protected shoulder just below the main N ridge, looking south across the amphitheatre to the hanging seracs opposite, east straight to the summit looming just above, and west to the valley of the Pamyi-Dunya and the Pamirs of Soviet Tadzhikistan, forming the W flank of the Pamir Knot just opposite.

Altitude sickness is whimsical at best. Some people can ascend Everest in 48 hours; others get sick when they step off the aeroplane in Aspen. Most of us fall somewhere in between. I felt in good hands with Dick Renshaw, who had been above 8100m without oxygen on both Everest and K2. However, on the Everest expedition in 1982 he had suffered a mild stroke after spending more than four days above 7800m, and this would be his first return to above 7000m since then. Dick was understandably very cautious in his approach to the mountain, and favoured a fast push from c6300m, with perhaps an overnight bivouac, as opposed to a more prolonged schedule which would give the climbers more time to acclimatize, but would also allow more time for their blood to thicken – which in turn causes many of the complications of high altitude, from reduced circulation (increased chance of frostbite and stroke) to pulmonary or cerebral oedema. It is generally felt that, once sufficiently acclimatized up to 6000m – an important qualifier – any time spent above 6000m is essentially unproductive, becoming 'actively counterproductive' beyond 7000m.

By the day that we occupied Camp 1 – on the third carry – we had spent 10 nights above 3800m, of which seven had been at 4750m, in excellent health. Thus Dick and I were much surprised when we both fell ill at Camp 1 with disorientation and headaches. With hindsight, this was probably more because we were in shape than out of shape; having arrived ahead of the others, we immediately set about clearing platforms and erecting two tents, whereas, in fact, we should have rested. At least, this is one explanation. Two mornings later – after one rough night and a 24-hour storm – we both felt fit, but Dick momentarily blacked out when he stepped out of his tent. This alone would have been no cause for alarm; indeed, I have experienced the same at sea-level when standing up after two hours on the floor in front of the television! However, the scare two days earlier was sufficient to persuade Dick to descend. I followed, using the excuse of my illness, together with the need to evacuate our French member Didier Gaillard who was suffering from snow blindness, to 'glaze over' the fact that I was quite frightened at the prospect of threading a

needle – on skis – between the wind-blasted N ridge above and a smooth but unstable snow-field dropping off into the Chodomak Glacier.

Marti Kuntz, Dr Wilmer Perez, and Keiichi 'Yeti' Ozaki continued their ascent of North Muztagh, reaching 6250m on the N ridge before unstable weather and persistent high winds drove them back down. Marti, a two-time women's world-record holder for speed skiing, descended straight from the ridge down the snow-field into the Chodomak Glacier and back to Base Camp – 1500m vertical – in only 20 minutes, no mean feat even at sea level. With unstable weather and our lack of experience, the decision to forgo a second attempt on North Muztagh was relatively easy.

The conclusion to this story brings us back to the main peak of Muztagh Ata, where in 1985 we had been turned back by bizarre lightning (*AJ*92, 117–121, 1987). This time the static electricity was still there – Marti in particular had a tiny spot in the back of her head where she had a scar from childhood and which seemed to be the target of much electrical attention – but it was by no means as fierce and unpredictable as in 1985.

Finally, well acclimatized and with a timely break in the weather, on the day after our camel-caravan transfer to Muztagh Ata Base Camp, the nine of us set out straight for the summit. We were soon divided into three groups of three in staggered starts at two days' interval – Dick's group returning to Base at 4550m with probable food poisoning and mine returning because of equipment failure (stoves). Anthony Willoughby and his wife Victoria – on their first anniversary – together with a recovered Didier, continued straight to the summit in true alpine style, stopping overnight three times en route. The other two groups, after making necessary repairs to body and machine, then went together straight to the top, camping overnight twice at 5650m and 6200m and, on the third night, setting out from the first party's Camp 3 (6800m) at midnight under a clear sky lit by brilliant stars and a full moon. We reached the top just after sunrise, deep golden rays shooting straight into our faces across the flat white horizon of the summit. A sea of cloud had moved in at the 6000m level, bombarding Base Camp with snow, hailballs and electricity, worrying those down below who knew that this would be our summit day and who thought us to be trapped high on the mountain in such appalling conditions. On the 7546m summit, however, it was a perfect cloudless day with stunning views of the shadow of Muztagh Ata thrown across a rippled screen of billowing pink clouds towards the west and, to the north, the pyramid of mighty Kongur sparkling in the early morning sun.

All that remained was a ski lesson from Marti; 3000m nonstop to the bottom – a strange place to learn the finer techniques of above-timberline skiing!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

We learned that four Austrians, led by Bruno Baumann, achieved the second ascent of North Muztagh, reaching its summit in September. Their route followed ours up the Chodomak Glacier, apparently confirming what we felt to be the most viable route up the mountain.