
PAT LITTLEJOHN

Adventure Guaranteed

From Ethiopia to a little-known corner of Kyrgyzstan

THE TOWERS OF TIGRAY

In the far north of Ethiopia, near the troubled border with Eritrea, lies the fabled province of Tigray. Much of the land is close to being desert, but its altitude means that it is never unbearably hot. Even in the sun it is possible to climb. The landscape is mountainous, having broad flat valleys lined with sandstone cliffs, many of which hold amazing secrets. Throughout Tigray, often in the most unlikely and inaccessible places, are rock-carved churches unique in the world. Whether Ethiopia could ever be a mainstream climbing destination is doubtful, but anyone seeking a truly adventurous rock-climbing destination in the middle of winter will find something special here which could not be further away from the bland bolt-clipping we often settle for on our 'Sun Rock' holidays.

Culturally and historically Ethiopia is fascinating. Known as the 'Cradle of Humanity', its human history stretches back 4.5 million years, the famous skeleton of the hominid 'Lucy' being displayed in the National Museum. As one of the oldest Christian cultures it has an amazing heritage of rock-hewn churches that in places like Lalibela are reminiscent of Petra. The story of Ethiopia's ruling dynasty begins with the legendary liaison of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Their son, the ruler Menelik, is said to have brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia, where it has supposedly remained for the past 3000 years, guarded day and night. Ethiopians are knowledgeable and proud of their culture, which remains strong partly because they are the only Africans never to have been colonised.

From a climbing point of view, Tigray was like being pitched back into the early days of climbing the desert towers of Utah and Arizona – a golden age if ever there was one. We explored a fairly limited area, climbing three big towers during an eight-day stay. Our style of climbing was beautifully simple – start at the bottom with a rack of nuts and cams, climb everything free, and be prepared to fail. Adventure guaranteed.

Internal flights are the way to get around this vast country, being cheap and good fun. We flew in a small propeller plane to Mekele, the regional capital of Tigray, then hunted around for a vehicle and driver to take us to Hawzien, a one-hotel village which we hoped would be in the thick of all the climbing potential.

Abune Yemata Guh

This group of towers is the site of one of the most remarkable rock-hewn churches in Tigray, carved into the base of a great castle of rock seemingly impregnable on every side. Beside it is a slender tower with an enticing crack line running down its north face – but not quite reaching the base. This was our first venture on to Tigray sandstone, the point where dreams meet reality...

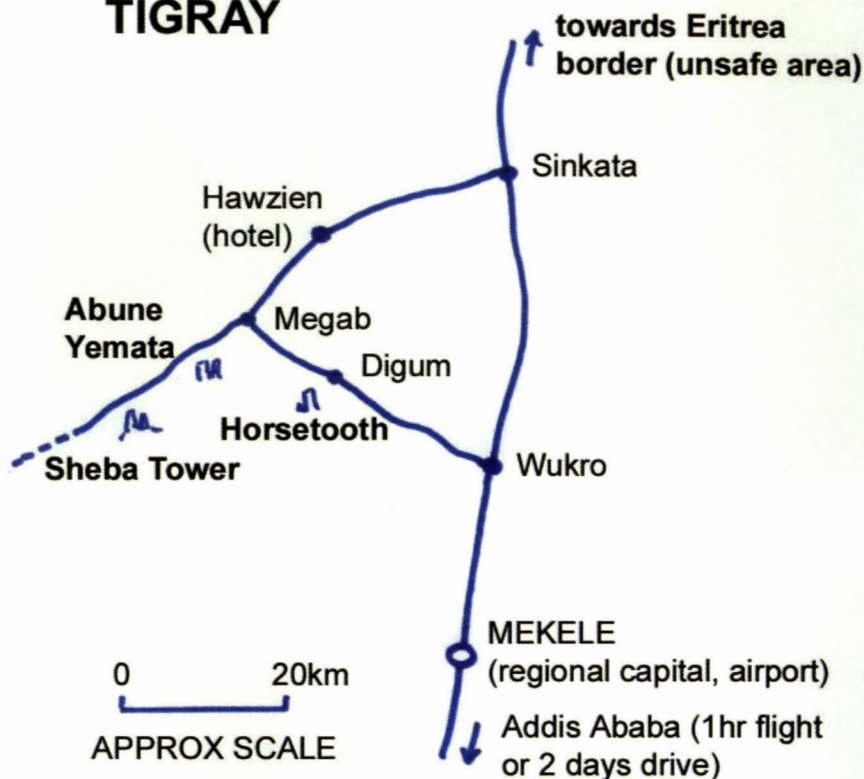
At the base, Steve Sustad takes one look and announces that it's my lead – he's like that in the mornings. I manage about 10 metres, thrash around for 20 minutes then give up, put off by the rock, the runners and the deceptive steepness. Plan B is to climb the right edge of the face for a pitch then traverse in to the crack. This keeps us busy for the next couple of hours but fails too, for the same reasons. So it's on to plan C, following cracks and chimneys to gain the dreaded south face, the sunny side. We'd planned to climb as much as possible in the shade, fearing that to climb in full sun in Ethiopia would be unbearable, but Steve had a theory that the rock would be better on the south side, baked hard in the sun or something, so off he went into a chimney system heading in the right direction. My lead is a horrid off-width but above this it looks beautiful, a perfect hand crack leading to a promising weakness going all the way to the summit.

Steve makes short work of the crack, putting to use his misspent youth climbing the cracks of Squamish Chief, then I get another nice pitch to a point where the top looks within reach if it weren't for two intervening off-widths, both overhanging and rounded. I should say at this point that our rack was all wrong for climbing in Tigray. Our biggest cam was a Camelot 3 – a grave mistake we would pay for time and time again – that made any off-width look even more frightening than it usually would. Ah well, Americans are off-width experts, I thought as I snuggled into my overhang-protected stance and passed over the lead.

Steve went up for a bit, then to my surprise didn't go up any further, he went *inwards*. Muffled cries of 'You're gonna love this' followed by 'F...ing Hell!' played havoc with the imagination till after what seemed a long, long time it was my turn to follow. I climbed 10 metres then looked into the crack and saw daylight. A narrow slot, and I mean narrow, went straight through to the north face. Skinny Steve had just about made it, but being more muscular around the midriff I had to exhale and wriggle like a snake before popping out into a position of stomach-churning exposure, 150m off the ground with overhanging rock above and below us. Steve was tied to a cluster of dodgy belays out to the left, trying to look cheerful.

For the next two hours I tried everything but the obvious, traversing out left, then right, then back into the tower to squeeze through to the upper of the rounded off-widths. In the end there was nothing for it but to attack the overhang directly. With just one runner between me and Steve I had visions of stripping both of us off the face if I fell, but eventually I passed the first

TIGRAY



bulge, only to be confronted by another. With time and energy exhausted we abseiled off and walked back as the sun set.

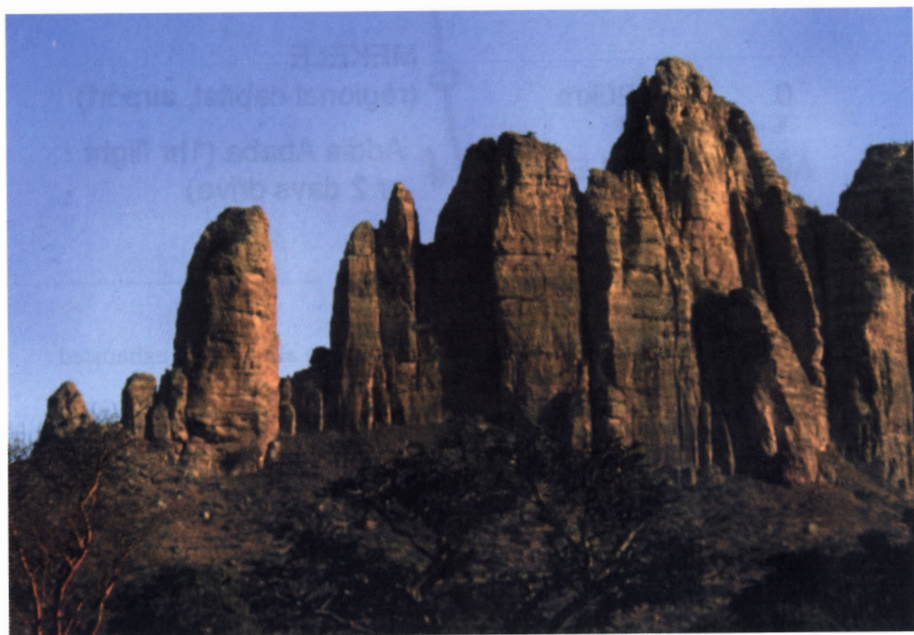
After a day to recover we were back, and with Steve belayed more securely in the middle of the tower I had the confidence to push on up the final crack and get us to our first virgin summit in Tigray. If pressed to give the route a conventional grade, I'd take a stab at E4. 'XS' seems more fitting.

Sheba Tower

Queen of the towers discovered so far, a 150m monolith of beautifully sculpted sandstone in the Nevelet group of towers, just 15 minutes drive along the track from Abune Yemata. The fissures in the north side looked



86. Nevelet Towers. Sheba is the biggest tower on the left. (*Pat Littlejohn*)



87. Horsetooth Tower, where the odd foothold snapped 'for that extra buzz'. (*Pat Littlejohn*)

smooth and scary so again we chose the south where a more featured chimney led to a massive bulge that looked like it might be a bit of a problem.

Four pitches of enjoyable and very atmospheric climbing led to a great chamber in the heart of the tower. The only way onwards was an unprotected section of wide bridging. It was either commit to it or give up, and I hesitated for a long time before I was mentally ready to go for it. Now we were on a huge jammed block at the level of the bulge, and Steve's lead. He went upwards and outwards in a bottomless slot that cut through the giant overhang. When I asked how it was he replied 'F...ing mind-blowing!' so I decided to keep quiet. There were scrapings, there were expletives, but the rope inched out steadily and eventually the shout of 'Safe!' echoed down to me.

On following I discovered he had done 20m of unprotected squeeze chimney in an incredibly exposed position, truly the Sustad Slot. 'Your mate's lead,' as they say. From here a relatively normal pitch featuring a 5c bulge at the end led to the summit, a fantastic spot with the whole of Tigray province spread below us, and some very interesting-looking rock peaks shimmering in the distance. A fantastic climb but another XS I'm afraid.

Horsetooth Tower

This was the first tower we investigated and it hadn't excited us as much as the others, being a bit smaller (120m) and at first glance less impressive. So we left it till the end for an 'easier' day.

Horsetooth is in a slightly more populous area than the other two towers and as the only whites in the area we got a lot of attention. To the children we were the mad *farangi* (foreigners) who had come to climb the towers they had scrambled around all their lives. They ran to greet us everywhere we climbed, wanting to carry bags, show us the path, guard our sacks. With the usual group of a dozen children in tow we slogged up to the base and chose our line - again, unfortunately, on the sunny side. Steve took the first pitch, that looked straightforward but had a mean bulge, and then I took over and enjoyed some great climbing up grooves in the crest of the tower.

We were following an intermittent crack that Steve took for another 5c pitch to a hanging belay. The crack steepened and gave some 6a climbing to pass a bulge and so reach a long narrow shelf. I thought I'd cracked it till I looked at the face ahead, which was lower angled but essentially devoid of cracks. Traversing back and forth didn't reveal anything easier or any protection. It was one of those situations where the runners are distant and you have to commit yourself into unknown hostile territory, risking a big fall if it doesn't pay off. 'Why always on my pitch?' I thought, till I remembered the Sustad Slot.

Delicate climbing I'd hate to reverse brought a thin bendy flake within reach. An RP placed behind it was purely psychological but still important, helping me press on along a precarious traverse, the odd foothold snapping for that extra buzz, till I could sink hands and runners into a decent crack. This was the hardest climbing encountered on the trip, Hard XS territory, or E5 had the rock been a bit better.

Quite a throng had gathered by the time we had abseiled back to the base, and a youth with artistic talent had carved the outline of a horse at the start of the route. This, and Steve's knowledge about such things as the shape of horses' teeth, gave us the name for the tower.

Ethiopia was a bit of a revelation. The poorest country I've been to but rich in so many ways, including its climbing potential. Since our trip, troubles have flared there again, with bullets used to quell anti-government protests and troops massing either side of the border with Eritrea. Maybe we'll return despite Foreign Office warnings – once you have felt the lure of unclimbed desert spires you're hungry for more – but whatever happens in the short term I'm quite sure that the climbing world will be hearing a lot more about Tigray sandstone.

Summary: An exploratory visit in February-March 2005 to the Tigray province of northern Ethiopia, a region of sandstone mountains reminiscent of Arizona.

THE CENTRAL BORKOLDOY, KYRGYZSTAN

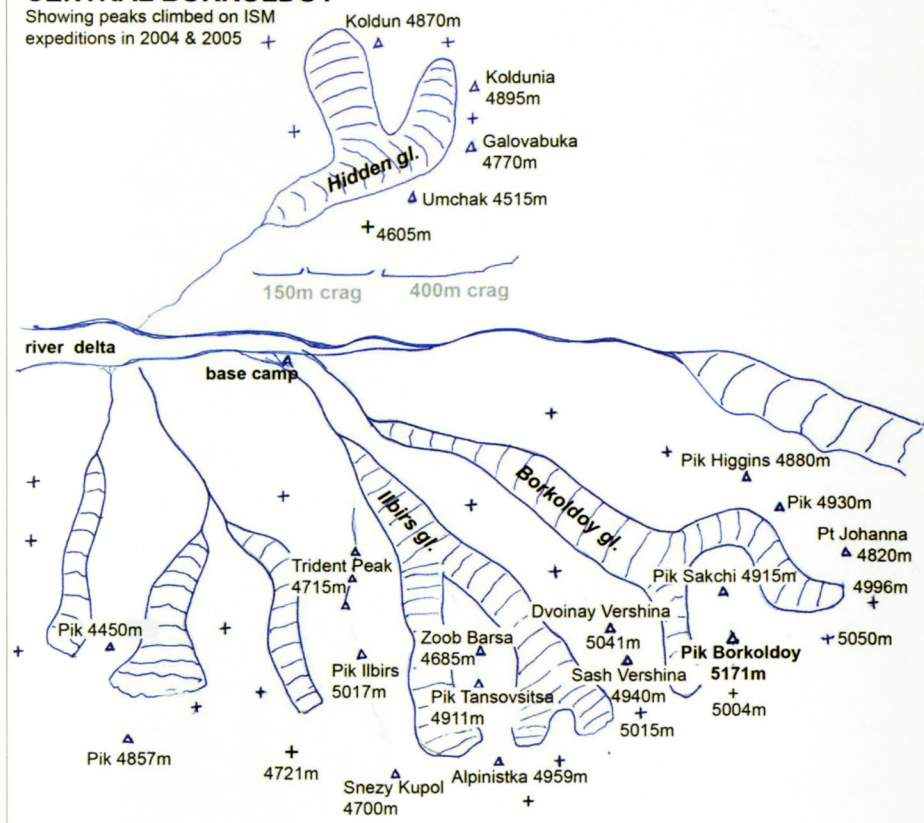
Coming upon the prints of a snow leopard and sightings of rare Marco Polo sheep was perhaps a fair indication of the remoteness of the Borkoldoy mountains in south-east Kyrgyzstan. The nearest proper village to our base camp was 200km distant.

An area of superb 'alpine' peaks, the central Borkoldoy lies to the north of the Dankova group in the West Kokshaal-Too range and is well defended on every side by chains of slightly lower mountains. It has been travelled by a few trekking groups in recent years but other than one (unsuccessful) attempt by a Russian team on the highest peak (5171m) there were no known records of previous mountaineering expeditions when our ISM (International School of Mountaineering) group ventured there in September 2004.

We expected to have to approach on foot using horses for camp equipment; however with all our manpower we were able to open up an old geologists' road made in Soviet times. This led to a broad river delta that was driveable for 20km to a base camp at 3570m. From here glaciers radiate like spokes of a wheel, around eight of them being within easy walking distance. As each is rimmed by great peaks this is an exceptional base for exploration.

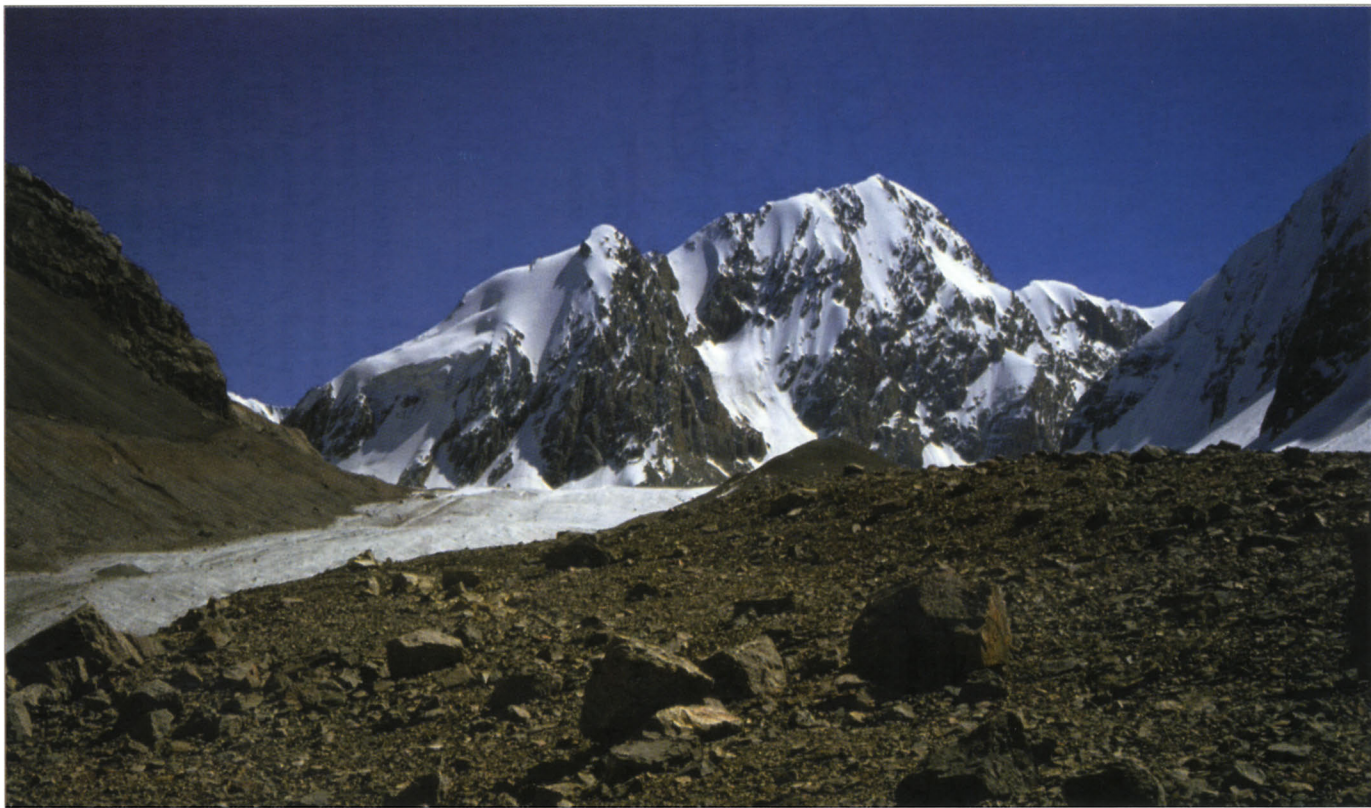
CENTRAL BORKOLDOY

Showing peaks climbed on ISM expeditions in 2004 & 2005



After a reconnaissance, advanced base was set up at 4240m on the right-hand branch of the double-headed glacier running southwards (later named Ilbirs glacier after snow-leopard tracks were discovered here). Ascents were made of Pk Ilbirs (5017m, PD+) the big dominant peak on the right side and the obvious rock pyramid on the east side (Zoob Barsa, 4685m, PD+), and a traverse made of Trident Peak (AD) just north of Pk Ilbirs. One team explored the glacier to the west and climbed Pk 4857 by its west ridge.

Overlooking base camp were rock walls between 100-500m high. These proved to be made of excellent solid limestone and gave two fine routes (E2 and HVS). For the second 'foray', advance camps were set up on the east branch of Ilbirs glacier and at the base of Pk 5171m. Several summits above Ilbirs glacier east were climbed including the excellent Dvoynay Vershina ('Twin Peak', 5041m).



89. 'Pik Borkoldoy' (5171m), highest peak in the group. The first ascent was made by Pat Littlejohn and companions in September 2005. (*Pat Littlejohn*)

The forepeak of Pk 5171m gave a pleasant excursion to 4915m (named Sakchi-Sentry) then a serious attempt was made on Pk 5171m via a couloir on the west flank and north ridge. At c5000m the ridge became seriously knife-edged and corniced and the attempt was abandoned. Three smaller summits on the opposite side of the glacier gave easier days before the expedition decamped. All in all a very enjoyable trip to the most remote mountains any of the team had visited.

2004 team: Pat Littlejohn, Adrian Nelhams, Vladimir Komissarov (guides); Ben Box, Steve Brown, James Bruton, Tom Fox, Phil Naybour, George Ormerod, John Porter and Nick Wheatley.

Twelve months later I led another ISM group to the Borkoldoy group and was pleased to find our repair work of 2004 intact, enabling us quickly to reach the river delta and motor to our former base camp at 3570m.

An advance base was set up at 4240m on Ilbirs glacier west. Adrian Nelhams, Bill Thompson and Mark Samuels climbed the north ridge of the big peak on the left side of the glacier, Pik Tansovsitsa (4911m, AD), while higher up the glacier, myself, Jane Whitmore, Ben Box and James Bruton made several attempts and finally succeeded on the west ridge of Alpinistka (4959m, D). After a spell of rock climbing on the 150m limestone crag above base camp, the Nelhams' team, along with Vladimir Komissarov and Peter Kemble, turned their attention to the previously untouched 'Hidden' glacier north of base camp. Over the following days they climbed four fine peaks, the highest and most difficult being Pik Koldunia (4895m) by the south ridge at AD+.

The main objective for my team was Pk 5171m, where Bruton, Box and I had been turned back at 5000m on the east ridge in 2004. This time, in better snow conditions, we were able to try the snowy north-east flank, picking the safest line through big séracs. The south ridge was gained at 5000m and followed on perfect névé to the summit. Though very arduous the route was technically straightforward at PD+. As the highest peak in the range it was given the name of Pik Borkoldoy. Clear weather on the summit gave stunning views of the West Kokshaal-Too and the unexplored peaks in the eastern sector of the Borkoldoy, some of which look very inviting.

The trip was rounded off with a brief stay at Lake Issyk-Kul, where the swimming was still found to be pleasant in late September and our stone-built hotel gave good training for keen rock climbers in the team!

2005 team: Pat Littlejohn, Adrian Nelhams, Vladimir Komissarov (guides); Ben Box, James Bruton, Jane Whitmore, Peter Kemble, Bill Thompson and Mark Samuels.