

Kyrgyzstan – ISM At Bashi expeditions – report by Pat Littlejohn

Two ISM expeditions led by Pat Littlejohn visited the Tien Shan in 2010, with the aim of exploring the At Bashi range, a 100km-long spine of 'alpine peaks' up to 4788m in height. The range is very accessible from the north, being just 2 hours' drive from Naryn, and at least 3 previous expeditions had approached from this side (where there are many valleys left to explore). This time both ISM teams approached from the south, necessitating an extra day's driving to get around the range but opening up a wealth of new mountaineering possibilities.

The first group (Littlejohn, Steve Taylor, David McMeeking, Ed Brown and Mat Piaseki) approached up the Mustabbes river in August and set up Base Camp where it divides, flowing from 2 glaciers. ABC was established at 3950m on the eastern glacier and after acclimatising on Pk Stefan (4480m, PD) the team climbed the striking 'tower' peak (Bashnya, 4690m) on the E side of the glacier via the N Ridge at AD standard. Next objective was a domed peak of light-coloured rock at the head of the glacier. Its E ridge gave another varied and enjoyable AD, with a compact rock tower providing the crux.

The W side of the glacier has several forbidding rock spires lower down than various summits approachable by steep snow faces. The most attractive of these was traversed N to S and featured exposed climbing over the rock tower of Pt Darshana (AD). Near the summit of the main peak five huge eagles circled the climbers, providing a memorable moment and a name for the peak – Beersh Berkut (4600m).

After this the weather broke, precluding an attempt on the rock spires, but the trip had shown the potential of the range for very enjoyable mountaineering which is technically interesting but generally less serious than the neighbouring Kokshal range to the south.

In September a larger team (consisting of Littlejohn, Adrian Nelhams, Vladimir Komissarov (guides), Tom Fox, Mark Dillon, Patrick Cadell, Tim Evans, Laura Fletcher, Paul Wellicome and Adam Dickins) began their trip in the limestone valley of Tash Rabat on the northern flank of the range. Famous for its thousand-year-old Caravanserai/fortress, the valley was also found to have good climbing potential, with 5 routes up to 500m long and HVS grade being climbed over 2 days. They then drove around the range and up the Kensu river valley to a group of glaciers below the second highest peak of the At Bashi range - Kensu (4757m). This had been climbed via its glaciated W flank by Soviet cartographers mapping this part of the At Bashi – their metal tripod still sits on top after 50 years.

Climbing from Base Camp at 3780m and from an ABC at 4120m, three climbing teams managed 11 new peaks/routes over 7 days, at grades ranging from Facile to Difficile Sup. Highlights included the long, pinnacled rock ridge overlooking BC (Sumashedshaya S Ridge, 4510m, D+), the E Ridge of Pk Ara (4595m, AD), the N Ridge of the twin-summitted Ekilik (4496m, AD-) and the long and demanding S Ridge of Kensu itself (AD). Unseasonable heavy snows then hit the range, forcing a retreat to Naryn where the team waited out 2 further days of snowfall before heading to Son Kul Canyon. Aside from the 'big wall' climbing of the Aksu and Karavshin valleys, Son Kul is currently Kyrgyzstan's premier rock climbing destination, having 'alpine rock' routes up to 900m as well as many shorter but adventurous crag climbs. Here several new routes were climbed (up to 8 pitches long and British E2 grade) giving a total of around 20 routes in the canyon so far. As usual Son Kul granted superb weather and was a perfect conclusion to a very enjoyable trip.