

2013 Expedition to the Fergana Range



**Trip Report Compiled by Daniel Keller and Thomas
Nunns**



Introduction

Between the 12th of July and the 10th of August 2013, a team of five British climbers enjoyed a brilliant trip to Kyrgyzstan, exploring the relatively unknown Fergana range and summiting four previously unclimbed peaks. The five of us, Daniel, Thomas, Nicolas, Sam and Alasdair had just graduated from university and with a good amount of Alpine and Scottish winter experience behind us, we were keen to explore somewhere far beyond our previous mountaineering horizons. Having heard about the fantastic potential in Kyrgyzstan from John Proctor, who went on an expedition to the Torugart-Too in 2010, we thought we would give it a shot! We hoped to mountaineer in areas that lacked previously recorded exploration and climb some unclimbed summits. The opportunity for adventure was certainly a driving factor behind the expedition.

Background and Initial Planning

We initially had a visit to the Torugart-Too in mind. This is a mountain range that borders China and lies to the west of the high Torugart pass, which is a major route into China. Such an expedition required some logistical organization as well as the acquisition of border permits to allow our presence in such proximity to the Chinese border. On the advice of the UKC forums and John Proctor, we got in touch with ITMC, a company based in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek that specializes in the organization of mountaineering expeditions and logistics. They were enormously helpful and sent us maps and information on the region as well as providing a driver, a UAZ, a satellite phone and they processed our paperwork for the border permits. Having read past trip reports of expeditions to the region we realized that the range had seen a fair amount of recent activity but we were nevertheless able to identify some likely targets and glaciated valleys that could provide access to some previously unclimbed summits. We decided to discuss our options in greater depth with ITMC upon arrival in Bishkek.

Kyrgyzstan and the Fergana Range

When we arrived, the five of us met with Vladimir Komissarov, the head of ITMC, to get a greater insight into the possibilities available to us. The only detailed maps of the region are Soviet military survey maps from the 1970s. Most of the labelled heights are incorrect but we lacked a reliable altimeter to confirm the extent of their inaccuracy. Vladimir used the map to identify some potential locations in the Torugart-Too that offered the chance for some further exploration and potentially unclimbed peaks before sweeping his hand further to the north-west to a range that runs south-east to north-west, skirting the southern edge of the Arpa valley from the Torugart-Too up in the

direction of Uzbekistan (from roughly N 40°46'2, E 74°17'4 in the NW to N 40°36'2, E 74°35'0 in the SE on the Soviet military map). The range runs for roughly 200 kilometers along the border between Naryn oblast and Osh oblast. According to Vladimir, the range had seen little or no exploration from mountaineers. It is separated from the Torugart-Too by some foothills and the powerful Karakol river, which is the main northern drainage outlet of another range that lies to the south/south-east of the Fergana range and the west/south-west of the Torugart-Too. We termed this mountain range the 'Inner Fergana'.



Fergana Range

'Inner' Fergana

Torugart-Too

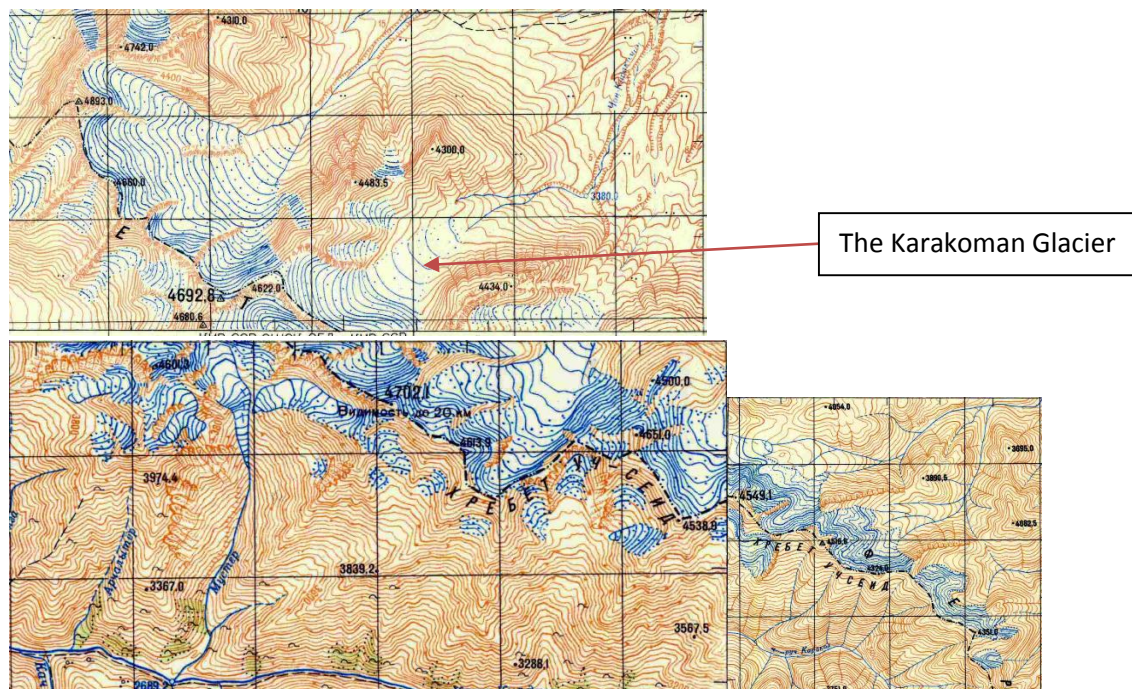


Figure 1 - The Fergana range, poorly put together (apologies) mainly because the range is awkwardly located at the corner of four different maps with no overlap.

After some research (a massive thank you here to Perry Keller) we found that the main Fergana range had been visited by two previous mountaineering trips. The Inner Fergana was visited by expeditions led by Dmitry Shapovalov (2008) and Mark Weeding (2010 and 2011). Shapovalov's team climbed some peaks in the Inner Fergana but also travelled up the main Fergana range and summited Uch-Seit (marked at N 40°42'4, E 74°21'2 on the Soviet military map), the highest peak in the range. Weeding's expedition in 2010 also saw them visit the main Fergana range. In his report, Weeding described the Karakol river as impassable but they evidently found some way of reaching the other side because they proceeded to climb several peaks in the south-east of the main Fergana range.

We considered our options and plumped for the Fergana range, reasoning that although we might not be able to reach the mountains because of the rivers, the reward if we did make it was a number of unexplored valleys, ridges, peaks and glaciers. Over the next couple of days we did some trekking in the Ala-Archa National Park, which lies just to the south of Bishkek, and bought all the food supplies we needed from Osh Bazaar and a local twenty-four hour supermarket. We bought all the gas we would need for cooking from ITMC (It should be noted that discussion of food and how we acquired suitable water is dealt with in the 'Food and Water' section below).



Figure 2 - The UAZ.

On the 19th of July we departed for the Fergana range. In the end it took a day and a half of driving on road and another twenty-four hours of off road (which included a swift overnight stop on the western bank of the Karakol river) to reach our base camp. Our driver, Valerii pulled off some impressive manoeuvres and several quick fixes on the UAZ but managed to get us to our intended destination, the base of a glacier (N 40°41'4, E 74°27'4 on Soviet military map) that acts as a main source for the Karakoman river (hence our naming it the Karakoman glacier).



Figure 3 - First sightings of the Fergana

Base Camp, Summits and Exploration

ITMC offer the possibility of their driver staying with you for the duration of the trip but we felt that this was unnecessary so we opted to say our goodbyes and agreed to meet him “by those two rocks over there”. Consequently we ensured that at least one of the five of us was at base camp at all times to prevent anyone or anything taking any of our possessions or food. The only person we encountered anywhere near our basecamp was a lone border-guard, patrolling on his horse. He asked to see our permits and passports but was extremely friendly.

Base camp was situated close to the Karakoman river, about an hour’s walk from the bottom of the glacier and was at an elevation of roughly 3,320 metres. We used a large Marmot Limestone 6-man tent for the five of us and a North Face Tadpole to store the food and other supplies that did not fit in the main tent.

Over the next three weeks we went on numerous treks to nearby valleys, foothills and rivers – getting a fantastic feel for this incredible location. During the first couple of days, Thomas, Alasdair and Nicolas went out onto the glacier to get a good view of the nearby peaks and get a sense of how wet/dry and crevassed the glacier was. Upon accessing the glacier the main expanse had few crevasses but the steeper areas where the glacier rose up towards bergschrunds and the surrounding ridges boasted some formidable serac bands. The glacier was also extremely messy and difficult to negotiate where it rose up to reveal an extra arm to the south-east. The easiest way to access this part of the glacier was via a steep snow ramp that runs underneath an extremely loose series of rock pinnacles. We also discovered that in late July and early August it barely reaches zero degrees centigrade at night at base camp. This meant that the snow had little chance to recover from the blazing sun that we experienced every day. As such, the snow was often slushy and sometimes rather unstable. By 8 a.m. the dry area of the glacier was a maze of fast flowing streams that cascaded down into the Karakoman river. Little wonder that the rivers running down into the Arpa valley were so powerful and difficult to cross. We would recommend that any further expeditions aim to visit the range in late August or September when it is less hot and the snow is hopefully in better condition.



Figure 4 - Accessing the south-east arm of the glacier

Joru (F) – Marked as 4,300.0 m at N 40°41'9, E 74°26'3 on Soviet military map - At around the same time as this early exploration of the glacier, Daniel and Sam summited the nearest peak to base camp, which we named *Joru*. This summit was an easy trekking peak although the huge amounts of loose rock and scree made for a tiring ascent. Near the top there were several snow fields and the summit offered spectacular views across to the neighbouring glacier and down onto our own. From here Daniel and Sam examined a possible route to try and climb an impressive, glaciated peak located much further down the ridge line from *Joru*. We gave the peak this name because *Joru* is the Kyrgyz for 'vulture' and we regularly saw large numbers of these birds circling near the peak.

Aiguille Weetabix (PD+) – Marked as 4,483.5 m at N 40.41'5, E 74°24'8 on Soviet military map - Shortly after, Daniel, Nicolas and Alasdair made an attempt on the aforementioned impressive peak via the long ridgeline that Daniel and Sam had previously gained to ascend *Joru*. The rock was extremely chossy and the snow conditions were fairly poor but in the end it was a slapstick moment involving Alasdair's bag and an extremely steep snow ramp that foiled the attempt. Instead, the team of three climbed an outlying rocky peak on the ridge that they had previously skirted beneath. A short but slightly exposed scramble up and over blocks of appalling consistency led to the peak of *Aiguille Weetabix*, as we came to affectionately (or not!) describe it. After a bite to eat on some more accommodating ground they descended and went to retrieve Alaisdar's bag.



Figure 5 - The view from just below the summit of *Aiguille Weetabix*.



Figure 6 - Sam at the summit of *Komur Chokusu*

Komur Chokusu (F) – Marked as 4,434.0 m at N 40°40'4, E 74°27'2 on Soviet military map – The third peak that we summited was climbed by Sam and Alasdair, who climbed the closest summit on the eastern side of the valley. From what they said about their ascent this was probably the best example of the Fergana range's scree slopes. Seemingly never ending shale that takes five steps to make one effective step. Fun stuff. On the plus side one can cruise down an entire mountain side in a matter of minutes on the descent. The summit is at the head of an incredible knife like ridge that looks like it could be a brilliant outing but the rock quality is highly suspect and so we focused on other objectives. The name of this peak was inspired by our driver Valerii who described the mountain as a vast heap of coal. The name means, roughly, 'Coal

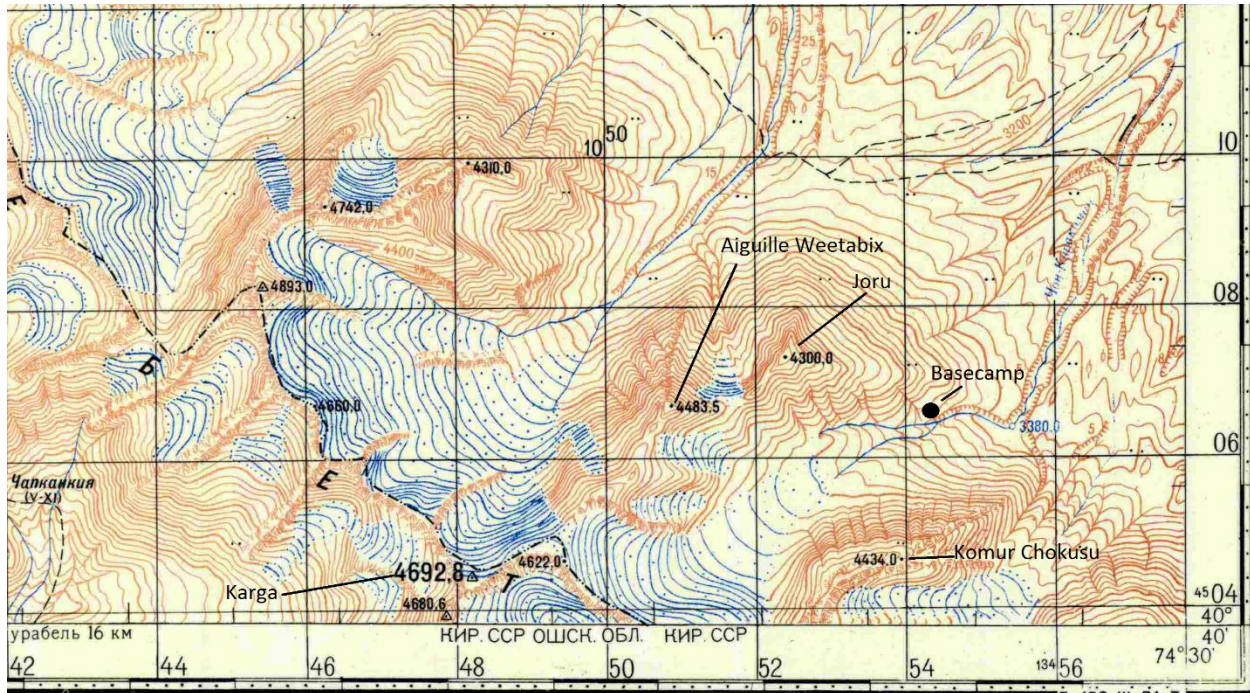
Peak' in Kyrgyz. Some snow couloirs on the western face might offer swifter if more technical access to the summit.

Karga (PD+) Marked as 4,692.8 m at N 40°40'3, E 74°23'1 on Soviet military map – The final peak that we summited was the impressive peak that we could see from base camp and that Daniel and Sam had identified as a good objective on one of the first days we had in the Arpa valley. Daniel, Thomas and Nicolas set up an advanced basecamp on a small knoll just above the glacier at around 3,700 metres. The team had identified a different line of ascent that climbed a steep snow ramp to gain a subsidiary ridge that connected with the main ridgeline. Here they scrambled over a rocky section of the ridge before rejoining the snow on a hanging glacier and negotiating a corniced section to the final summit slopes. The west face was steep with an ominous serac band perched near the top. Consequently the team made their way up the eastern side of the ridge on snow that was rapidly deteriorating in quality. After a quick photo at the summit we beat a hasty retreat. Our fears about the snow conditions were confirmed when we saw the evidence of an avalanche high on the eastern face a few days later. In better conditions we would strongly recommend this line as it makes for a fantastic ascent of a peak that offers stunning views. We named the peak *Karga* after the raven (*Karga* is Kyrgyz for raven) that followed us half way up the mountain, which fortunately turned out to be a good omen.



Figure 7 – *Karga* from just below the summit of *Joru*, with our line of ascent. *Aiguille Weetabix* is out of shot to the right.

Daniel, Thomas and Alasdair made an attempt to climb the pinnacles that extended from the snow dome, which divided the glacier between the main area and the south-eastern arm. Although they managed to investigate the elevated south-east arm (See *Figure 4*) of the glacier, poor conditions prompted the decision to head back without making a final attempt on the pinnacles. As aforementioned, there were several trips to explore the neighbouring valleys and foothills including a trek to the foothills that lay just to the north of where Mark Weeding's expedition were active. We were rewarded with some great views of the peaks and glaciers at the south-eastern end of the range.



The expedition was hugely enjoyable and we hope our report helps to provide a substantial contribution to the currently limited knowledge base concerning the Fergana range (Information beyond the Weeding and Shapovalov reports is scant and we met no one in Kyrgyzstan that knew where we meant – most people thought we were referring to the Fergana valley in Uzbekistan). The Fergana range and the Arpa valley are incredibly beautiful and the remote nature of the location was fantastic. The two issues to bear in mind however are that access can be difficult (a good 4x4 is required in addition to reliance on a fairly low river level) and that a lot of the rock quality is poor. With good snow coverage and cooler weather however it could allow for some excellent mountaineering opportunities with an abundance of unclimbed routes and peaks in addition to the gradual accumulation of knowledge about the range.



Figure 8 - Taking basecamp apart.

First Aid and Medical

Medical supplies were divided amongst three kits: a large base camp first aid kit, a small/medium sized kit for day trips and a minimalist kit for peak attempts. The contents were chosen based on personal experience, the Cicerone book "Pocket First Aid and Wilderness Medicine" and previous expedition reports (such as John Proctor's report on his expedition to the neighboring Torugart-Too). Several of us received First Aid training prior to departure and we would recommend exploration medicine with www.lifesignsgroup.co.uk.

Medicines and Supplies

- Altitude Medicine: Acetazolamide (Diamox, for treatment of Acute Mountain Sickness); Dexamethasone (for emergency treatment of High Altitude Cerebral Edema)
- Anti-biotics: Ciprofloxacin (also for serious diarrhea); Flucoxillin; Metronidazole.
- Painkillers: Ibuprofen, Paracetamol, Aspirin, Co-codamol, Tramadol.
- Loperamide (Imodium)
- Cetirizine (Piriton, anti-histamine)
- Ranitidine (indigestion treatment)
- Chloramphenicol eye ointment.
- Cinnarizine (Stugeron, anti-nausea)

- Anti-fungal cream , Anti-septic cream, emergency burn gel
- Assorted plasters/wound dressings/blister plasters
- Assorted bandages
- Surgical tape
- Duct tape
- Emergency dental kit
- Scissors
- Latex gloves
- Tweezers
- Safety Pins
- Antiseptic wipes
- SAM splint
- Suncream - high factor and high factor lip salve

The trip proceeded largely without incident, other than the occasional Ibuprofen/Paracetamol for headaches etc. the only drugs used were Loperamide/Ciprofloxacin for bouts of diarrhea (particularly after consumption of Koumys) although most of these were during travel to/from base camp and in Bishkek and Cinnarizine for car sickness in the UAZ. Daniel suffered from itchy/painful eyes at one point, possibly due to snow blindness, however he recovered relatively quickly without any treatment. We all suffered from a degree of itchy eyes/sneezing possibly due to pollen from the meadows in which we were camped.

Food and Water

Initially water was collected from a glacier run-off river and filtered with an MSR HyperFlow Microfilter, this was effective for a few days, however the filter rapidly clogged and became impractically slow; fortunately we were able to find a clear spring relatively close to our base camp. We would recommend that future expeditions ensure they have a filter capable of dealing with water containing a high volume of sediment if they plan on using a glacier run-off river as their main water source. Water from the spring was purified with chlorine dioxide solution. We also received five filter containing bottles from Water-to-Go, which allowed us to drink directly from almost any source (we didn't find any water that they couldn't deal with).

Food quantities were calculated based on our initial acclimatization days in the Ala Archa national park, we took enough food for four days more than our intended time in the Arpa. Breakfast generally consisted of porridge and for dinner we alternated

between soup noodles and a dish of rice, lentils, dried sausage and stock. As the UAZ was able to get relatively close to our base camp we were able to bring several more bulky luxuries, including eggs and fresh fruit. All our food was purchased in Bishkek with the exception of peanut butter, herbs and spices brought from the UK. We would also advise strongly against the purchase of pasta in Bishkek for consumption because both we and others have found it to be edible in only a very loose sense of the word.

Accounts

Expenditure

<u>ITEM</u>	<u>COST</u>
ITMC Costs*	£2,800 (approx. after conversion)
Return flights from Gatwick to Bishkek (via Kiev)	£2,000 (£400 per person)
Bishkek and Naryn Accommodation	£320 (£64 per person)
Food	£500
Insurance	£600 (£120 per person)
TOTAL	£6,220

*ITMC costs include transport, driver, border permits, satellite phone and camping gas.

Income

BMC Grant - £650



Figure 9 – Thomas and Daniel at the summit of Karga.

Thanks to...

The BMC

ITMC

Water-to-Go

Power Traveler

Perry Keller

John Proctor