

CHINA

TIEN SHAN

Kokshaal-Tau, Attempts and Exploration. I'd first learned of this area of China's Tien Shan/Kokshaal-Tau range from a series of black-and-white photos taken by Christian Beckwith and a write-up published in the 1999 *AAJ*. Beckwith speculated that a treasure of pristine, granite peaks lay within the Chinese side of the range. Through months of research, I found that, due to heavy military activity in the region, the Chinese government had long restricted all travel to this specific area. My contact in China confirmed that no one had ever entered this area from China to climb. I tracked down some 1942 topographic Russian military maps of the region that showed at least four huge valleys that appeared to hold endless formations of steep rock towering up to 19,000 feet.

My contact in China, Guo, whom I'd never met, told me that the military had demanded that he do a reconnaissance trip to determine whether or not we should be given permits. I wired several thousand non-refundable dollars to Guo for his trip.

After several anxious weeks, I received an e-mail from Guo. He was almost certain we would receive the necessary permits to enter the area, but he could not guarantee it. There was another catch, as well: we would not be allowed to go within five kilometers of Kyrgyzstan's border, exactly where the maps revealed the steepest and biggest features to be. In spite of the uncertainty, Jed and Doug Workman, friends of mine from Utah, accepted my invitation. Jerry Dodrill, a climber and photographer I'd met years before in Yosemite, also accepted.

We arrived in Beijing in late July. Our itinerary, created by Guo, who would be acting as our chief liaison officer, was strict and specific. A travel snafu delayed our arrival in Urumqi for three days. The flight delay in Beijing hampered us even further: hours before we arrived, the military police station closed for the weekend. When it re-opened, we were pleasantly surprised when things went smoothly: we traded the rest of our payment (almost 120 U.S.\$100 bills) for our visa extensions, permits, and upcoming services from our Chinese escorts. We spent the next two days driving 1,000 kilometers west to the town of Aksu. One of our trucks broke down, and our strict schedule lost another day.

A few more days in the trucks heading northwest brought us through Wushi, Akqi, and Karabulak, where, much to our relief, we passed through the final military stations with permission to explore in the area. Once again, we were warned not to go within five kilometers of the border.

Finally, we arrived in a tiny, Kyrgyz mountain village (in China) where we would park the vehicles for the next several weeks. Our team—comprised of Guo, a cook, a few porters, and several camels and mules—set out walking slowly up the valley along a huge, muddy, glacial river. At about 12,500 feet, we encountered a Kyrgyz nomadic village. The next morning, with animal and porter support for a couple of hours more, we started the trudge up into the cold wilderness. The animals and porters could go no farther and turned back before the rough glacial terrain. Though our Chinese companions were supposed to monitor us at all times, Guo and his cook decided they would camp where the camels dropped us off in a grass valley below the glaciers. We would return a few weeks later.

We had already lost at least eight days of our original schedule, so there was no time to waste. Then, we ran into yet another unforeseeable variable: we discovered that we had been robbed. After some reflection, we realized that it must have happened back where we parked the trucks.



"Grand Poohbah Peak." Beginning at 4900 meters, Doug and Jed Workman, Jerry Dodrill and Mike Libecki climbed the southeast ridge (the prominent ridge on the left), reaching ca. 500 feet below the 5697-meter summit before being turned back by a lightning storm. The team turned around on a corniced ridge just below a final easy looking rockband. DOUG WORKMAN

We lost three new ropes, over 500 feet of 7 mm cord, a back-up camera, and toiletries.

We finally agreed to attempt a route on a very attractive 5697-meter peak we called the "Grand Poohbah." According to our map, it lay directly on the border of China and Kyrgyzstan. We opted for an ice/granite buttress to the west. We brought two bivy sacks, Clif Bars for a day or two, a few liters of water each, ice axes, one 8.8 mm rope, a light alpine rack, and swami belts without leg loops. Four of us simulclimbed with our one rope, which forced us to do many short, belayed pitches, and caused us to move very slowly. We had hoped to spend 24 hours on our attempt, but ended up spending over 60 hours with little, if any, sleep. After a few thousand feet gained to an advanced base camp from the valleys below, and well over 2,000 feet of steep climbing on granite, ice, and snow, we were turned around by an electrical storm just short of the summit.

After this attempt, we decided to climb on some vertical granite wall/crags. We spent several days climbing beautiful pitches on clean, solid, gold granite, including one of the nicest chimneys in the world and perfect, steep seams. This particular wall/crag area offers endless, beautiful cracks of all sizes.

The variety of climbing offered in this area of China, be it ice climbing, face climbing, wall climbing, alpine climbing, free climbing, or even bouldering, was top notch.

MIKE LIBECKI*

*Recipient of a Helly Hansen Mountain Adventure Grant

Peak Kezi-Sel, Traverse, and Jamanjar, Attempt. After 14 days' acclimatization in Kyrgyzstan