

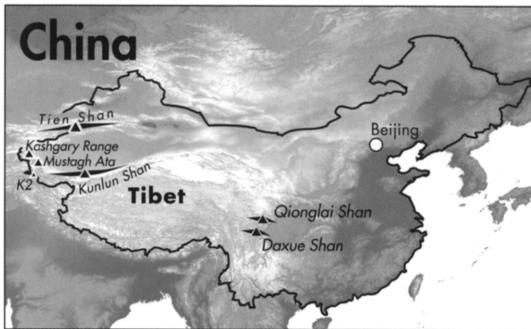
China

TIEN SHAN

Western Kokshaal-Too, first ascent of "Tombstone Tower." Fermented horse milk is a delicacy not to be missed. Especially if accompanied by freshly beheaded, blood-boiled lamb, goat yogurt, and yak butter on homemade fry-bread. The boiled goat head and intestine stir-fry topped off the gourmet meal. We devoured the food with sloppy slurps and grunts of delight. Our gracious hosts were two Kyrgyz families, living at 3,300m at the foot of the Tien Shan/Western Kokshaal-Too Mountains in northwestern China, in Xinjiang Province near the Kyrgyzstan border.

In 2000 I had received permission to enter one of China's most restricted regions of the Tien Shan Mountains. On that amazing journey, while on an untouched nearly 5,700m peak [Grand Poobah, a.k.a. Pik Byeliy; see *AAJ 2001*, pp. 400-401—Ed.], I got a glimpse of a huge valley of granite over the next ridge to the west.

We returned last July and August. We flew via Beijing to Urumqi, where our team of six Chinese officers loaded our 15 haul bags into two 4x4s and then had us heading west for three days over dusty, sandy roads. We skirted the Taklamakan Desert and slept in the Uygur-Muslim towns of Kurla, Aksu, and finally Ahqi. There, our liaison officer presented our permission papers and passports to the local military. After three hours he came out with good



"One of my goals was to stand on the summit with my brother, completely naked wearing only a Year of the Cock mask. Well, considering the temperatures, maybe one sock each." The Libeck brothers on top of Tombstone Tower, West Kokshaal-Too.

news; access was granted. However, we acquired a new team member, a local military officer who was armed and in full camouflage dress. We then all drove toward the snow-capped witch hats in the distance, toward the virgin valley of granite I'd discovered through secret channels.

Above base camp we carried hefty loads for five days, 18km a day. We then took a day to scope routes, stretch, and eat. The wall we decided to climb reminded me of Sentinel in Yosemite, except that it was bigger, steeper, and completely virgin. All I could think about were sweet splitter cracks, snuggling on portaledges in storms, and standing on a tiny ca. 4,700m summit in China looking into Kyrgyzstan.

My younger brother Andy is an amazing musician, whose ability to rip up the banjo is astounding. When we first talked about this expedition, we made a deal: I would show him the experience of a big-wall first ascent, and he would show me how to play the banjo. This would be

only his second climb ever: his first was a first ascent in Greenland.

I also had two goals regarding the tombstone-shaped tower we were about to climb: to come down alive, not necessarily without pain or injury but alive; to stand on the summit with my brother, completely naked wearing only a Year of the Cock mask. Well, considering the temperatures, maybe one sock each.

The first pitches were super-fun free climbing and, for a first ascent, surprisingly clean with little loose rock. But the smile-inducing 5.10 cracks turned into A3 seams and rotten A3/A4 pitches of kitty litter. Finally, after some tedious birdbeaks, I fixed to a high point about 300m off the deck.

Climbing capsule style gave my brother a chance to practice juggling, digest the exposure, and go through rescue scenarios. Climbing in an out of snow showers we fixed lines for a week and then committed to the wall. I needed to show my brother some additional techniques: how to go Number 2 on the wall; how to jug in space and horizontally. I taught him double hauls, Munter-mule knots, 'biner rappels, and hundreds of other variables in the big-wall equation.

From our highpoint, I was able to fix several more pitches. I decided that the extensive work involved in fixing all of our ropes as high as possible, and then do a push to the summit, would be safer and give us a higher possibility of success than doing another big haul. The upper part of the wall was treacherously loose. Flakes the size of pool tables looked like they could go. I spent an extra day rigging the fixed lines away from sharp edges and loose rocks.

We had now been climbing the wall for just over a week and had endured snow showers daily. Fast moving, time-lapse clouds threatened another storm at any time. I climbed a frightening pitch through a maze of giant leaning flakes and fractures, all relying on each other for stability. Once we were past this nightmare, an easy, unroped, 4th class scramble led us to the breakfast-nook-table-sized summit.

Thunder brought worry. I have no problem sitting out a storm, even if it lasts days. Storms offer time for rum, hot chocolate, and fantasy novels. But thunder changes everything. If lightning strikes home, everything will melt and our last few seconds of life would abruptly end with the sudden arrival of the ground. Even rum and hot chocolate won't ease minds if thunder roars. This is not the first electrical storm I have experienced here, and most likely not the last.

At base camp our sweet new Deering banjos waited. The goals of this expedition were soon fulfilled. My brother got the big-wall first-ascent experience, with thunderstorms, vertical toilets, plenty of hanging in space hundreds of meters off the ground, and summiting a virgin peak. Complete and utter satisfaction. By the time we got back home, I could play all of "Dueling Banjos." Squeal like a pig boy!

We named our route Libeckistan (500m, 5.10d A3+).

MIKE LIBECKI, AAC

Tomurty, far eastern Tien Shan, first ascent. The National Defense Academy Alpine Club of Japan organized an expedition to the Tien Shan to commemorate its 50th anniversary. The objectives were to climb Tomurty (4,886m), the highest virgin peak in the Karlik (Harlik) Shan and to explore the neighboring mountains of the far eastern Tien Shan, a range some 2,400km long.

Tomurty is located about 70km northeast of Hami in Xinjiang Province [a.k.a. Tomort and situated well east of the Bogda Shan at 43.1 N., 94.3 E—Ed.]. Although its height does not exceed 5,000m, it is well glaciated, and despite easy access, the little-known Karlik massif