

Three days later we prepared for the most beautiful mountain so far by establishing a camp in a col on the frontier ridge. To our knowledge this pass had not been crossed by humans, but that night we dreamed of carpet-smuggling Taliban. The next day we woke to a glorious morning. We climbed a snowy ridge, then made a steep traverse around a rock tower, and finally followed another ridge to the top. Superb! We called it Koh-e-Forot Zorman (5,500m), after Roeland's newborn nephew. Our route was AD+, with snow to 60° and one short mixed gully of 80°.

We spent another night at the border camp and then tackled our fourth peak. Again, we had problems estimating scale. A couloir led to a ridge. We thought the couloir looked rather difficult and delicate, but the ridge seemed to pose no problem. How wrong we were. Climbing the couloir on the east face was effortless, but the ridge turned out to be steep, unconsolidated snow alongside equally steep rock. Two hundred meters below the top we had no choice but to retreat. As far as we got, the grade was D-, with loose snow to 70° and rock to UIAA V. We were a little disappointed by this failure but, overall, very satisfied with our journey through a wonderful country, and our three new peaks.

MARIAN MICHIELSEN, *The Netherlands*, with additional information by Daniel Kuipers

PAMIR

Hindu Kush, Koh-e-SuzAnna (4,660m); Little Pamir, Koh-e-Ski (4,760m) and Koh-e-Grivel (4,800m). On May 25 Anna Torretta, from Italy, and I arrived in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, and traveled southeast for two days by 4WD to Ishkashim, where we crossed into Afghanistan. This sensitive border is renowned for opium and people smuggling, so imagine my astonishment when I stepped outside the smoky wooden passport hut and spotted Anna filming with her video camera. Was she mad? A shreik from a border guard told me that someone certainly was. My nostril got nervous as a gun was poked up it. Not good. Anna took out the tape and offered it to the police. I wanted to snatch it from her, stamp on it with my mountaineering boot, and attack it with my ice axe. Slowly, slowly, the matter was settled with cigarettes, cash, and diplomacy, and my nostril breathed again.

Anna had visited the Wakhan in 2008 (*AAJ 2009*) and was keen to go farther east. But the valleys of the Hindu Kush south of the Wakhan Corridor were loaded with snow, and the weather did not seem good, so we decided to stay low and attempt smaller peaks with less avalanche risk.

Our aim was to complete a journey on horse and foot along the Oxus River to Lake Chaqmaqtin, stopping along the way to ski anything that tickled our fancy. We had no maps or photos, but knew there was one difficult snowy pass to cross. We didn't even know whether we would get to ski. And I had never ridden a horse.

After two days of bureaucracy we boarded another 4WD and traveled a further two days along the Corridor to the roadhead at Sarad-e-Boroghil (3,300m), where we stopped for a day, May 31. It was time for some skiing.

"I think the peak is about 4,000m" said Anna. By the time we reached 4,500m, I was fried. My feet were on fire, and my throat as dry as the Sahara, from six hours of ascent in ski boots. We had started the day bumping south across the Oxus on horseback—my triumphant first ride. We then scrambled for two hours on scree, followed by skinning for four hours. It was a bold acclimatization day, but every sweaty painful step was worth it for the final, astonishing views into Pakistan from the top of what we named Koh-e-SuzAnna. After the first ascent came a magical ski descent on spring snow.



Suzy Madge (left) and Anna Torretta near Sarad-e-Boroghil. Behind and to the south is Koh-e-SuzAnna. *Suzy Madge*

Next day we reached the Daliz Pass (4,173m), but deep snow prevented the horses from crossing. We tried again next morning, having to unload the horses and drag the loads ourselves. Incredibly, there was a dry path on the far side, and the horses merrily trotted beside us as we skied east from the pass.

For the next three days we walked and rode spellbound into the Little Pamir, occasionally crossing paths with Kyrghiz nomads

driving yak herds. Eventually we reached Bozai Gumbaz (4,000m), a Kyrghiz nomad spring village, where we paid our horsemen. Poor weather encouraged us to stop here and climb/ski two small mountains: Koh-e-Ski, via an ascent of the southwest flank and descent of the northeast, and Koh-e-Grivel, up and down the southeast flank. Unstable weather kept us from bigger ascents.

On June 7 we reached Lake Chaqmaqtiin (4,000m) and two days later made an attempt on a 4,800m peak via the north ridge. Not far from the summit the weather turned and we retreated, skiing the northeast slope (35-40°).

All too early, we were forced to start heading back to Sarhad; the Kyrghiz were returning to collect supplies from the World Food Programme and we needed their horse transport. The four-day journey was arduous, with 13,000m of ascent and descent on narrow paths above 1,000m drops, which provided huge motivation for a novice to cling to her horse. Poor weather in Sarhad spoiled our plans to ski in the Big Pamir to the north, but we did get to walk into the unexplored Kharej Valley in the Hindu Kush and look at three terrific unclimbed peaks of about 5,500m.

We found the locals welcoming and hospitable, and felt we were probably treated no differently from men visiting this region; foreign travelers are simply considered a different (and rich) species, irrespective of gender. In fact, the people who expressed the most surprise were German soldiers, whose path we crossed the day we left. They were utterly shocked to see us, asked for photos with us, and were intrigued to know how two women had fared. We never felt in any danger, nor did we feel we were doing anything unacceptable. I would recommend this region to any man, or woman.

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