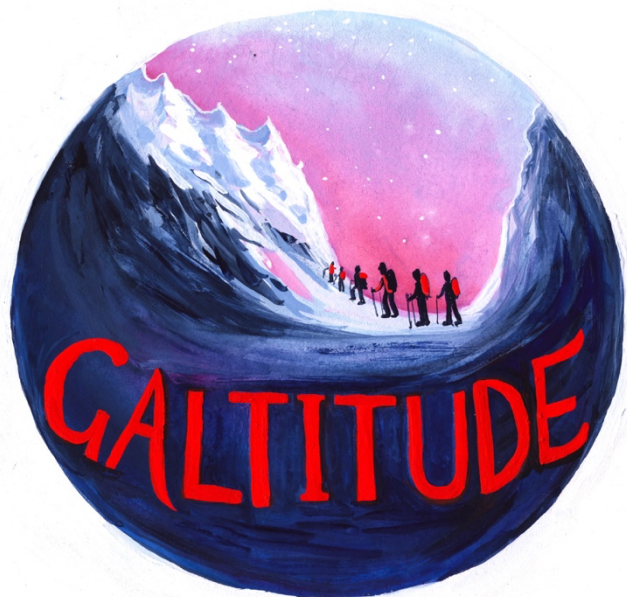


Kyrgyzstan Ak-Shyyrak Expedition 2024

First ascents in the Kyrgyzstan's Tien Shan Mountains



Expedition Team:

Elizabeth Porter

Caitlin McHale

Martha Gutteridge

Charlotte Krishek

Isabel Jones

Jing-jie Cheng

Supported by:

Mount Everest Foundation

Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund

GRIT&ROCK

Montane

Izipizi

Expedition Foods

Cover artwork: Martha Gutteridge

Report by: Elizabeth Porter



Summary

In July 2024, a group of 6 female mountaineers travelled to the Ak-Shyyrak range of Kyrgyzstan's Tien Shan mountains. The goals of the expedition were:

1. To come back safe.
2. To complete first-ascents of summits between 4500 and 5500 m.
3. To challenge ourselves and develop our own expedition skills and experience, with a view to the group members going onto participate in or lead more expeditions in future.
4. To increase visibility of women in expedition mountaineering and provide relatable inspiration to other women or minority groups who may have been put off from mountaineering goals by a lack of representation.

Base camp was reached from Bishkek via an overnight stay in Tamga. We were transported from Tamga to the Kara-Say valley in an off-road truck, which carried us about 20 km from the road with all our equipment. BC was established at 3790 m in the Kara-Say valley (41.733459 N, 78.226586 E).

The team succeeded in reaching the summit of two peaks which we believe had not been climbed previously. The first, Peak 4660 (41.710065 N, 78.227877 E), was reached by a team of 3 on the 13th of July, after an unsuccessful attempt the day before. The route took the glacier up directly from Base Camp in the Kara-Say valley, ascended a steeper section onto the col at the back and then took the short and non-technical South ridge to the summit. We believe the grade to be around PD.

The second successful ascent was of Peak 4749 (41.719439 N, 78.249644 E). This was reached on the 21st July by another team of 3 via an Advanced Base Camp at the base of the glacier just to the East of the mountain. The route followed the glacier and then took a physically relentless but non-technical ascent of the East shoulder to the summit. Grade approximately F+.

The team attempted several other mountains in the area and established two other advanced base camps, but no other summits were achieved. One mountain was retreated from due to inclement weather, another due to dangerous loose rock, and a further two due to warm weather and soft snow resulting in a high risk of falling in crevasses, even pre-dawn. In addition, one team member unfortunately had to descend after suffering from high altitude pulmonary oedema a few days after arrival, however she recovered quickly in Karakol.

Overall, the group had an amazing time and found the Ak-Shyyrak range was beautiful and offered a lot of potential for climbing, however this is highly dependent on snow and ice conditions which might be more favourable in the Spring in future.

Background

Location

The Tien Shan mountain range extends along the border between Kyrgyzstan and China, and into China's Xinjiang province. The Ak-Shyyrak range is a remote part of this mountain system, located just to the North of the road which leads from Kara-Say village to Ak-Shyyrak. The western part of the range can be accessed from Kara-Say village via the Kara-Say river valley, which is wide and flat enough at the bottom to accommodate an off-road vehicle.

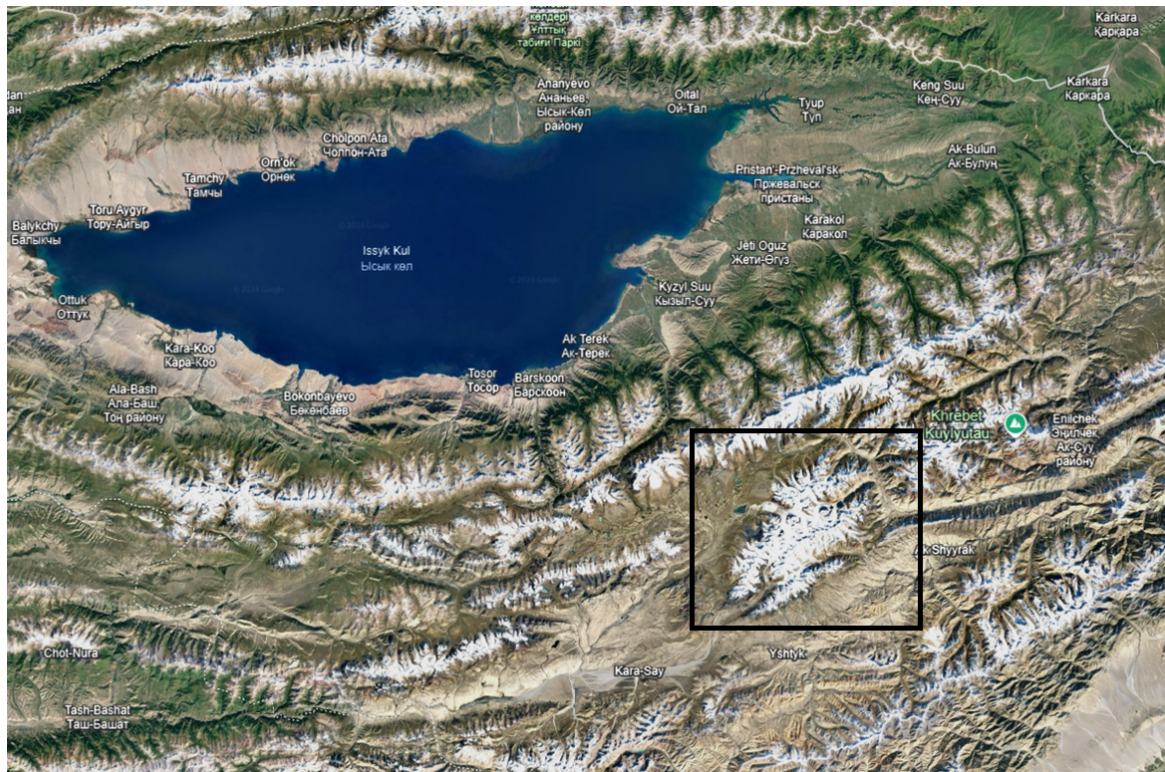


Figure 1 - Map showing the location of the Ak-Shyyrak range within Kyrgyzstan's Issyk-Kul region. Source: <https://earth.google.com>

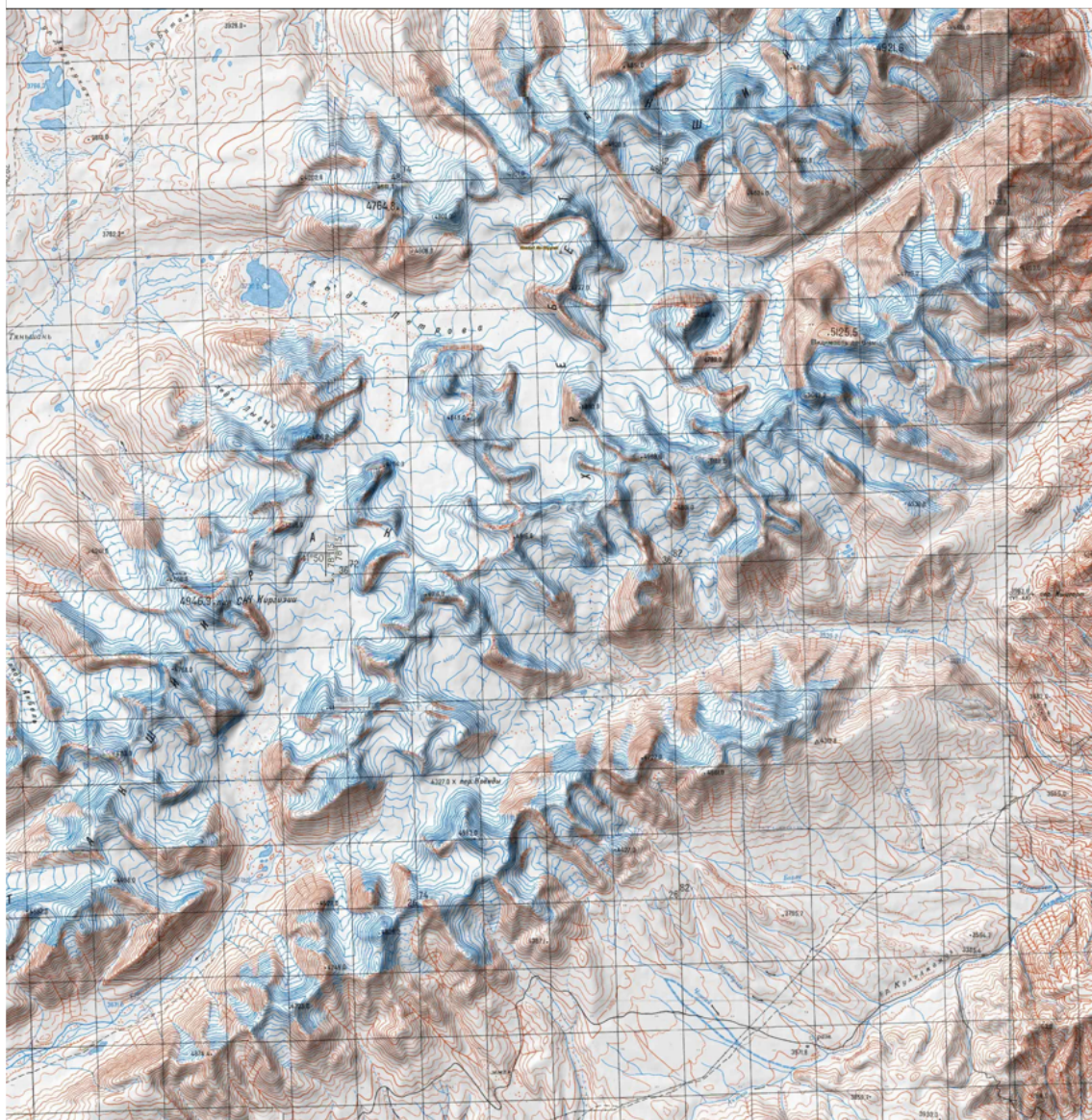


Figure 2 - Map of the Ak-Shyyrak range with the access via the Y-shaped Kara-Say valley in the bottom left. Source: [GeaMap.com/en](https://geamap.com/en)

The Ak-Shyyrak range has seen a handful of expeditions dating back to 2003, however these have been almost exclusively ski-touring expeditions. The only mountaineering expedition to the region was the Lithuanian expedition in 2023. Many of the ski-touring expeditions did reach the summits of peaks in the area. The expeditions we were able to identify were:

1. Mount Everest Foundation/Eagle Ski Club 2003
2. Eagle Ski Club 2006
3. Alpine Club Ski Expedition 2007
4. Eagle Ski Club 2008
5. Kirgski 2016
6. Ski Expedition 2017
7. Salomon 2018
8. Lithuanian Expedition 2023

Before we travelled, we went through the reports for all the above expeditions to identify which summits in the range had previously been climbed. We plotted this on a map which we took to base camp to use to determine which mountains had not seen previous ascents, so we could plan our attempts.

Team

The team consisted of Elizabeth Porter (expedition leader), Caitlin McHale (doctor), Charlotte Krishek (doctor), Jingjie ('JJ') Cheng (doctor), Martha Gutteridge, and Isabel Jones. All team members had experience climbing in the Alps, and extensive experience of trad and winter climbing around the UK. Some expedition members had previous expedition experience, but for all of us this expedition would be a first foray into exploratory climbing and first ascents.

Funding, Sponsorship and Support

The whole team is very grateful to the funding bodies and sponsors who made this expedition possible. We would like to thank the GRIT&ROCK Foundation, the Mount Everest Foundation, the Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund, Montane, Izipizi, and Expedition Foods for their support. We are also greatly indebted to our friends and family for their remote support and equipment loan. thankfully

Expedition Account

After a frantic three days of preparations in Bishkek which had involved half our luggage being misplaced by Turkish Airlines, a last-minute location change resulting in anxious calls to our insurers and unpredicted hours spent poring over maps, and several chaotic grocery shopping trips for all the supplies we would need for more than 2 weeks in the wild, we were finally deposited at our base camp location on the 10th July 2024. Base camp was conveniently situated by the fork in the Y-shaped Kara-Say valley, allowing us convenient access onto both the North and South Kara-Say glaciers. Having been warned by ITMC, our Bishkek-based logistics provider, that we may not get all the way to the fork depending on the conditions of the terrain and the driver's willingness, we were thrilled that our driver Aleksandr had shown his mettle and through a heroic effort had driven all the way to the exact spot we had hoped to set up camp.



Figure 3 - The team unload the equipment from Aleksandr's truck at base camp.

After a day and a half of camp set-up and acclimatisation, we set our sights on the peak nearest our camp (Peak 4660) as what we thought would be a warm-up route. We woke up at 04:30 on the 12th of July, hoping to leave by 05:00 but due to unforeseen inefficiencies in our preparations we did not leave until 05:50. Climbing in two teams of three, the first team (Martha, Caitlin and Izzy) were unfortunately forced to turn back shortly after joining the glacier due to several of the group still suffering from altitude. The second team of three (Lizzie, Charlotte and JJ) made better progress and wove a path up the glacier towards a col which would lead to the South ridge of our objective, however the snow on the upper section of the glacier was incredibly soft which made progress very slow, and raised concerns over the possibility of falling in unseen crevasses. The group turned back just 150 m shy of the summit at around 10:00, reluctantly admitting that if we hoped to reach any summits, we would need to be setting off much earlier.

Martha, Charlotte and JJ rested the next day, however Lizzie, Izzy and Caitlin were keen to have another go, so we set our alarms for 02:00 and packed our bags meticulously. Thanks to our tracks from the day before greatly speeding up our progress and the colder temperatures earlier in the day, we were standing on our first summit of the trip by 06:30 the next morning.

When the summit team arrived back at base camp they found that JJ, who had started feeling unwell the day before, was now exhibiting symptoms of a chest infection. Reluctant to admit that she may have to descend, we decided to wait another day before making any decisions, and scheduled a rest day for the next day. After a very rainy day of resting, playing cards, and eating at camp, we decided that if she wasn't any better the next morning we would call our logistics provider to help with getting a truck to come back to take her back down where she would hopefully recover more quickly.



Figure 4 - Isabel Jones emerging onto the final summit ridge of Peak 4660.



Figure 5 - The muddy conditions after the heavy snowfall and rapid melt complicating the rescue operation.

We woke the next morning to heavy snow, which we had slept through and had accumulated on the tents, damaging the mess tent and Erlan's tent, and collapsing the tent that JJ had been sleeping in. While half the team dug out the tents, the other half called ITMC to request a rescue for JJ. Due to the unfortunate fresh snow and resulting issues with the terrain, the rescue operation was more complicated and time-consuming than would have been hoped, and during this time JJ's condition also worsened significantly, so we were enormously relieved the next morning when Aleksandr arrived in his trusty truck to take JJ down to Karakol. A decision was made that Lizzie would go with JJ, in order to make sure she was safe and well before hopefully returning to base camp.

In Karakol, a chest x-ray at the hospital confirmed High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE), but luckily the primary treatment for this condition is descent from altitude, so JJ recovered relatively quickly once down, however it was not possible for her to return to base camp due to the risk of recurrence and the complexities of descent from a remote location. Lizzie was able to hire a car to take her back to Kara-Say from Karakol on the 19th of July, and then walked from Kara-Say to the base camp location.

After JJ and Lizzie had left, the rest of the team had another rest day, partially to recover from the stress and sleep-deprivation associated with the rescue operation, and partly to allow the fresh snow up high to stabilise. On the 17th of July the team went on to set up an advanced base camp by a beautiful glacial lake in the north fork of the Kara-Say valley, with a view to attempting a summit the following day. Unfortunately, inclement weather the next day forced a retreat from the mountain and a return to base camp.

The mountain right next to our base camp had been a slightly tempting prospect since our arrival. It did not have a lot of snow cover, and the rock was mostly scree, but it was not steep and not very big, so it was felt that it might be worth a shot. The team therefore rested the day after returning to base camp, with the plan to get up early the following morning and attempt the summit from base camp. Lizzie arrived back with the group in the afternoon.

When the alarms went off at 03:30 the next morning, Lizzie was still feeling quite tired from the big walk back to base camp the day before, so decided to stay home. Caitlin, Martha, Izzy, and Charlotte all started up the mountain, but Charlotte turned back with Caitlin after reaching a scree shoulder due to an intense dislike of scree. Martha and Izzy made it much further and said that the scree actually proved quite nice underfoot on the ridge, however they eventually reached a steep chossy face which barred further progress, only about 200 m below the summit. They slid all the way down the side of the scree shoulder back to camp.



Figure 6 - The first advanced base camp in the North Kara-Say valley.

With a weather window forecasted, the group were keen to maximise their chances of getting some more summits, so packed up that same evening and made a slow but steady journey to another advanced base camp location after dinner that night. This time the location was a scree shelf below a tributary glacier in the south fork of the valley. There were a handful of mountains we thought we might try from here, none of which were visible from the location of advanced base camp. On the 21st July, Caitlin, Izzy, and Lizzie got up early and set off, optimistic that at least one of the three mountains we were heading towards would show a plausible route. As the dawn began illuminating the ice and snow all around us, a broad, snowy shoulder leading up to one of the summits appeared. It was a slog, and an unfortunate optical illusion made it always appear that you were just below the summit even when it was still 500m up, but we made it to the top (4749m) at around 7.30am.



Figure 7 - In descent on Peak 4749, with other potential summits nearby in the background.

In descent, we spotted several options for routes on other mountains in the area and formulated a plan to try a 4,825m summit the following day. Martha, Caitlin and Lizzie made the attempt, but unfortunately, the condition of the glacier and snowpack proved to be very unsafe in the warm conditions, so after a tough effort to reach a col at 4,530 m, we reluctantly descended. Exhausted, we all returned to base camp that evening.



Figure 8 - Martha on the col at 4530 m, with the glacier we established our final advanced base camp below in the background.



Figure 9 - The team on the final summit attempt, just before turning back on the highly crevassed glacier.

With only a handful of days to go before returning to civilisation, we established a final advanced base camp further up the south fork. We were lucky to find a flat shelf on the moraine above the glacier for our camp, which gave fantastic views over the valley that had been our home for the preceding two weeks. The next morning, after only a few hours on the glacier we were forced to retreat after two team members in quick succession had near misses with crevasses due to the soft snow. Unfortunately, this also meant abandoning our final planned summit attempt, which relied on the same glacier.

We returned to base camp, sad not to have completed our final objectives, but very glad for the incredible experiences we had all had, the two routes we had completed, and that we were all returning home fit and well.

Route Descriptions

Peak 4660

This summit was reached via the glacier directly above base camp, as shown in Figure 4. The bottom section of the glacier was steep in places, so we joined the glacier on the eastern edge where it was shallowest. The glacier levelled off substantially after the initial section and was easy going until we reached the steepening at the back, which we were initially unsure would be possible. However, thankfully there was an easily navigable line of plateaus which took us to just below the col. The final section of ascent to the col was steep enough to require the use of an axe. Then we followed the short South ridge to the summit, which had only a short steep section. We graded the route PD+.

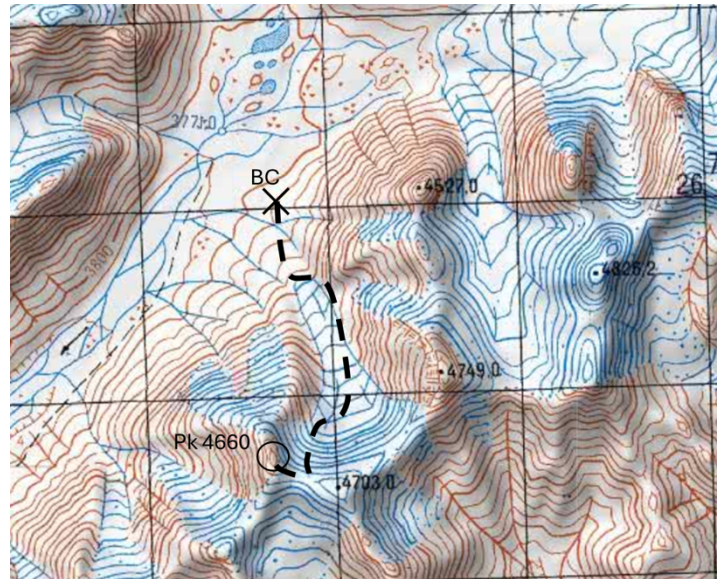


Figure 10 - Map showing approximate route to the summit of Peak 4660 from base camp. Adapted from: Geomap.com.



Figure 11 - Photo showing route taken through upper section of glacier to reach the South ridge of Peak 4660.



Figure 12 - Isabel Jones on the summit of Peak 4660.

Peak 4749

Peak 4749 was accessed from an advanced base camp at the bottom of the next valley over to the East from base camp (41.746221, 78.249938). We ascended the scree to the East of the bottom section of the glacier briefly, before climbing onto the glacier itself after its steepness had reduced. Again, we had no idea if our route would be possible as the mountain was not visible from the valley, however as we approached along the flatter section of glacier, a snowy shoulder appeared which looked easily climbable appeared. This proved arduous but technically straightforward, we graded it F+.

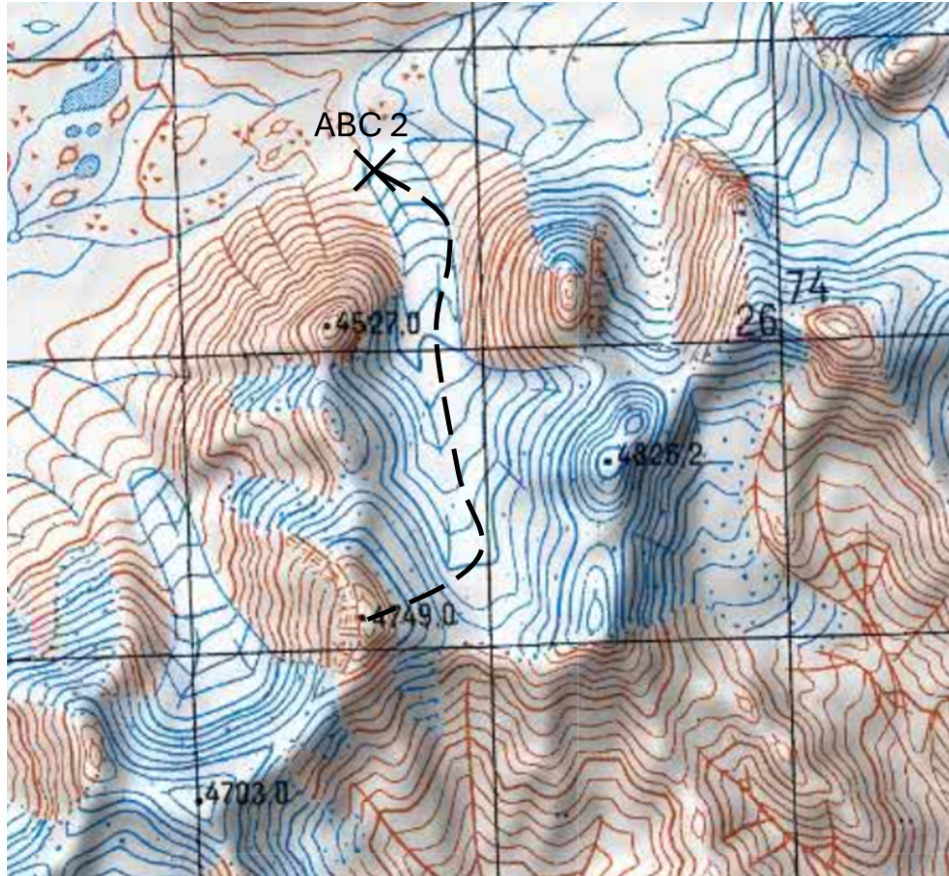


Figure 13 - Map showing approximate route to Peak 4749 from advanced base camp 2. Adapted from: Geomap.com.



Figure 14 - Photo taken from South Kara-Say glacier showing the route taken up Peak 4749 and the steep lower section of the glacier.



Figure 15 - Isabel Jones, Caitlin McHale and Elizabeth Porter on the summit of Peak 4749.

Future Climbing Potential

There is still potential for future first ascents in the range at a low technical difficulty, but these would require cooler conditions and better snow cover to be safe. The eastern part of the range remains largely untouched, and would offer plentiful opportunities for first ascents.

We did not explore the North Kara-Say valley extensively since most of the preceding expeditions had visited this area and the majority of peaks in the North Kara-Say valley are well-documented and have seen previous ascents (mostly the 2006 and 2016 expeditions). The South Kara-Say glacier, has seen much less exploration, and still provides plentiful opportunities for new routes. Fig. 9 shows a view onto mountains on the south side of the South Kara-Say valley, only the left-most of which (Wolf Peak) and the right-most prominent peak (Peak 4749, climbed by us) have been climbed. Fig. 7 also shows two potential first ascents in the region of our ABC 2, should the glacier and snow be in good condition, one involving a somewhat more technical-looking ridgeline, and the other being the summit we attempted from ABC 2 via the North col. See Appendix 1 for a map of our attempted route.

We had hoped to travel further up the South Kara-Say valley into the Eastern part of the range where we do not believe any climbing expeditions have travelled previously, however we unfortunately did not get time to do so. Since this area is beyond a col on the glacier, we also were unable to document the climbing potential here, however we believe a fit party could cross over this glacial col to establish a temporary camp in the Eastern part of the range where there is a high likelihood of being able to attempt mountains up to an altitude of 5100 m.

Media/Social Media Coverage

The team set up an Instagram account (@galtitude2024) to document preparations, the trip itself, and share our experience and learnings in the hopes of inspiring others to participate in or organise their own expeditions.

We will also be presenting on our expedition at the Kendal Mountain Festival in November 2024 and at an Alpine Club lecture (date TBD). A short summary of our expedition will be published in the next edition of the Alpine Club newsletter, and we were featured on the Alpine Club's instagram. In addition we will be publishing a blog post for Montane.

Final Budget

Costs		Income	
Flights	£4004.00	Mount Everest Foundation	£6000
Insurance	£2493.24	Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund	£2500
Transport in-country	£2677.44	G&R	£1170
Additional transport to BC for returning team member	£134.32	Personal Contributions	£3277
Accommodation (Bishkek and Tamga)	£517		
Equipment hire (base camp tent)	£234.89		
Cook Wages	£720.68		
Food and Expedition Meals	£1016.95		
Carbon Off-setting	£126		
InReach and Sat Phone fees	£313.38		
Group Equipment Purchases	£555.08		
Gas and Hire of Gas Stove/Bottle	£85.41		
Border Permits	£68.64		
Total	£12947.03		£12497.03

Nb exchange rate used USD = 0.76 GBP

Appendix 1 - Map

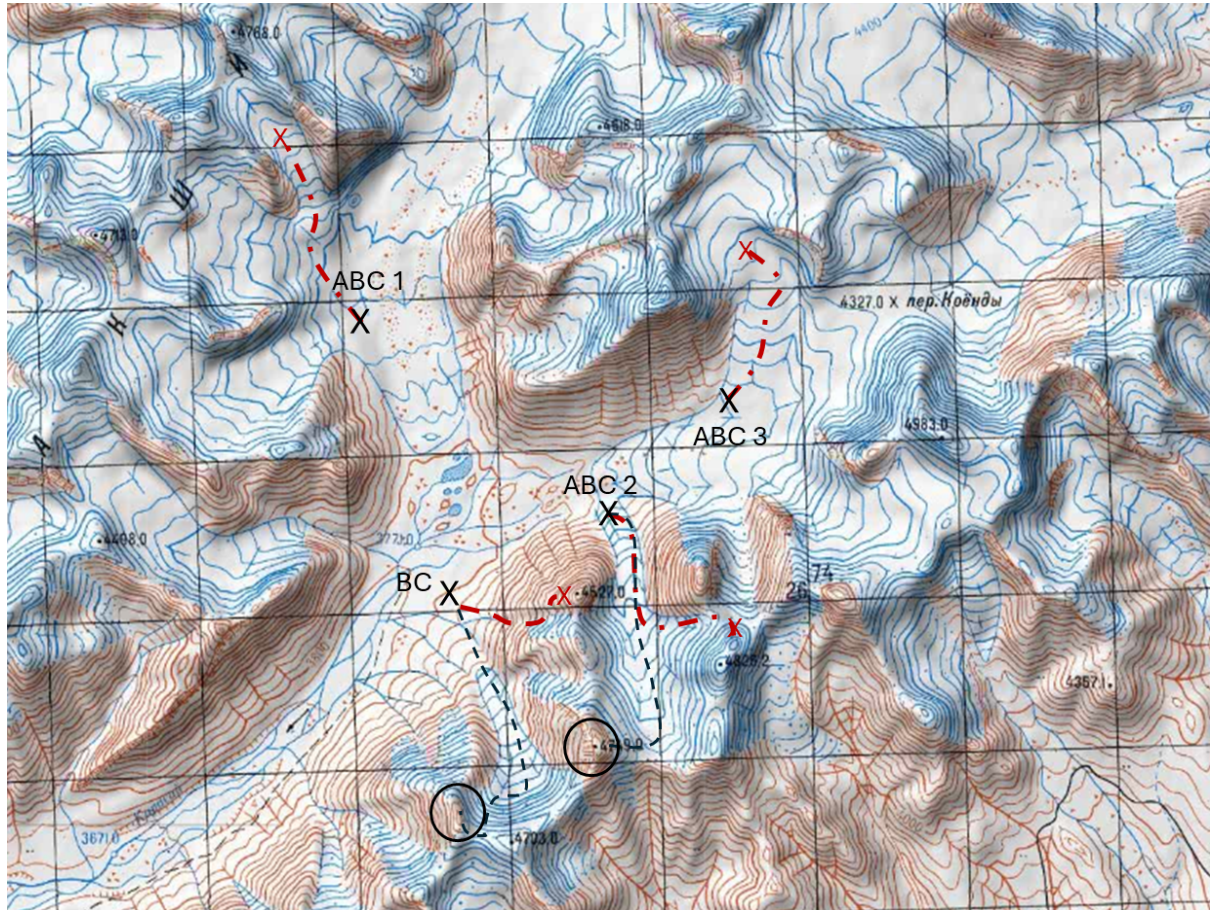


Figure 16 - Map showing all the attempted routes and all camp locations. Red dotted lines show unsuccessful attempts with approximate high points marked with X's. Black dotted lines show successful new routes with summits circled. Adapted from: geamap.com.

Appendix 2 – Summarised Expedition Diary

06/07/24	Lizzie, Izzy and Charlotte arrive in Bishkek. Meet ITMC and Erlan (camp cook).
07/07/24	Food shopping and finalising logistics arrangements.
08/07/24	Caitlin, JJ and Martha arrive in Bishkek. More food shopping.
09/07/24	Drive from Bishkek to Tamga.
10/07/24	Drive from Tamga to base camp (41.733459 N, 78.226586 E) and set up camp.
11/07/24	Acclimatisation day. Walked to Kara-Say river to assess potential crossing points.
12/07/24	First attempt on Peak 4660 (41.710065 N, 78.227877 E).
13/07/24	Second (successful) attempt on Peak 4660. JJ begins exhibiting symptoms of a chest infection.
14/07/24	Rest day and inclement weather.
15/07/24	Fresh snow so no climbing. Call made to extract JJ in the morning.
16/07/24	JJ collected by off-road truck in the morning and taken to Karakol with Lizzie. Rest of team rested.
17/07/24	Advanced base camp established in North Kara-Say valley (41.7680 N, 78.2145 E).
18/07/24	Summit attempt on Peak 4768 (41.801952 N, 78.191529 E). Retreat made to BC due to bad weather.
19/07/24	Rest day. Lizzie returns to BC.
20/07/24	Summit attempt on Peak 4527 (41.736701 N, 78.246152 E) abandoned due to poor rock quality. Advanced base camp established further up South Kara-Say valley (41.746221 N, 78.249938 E).
21/07/24	Successful summit attempt on Peak 4749 (41.719439 N, 78.249644 E).
22/07/24	Summit attempt on Peak 4825 (41.729007 N, 78.269857 E) abandoned due to poor snow quality. Return to BC.
23/07/24	Rest day.
24/07/24	Advanced base camp established off South Kara-Say glacier (41.759309 N, 78.270451 E).
25/07/24	Summit attempt on Peak 4650 (41.778376, 78.283771) abandoned due to risk of crevasses. Planned summit attempt on Peak 4830 (41.772077 N, 78.261461 E) for the next day also abandoned, so return to BC.
26/07/24	Preparing to be collected on the 27th. Then finding out not being collected until 28th.
27/07/24	Preparations (again).
28/07/24	Packing and getting picked up. Drive from BC to Tamga.
29/07/24	Drive from Tamga to Bishkek.
30/07/24	Day of sight-seeing in Bishkek.
31/07/24	Flying home.