

Cover Sheet - Sapar 2025

Expedition Report MEF ref 25 – 07:

Zaalay range, Nura Valley, Alay District, Kyrgyzstan 27/06/2025 - 29/07/2025

Base camp : 39.53757, 73.80524bAdvanced Base camp : 39.50169, 73.84781

Supported by: Mount Everest Foundation and Real Meals NZ

Participants: Joe Collinson, Maria Koo, Lawrence Luscombe, Orla O'Muirí



Summary

This trip was an exploratory climbing expedition into the Nura valley, which extends south from the village of Nura in the Alay region of southern Kyrgyzstan towards the Chinese border. There are multiple un-named peaks in this region up to just below 6000m elevation with no previously recorded ascents. As there was a paucity of information about this valley, and no photos or detailed descriptions of any of the peaks in the area, our initial goals were fairly broad – to explore the valley, identify a route across the rivers, moraines and glacier and to hopefully identify and climb potential routes on the unclimbed peaks in the valley.

By climbing new routes in the valley we hoped to bring increased interest in mountaineering to the area, establish beta for logistics, the approach as well as the actual routes for future teams, and to follow a sustainable approach with minimal environmental impact by removing all waste from the environment and using horse transport to access the valley and our base camp.

We were successful in completing a ridge traverse of 4 unnamed peaks just north of the Chinese border (ranging from 4400m to 4700m) during our first weather window. Our main objective which we attempted during the second weather window was the 1500m North ridge of the unclimbed and unnamed 5700m peak on the Chinese border between Pik Leibniz and Kypym-Top-Taz. Despite initially good conditions, we turned around after 800m (at 5100m) due to snowpack instability.

We had a final attempt at climbing an unnamed peak 4780m on the last day before we were picked up from basecamp, but turned around at the col to the north at 4550m due to poor weather and a deteriorating forecast.

All the peaks we attempted we believe are unclimbed, from info from the local guiding company Ak-Sai, previous trip reports from the area and communication with locals.

Despite turning around on two of the three objectives, we were successful in collecting detailed beta on this route, and several other unclimbed routes in the area, for future expeditions.

Unfortunately, half way through the trip, two of Joe and Maria's bags full of equipment were stolen from the advanced base camp overnight. The advanced base camp (ABC) was high on the glacier and very remote so this was very surprising. After discussion with the local horseman, Matiev Jenishbek, who helped us get in and out of the valley, he told us that the proximity with the Chinese border meant that this valley is a common smuggling route, and the government is considering installing a remote camera here as it is such an issue. His suspicion was that smugglers going past in the middle of the night are the most likely culprits. Any future expeditions should be aware of this, and not leave equipment unattended in the valley. We suspect the snow pack would have been more stable the week prior to our summit push day for the main objective on the 5700m peak, but due to the missing gear we missed this weather window.

The expedition costs are listed in the appendix.

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Happy Campers

Research & Planning

After five years of talking about a hypothetical trip to Kyrgyzstan, in early 2024 we finally committed to planning a trip for mid 2025. Our goal was to find an area of Kyrgyzstan with multiple unclimbed peaks to explore, with reasonable access / logistics. After scouring maps, satellite images, previous expedition reports, discussion with local guiding companies and a very helpful google file of climbed and unclimbed peaks, we finally settled on the Eastern Alay area of the Pamir range. Situated in the south east of the country, in the border region with Tajikistan and China, it is most famous as the home of the 7,134m Lenin peak which is the second highest peak in the country and a popular guided mountaineering objective. The area to the far east of the range, however, just at the Chinese border, where the peaks all drop below 6000m, has received little attention and has multiple unclimbed peaks. This is partly due to the fact that the border area between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China was closed for a long time so expeditions of this type were not possible. Notably a 2009 expedition resulted in the successful ascent of Pik Leibniz, at the far eastern end of the range.

We aimed to travel to the village of Nura, approach the range via the Nura valley and set up a base camp in the valley allowing access to the peaks to the west and north of Pk Leibniz. Previous trips reports from the area suggested the snow level would be near the valley floor, and so we brought skis hoping we would be able to ski some of the peaks, and also as a means of transport





Getting to Osh

A year out, we emailed a logistics company (Ak Sai) to discuss our plan, enquire about rental equipment, horses and permits. They reviewed their archives and reported there were reports of previous ascents on the peaks we were looking at. They were also able to secure the border permits for \$30 USD per person, and they provided rough estimates of rental prices. In the months leading up to the expedition we pushed Ak Sai to provide confirmation of our reservation, but we never received anything concrete and we were never asked to pay any sort of deposit. It was safe to say that this was the biggest unknown and source of uncertainty heading into Kyrgyzstan.

Our flights to Kyrgyzstan went from London Stansted to Osh via Istanbul. This flight was with Pegasus (think Turkish Ryanair - tightly packed hard seats, no frills and surly attendants). Pegasus were the only company operating on that route and we were able to add an additional 60kgs and 2 ski bags to our booking online.

Getting from Osh to Nura

Meeting with logistics company

We had scheduled a couple of hours on our first day in Osh to meet with Ak Sai to discuss our objectives, the conditions/snow level, and logistics. We met the Osh branch's single staff member but to answer our questions she had to make multiple phone calls to the head office in Bishkek then gave us confusing and sometimes contradictory answers. Our guess is that because the logistics company is based in Bishkek the smaller Osh office is just used for airport

transfer runs for groups heading to Lenin Peak. Subsequently the meeting was not as fruitful as we had hoped.

The outcomes of this meeting included:

- The snow line was somewhere above 4000m
- Our plan A basecamp wouldn't be accessible by horse
- We arranged to rent a large basecamp tent (\$25 per day)
- We turned down renting their gas bottles (they didn't come with the burner and we couldn't find a burner for sale locally that didn't also include the gas bottle anyway.)
- We scheduled a minibus transfer from Osh to Sary Tash (\$600 return)
- We booked a guesthouse in Sary Tash (\$30 pp/pn)
- We scheduled a final minibus transfer from Sary Tash to Nura (\$600 return)

Horses and Logistics

The morning we left Osh the logistics company texted us saying they could not confirm the availability of the horsemen and decided to refund us the cash we had paid for that part of the service. Fortunately our worry was short lived as we discovered the owner of the Sary Tash guest house was plugged into the Nura horse network and was able to hook us up with Jingesh. For \$100 per horse per day, Jingesh and his two sons were able to get all our equipment 15km up the valley from Nura, including what would have been a waist deep river crossing. In our opinion, it was worth every dollar to be able to have a heavier (more comfortable) basecamp setup.

Jingesh was keen for us to spread the word of his services for any further expeditions to the area - he is on whatsapp +996777004457. You will need to use google translate to communicate as he only speaks Kyrgyz (FYI in Osh, Russian was more widely used).

For the way out we had set a date to be picked up by the horsemen and subsequently the logistics driver. Our logistics company had assured us that if we contacted them via Inreach they would be able to tweak this date should the situation change once we were up the valley. This indeed ended up being the case but it took a Russian speaking friend back in New Zealand fighting on our behalf to get hold of all the necessary people to make it happen. Even then, the horsemen struggled with high river levels and ended up coming in a day later. Not the end of the world, but not the breezy one message fix that the company had us believe it would be. Our lesson would be to have a friend you can inreach to directly whatsapp the horsemen if there are going to be any changes.

After we got to Nura, Jingesh, our horseman, took us back to his Jailoo (high altitude summer pasture) to share food with his lovely family who were spending the summer there in their Boz Uys (yurt tents). From what we could piece together through Google Translate, Jingesh was the patriarch of the village. His family kept a herd of cows and horses for milk, meat and transport. Alongside this, he was also the government's anti-poaching officer for the region, so was very interested in hearing the details of our experiences up the valley. His wife and six children lived in a boz uy where we were fed bread, butter, sour cream, sweets, tea and the local delicacy of

fermented horse milk. For the curious, the best four words to describe fermented horse milk would be warm, fizzy, vinegary and lumpy. After a few hours of gracious hospitality, and a drone flying lesson with some of Jingesh's kids, we were back on the road to Osh.

When we left the Jailoo our driver took us straight back to Osh in one push (5 hours) rather than stopping overnight in Sary Tash as we had done on the way in. In hindsight, we could have done this on the way into Nura, but our stop in Sary Tash did give us a bit more time to see Kyrgyz life. We were also unable to confirm if there was a guest house in Nura.

The transfers to and from Nura were a big part of the in-country expenses (\$1200 total) and if we were to do the trip again we would give ourselves extra time in Osh to try and find a local independent driver to cut these costs down.

We had arranged a driver with Ak Sai for the airport transfer home but the evening before the driver cancelled on us so we ended up relying on a local contact of the guest house owner (Lovely Home Hostel). This driver picked us up on time, and 15 minutes into the drive, he insisted on stopping to buy us fresh bread as a final breakfast before our flight. This was the type of Kyrgyz hospitality we found everywhere we went; people eager to go out of their way to help and show kindness to travelling strangers.

Burner and Fuel

A Reddit post led us to believe that there was a sports shop in Osh that sold small gas canisters (jet boil compatible). We quickly discovered that this is not true, so opted for plan B - large gas bottles for cooking at basecamp and a petrol fuelled MSR whisperlite for higher camps. We found a shop selling 5kg gas canisters ($\frac{1}{3}$ the size of a normal bbq type) with a single burner that screws onto the top (similar to campingaz 907 bottle / super carena burner). We opted to buy three of these bottle and burner combos at 2600 SOM (€26) each from the Osh Tatan shopping centre (opposite Maxcom urban mall).

All the gas bottles we found were sold empty and although many of the petrol stations have big lpg tanks they are unlikely to have the correct adapters to fill these smaller bottles. With the assistance of yet more helpful strangers we were shown directions to the only gas bottle filling station in Osh on a back street of a back street (АГЗС "Сулайман Тоо" (Газозаправка)).

The small gas bottles for basecamp were a success. They cost about 450 SOM (€4.50) each to fill and they were easy to pack down and load onto the horses. A week in we discovered one of the bottles had a leaky valve so we were down to two bottles which still ended up being more than enough. We burned through all the gas in 1 bottle over the course of about 16 days cooking in basecamp.

Petrol for the MSR whisperlite was easy to get hold of, and most of the big petrol stations sell 10L metal Jerry cans (2900 SOM / €29). We looked for the smaller 5L plastic cans but couldn't find them anywhere so opted to just half fill a bigger 10L metal can.

Of note, whilst in the valley, we saw the odd small gas canister littered about - it transpired that Ak Sai do have a supply of these so jetboils could be an option for advanced camps after all.

Basecamp supplies

At the Osh Tatan shopping centre we bought 4 small folding camp stools for a few hundred SOM each which made basecamp life a lot more comfortable. Would recommend.

Not all shovels are built the same. Our 200 SOM purchase was definitely on the budget end of the spectrum and it showed. The wooden handle snapped after a few days. Learn from our mistake, test before you buy.

We couldn't find a big plastic tarp so we opted for waterproof table covers as a basecamp ground sheet instead. It was sold by the meter off a 1.5m wide roll in the supermarket.

A large cooking pot, washing bowls, sponges, etc were all purchased at the supermarket.

Food

We brought dehys from NZ as we didn't think these were available in Osh (they aren't so we're glad we did) - around 12 dehy meals per person. Just for the pushes to ABC.

Otherwise, most of our food was purchased at the Globus hypermarket. They had a great supply of everything we needed, and it felt comparable to any large European supermarket, except for the occasional unusual product (canned horse meat?).

- Breakfast: Oats, coffee, powdered creamer
- Lunch and snacks: wraps, rice cakes, nutella/jam, muesli bars / biscuits / sweets
- Dinner: rice, bulgur wheat, noodles, lentils, mung beans, canned vegetables and sauces
- Fresh items for week 1: cheese, fresh veg
- Luxury items that we brought into country: packet soups, dehy peanut butter, veggie stock cubes, cliff bars

From the Osh Bazaar we bought 3kg of dried fruit and 5kg of peanuts. The bazaar was well worth the visit, with lots on offer and a very friendly atmosphere. There was no aggressive haggling or tourist prices. Here we also picked up 2 large plastic storage boxes - essential, as there were hungry critters around BC.

Water

We brought plenty of chlorine tablets and also had 2x 6L hydrapak filters. These were absolutely essential. Not only did this put our minds at ease for infection, but the water was also heavily sedimented with silt so having filtered water was key. Nobody developed gastroenteritis during the trip.

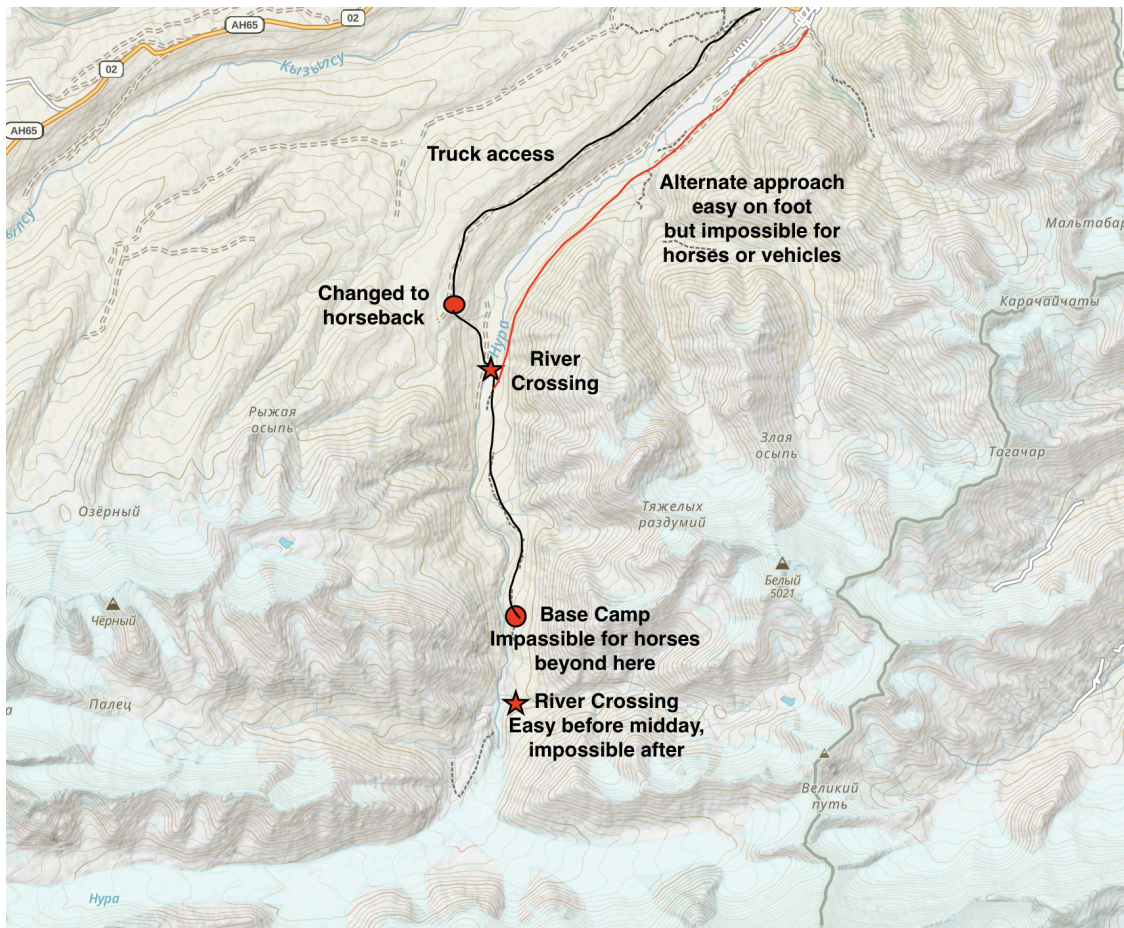
Access

Accessing the Nura Valley



The beautiful Nura valley, with the imposing wall of Kypym Top Taz towering in the background

- Once established in the valley you want to be on the East of the river. This is where there is an established track, camp sites and access to the glacier. The west side drops steeply down to the river and is impassible
- We drove up the western side of the valley for around 5km in the horseman's truck; the horses were walked in by the horseman's sons to where we were then loaded up the horses to walk the remaining distance.
- It is possible to walk from Nura up the Eastern side of the valley - however where the river turns south it becomes steep walled and narrow and is impassable for horses or vehicles
- We crossed the river at this point. The Nura river significantly changes in volume and character, and therefore risk, with time of day. With glacier melt, mid afternoon sees the river become a raging torrent whereas it is manageable and just about possible to cross on foot in the mornings. The colour of the water is brown from silt but the intensity of colour can indicate the flow - with more water and greater flow more silt was being churned around creating a deep chocolatey brown colour.
- We wanted to get as far up the valley as possible, but after around 10km a number of small rivers running east to west had cut deep gullies across the track. Fine on foot but impossible for the horses.



- Each horse was carrying 40-50kg of gear; with the strongest 3 horses carrying the horseman and his sons too.
- The trail was fantastic - it is very well established; there were cows and horses around and we learned that it was farmed land that was being accessed not infrequently by the farmer(s).
- We walked while the horsemen and his sons travelled on horse, but for the river, we weren't given an option and the horseman unloaded the bags off the strongest horse to shuttle each of us across 1 at a time.
- Our experience with hiring horses previously had the horsemen packing the bags into sacks to contain them / protect the bags. However in this case, they were loaded up as they were and so by the time we got to base camp we discovered a missing flip flop, a broken bag strap and a new foam mat was looking worse for wear and slightly torn. Although secure enough, the horses girth was very wide with the bags and so they were constantly being brushed against the abrasive prickly bush we were often passing through.



The Nura river. South of our crossing it is like this, extremely steep unstable walls, impossible to cross. West on the left east on the right



Just after loading the horses. We are on the west side of the river here. The spot we crossed is visible up ahead, leading onto the grassy area on the east of the river. Crossing beyond here would be extremely difficult - note the steep sandy / soil walls visible in the distance



Jingesh and his sons who got us up the valley



Typical terrain heading down the east side of the valley



Maria with the horses

Accessing the glacier / advanced base camp

- South of base camp, the largest of the east to west rivers was a significant river crossing. As with the main Nura river, easily crossable on foot before midday but extremely dangerous in the afternoon with glacial melt. We bivvied on the other side of it rather than crossing late in the afternoon.
- The main Nura river is extremely steep walled with 100m high loose soil / sand walls and is very fast flowing - attempting to cross it anywhere beyond our crossing point (ie essentially the entire valley) would be extremely dangerous.
- There is a track marked on the map which is shown going from the terminal end of the glacier SW which we had thought could provide access to the interesting looking mountains to the west, or as a base camp - this is outdated and would be completely impassable due to river erosion.
- A big concern for us was access from the south end of the Nura valley to the main glacier. Our local contacts weren't able to give us information on this and satellite imagery showed a large glacial moraine with steep walled rivers. Thankfully the access was straightforward. By staying on the east of the valley, it is possible to follow grassy ledges right up until the edge of the moraine. A steep but manageable scree slope leads to the glacier, and by hugging the east and the north edge, just underneath the peaks of our 1st objective, a relatively flat scree / shingle route is followed all the way to ABC. This provided a large flat sandy area on top of the moraine wall with a good water source. The moraine wall was around 100m high so it was quite well protected from any avalanche hazard from the major peaks to the south. The south faces of the peaks to our north were free of snow so there was no hazard from these, but if there earlier in the year there was an elevated section that would provide some protection.

Waste

All waste was packed out at the end of the trip and taken back to Osh where it was disposed of at the waste processing centre



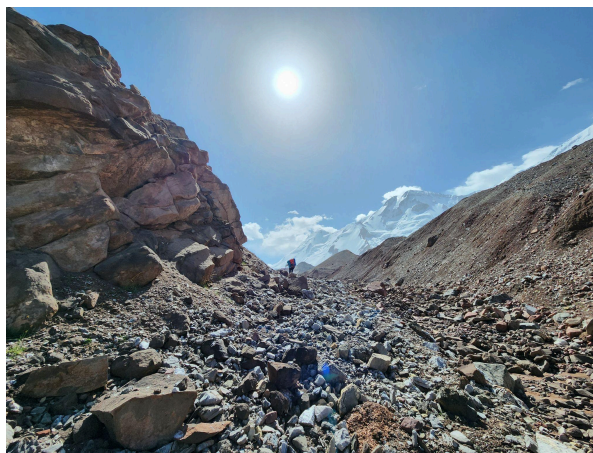
The south east end of the Nura valley, with scree slopes down to the glacial moraine visible on the right



Glacial moraine. By staying on the left at the edge of the glacier it was possible to avoid the complex terrain on the glacier itself and make rapid progress to ABC



It was like this most of the way to ABC



Sticking just to the north of the glacier, approaching ABC. Our main objective coming into view

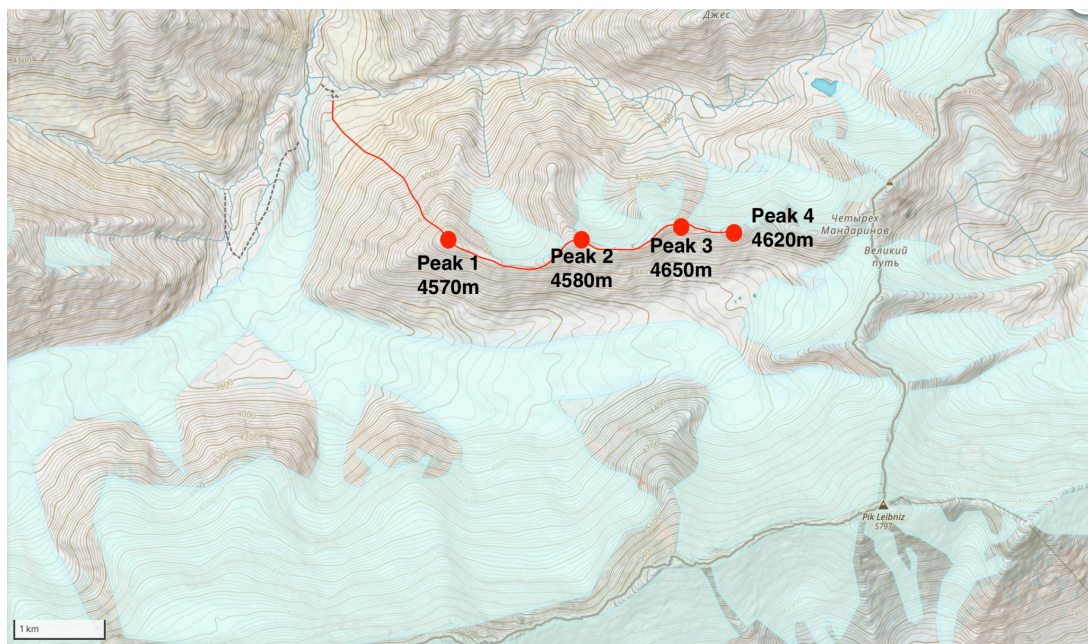


The second river crossing, cutting east to west on the eastern side of the valley. Not passable in the afternoon

The Climbs

The weather had been extremely hot for several weeks before we arrived in the country, with the locals describing it as an exceptional heatwave. The snowline was therefore a lot higher than we were expecting, with all of the smaller peaks essentially devoid of snow. North facing slopes had snow to around 4000, and south facing non glaciated peaks were completely bare as high as we could see (4560m). While on the walk in, numerous peaks on both the east and west looked like they would provide fantastic skiing terrain, but would require a trip much earlier in the year. We therefore turned our attention to the glaciated north facing peaks just north of the divide and the heavily glaciated peaks on the main divide between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

Climb 1 5/7/2025 - Enchainment of Peaks 4570, 4580, 4650 and 4620m

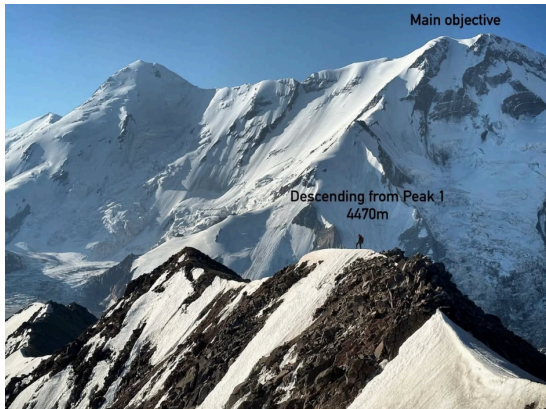


We camped just beyond the second river crossing before the climb. We woke at 0200 and were away by 0300.



Camp spot for climb 1. North west face of peak 1 visible in the background

- We ascended the 1000m north west face of peak 4470 via the large obvious couloir. The first 500m or so was dry, ascending on scree and loose blocks. The second 500m had a thin <10cm layer of melt freeze snow overlying thin but solid ice. The ice was thin enough that this would have been difficult to protect, but it was fast and secure to climb, with a few short mixed steps, which we soloed to the summit. The angle did not exceed 50 degrees.
- From the summit we proceeded east along the ridge, which was at times knife edge and exposed, but never technically difficult. The ridge was largely clear of snow to the south, and glaciated to the North with a mixture of melt freeze snow and bare glacier ice.
- From the low col at 4400, we stuck mainly on rock on the south of the ridge (max grade NZ 12) before turning a large gendarme on the south to reach the second summit 4580m. From here we followed the knife edge ridge over some complex and exposed ground to the North to the final peak at 4650m. We then reversed the route
- This ridge traverse gave fantastic views to the South, putting the entirety of the North faces of the main divide along with the glacier, moraine and access clearly into view. This allowed us to take multiple beta photos and plan our main objective



View along the ridge traverse heading East; taken from summit of peak 1



Maria descending peak 1 with a good view of peak 2 behind



Where the ridge became more exposed, we sidled the scree on the South facing aspects



Final peak (no 4) visible on the left



View looking back west from our final peak/turnaround point along the ridge

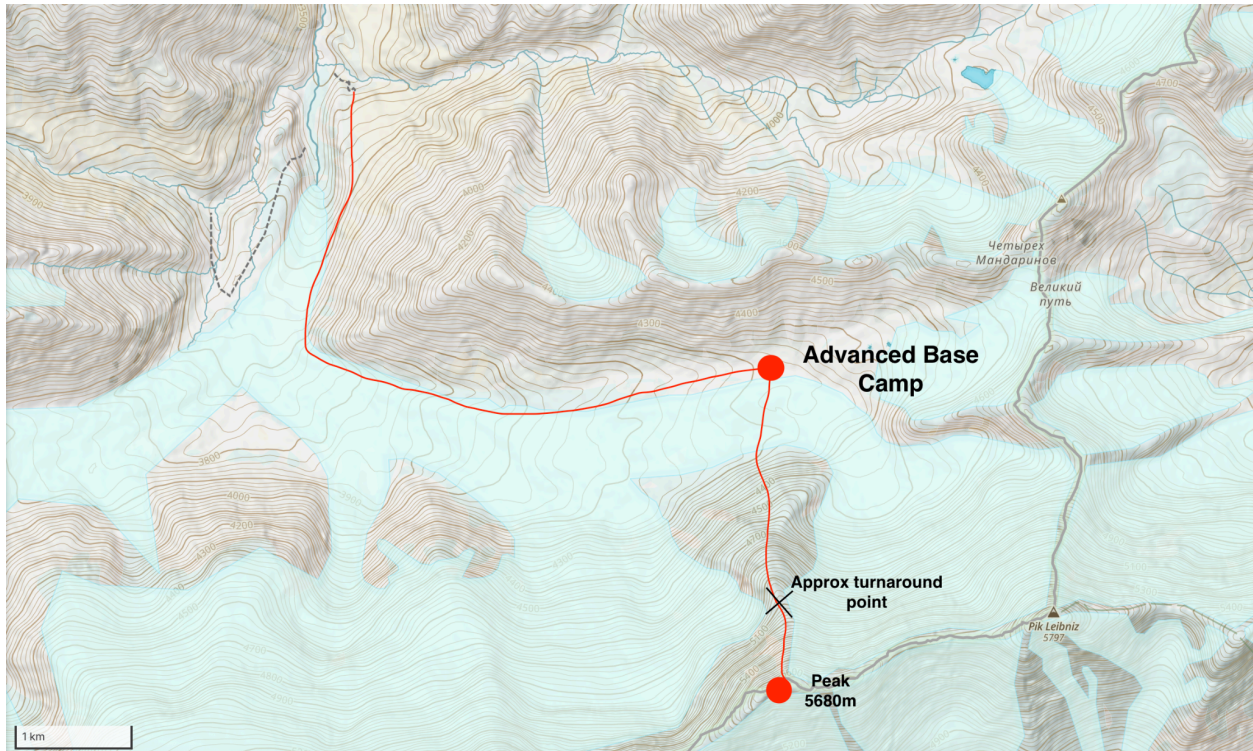
A Minor Hiccup

- To prepare for an attempt on the North face of 5670m, we had pushed our mountaineering gear and multiple days worth of food to an advanced base camp. Concerned with rock fall / landslides or animals getting into them, we buried the bags under rocks so they were completely concealed, and put a GPS dot and a cairn to mark the spot. We retreated back to our main base camp waiting for a weather window to attempt a summit push. The perfect 4 day window came up - we planned a day for hiking up to advanced BC, a rest day, then a day for the climb and a further day for the walk out. On reaching our advanced base camp however, all that remained of our bags were 3 snow stakes and 1 ice axe. We were completely stunned. There was absolutely no change to the immediate environment to suggest there had been rock fall; in fact the cairn was intact. No shred of the bag remained to suggest an animal had gotten into them either.
- Evidence of human faeces was at the site of our bags as well as footprints leading up to and away from it. We followed the footprints - 2 sets - for 6km or so, but stopped at a snow slope given we had no snow gear.
- Locals have subsequently informed us that this is a common smuggling route between China and Kyrgyzstan, as it avoided border control in Nura. It is our working theory that 2 smugglers must have taken our bags into China; each bag weighed 25-30kg so it is somewhat impressive they took the bags in their entirety in addition to whatever they were smuggling.
- Although we were concerned this would be a trip ending event, Joe and Maria walked out to Nura to restock on the missing days of food, and contact insurance. We decided as a group, between us we had enough to continue the expedition in some form.



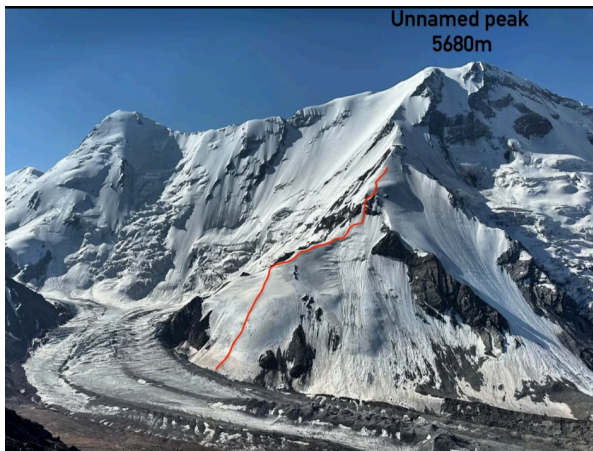
The scene of the crime. Human poop visible in the bottom left...

Climb 2 - Main Objective, Peak 5680m North Ridge



- With the beta gathered on our first climb, plus reconnaissance from a drone flight, we were confident on the approach to ABC and of the line on our main objective, peak 5680m. An obvious and aesthetic 1500m line cut up the lower face before joining the prominent north ridge via a narrow crux gully, before the final ridge which led directly to the double summit.
- Approach from BC to ABC was approx 9km, which took roughly 4 hours.
- We woke at 12am, leaving ABC at 1am. We crossed the glacier to the base of the route.
- The first section was directly north facing, with 1-2cm of refrozen snow on top of bomber glacier ice. This made for calf burning but safe and secure 45-50 degree ice climbing with solid screws. We simul-climbed this section for 400m to a low angle ridge. After this was the crux, a couloir where the angle kicked up to 60 degrees. We pitched out 5 rope lengths here on bomber ice, making for fun and efficient climbing. This led us to a plateau at around 5000m, leaving only the final lower angle snow slopes and the 600m or so left to the summit.
- However the change of aspect on these higher slopes had caused significant sun effect. After digging into the snowpack we found that underneath the refrozen suncrust the previously bomber ice was now completely rotten, with 30cm of slushy ice over rotten melt forms with fist firmness disappearing right up to our shoulders. With the sun rapidly melting the suncrust, we would soon be left with only the rotten and unsupportive snowpack underneath, and with the extreme exposure of the final slopes to the summit we quickly decided to turn around.

- We made 7 rappels leaving 1 picket and then v-threads in the solid ice below to bail, retracing our steps until we reached the ridge at the top of the first snow slope, where we were able to drop onto the east face which had no snow left on it and we descended easily on soft shingle.
- Navigating the crevasses and by this stage, softened snow bridges, across the glacier back to ABC was complex and time consuming, and we delicately weaved in and out through the terrain back to camp.



An aesthetic 1500m line, easily visible from advanced BC; the red line demarks our route/where we got to



View of the route again, from a different aspect. After retracing our steps on the descent we dropped over the face not visible and walked out via the glacier on the left



Joe coming up the final pitched section which was not as firm as the lower sections



Maria rappelling; this photo reflects the obvious choke point seen on the zoomed out photos above



Maria & Joe; after making the decision to turn around, spirits were still high



Joe on the final rap before the col. The start of the scree slope on the east face is just visible to his right



Maria walking along the col towards the scree slope descent to the glacier

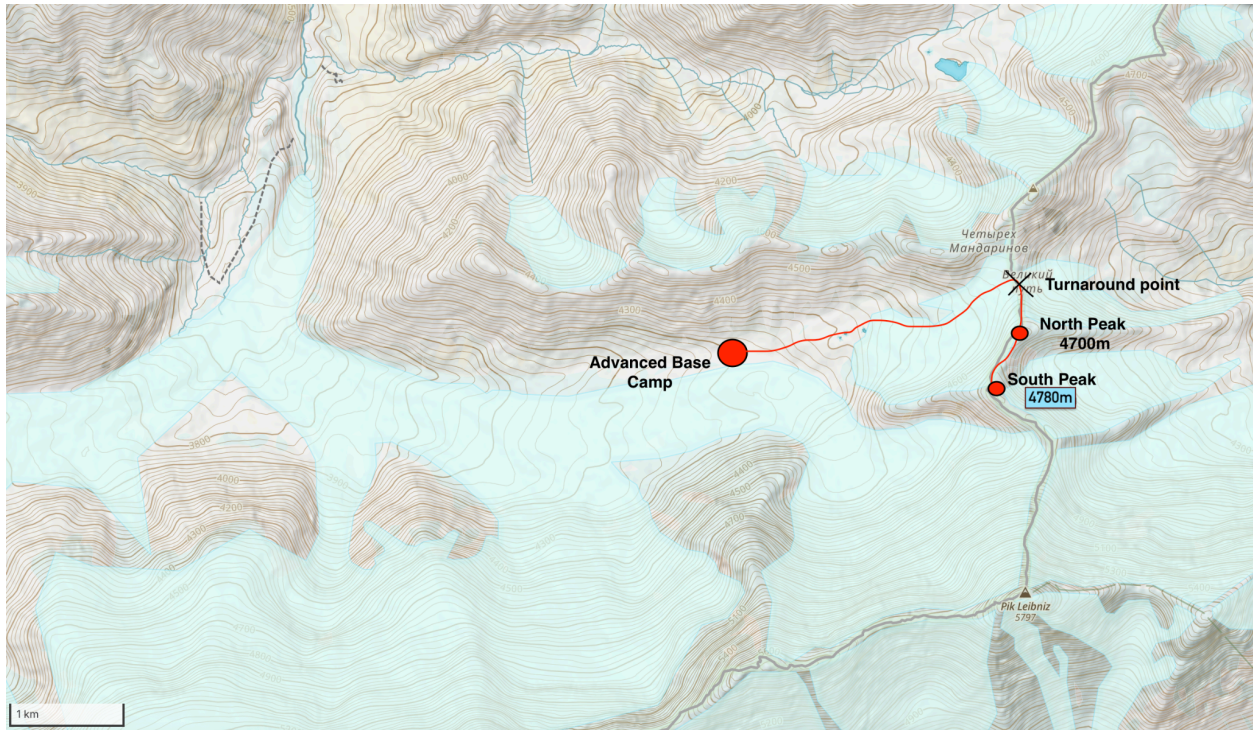


Maria walking out through complex terrain back to ABC. Peak Leibniz visible on the left



*View of the route 2 days after our summit attempt; the main face is almost
Unrecognisable after the unrelenting heat of the days prior*

Climb 3 4780m



- We woke at 3am and left advanced BC at 4am. We headed east for the Chinese border where we planned to join the ridge heading up to peak 4780m. When we reached the col however, the visibility was about 50m ahead so we waited until the sun rose to see if the clouds would burn off. Unfortunately visibility remained poor so we retraced our steps and were back at ABC by 7am. We don't have any useful photos of this climb as we were in dense fog the entire time.

Appendix

Expenses

Flights London to Osh including extra bags	£787.50 pp - including around 40kg baggage total pp (without additional baggage = £611)
Insurance	£550 pp (NZAC 92 day policy)
Accommodation & food in Osh	\$14 USD pp/pn accommodation ~ \$20 USD pp/pd food
Accommodation & food in Sary-Tash	\$30 USD pp/pn including food
Equipment rental	Basecamp tent = \$25 per day
Permits	\$30 USD PP
Food & Fuel for basecamp	\$200 USD PP
Transport	Osh - Nura - Osh = \$1200 USD Osh - Airport = \$20 USD
Horsemen	\$100USD per horse per day We had 4 horses in each direction