

Granitic Peaks of Kirgizia

MARK BEBIE and TOM HARGIS with IGOR TSARUK, *St. Petersburg*

MICHAEL GRABER WROTE in *Ascent* of 1980, "God went nuts when He created the Cathedral Spires," and halfway around the world from Alaska, this statement applies equally well to a recently discovered climbing paradise in central Asia. Located on the Kirghiz side of the border with Tadzhikistan, these stunning granitic peaks form a narrow east-west spine about 15 miles long among the usual shale and limestone peaks of the Pamir Alai. In the quality of their rock and their sheer and massive shapes, they resemble their granitic cousins in Patagonia, Pakistan and Alaska, yet with much less severe weather.

The moderate altitude combined with moderate climate makes climbing here a pleasure. The climate is so dry that couloirs are best climbed early in the season since they can be snowless or composed of old, hard ice late in the season. Permanent snowfields and glaciers are generally found above 4000 meters, although many rock routes have stagnant snow and ice to cross on the approach. As on all high mountains, storms can coat the peaks with a healthy layer of snow, but here it disappears quickly. The long rock routes on the lower peaks are usually free of snow, but sometimes the cracks can be filled with ice. What is the best way to characterize the region? Patagonia without the weather? A Yosemite-scale Wind River Range? Analogies never tell the real story, but most people returning from this region can't stop talking.

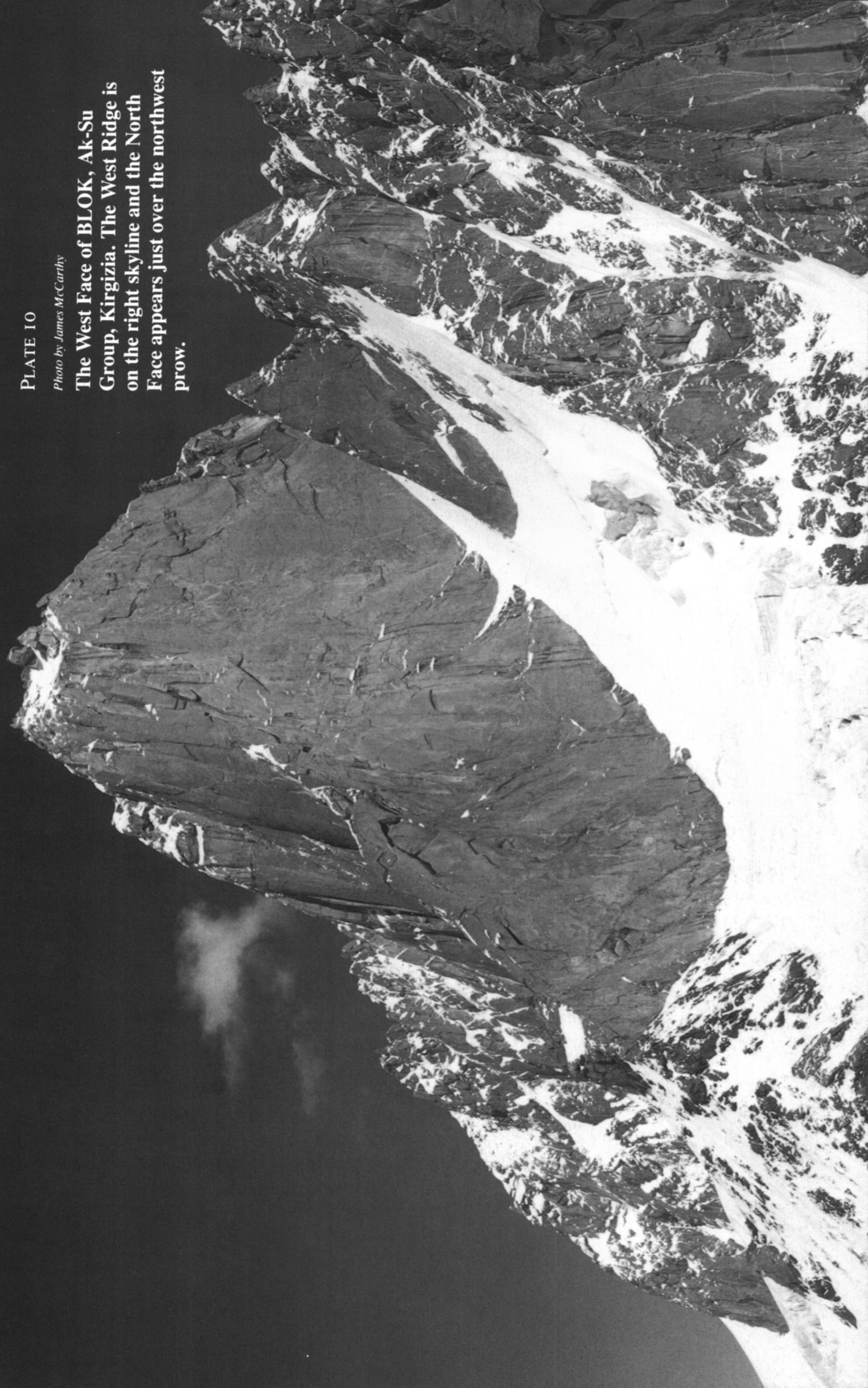
For centuries, shepherds and their sheep, goats, cows and horses were the only visitors to the lush alpine meadows at the headwaters of the Lyaylyak and Karavashim rivers. Early in this century, the Asan-Usan valley was a site for mica, tin and beryllium mining, and some abandoned mines can be found there today. In 1933, the General Staff of the Red Army produced a map of this region. In 1942, the German General Staff also mapped the area, and the U.S. Army produced its map in 1952¹. These maps are now out of print, and since they are difficult to read, we hope that the accompanying sketch map illustrates the topography well enough.

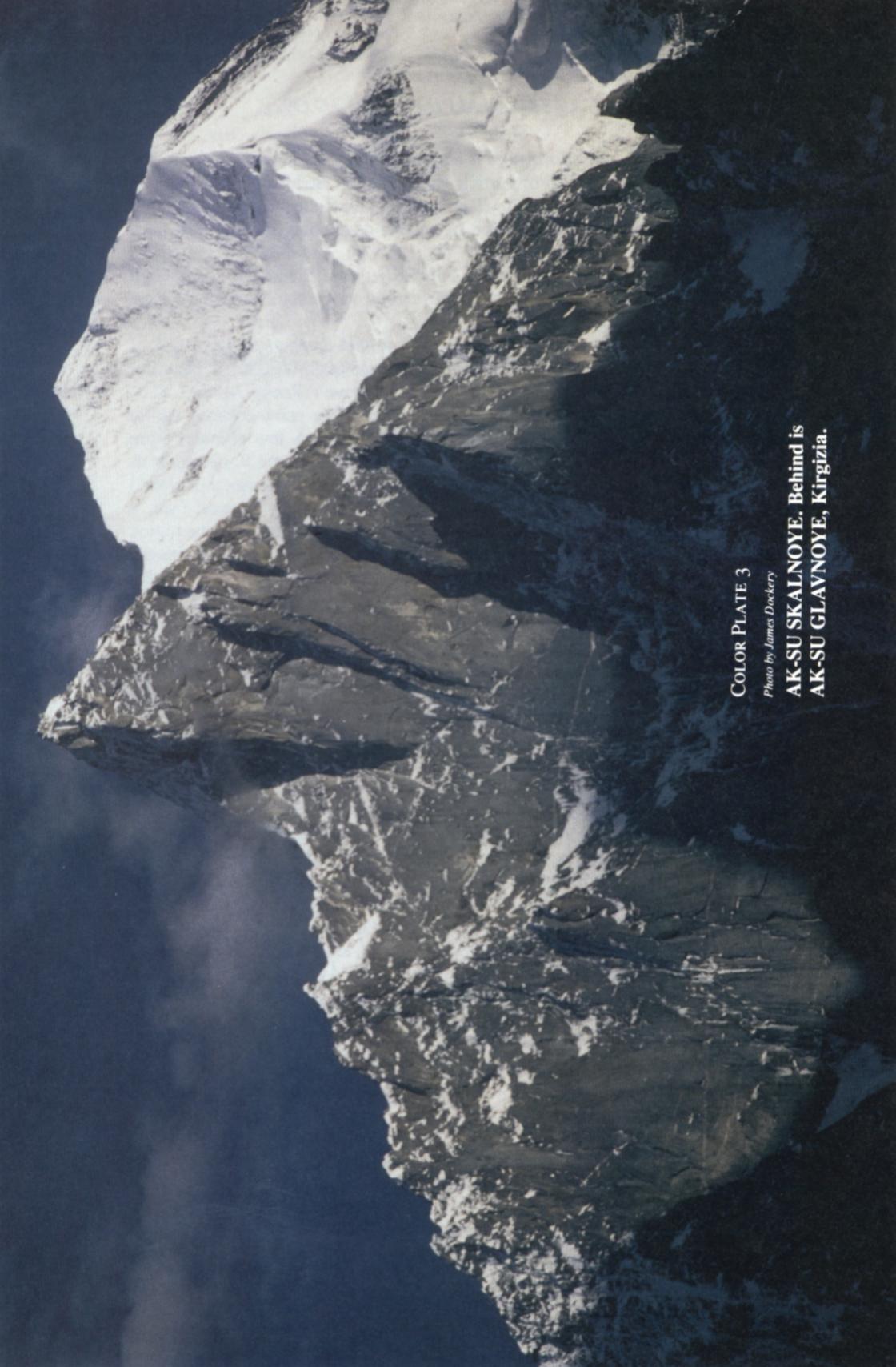
One will quickly notice that the names Ak-Su ("white water") and Kora-Su ("red water") are used quite freely, especially when it comes to creeks. Fortunately that is not the case for mountains. A nameless peak is identified by a number that is the peak's height in meters. Also, as a reference for climbs described here, the length of the Nose Route on El Capitan is 900 meters, the height of the northwest face of Half Dome is 600 meters and the altitude of Mount Whitney in the Sierra Nevada is 4418 meters.

PLATE 10

Photo by James McCarthy

The West Face of BLOK, Ak-Su Group, Kirgizia. The West Ridge is on the right skyline and the North Face appears just over the northwest prow.





COLOR PLATE 3

Photo by James Dockery

**AK-SU SKALNOYE. Behind is
AK-SU GLAVNOYE, Kirgizia.**

Unfortunately, our information is less than complete for many of the routes described, but we hope that this article sheds light on the history, potential and development of climbing here. It will quite clearly illustrate the tremendous skill of the Soviet climbers, skills which have been developed, for the most part, isolated from the West.

An apology is also made for the use of "Soviet" and "Leningrad." Although they are no longer appropriate, they indicated the currently used names at the time when the described events took place.

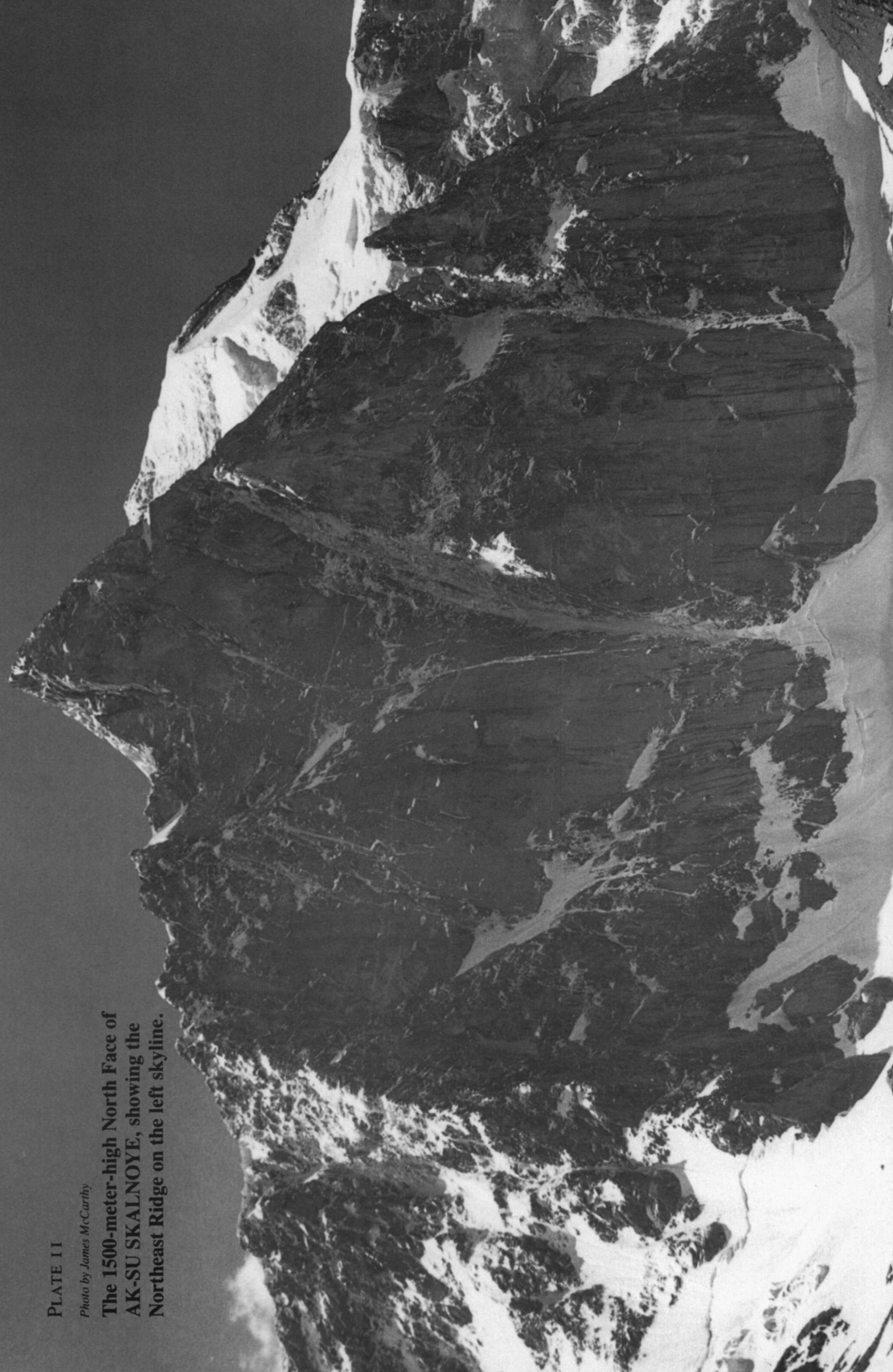
The Ak-Su valley was first discovered by Soviet climbers in the winter of 1982. At the head of the valley stands the namesake Ak-Su, a beautiful double-summitted peak. The granitic Ak-Su Skalnaye ("Rocky Ak-Su;" 5217 meters, 17,116 feet) lies just north of the crumbling, snow-covered Ak-Su Glavnoye ("Main Ak-Su;" 5429 meters, 17,812 feet). A few climbers from Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) took a chance on the fantastical stories emanating from central Asia, and that summer Big Iskander ("Alexander the Great") was climbed. Currently, Big Iskander has been climbed by its west face, a mid-fifth-class mixed route, a 19-pitch grade V. Suddenly interest in the region blossomed, and in 1983, the 1500-meter-high face of Ak-Su Skalnaye was the scene of two teams competing for the National Championship. Both the right-hand buttress route of 41 pitches and the left-hand one were ascended over a period of eight days, involving aid, free- and mixed-climbing. Also on Ak-Su Skalnaye is the very alpine northeast ridge (30 pitches, V, 5.10d) and in 1991, the very obvious central couloir was climbed by the Krasnoyarsk Club. Other notable ascents were done in the 1980s. On Blok (5229 meters, 17,156 feet), the classic west ridge (IV, 5.10b) was climbed as well as two routes on the 1000-meter west face. Both of these are grade VI aid climbs, one of which gains the northwest prow, where it steepens. The popular east face of Little Iskander (14 pitches, III, 5.10b) was climbed, and Little Makalu is reported to have a mostly snow mixed route. Above the Base Camp area at 2700 meters is the rare solid limestone peak Domashnyaya ("House"). Its popular northwest face has more variations than routes, so it is better to choose a line and go. After four years of development by Soviets, the reputation of the climbs in the Ak-Su valley spread to western Europe, and starting in 1986, the first outsiders, a Czech team, visited the valley². The first Americans followed in 1987^{3,4}.

In the mid-1980s, geologists, using helicopters, saw with climbers' eyes the Asan-Usan peaks, which are above two valleys, and 14 hours on foot, to the east of the Ak-Su valley. Asan and Usan are Kirgiz names given to twins. Viewing them from the cirque between them and P 4810, one can easily see why. Thus, in 1986, three teams from the cities of Dnepropetrovsk, Odessa and Rostov made the first climbing visit to the Asan-Usan valley, expressly for competing for the National Championship on the 900-meter-high west face of Asan (4230 meters, 13,878 feet). In addition to three grade VI west-face routes, the southwest pillar ("Alperian Route;" 26 pitches, the top ten of which are scrambling, V, 5.11b, A1) was climbed. Typical of peaks in this region, the descent off Asan is involved. Opinions differ, but the descent requires at least 16 rappels.

PLATE 11

Photo by James McCarthy

The 1500-meter-high North Face of
AK-SU SKALNOYE, showing the
Northeast Ridge on the left skyline.



The north ridge of P 4810 (15,781 feet; 45 pitches, VI, 5.11) was also climbed; the approach couloir is best done early in the season.

Interest waned in 1987, but two teams from Odessa and Leningrad used mules to transport their food and gear to the 2700-meter Base Camp. They climbed the remote north face of Pyramidalny Peak (5507 meters, 18,068 feet; grade VI), and the 16-pitch diagonal route on the Yellow Wall (IV, 5.10b/c), which has become a popular climb. The southeast pillar of Usan (IV, 5.10b, grade IV) was climbed, and further south, a 15-pitch, grade III, 5.8 route was also put up on Usan which starts from the col with P 4810. Finally, a small dent (12 pitches) in the huge west face of P 4810 (15,781 feet) tentatively set the stage for the following year.

In 1988, eight teams showed up to compete for the National Championships on the smooth, steep, 1200-meter-high west face of P 4810. Four grade-VI routes were completed, and three more have been added since. These are certainly of the highest standard of alpine rock climbing in what used to be the Soviet Union, since they are comprised of 60% aid and free climbing up to 5.11. Our co-author, Igor Tsaruk, moaned about the lack of ledges on the winning climb he was on: a 38-pitch, eight-day route. It took two days to descend. The nature of the rock on this face lends itself to much hooking, but the difficulty (A3, A4 or A5?) has not been translated into its Yosemite equivalent. Nevertheless, these climbs could probably be grouped with the moderate-to-hard nailing routes on El Capitan.

Igor claims that the Soviet method of aid-climbing is superior to the Western style. Instead of multiple *étriers*, the Soviets have a single strap to which equally spaced rings are attached with two rings at the top. To use this ladder of rings, they attach hooks to a point just below the kneecap by straps running around the upper calf and around the arch of the foot. One ascends by means of "knee-hooking" (literal translation) to the top rings and once established, it is claimed to be a more secure stance than top-stepping in *étriers*. Igor also claims that one has a longer reach from this position of greater support and stability.

Also in 1988 on P 4810, a route on the south ridge was added, a mostly free climb (26 pitches, 5.10+). The peak just north of P 4810 is named "One Thousand Years of Christianity in Russia" (4507 meters, 14,787 feet). The striking south ridge was climbed in 30 pitches over a period of three days. Due to its extremely narrow profile, the descent was a very difficult series of rappels, including 50 rappels down a couloir after the descent off the rock! A difficult, although unfortunately dangerous, route was put up on the 1000-meter-high west face. Asan saw more activity with three new routes, two of which are on the west face. Also in that year, yet another valley to the east was visited. An aid route on the 700-meter north face of P 3850 (12,631 feet) was done, as well as a free route on the northwest ridge (V, 5.11 o.w.). Two routes were climbed on the 900-meter-high face of P 4240 (13,911 feet). Other peaks climbed were the snow peak Kara-Su (5294 meters, 17,379 feet), located behind the Yellow Wall, Shaitan Khanna (c. 5000 meters, 16,404 feet), which is just east of Pyramidalny, and the unattractive shale peak Lomo (4700 meters, 15,420 feet),

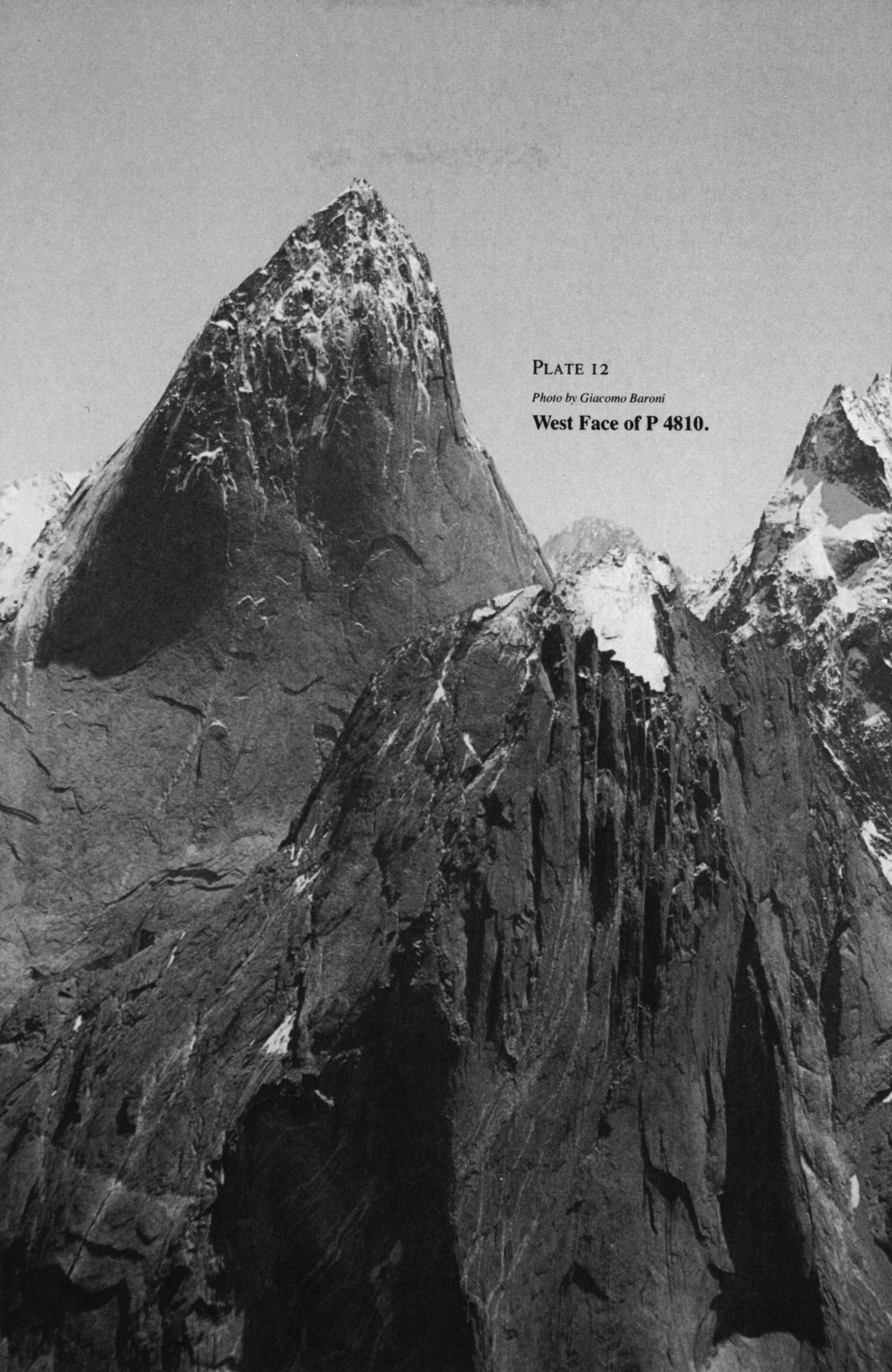


PLATE 12

Photo by Giacomo Baroni

West Face of P 4810.

climbed from the pass between it and P 4810. A lot can happen in one year when 250 climbers spend their summer vacation in one valley.

In 1989, the central pillar of the north face of Ptitsa ("The Bird") was climbed. This striking 20-pitch, grade-V, 5.9 line with 60 feet of aid is a five-hour hike south of the P 3850-P 4810 Base Camp. Two routes were done on the 1100-meter-high east face of P 4810. The first visit by foreigners, Americans, was made to the Asan-Usan valley. Since then, the two valleys have become increasingly popular with foreigners^{5,6,7,8,9}.

A word on the National Championship. Climbing teams of, say, three people come from clubs located in the cities. More than three from a club may attend, but they climb as their own ability and interest dictates. A "meet" is not held. Climbers just show up at a place of their own choosing to do a climb and then submit a report of their efforts to a committee which reviews the year's climbs. These judges choose the winners and runners-up. Coincidentally, other teams may choose the same route at the same time. Apparently, only coins (not fists) have been tossed and the losers of the toss have chosen another line. Of course, to submit a report on a first ascent carries more weight than the repeat of an already completed route. When the Soviet system existed, a prominent climber would gain respect and encouragement from the State and thus be able to climb more. There is a National Championship for alpine climbing on technical peaks such as Ak-Su Skalnaye or P 4810 and one for big peaks, such as Pik Pobedy. This championship has nothing to do with crag-oriented speed climbing.

These reports contain photographs, pitch-by-pitch descriptions, and anything else you can think of. For example, the report for the north face, right, of Ak-Su Skalnaye is 27 pages long. These reports are not kept in any central location, nor published annually in something like the *American Alpine Journal*. However, new route information is easily exchanged among the clubs since they all know each other. These reports are personal property and are carried back and forth by the owners.

The climbing season is June through August, and most Soviets climb in June, tapering off during the season. Visiting climbers looking for route information may be out of luck if they are there in the latter part of the Soviet high season.

Access to the Ak-Su valley can be made by truck, although helicopters are used. One can approach the Asan-Usan valley on foot, but for the purposes of climbing, helicopters are almost essential. The Tadzhikistan (south) side of the border is much more rugged, steep and barren than the gently rising valley bottoms on the north side.

Since foreign currency and foreign gear are highly desired by the Soviet climbers, outsiders are welcome. That is not to say that Soviet climbers are purely mercenary, but most of their equipment (even Friends) is home-made and they really want access to Western products. Since Soviet hospitality is second to none, no reason, not even a language barrier, should prevent anyone from visiting this region. Only the biggest and most significant routes have been reported here. There are many smaller half-day and one-day routes available,

PLATE 13

Photo by Giacomo Baroni

**Piramidalny's North Face. Italian
Paolo Tamagnini's solo is marked.**



and much potential exists for new crag climbs on cliffs south of the Yellow Wall. At the time of this writing, very few organizations in the West are communicating with the Soviet clubs, although a little digging can uncover a Western liaison to obtain the prerequisite "invitation" for a sports visa.

Except for the arrival of climbers in the last ten years, not much had changed in these high valleys. The Kirgiz shepherds still live in the same stone, wood and canvas huts they used to and they still walk or ride their horses (although an occasional motorcycle is seen). They dye their wool and make their cheese as they always have, and their flocks still graze the meadows in abundance. Keeping this last fact in mind, visiting climbers should not neglect water purifiers and antibiotics.

REFERENCES

¹U.S. Army Mapping Service, NJ 42-3, series N502, 1952, scale 1:250,000.

²Note by Vladimir Weigner, *AAJ*, 1987, pages 312-3.

³"Ak-Su Adventure" by Sibylle Hechtel, *Mountain* #122, July/August 1988, pages 32-37.

⁴Note by Sibylle Hechtel, *AAJ*, 1988, page 289.

⁵"Back in the USSR" by Mick Fowler, *Mountain* #136, November/December 1990, pages 32-7.

⁶"Asan Acquaintance" by Brian Swales, *Mountain* #137, January/February 1991, pages 26-31.

⁷Note by Darko Podgornik, *AAJ*, 1989, page 295.

⁸Note by Michael Fowler, *AAJ*, 1991, pages 305-7.

⁹"Back in the USSR" by Jim Dockery, *Rock and Ice* #44, July/August 1991, pages 20-27.

