East of Lake Baikal

Introducing the big granite walls of Transbaikalia, Siberia.

Konstantin Beketov

The mountains of the Stanovoi Range are located to the east of Lake Baikal in southeastern Russia. This vast territory, referred to as Transbaikalia, is crossed by the central part of the Baikal-Amur Railroad (BAM). The mountains have an alpine appearance with occasional 1,000-meter walls, the majority of which still remain virgin. Despite their relatively low altitude (reaching a little more than 3,000 meters), the mountains rise as much as 2,000 meters from the valley floors to the summits.

In this article, the Transbaikalia Mountains refer to the southwestern and highest part of the Stanovoi Range. This mountain system stretches for approximately 1,000 kilometers from southwest to northeast; its western part drains to the Lake Baikal basin, while the eastern part drains to the Vitim River.

The continental climate of the region is characterized by sizable seasonal and daily temperature fluctuations. The coldest month is February, with mean daily temperatures below –30°C. The warmest month is July, when the air temperature in the intermountain basins occasionally rises to 30°C to 35°C. The amount of precipitation decreases as you move eastward; the mountains near Lake Baikal are known for their high humidity, and especially intensive precipitation occurs in the Barguzin and Upper Angara ranges. In the mountain basins common in this region, the climate is much drier. The Chara Basin, known as Chara Sands, is the northernmost sandy desert in the world. In winter, the rivers are covered with thick ice, simplifying access to the mountains along river valleys. Waterfalls also freeze, especially in the eastern part of the region, where the climate is more severe.

Transbaikalia is a region of high seismic activity. As a consequence, rockfall is common and spontaneous avalanches are possible in winter. Due to all the tectonic activity, there are many hot springs in the region. The mountain ridges are experiencing uplift, "growing" a few centimeters every year. This is a possible explanation for deviations in altitude estimates on maps of different years.

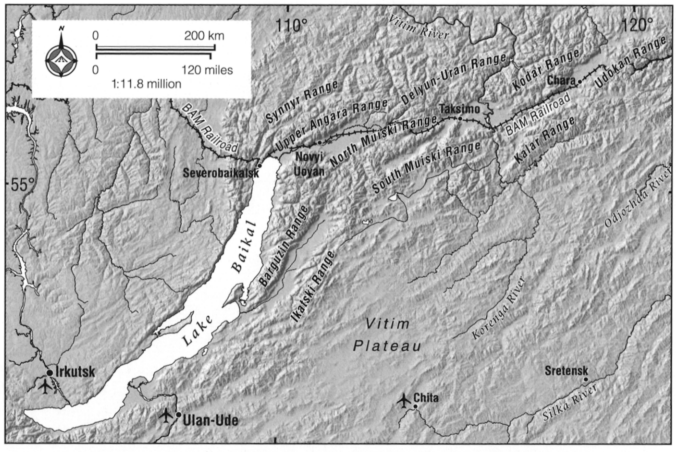
Another important characteristic of the region is the abundance of bloodsucking insects. Their quantity varies from year to year; in certain years one can observe very few insects. Mainly, this misfortune is concentrated in intermountain basins and in river valleys. High in the mountains, there usually are no mosquitoes or midges.

The mountains described here do not reach the permanent snow line, but the central part of the Kodar Range has several dozen glaciers totaling approximately 20 square kilometers.

The highest point of the Transbaikalia Mountains is considered to be Peak BAM (3,071 meters) in the Kodar Range, followed by Muiski Giant (3,067 meters), located in the South Muiski Range. Ascents to Peak BAM along the easiest route (2B) are made every year, generally in summer; however, only four ascents to Muiski Giant are credibly known, all in summer.

The unclimbed White Wall, South Muiski Range, Stanovoi Mountains. *Konstantin Beketov*

TRANSPORTATION



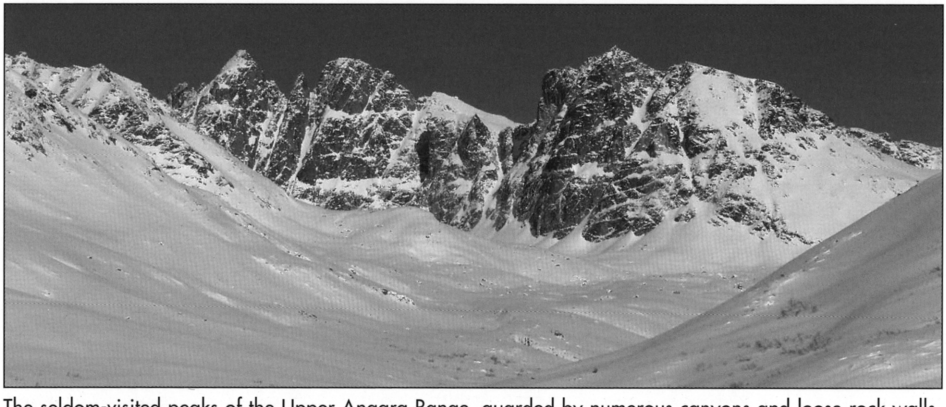
Transbaikalia map by Martin Gamache, Alpine Mapping Guild

The main means of transportation is the Baikal-Amur Railroad (BAM). The railway goes along large intermountain basins, crossing the Baikalski, North Muiski, and Kalar ranges. Distances from the railway stations to the mountains average between 10 and 60 kilometers. The largest towns are Severobaikalsk, Novyi Uoyan, Taksimo, and Chara (station Novaya Chara). Nijne-Angarsk is connected by air transportation with Irkutsk, and Taksimo and Chara have flights to Chita. In summer there is a motorboat that goes back and forth across Lake Baikal from Irkutsk to Nijne-Angarsk.

In order to get farther into the mountains, one can use various off-road vehicles and helicopters. In winter, heavy loads can be transported deep into the mountains by sledge along frozen rivers. Access to particular mountain areas will be described in more detail below.

UPPER ANGARA RANGE

This range forms one side of the Upper Angara Valley, towering abruptly over a marshy intermountain hollow. The highest peak (2,641 meters) is located in the eastern part of the range. The central part of the range, at the rise of the Asikta River and its tributaries, is the



The seldom-visited peaks of the Upper Angara Range, guarded by numerous canyons and loose rock walls. *Konstantin Beketov*

most interesting; the mountains here are in the form of rock towers with broad walls. The rocks are highly deteriorated, and rockfall caused by seismic movements is not rare. The distinctive feature of these mountains is numerous canyons, the crossing of which demands much time and effort.

The mountains can be reached from a small, unmanned BAM railroad station between Kitchera and Novyi Uoyan stations. The distance does not exceed 20 to 30 kilometers, but the absence of trails makes it difficult. This is possibly the reason for the rarity of visits to these mountains.

To the northwest of the Upper Angara Range lies an isolated massif: Inyaptuk (2,514 meters), the highest point of which apparently has not been reached. (A few attempts are known, including one in winter; all failed to climb the final summit ridge.) The remoteness of this massif—approximately 100 kilometers from the railroad—contributes to a scarcity of information and low popularity.

Barguzin Range

This range stretches along the eastern shore of Lake Baikal. The area is visited relatively often in summer for hiking and rafting trips; it is considerably less popular in winter. The southern part of the range belongs to the Barguzin reservation, with rather strict visiting rules. The highest point (2,841 meters) is located in the southeastern part; it rises more than 2,300 meters over the Barguzin Basin.

Alpine walls are found in all parts of the range, especially at the headwaters of the Talinga, Alla, and Kabanjya rivers. About 10 climbing routes of high difficulty have been done here.

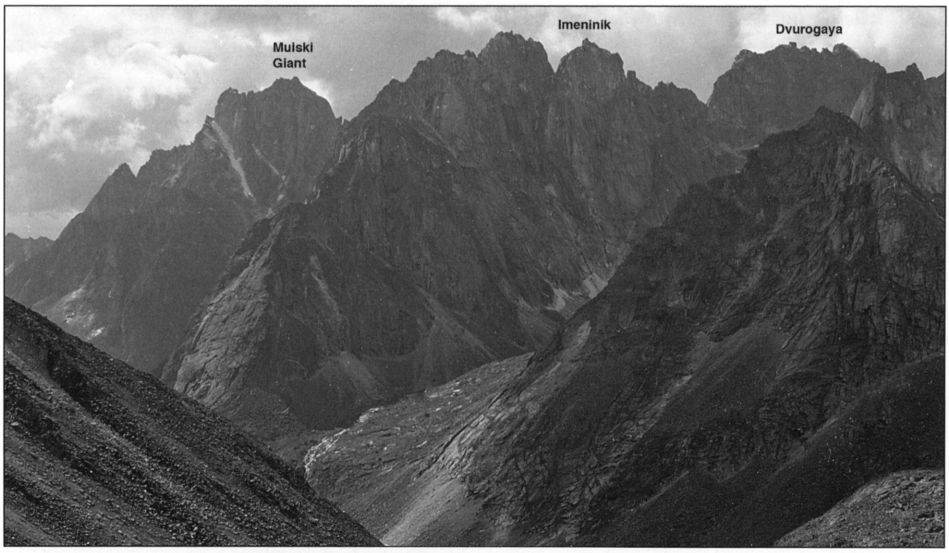
Access to the mountains is by hiking from the north from the BAM railway or from the south from the villages of Urumkan, Alla, and Ulyukhan, which are connected by a road with Ulan-Ude.

Ikatski Range

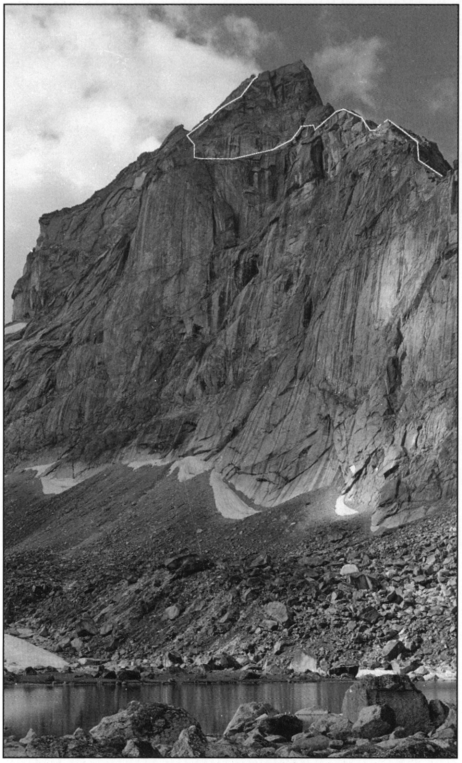
These mountains lie to the east of the Barguzin Range, between the Barguzin and Upper Tsypa valleys. At its north end, the Ikatski Range meets the North and South Muiski ranges. The highest point, a nameless summit of 2,574 meters, is located at the origin of the Barguzin River. Nearby is also the highest alpine cluster of the range. The mountains here are composed of skeletal towers, ridges, and rock fingers several hundred meters high. This little-known area has many possibilities for rock climbing routes.

The mountains can be reached from the Barguzin Valley in winter by the Ulyukhan-Kumora road. The closest towns are Ulan-Ude in the south and Novyi Uoyan on the BAM railway in the north. Unfortunately, the road can be used only in winter; in summer, the marshy road and river bed can only be used by hiking or a special off-road vehicle (which can possibly be rented).

In winter, the Ikatski Range is characterized by a more stable climate than the other mountains described above. There is less snow here, and the rivers freeze more often. The best time for winter trips is February and March; for summer trips July through September.



Big peaks of the South Muiski Range, seen from the northeast. *Konstantin Beketov*



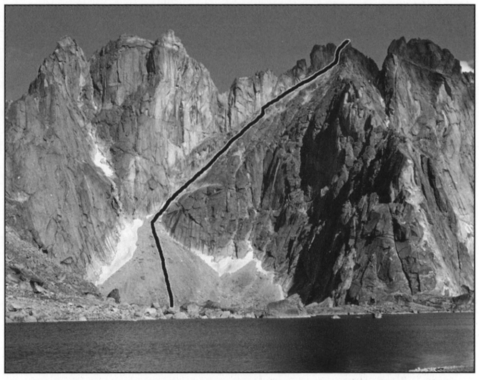
Peak Zorro from the upper Bambukoi River. The line marked is the last section of the 1994 route (4A) from Kuanda Pass, led by V. Ryzhii. *Konstantin Beketov*

SOUTH MUISKI RANGE

This range stretches more than 300 kilometers between the Muya Valley on the north and the Tsypa Valley on the south. In the western part of the range, Dorong Peak (2,661 meters), at the origin of the Inamakit River, and the surrounding mountains have some interest. But the main attraction of the South Muiski Range is its highest part in the east, at its junction with the small Mudirikan Range. Here is the second-highest summit of the whole region: 3,067-meter Muiski Giant. (On older maps one might find another name—Spartak Peak—and for a long time its altitude was considered to be approximately 2,700 meters, but later it was discovered to be 350 meters higher.) In the "fork" of the two Bambukoi rivers' sources, Muiski Giant rises for 1,400 meters. There is no easy way to the top; the easiest one (4A-4B) is the route from the north. Muiski Giant has the appearance of a monumental cathedral. Numerous routes are possible.

Base camp can be easily organized at the junction of the Bambukoi's sources, where

extensive flat ground is available. From this point, the foot of the mountain can be reached in 1 to 2.5 hours, depending on the route. Heavy rains may flood this camp, however, so base camp can also be organized higher, directly under the flanks of Muiski Giant, on the lower or upper lake in the valley of the Bambukoi's left (northwesterly) source. Here the climate is more severe; there are fewer mosquitoes but no wood for a fire, and even in summer it might snow. From the lower lake, it is convenient to start the interesting routes to the summits of Dvurogaya (meaning "Double Horns") and Imeninik. The upper lake is close at hand to the routes on Peak Zorro. For the routes in the valley of the southwestern Bambukoi source, base camp can be set along Kholodnoe Lake (meaning "cold"), which justifies its name.

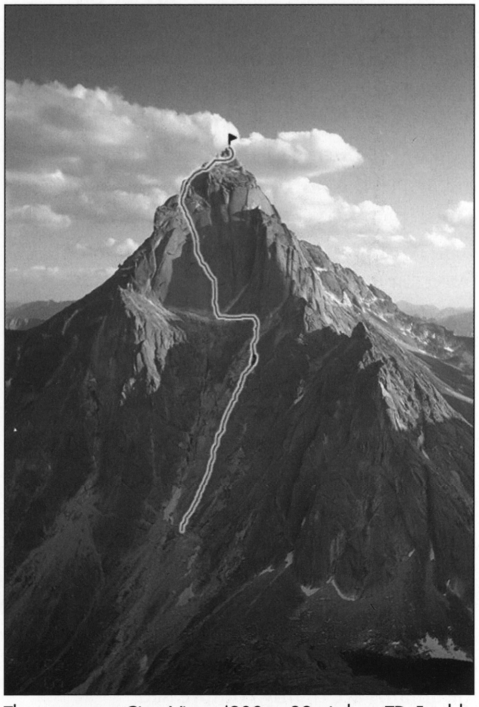


The south face of Imeninik ("the person whose birthday it is") on the right, with the 1994 route (2A) led by V. Ryzhii marked. Dvurogaya ("Double Horns") is on the left. *Victor Ryzhii*

Besides the above-mentioned summits, Solovyev Pyramid has intriguing steep sides formed by extensive rock slabs. Also interesting are the northern flanks of Dvurogaya and Imeninik, with 900-meter walls.

Despite its remoteness and difficult access, the South Muiski Range might become a popular area for expeditionary alpinism in the near feature; one will not find such a diverse collection of interesting and new routes anywhere else in Transbaikalia.

The base for access to the Muiski Giant area is the village and BAM railroad station of Taksimo. Here is located the local airport, from which helicopter flights can be organized. Muiski Giant is 50 kilometers from Taksimo. Hiking to the area along the old, often disappearing trail will take three to five days with a load. Especially difficult is the hike along Mudiriskamskit River to the saddle in the dividing range, due to the fact that the altitude difference is almost two kilometers.



The new route Ciao Victor (900m, 33 pitches, TD 5c obl., A. Studnev, M. Studnev, August 2005), on the north face of Muiski Giant. *A. Studnev*

In winter, there is a route passable for off-road vehicles along the Muya Valley, which allows closer access to the mountains. But it should be taken into account that not all rivers of the South Muiski Range are suitable for traveling on ice; one can face several kilometers of loose rocks covered by deep, dry snow. Movement on such surfaces is very tiring and time consuming.

NORTH MUISKI RANGE

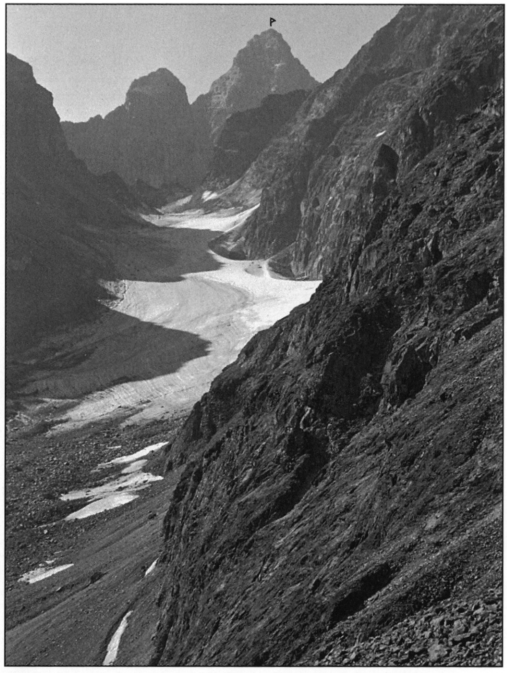
This range stretches from its junction with the Ikatski Range in the southwest until the Vitim Valley in the northeast. In its southern part, the North Muiski Range is crossed by the BAM railroad via a 15-kilometer-long mountain tunnel. In general, the area is characterized by little relief; alpine relief can be found at the origins of the Upper Angara and Amnunda rivers, where the highest point of the range (Peak 2,493 meters) also can be found. The mountains can be reached from the railway stations at Angarakan, Tonnelnyi, and Severomuisk. The North Muiski Range is still waiting for explorers; in the 1980s and '90s several ski expeditions were made in the area, and so far these have provided the only available information.

KODAR RANGE

These mountains are among the best known in Transbaikalia because of easy access and a high concentration of interesting objectives. The first difficult ascents here were made as far back as the 1980s.

The range stretches from the southwest to the northeast for about 200 kilometers, to the north of the Chara Basin. Three main parts are distinguished: Western, Central, and Eastern Kodar. The most interesting are the central section and the eastern part of Western Kodar. Here, the mountains have highly broken alpine relief with recent glaciers.

The highest point is BAM Peak (3,071 meters), and several other summits rise above 3,000 meters. Central Kodar is characterized by very complicated orography. The dividing range makes incredible twists and turns, and spurs are often higher than the main ridge. (BAM Peak, in particular, is located on a spur.) Kodar also has very narrow valleys, and the mountains are tightly compressed.

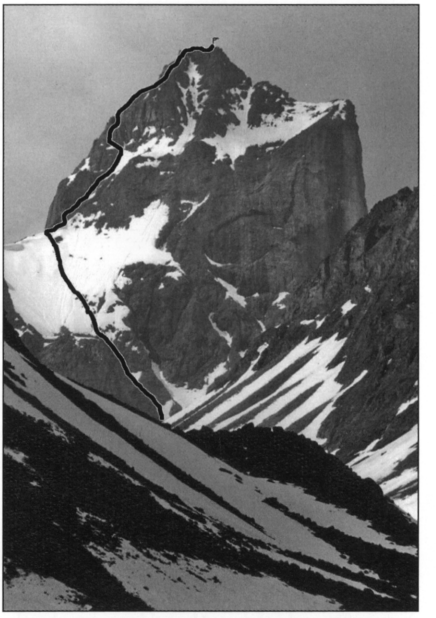


BAM Peak, high point of the Kodar Range, from the north. First climbed in 1963 via its eastern flank, the peak sees several ascents each year. *Konstantin Beketov*

Besides the routes on BAM, climbs have been done on Pioneer Peak (Obrez), Tron Peak (Tzar Tron), Moskva Peak (Polivanova), and Tchitinets Peak. Almost untried are the interesting summits above the Sygykta River Valley, and also the northern spurs of the main range.

Due to the presence of glaciers and high altitude, one can find mixed routes and ice couloirs. The rock is very deteriorated, causing a high danger of unpredictable rockfall due to seismic activity.

Access to the Kodar Mountains is relatively easy. The route starts in Chara (Novaya Chara train station), which can be reached by railway or by airplane from Chita. For access to the mountains, three valleys are used (listed from west to east): Upper Sakukan, Middle Sakukan, and Upsat River. The most popular is the way along the Middle Sakukan, with a forest road passable for off-road vehicles for seven kilometers up the gorge. The winter road along the Upsat River to Lake Nichatka has not been operating for the last 15 years and has become partly overgrown. The way along the Upper Sakukan requires a long hike, but this is the only way to get to BAM Peak without crossing additional mountain passes.



Rus' Peak in the Western Kodar Range. First climbed in July 1993 along the ridge from Rus' Pass (2B-3A) by Viktor Ryzhii and Viktor Solov'yev. *Victor Ryzhii*

LOGISTICS

All climbing in the region is expeditionary. The area is very sparsely inhabited, and for many days you won't see a person or even traces of human life. Such autonomy requires additional attention to safety. Rescue teams are only present in Severobaikalsk and Chara, and their capabilities are rather limited. From the mountains, they can be reached only by satellite telephone or by a very powerful base radio set. As a consequence, rescue help can not be received immediately.

In this context, such factors as experience, sober estimates of one's strength and capabilities, and the necessary equipment for technical climbing as well as surviving in a severe climate are all essential. Compared to other mountains, you might need more reliable camping equipment, additional food reserves, and skills in such things as making Tyrolean traverses, canyoneering, orienteering in the taiga, and so forth. In the Transbaikalia, only the high-altitude factor is absent. In everything else, these are not toylike mountains, and they impose high demands on mountaineers.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Born in 1971, Konstantin Beketov lives in St. Petersburg. A former Russian ski-mountaineering champion, he has led exploratory skiing expeditions in remote mountainous areas across Russia.

Henry Pickford provided translation assistance for this story.