

Finally, Pickford and Whittaker added the hardest route of the trip, with an ascent of a pillar, on the very right edge of the Central Pyramid, rising out of the large depression between the Pyramid and the Russian Tower. This 400m, eight-pitch climb had a fourth-pitch crux of E7 6b, led by Whittaker, and reckoned to be one of the hardest on-sight leads he had ever made. The climb was named *From Russia with Love*.

Towards the end of the trip, while O'Sullivan and I were returning to base camp, having just done our direct start, we heard the unmistakable sound of an AK-47 rifle spitting its hot leaden death. We peeked round a corner to see Whittaker trying to eliminate a small bottle of water set on a rock. We approached to discover we had been joined by an army group, their camo gear and sniper rifles made more sinister by their shades, Coca-Cola T-shirts, bandanas, and Adidas trainers. The long and the short of it was that they were going to have a lot of money from us, and we were to leave the valley. From then on we were seen by anyone with a gun as an ever-diminishing pot of money. The final bizarre episode occurred on the Aeroflot plane, where armed men demanded, "Were you the Alpinists?" "No," replied Pretty, "I collect flowers." We were allowed to fly home with our final few dollars.

This area still has lots of potential for development, although, as stated, what has or has not been done is not always clear, especially if climbers leave no drilled protection. The weather was fairly showery with, on average, afternoon rain every other day, though the rain was often light and would not necessarily mean coming off a route. Flies and other wildlife, cows excepted, were not a problem, and day and night temperatures were pleasant. The base camp area has excellent bouldering (our team added problems up to V9), and an expedition might bring a pad or two. Apart from boys with guns, the locals were warm, friendly, and generous.

NIALL GRIMES, *United Kingdom*

## WESTERN KOKSHAAL-TOO

*Kyzyl Asker, southeast face attempt.* On August 3 Scott Adamson, Tom Adamson, and I stepped off the plane in Bishkek, courtesy of an AAC Lyman Spitzer Grant. We immediately realized the extent of the communication barrier and were glad to see our contact, Misha Sohorukov (mis48@rambler.ru), waiting at the terminal. He loaded our mountain of gear onto his tiny car and away we went, flying through the early morning darkness, excited and exhausted from so much travel.

Misha is an outfitter who came highly recommended. Our agreement was simple: one flat fee and we were his complete responsibility for a month-and-a-half. He took charge of our meals, lodging, and travel expenses. He also had enormous expertise as a ski mountaineering guide and porter, and was familiar with the areas in which we were interested. Although he speaks limited English, communication was not a problem. We found his services exceptional throughout our stay.

We hashed out details the following day over dinner with his wife (who speaks very good English). We would spend a week or so in the Ala Archa, getting used to our new surroundings and acclimatizing on the 4,500+m peaks around the Ak-Sai Glacier. We'd then head back to town long enough to gather supplies, and then head off again to spend a month in one of the most remote and unexplored mountain ranges in the world. A day later, in an amazing down-pour, we hiked up the grueling 1,500m vertical interval to the Ratsek Hut at the mouth of the

Ak Sai. We then sat in the hut through eight days of rain. The weather cleared long enough to see us through one of the classic 5.9 rock pillars on the south face of Pik Bachichiki and a failed attempt on a new route up the north face of Korona. After eight days we had had enough and steeled ourselves for a muddy descent.

Two days later we headed to Naryn, past ancient relics of the Soviet era and into the Western Kokshaal-Too on the border with China. The final day's drive was one of the most gripping on the trip, as we threaded our way through washed-out roads and bridges for 100km in Misha's tiny car.

Driving along the western approaches to the Kokshaal-Too is extreme, and we slowly rose onto a 3,600m bench that provides a surreal view. Finally, the Kyzyl Asker group came into view, the main summit a huge mountain dominating the southern horizon.

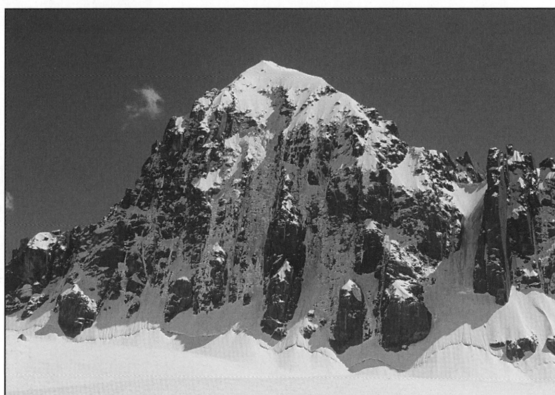
The next few weeks of fall saw our initial five days of sunny weather deteriorate into an early winter. In addition, a nasty stomach bug led to me suffering pulmonary edema, and an attempt on Kyzyl's southeast face by the other two almost ended their lives. Only nine days into our stay on the Komorova Glacier, plagued by sickness and unable to hydrate, I was beset by some alarmingly high respirations while completely at rest. These forced me back to Bishkek and a Kyrgyz hospital. Forging on, Scott and Tom pushed the remaining five kilometers to an advanced base close to Kyzyl Asker, where they waited out weather system after weather system, before finally committing themselves to the face. The weather quickly deteriorated into a tempest, and constant spindrift finally forced a retreat at mid-height. The ensuing storm dumped a full three meters of snow over the following five days, crushing all hopes of another attempt and providing challenges during the 20km hike out. The extreme weather caused Tom to suffer frostbite.

Back in Bishkek on September 9 after a bit of rejuvenation on the soothing shores of Lake Issyk-Kul, we wished we had done things differently. Hopefully our short memories will be an asset in getting us motivated for some more abuse next season.

JAMES STOVER

*Fersmana Glacier, Pik Neizvestniy, first ascent, and various attempts.*

In July and August I traveled with Grant Piper and Graham Rowbotham to the central part of the Western Kokshaal-Too. We climbed in the previously unexplored Fersmana Glacier basin, where we were delighted to find granite columns and steep walls, rather than the friable limestone prevailing immediately to the east. However, the walls of the highest peak, Byeliy (a.k.a. Grand Poohbah, 5,697m), were mostly overhung by seracs, and we saw no suitable routes on the



The north face of Granitsa (5,370m) at the head of the Fersmana glacier, Western Kokshaal-Too. The Anglo-New Zealand party attempted this peak via the west ridge (right skyline), but the peak remains unclimbed. *Paul Knott*