

Mongolia

ALTAI MOUNTAINS

Huiten, a.k.a Khuiten Uul, first winter ascent of north ridge. On the winter solstice, December 22, Graham Taylor and I summited Huiten (4,374m), the highest mountain in Outer Mongolia. Taylor had made two previous winter attempts, in 1999 and 2000. Both were unsuccessful due to severe cold and weather conditions. Both of us have now been resident in Mongolia for over six years, Taylor as a director of an adventure tour outfitter and I as an exploration geologist.

Huiten or Khuiten Uul, meaning "Cold Mountain" in Mongolian, is located in the extensive Altai Range in the northwest corner of Mongolia. The Altai Range spans over 1,500km, emerging from the pebbly plains of southwest Mongolia's Gobi desert and running along the Mongolian border northwestward into Siberian Russia. Huiten is the highest point in the Tavan Bogd (Five Holy Peaks) sector of the Altai, a dense cluster of alpine peaks that contain a compact but complex system of glaciers. Huiten is located only 3km south of the ice-dome summit of Naraimdal Uul (Friendship Peak, 4,184m), the geopolitical triple point where Mongolia, Russia, and China converge.

The first ascent was completed in 1967 by Russians, and later most of the surrounding significant peaks were climbed. Because of the remoteness of the Altai frontier and the extremely cold climate, it was only in 1998 that Huiten was climbed in winter. This ascent took place via the southeast ridge (AAJ 2003).

We chose to climb the mountain by the north ridge, which connects with Naraimdal Uul via a north-south trending ridge and col. Following a 15km snowshoe approach (the snowline was 2,400m), we established a base camp along the margin of the Potaniin Glacier's northern-flanking lateral moraine. Our ascent route continued westward up the central longitudinal axis of the Potaniin Glacier. Crevasses on the middle slopes of the glacier were mostly covered with hard, wind-packed snow that presented no significant hazard. The moderate (30-40°) slopes on the upper glacier contained more complex terrain, including open and partly buried crevasses and sections of hard ice that required more diligent route-finding. From the upper glacier we traversed southwest and gained the north col, which connects directly to the summit ridge. On the narrow corniced col we swapped our snowshoes for crampons, in preparation for ascending the north ridge to the summit. The ascent up the 45° hard, snow-packed north ridge took one and a half hours. From the false summit located on the southwest part of the summit ridge, we traversed another 15 minutes to the true summit. Visibility from the north col to the summit was limited by blowing snow driven by a winter storm. Summit conditions included temperatures of -20°C and were accompanied by gusts exceeding 100 km/hr. A rapid descent was necessitated by the conditions. Including the 15km approach from the Tavan Bogd National Park entrance, we completed the climb in a 30-hour alpine-style push, beginning on December 21. The ascent from base camp to the summit took 11 hours and the descent back to base camp a further five hours. The overall grade was PD+.

Taylor's third winter attempt resulted in the first winter ascent via the north ridge, the second winter ascent, and the first ascent on the shortest day of the year, when there is only eight hours of daylight.