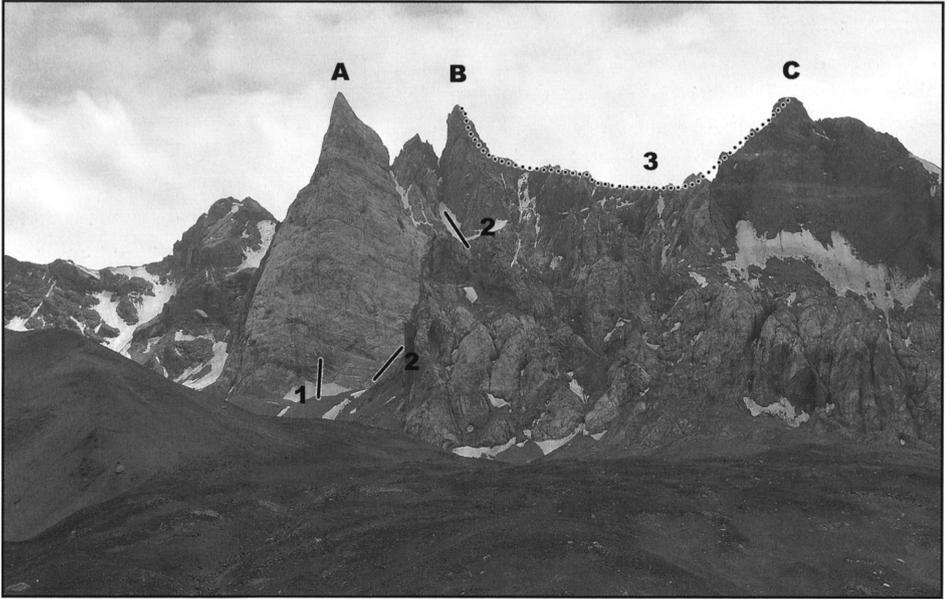


Afghanistan

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KOH-I-BABA MOUNTAINS



Koh-i-Baba towers from the south. (A) First tower attempted, by line (1). (B) Second, highest, tower (ca 15,400'), climbed by the couloir (2) and face on far side. (C) Third tower, climbed by traverse (3) from second tower. *Mike Libeck*

Koh-i-Baba towers. In early July I arrived in Kabul alone and took a chartered flight to Bamiyan Province. Here I hired a 4x4 and local guide/translator and drove to the Koh-e-Baba Mountains, a western extension of the Hindu Kush 170km west of Kabul. I had photos of some towers, but no one I met recognized them. After several hours of driving, I spotted them from the road. Locals agreed to hire a horse and mule to take me to the towers. At first the locals were concerned that helping an American might cause political trouble in their village, but as I had official documents, they allowed me to continue. Next day we established base camp close to the towers. The photo had made them look like granite, but now I could see they were loose, crumbly limestone. Rain and wet snow settled in, part of the same system that caused horrific floods in Pakistan at that time.

A week later the weather stabilized, and I fixed a pitch through snow and ice (rock climbing shoes with crampons) and up into the gray-white limestone. The stone was so loose and sandy that most cam placements slid out under bodyweight. Next morning I started pitch two. After 175' the system I was following led to a questionable, chunky flake, about eight feet wide, five feet tall,

and just over a foot thick. I tapped it lightly with my hammer. I had to pass through this section or retreat. I put in a cam on the very right edge of the flake, weighted it, and it pulled out. The limestone seemed to be all mudded together, so I decided not to touch the flake again. I drilled a couple of holes underneath it and hooked past the flake. Ten feet above and left of the flake, I started to drill an anchor. As I hammered the bolt, cckrrrrhhupulchch. The entire flake exploded down the face. Frightening is an understatement. My main thought was that the ropes could be cut. I finished building my anchor, then, with two back-ups on my tag line, slowly lowered. The tag line was hit badly in two places; I tied double knots and passed them. My lead line was cut, exposing white cord. This was the worse rock I had come across in my life, and, tail between my legs, I went back to camp.

Next morning I swapped my lead line for a spare and continued. But 100' up the fourth pitch I finally accepted the message that the rock, lubricated by rain, was giving me. At that moment huge stonefall came down to my right. The lead rope was hit in two places. I had to go down now, finally limping away from the base of the tower after a grapefruit-sized stone connected with my foot.

I had a few days left before catching the plane home, so I focused on the remaining two summits. Several couloirs led to a ridge that would get me to the backside of the towers. I climbed one that was enjoyable: easy enough to climb fast with crampons, steep enough for a long fall. After about 1,500' I was on a ridge of dragon-back peaks and fins, again composed of the shittiest rock. I had come upon a self-born rating system, which I reference as Russian Roulette Rating to quantify the looseness of the rock. On a 1 to 5 RRR system, the first climb I attempted had to be RRR4 (am I sugar coating this, some kind of denial?), while this second tower was RRR3. The rock crumbled every few moves. Downclimbing would be scary. Twenty feet below the top I thought of turning back. I moved s-l-o-w-l-y, to the summit, touched it with my hand (tag, you're it) and downclimbed.

It was now late afternoon, and I still had one more summit I wanted to climb. I scrambled through gullies and along ridges to reach its base. Although loose, the climbing was straightforward, and the ascent quick. I arrived back at camp as a manzanita-maroon sky and jagged black horizon became one.

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HINDU KUSH

Noshaq (7,492m). From 2007-2010 there were four ascents of Noshaq, the highest mountain in Afghanistan and second highest in the Hindu Kush. In the autumn of 2007 Iranians Mehdi Amidi and Azim Qeychi-Saz became only the second group of climbers to reach the summit in nearly 30 years. In 2003, Carlo Alberto Pinelli, gained official permission to visit the Wakhan Corridor with his expedition 'Oxus, Mountains for Peace in Afghanistan'. His team successfully made the first ascent of Noshaq for 25 years, though they had deal with unexpected objective danger in the approach valley, which they discovered had been planted three years previously with over 600 anti-personnel mines (AAJ 2004).

In mid-July 2009 Amruddin and Malang, Afghans from the Wakhan who had trained in Chamonix, reached the summit with French guides Jean Annequin and Simon Destombes. In 2010 there were two ascents. James Bingham (UK), Bill Lyden (US), and Mark Wynne (UK) reached the summit on July 21 from a high camp at 7,100m. On August 29 it was the turn of Iranians Husain Asghari, Amin Moein, Gholam Nodehi, Mohammad Rafiei, H.Reza Sanjari, and Iraj Taheri, who topped out just 17 days after arrival at base camp. All climbed via the "standard" west ridge.