

Expedition to the Western Kokshaal-Too 2005

Paul Knott

In July-August 2005 Paul Knott, Grant Piper, and Graham Rowbotham made an exploratory climbing trip to the remote central part of the Western Kokshaal-Too range on the border between Kyrgyzstan and China.

Access to base camp

Our intention was to take a vehicle up the Uzengegush river to a base camp at Pt. 3392m. As it turned out, we had to walk the whole 65km up this valley with our luggage on horses. This took two days. We had also lost two further days due to a rejected border zone permit and a blown radiator (which was eventually fixed with the aid of black pepper!).

The main reason for the road closure seems to have been the re-alignment of the border with China. The new boundary follows the Uzengegush river from the point at which the road meets it from the north to the confluence of the Chon-Tyuekuyruk river. The road was also blocked by landslips, although these were later cleared. The revised border has not been well publicised and is not shown even on the excellent 2005 American Alpine Club map.



Summit ridge of Neizvestniy

Due to a misunderstanding, on our return we were left stranded at the Uzengegush border post for three days. We avoided missing our international flights only by persuading the military to make emergency contact with our agents in Bishkek.

Access to the Fersmana glacier basin

As far as could be established, we were the first climbing team to access this glacier other than the 2003 Moscow group who appear to have crossed the upper basin.



North sides of Pik 5697m ('Grand Poohbah', right) and Pik 5481m (left)

From our base camp it was 16-18km to the head of the Fersmana glacier. It would not have been possible to drive beyond the camp: the terrain becomes gorge-like and the road marked on the maps was never built. Once we reached the glacier, we stayed near the trench on the true left (west) side until forced by a rock buttress to descend onto the moraine. This point was opposite the junction with the Sarychat glacier. From here we followed moraine and white ice to the upper glacier cirque where campsites could be found. The walk-in from base camp took us between 7 and 9 hours.

At the head of the glacier there were elegant spires and steep granite walls. In the case of the highest peak Grand Poohbah (5697m), the walls were mostly overhung by seracs and we saw no suitable routes

on the NE, E or S sides. The only existing route on this mountain is the SE ridge, which was climbed in 2000 by Mike Libeck's party from the USA. They turned back short of the summit.

We experienced squalls almost every day and were unable to climb during an eight-day period of very unsettled conditions. In early August we waded through melt streams and slush on the upper glacier; two weeks later the streams were frozen over and powder snow covered the surface.

Climbing ascents and attempts

Neizvestniy (5240m) (existing peak name meaning 'unknown' in Russian)



First ascent: 6 August 2005. Traverse via NE arête and west ridge.

We chose the striking NE arête of this mountain as an acclimatisation route. We noted that the arête led only to a foresummit, and on reaching this our fears were realised when we saw a steep and unstable corniced ridge between us and the main summit. This required delicate 'à cheval' climbing – sometimes we could feel the cornice vibrate – and accounted for much of the 5½ hours we took from bergschrund to summit. Fortunately our descent route, the W ridge, turned out to be straightforward. We graded the climb Difficile or NZ 4.

Granitsa (5370m) (proposed name meaning 'border' in Russian)

Attempt: 19 August 2005. West ridge.

This is the most elegant of the peaks at the head of the glacier, and the most impressive if the Grand Poohbah massif is excluded. We saw no easy route to the summit other than two couloirs on the SW face. With this in mind we climbed to the 4760m col west of the mountain. Below us on the Chinese side was a steep mixed couloir dropping several hundred metres; across on the SW face we could see signs of major avalanche activity. We elected to attempt the west ridge above, hoping to weave around most of the granite gendarmes. After some 200m of pitched climbing on poor ice and mixed ground we were confronted by vertical, monolithic granite gendarmes and were forced to retreat. From the glacier it was clear we had covered a fraction of the hard ground on the ridge.



North face of Granitsa. We climbed from the col on the far right towards the first gendarme.

Pogranichnik (5220m) (proposed name meaning 'border guard' in Russian)



West spur and north ridge of Pogranichnik

Attempt: 20 August 2005. North ridge.

This is the peak at the SE corner of the cirque with a granite 'head'. We climbed the north ridge via a spur to the west with snow slopes and rock steps. The lower approach slopes were loaded with unconsolidated powder. We reached the foot of the 'head' at 5180m but were unable to climb it as the ground above required high standard rock climbing. The summit may possibly be approached more easily from the Sarychat glacier to the east.

Zastava (5010m) (proposed name meaning 'border post' in Russian)

Attempt: 21 August 2005. West ridge.

This is the small peak that lies between Neizvestniy and Granitsa. Its east ridge consists of granite gendarmes, but the west ridge appears to offer a straightforward snow route. Attempting this on our last climbing day, we found ourselves wading in deep powder on the approach and trenching up a 'sugar chimney' on the slopes to the col west of the summit. We turned back shortly above the col at an indicated 4875m due to excessive loading of the slopes with avalanche powder.



North face of Zastava

The members of the expedition would like to express their gratitude for financial support from the Mount Everest Foundation, Sports Council / British Mountaineering Council, and New Zealand Alpine Club.