



North sides of Grand Poohbah (R) and Pik 5481m (L)

Grand Poohbah Expedition 2005

Supported by:

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New Zealand Alpine Club (New Zealand)***

Final Report

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Photos and content by Paul Knott except where indicated.

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Summary

We overcame a number of access challenges to climb in the previously unexplored Fersmana glacier basin in the remote central region of the Western Kokshaal-Too. We were delighted to find elegant spires and steep granite walls, in contrast to the limestone peaks immediately to the east. 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.

We made the first ascent of Pik Neizvestniy (Unknown, 5240m) via the snowy NE arête and the sharp corniced ridge beyond. Following this we persisted at our high camp through innumerable squalls to make attempts on three further granite peaks up to 5350m, reaching the summit 'head' of Pik Pogranichnik (Border Guard, 5220m).

Our journey to base camp was affected by a little-known change to the border between Kyrgyzstan and China. We found ourselves walking the last 65km with our luggage on horseback. Our proposed names for the peaks reflect the close border control in the area.

On our return we were left stranded at the Uzengegush border post for three days, almost missing our flights. Lacking any means of communication, we found ourselves completely immersed in the charm of uncontrolled adventure.



Summit ridge of Neizvestniy

MEF Reference: 05/18
Area visited: Fersmana Glacier, Western Kokshaal-Too range, Kyrgyzstan/China border.
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Objectives: Exploration in the remote central region of the Western Kokshaal-Too with first ascent of Pk. 5697m ("Grand Poohbah").

Area background

The Kokshaal-Too range runs along the Kyrgyz-China border, with Pik Pobeda (7439m) near its eastern end. 250km SW of Pobeda lies a further area of high peaks known as the Western Kokshaal-Too. Until the mid-1990s access to this massif had been politically restricted, and as a consequence only a small number of visits had been made, all by climbers from the former Soviet Union. Only since the easing of these restrictions has the potential of the area become more widely known.

Since 1997 a significant number of climbing visits have been made to the western end of the massif, partly because of the good quality granite at this end of the range. The eastern end of the massif, although close in distance, must be reached by an entirely different access route. This area presents imposing summits and serious climbing, including the highest peak of the Western Kokshaal-Too, Dankova (5982m). Peaks rise 2000m from the glacier and present the challenge of generally poor limestone as well as complex features.

The earliest of the major ascents, including that of Dankova, took place in 1969. After one further expedition in 1972 the area appears to have been untouched by climbers until 1993. The visit of a Russian and European team in 1996 was followed by an ISM trip in 1997 and a large Moscow team in 1998. Together, these made ascents of most of the major peaks at the eastern end of the range. However, the central part of the range remained far less visited, probably due to its remoteness from both eastern and western vehicle approaches. The Fersmana glacier in particular did not seem to have been explored by climbers (other than a crossing of the upper glacier by Danil Popov's Moscow team in 2003).

The major attraction of the Fersmana glacier basin was the unclimbed Peak Byeliy (5697m). The rather poor photos available prior to the trip showed this as an exciting looking block summit guarded by seracs and granite walls. We hoped that closer inspection would reveal relatively modest lines of ascent. The other problem with this peak is that it lies directly on the main dividing range and hence bears the brunt of the amazingly inclement weather that seems to come up from the Taklimakan Desert. The only previous attempt was by Mike Libecki's American party in 2000, who gave it the nickname "Grand Poohbah". After climbing much of the rocky SW ridge (not SE ridge as captioned in AAJ), they were forced to turn back by deteriorating weather. They reached the peak via an epic approach from the Chinese side. A northern outlier of the massif (Pik 5145m) was climbed in 2000 by a Moscow party including V. Starostin. They named the summit Pik Korsun. Immediately to the west, from the Nalivkin glacier (feeding the Aytali river), ascents were made of Pks 5155m and 5015m by an ISM party in September 2001 and of Pik Letavet (5471m) by the 2003 Moscow team.

During 2005 a map of the area was prepared by the American Alpine Club. This map incorporates the peak names researched for the expedition.

Events summary

25 July 2005 Graham and Paul fly London – Bishkek (BA/BMed flight).
26 July Arrive Bishkek. Purchase supplies in Osh Bazaar with help from ITMC driver.
27 July Grant arrives via Istanbul (TK flight). Drive to Tamga.
28 July Marooned in Barskaun valley with blown radiator on ITMC Gaz-66.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| 29 July | Permit rejected at Kara-Sai border post. Drive to Karakol. |
| 30 July | Validate permit at Karakol. Drive to Uzengegush border post. |
| 31 July | Onward vehicle access prohibited. Await horses from Karakoz "camp". |
| 1 August | Walk 43km to Karakoz border post (gear carried by horses). |
| 2 August | Walk 20-25km to base camp 1km south of Pt.3392 (gear carried by horses). |
| 4-7 August | Fersmana glacier reconnoitre with first ascent of Neizvestniy (see below). |
| 10-14 August | Fersmana glacier: climbing plans curtailed due to unsettled weather. |
| 17-22 August | Fersmana glacier with attempts on Granitsa, Pogranichnik and Zastava (see below). |
| 23 August | Paul travels to Karakoz border post to make contact, partly on horseback. |
| 24 August | Grant and Graham travel to Karakoz camp on horseback with gear. |
| 25 August | Travel to Uzengegush border post on horseback. |
| 26-28 August | Await ITMC vehicle. Emergency contact eventually made via military telephone. |
| 29 August 0030 | ITMC vehicle arrives with 2 drivers. Travel directly to Bishkek over snowy passes. |
| 30 August 0645 | Graham and Paul fly to London and Vancouver. |

Travel and access

Our story ...

The trip was arranged on the basis of Paul's 2001 trip to the Chon-Turasu valley (MEF 01/56), on which the base camp was easily reached by vehicle on a journey that was almost disappointingly uneventful and took three modest travelling days from Bishkek. This gave confidence that a trip to the more remote area further up the Uzengegush river should be a reasonable undertaking, giving vehicle access to a base camp at Pt. 3392. From this point a long day's walk remained (16-18km) over the moraines to the head of the Fersmana glacier. A similar base camp had been accessed by the large Moscow/Chernogolovka team in 1998 by driving the last 25km up the gravel river bed. In case the last section should prove impassable by vehicle, we felt that horses might be available (only from the border post: there seem to be no other inhabitants in the area). The road as far as the Karakoz border post should surely have been kept open, notwithstanding that in 2001 it had been surfaced with boulders and threatened by collapsing bridges and hillside.

As it turned out, on the outward journey in 2005 we encountered a major vehicle breakdown (the blown radiator was eventually fixed with the aid of black pepper!), a rejected border zone permit, and a closed road requiring the last 65km to be completed on foot. These events lost us 3 days and also meant we had no communication at base camp, since it was impractical to carry the radio on horseback with its car battery and pine-tree aerial. Our border zone permit had been issued some months previously, and it seems that the Colonel who authorised it had been ousted following the March coup. It was also the case that it had been issued in Naryn, whereas the Kara-Sai border post is under the jurisdiction of the Karakol region. The Colonel in Karakol met us in person, re-validated the permit and later helped with emergency contact. The main cause of the road closure appears to have been the re-alignment of the border with China (see below).

The return journey went smoothly until we arrived at the effective road head at the newly opened Uzengegush border post. Here we were left stranded for three days: we avoided missing our flights only by persuading the military to make emergency contact with ITMC via their telephone system.

Recommendations

Three issues should be considered in any effort to learn from our experiences: the state of Kyrgyzstan in general; the situation at our agents ITMC; and the situation regarding the new border.

Kyrgyzstan went through a revolution in March-April 2005, and although the transition to the new government was largely peaceful the legacy at the time of our visit was a regime struggling to assert authority and trying to unravel the widespread nepotistic appointments alleged to have been made by the Akayev regime. The only direct consequence of this for us was the ousted Colonel who had authorised our permit. The country seemed to have developed in economic terms since 2001, with new

supermarkets and hotels in Bishkek and more facilities for travellers generally. We experienced no problems relating to security, violence, bribery, begging, corrupt authorities or failed infrastructure.

Of more direct consequence to our trip were the shortcomings in service quality from ITMC. Before our outward journey the vehicle would have benefited from preventive maintenance; the validity of the border permit might have been checked; and updated information might have been obtained about the road up the Uzengegush. For our return journey, better contact with the border guards and a more thorough briefing to the driver would have avoided all or most of the delay (the driver had been waiting for us at an alternative exit point that had been mentioned as a possibility after the problems with the outward journey). These shortcomings in the back office were balanced by the dedication, expertise and patience of our drivers.

One might speculate that these problems could be attributed to the new and perhaps less experienced person at ITMC who dealt with the logistics for our trip. In 2001 we had been well looked after by Ayana, who subsequently moved to another firm. After the 2005 trip there was a well-signalled staff change, so it is possible the previous higher standard of service will be re-established. Prices charged by the major agencies in Bishkek are substantially above local market prices for equivalent services, so one is entitled to expect high standards.

We did not take a satellite phone on the trip, preferring to use a local HF radio (as used successfully in 2001) backed up by communication via the border posts. In the event neither means of communication was as effective as we had hoped. Future parties wishing to have communication with the outside world might prefer to take a satellite phone.

Kyrgyz-China border changes

We were surprised to find that parts of the border in this area between Kyrgyzstan and China have been realigned. All current printed maps (including the 2005 AAC map) show the de-facto boundary that has stood since the time of the Soviet Union. The legal border has been ill-defined since the 1860s-1880s agreements between Russia and China.

A new agreement, which remains highly contentious in Kyrgyzstan, cedes significant parts of the disputed territory to China. One such area starts west of the Bedel Pass, with the new border following the Uzengegush river from the point at which the road from meets it from the north to the confluence of the Chon-Tyuekuyruk river (grid ref. 436630 on 2005 AAC map). The border then follows the Chon-Tyuekuyruk east of Pik Koroleva (5816m). Along the Uzengegush section we saw border posts dated 2001. The originally disputed territory encompasses the whole alpine area of the Western Kokshaal-Too as well as much of the Borkoldoy range; the recent agreement also cedes an area of the Kokshaal west of the main massif.

The road up the Uzengegush now crosses into China for some of its length, and we were told only military vehicles are authorised to use it. The road was also blocked by landslips, although these were later cleared. Future parties may find it more convenient to access the Fersmana glacier by walking from the Kotur base camp, which can be reached via the western vehicle approach. This has better roads and fewer political complications.

Exploration of 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.

Access to the glacier

Above our base camp the terrain becomes gorge-like before opening out near the glacier snout. We took the south side, taking grass terraces above the gorge. We saw similar terraces on the north side, but no sign of the road marked on the map: driving west from our base camp would not be feasible. Probably this section of road had been planned at some point, but never built. Close to the base camp we had to cross a waterfall, which was challenging when it was in full flow.

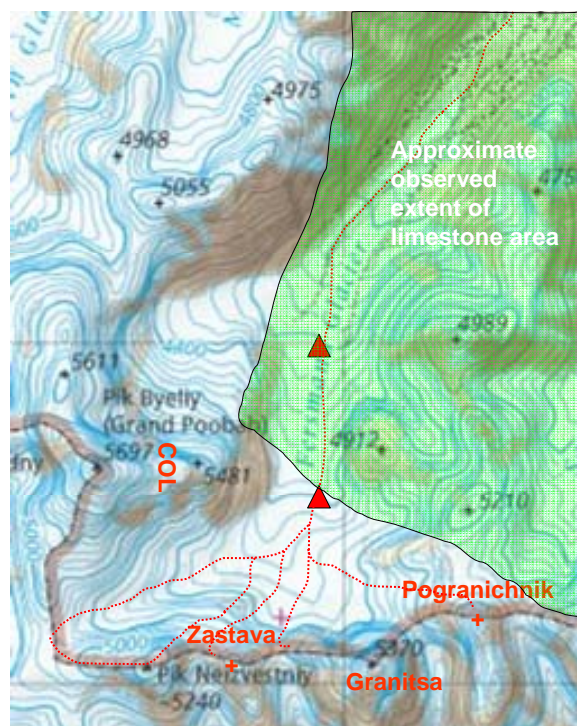
From the river flats below the glacier snout we took the moraine trench on the true left (west) side, crossing onto the ice where the river emerged. In this way, we avoided any river crossing. Above, we

followed the moraine trench or the nearby crest until forced by a rock buttress to descend onto the main glacier. This point was opposite the junction with the Sarychat glacier. From here we followed undulating moraine past a glacial lake and over two major hummocks before descending onto the first of the white ice. Above this we returned to the medial moraine (which had granite on its west side and dark crumbly rock on its east side) until it was possible to cross onto the white ice of the upper glacier where campsites could be found. The walk-in from base camp took us between 7 and 9 hours to high camps at 4200m and later 4400m in the upper glacier cirque.

Climbing opportunities

Our visit revealed much climbing potential. Outstanding opportunities for future parties would be:

- Routes on the NE or SE sides of Grand Poohbah – Pik 5481 massif. Mostly granite. Some ice lines. Often overlooked by seracs. Summit ridge looks rocky with multiple summits.
- Granite walls on the Chinese side of Granitsa.
- Ice lines on N face of Granitsa – but the ground we climbed of this orientation seldom had good ice (deposition zone with no sun).
- First ascents of the smaller peaks: Pogranichnik from NE side; W ridge of Zastava; SW couloirs on Granitsa from China; S face/couloir of Pik 5210.



Peaks and routes in Fersmana cirque (extract from 2005 AAC map)

The map of choice for climbing would be the excellent American Alpine Club map from which the extract is printed above. The Russian maps even at 1:50000 do not contain useful additional detail and are harder to read. None of the maps gives a true impression of the climbing terrain. Granite walls and tottering limestone towers alike often appear as simple snow slopes.

Climbing ascents and attempts

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



When seen from the glacier the striking feature of this peak is the snowy NE arête. This drew our attention as we looked for an acclimatisation ascent. During our reconnoitre there had been cloud over the summit, but we had the impression the arête might lead only to a foresummit. On reaching this our fears were realised when we saw a steep and unstable-looking corniced ridge between us and the main summit. This required delicate 'à cheval' climbing for some distance – sometimes we could feel it vibrate as we climbed – accounting for much of the 5½ hours taken from bergschrund to summit. Fortunately our descent route, the W ridge to the 4920m col S of Grand Poohbah, turned out to be straightforward. Overall we gave the climb a grade of Difficile or NZ 4.

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



N face of Granitsa. We climbed from the col on the far R towards the first gendarme.

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 W 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 W 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.

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



W spur of Pogranichnik

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.

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



N face of Zastava

This is the small peak that lies between Neizvestniy and Granitsa. Its east ridge consists of granite gendarmes similar to those on Granitsa, 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 c.4850m 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. In acceptable snow conditions the peak would be very straightforward.

Weather and conditions

We experienced squalls on almost every day of our visit 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. The same snowfall caused the avalanche conditions we experienced on north facing slopes. Overall, conditions seemed colder than in August 2001. The bad weather generally came from the south. This meant that conditions were significantly worse on the peaks on the main dividing ridge. Dankova, lying slightly further north, tended to remain clear for longer.

As we made our way down the Uzengegush valley at the end of the trip the snow line steadily descended to a level that must have been below base camp. The border guards at Karakoz reported that snow normally arrives at the post from early October. On our return truck journey there was snow on the already marginal 4000m passes.

Environmental notes

As specified in the original application, we reduced general impact by using a small team, buying most food locally, minimising packaging, and not using extra base camp personnel. We carried all non human waste back to Bishkek for disposal, along with the tin cans and bottles previous parties had left in the base camp area. Human waste was left semi-buried to decompose in a marmot hole; vegetable peelings were left in a similar hole.

The only activity we saw in the area was that of the border guards. The border posts seemed well-ordered in terms of keeping the area clean, but seemed to regard all wildlife in the area as available for hunting – not only highly abundant animals such as Marmots but also Ibex, Marco Polo sheep, and possibly even endangered species.

Medical notes

The evening before we returned to Bishkek Grant was attacked by a dog at the Uzengegush border post, suffering puncture wounds to the legs. The officers at the post were adamant that the dog (actually a bitch with young puppies) was healthy and did not have rabies. However, following medical advice he took a course of vaccinations at a cost to the insurance company of around £750.

Food and supplies

Modern supermarkets have now appeared in Bishkek, although we purchased most of our supplies during a more characterful day in Osh Bazaar. Essentially all but specialist foods are available. For our hill meals we took Backcountry Cuisine freeze-dried packs from New Zealand. These were excellent; they deserve to be more widely available. In Bishkek one interesting item we had not expected was dark shrink-wrapped bread that stayed edible until well into the trip.

At base camp none of our food was attacked by marmots despite the proximity of several burrows. Our use of the holes as latrines and for food waste may have been something of a deterrent.

We tried to use coffee filters to remove the large amount of silt carried in the river water. The filters became clogged almost instantly. The solution was to allow the silt to settle, which fortunately it did in clear pools that remained when the water was low in the mornings.

We experienced no digestive problems despite eating all food (including un-peeled fruit), drinking all water without precautions (apart from minimising river silt), and consuming un-pasteurised kefir and fresh meat with the border zone officers.

Equipment

We took X-GK stoves exclusively, burning in total x litres of fuel. Following the advice of our driver Vitaliy we used 95 octane petrol. This worked reasonably well, and certainly better than the 76 octane used on Paul's 2001 trip to the same area – although it did seem to affect the rubber of the pump O-rings. One of the stoves was a newer shaker jet model, and this worked more powerfully than the older type. Gas is

now available in Bishkek, but we decided not to use it. During our days at the Uzengegush border post we had to burn diesel in the stove (having previously given away much of the spare petrol at the horse 'camp'). It worked, but produced vast quantities of black smoke.

For our high camp we used Integral Designs MK1XL and MK3 tents. These performed superbly. The ventilation tunnels, not present on all designs of this type, worked well both as vents and as periscopes. To save weight, we did not take vestibules. This made cooking difficult during squally weather as the stove tended to blow out. However, life was also made easier by the presence of melt water, which persisted sufficiently at our 4400m camp even during the colder conditions later in the trip.

Appendix 1: GPS data

The device was set to the WGS-84 datum. The altitudes differed slightly from those given on the maps.

| | | | |
|--|-------|-------------|-------------|
| Rest point a few metres short of Sarychat glacier terminal | 3592m | 41 5.97 N | 77 32.634 E |
| Glacier camp (lower) | 4197m | 41 1.658 N | 77 30.390 E |
| Base camp | 3401m | 41 8.495 N | 77 35.741 E |
| Saddle S of Grand Poohbah | 4881m | | |
| Pik Neizvestniy summit | 5202m | 40 59.699 N | 77 28.860 E |
| Approximate limit of 4wd road S of Uzengegush river | 3253m | 41 11.625 N | 77 41.98 E |
| High point on Pogranichnik | 5178m | 41 0.071 N | 77 31.642 E |
| Glacier camp (upper) | 4376m | 41 0.756 N | 77 30.373 E |
| Ice bridge (access onto glacier where glacial river emerges) | 3634m | 41 5.818 N | 77 32.394 E |
| Glacier melt lake | 3788m | 41 4.116 N | 77 32.141 E |

Appendix 2: Finances

Expenses

Equipment costs and consumables such as camera film are excluded.

| | NZ\$ | GB£ | US\$ | C\$ | Som | GB£ Totals |
|------------------------------|--------|-------|------|------|--------------|-----------------|
| Travel | | | | | | |
| Flight tickets | 3793 | 615.7 | | 2950 | | |
| Tamga guest house | | | | | 1872 | |
| Karakol guest house | | | | | 1350 | |
| Café Kench | | | | | 450 | |
| Horse payment to Kiril | | | 300 | | | |
| Airport shuttles | | | 76 | | | |
| Bishkek flat | | | 156 | | | |
| Gaz-66 truck | | | 708 | | | |
| Ural truck | | | 830 | | | |
| Yurt restaurant | | | | | 800 | |
| Bishkek restaurant | | | | | 400 | |
| Bishkek Manas airport tax | | | 30 | | | |
| | | | | | | 4685.25 |
| Permits and visas | | | | | | |
| Visa postage | 36.2 | 17 | | | | |
| Visa fee | | 180 | | | | |
| Visa invite ITMC | 60 | | | | | |
| Border permit ITMC | 30 | | | | | |
| | | | | | | 261.23 |
| Food and supplies | | | | | | |
| Osh Bazaar | | | | | 5700 | |
| Petrol | | | | | 410 | |
| Bishkek supermarket | | | | | 401.52 | |
| Canada food | | | | 210 | | |
| Prescription drugs | 53.8 | | | 54 | | |
| Backcountry Cuisine | 173.31 | | | | | |
| Tesco food | | 11.86 | | | | |
| Boots vitamin pills | | 4.49 | | | | |
| Waitrose food | | 11.04 | | | | |
| Somerfield food | | 9.05 | | | | |
| Petrol canister (ITMC) | | | 15 | | | |
| Radio hire (ITMC) | | | 165 | | | |
| | | | | | | 435.68 |
| Insurance | 676.55 | | | 105 | | |
| | | | | | | 309.48 |
| Other (Som purchases) | | | | | | 40.42 |
| | | | | | Total | £5732.07 |

Conversion rates applied:

0.69 NZ\$/US\$; 0.83 C\$/US\$; 1.79 GBP/US\$; 0.385 NZ\$/GBP; 0.464 C\$/GBP; 73.39 Som/GBP.

Income

| | £ |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| Mount Everest Foundation | 675.00 |
| British Mountaineering Council | 1300.00 |
| New Zealand Alpine Club | 570.00 |
| Individual contributions | <u>3187.07</u> |
| Total | £5732.07 |