

The British Southern Fergana Expedition 2015

Expedition Report



Gabe Oliver on Peak 4361m

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Introduction

The Fergana range is a long chain of mountains forming part of the Tien Shan range in Kyrgyzstan. It is 206 miles in length with an average height of 3800m. The south eastern end of the range contains the highest peaks and is heavily glaciated below the main watershed. The snow peaks in this area are alpine in scale with heights between 4200m – 4819m.

This part of the range can be approached from the north via the town of Naryn and then by following the main road towards the Torugart Pass. The range can then be accessed with a 4 wheel drive vehicle from the wide valley that runs along the range to the north (the Arpa valley). A border permit is required to enter this area due to its close proximity to the border with China

The range has seen a few previous expeditions and some of these have been recorded with the reports available via the AAJ and BMC. The part of the range that we were interested in was the extreme south eastern end of the range, lying just to the west of the adjacent range, the Torugart Too. This area has seen two recorded expeditions by Mark Weeding and team (2010 & 2011) and one by Dimitry Shapovalov and team (2007). There may well have been other un-reported expeditions to the range as well.

The initial idea for the expedition was conceived by Paul Josse and John Venier, who had both taken part in a very successful expedition to the nearby At Bashy range in 2013.



Mountains of the Southern Fergana from Peak 4361m

Summary

We were originally planning on exploring several glaciers at the extreme South eastern end of the range, approaching via the Kokbel valley. After a 2 day journey from Bishkek, we were blocked from entering the Kokbel valley by a very organised hunting team. After some discussion and translation via satellite phone to ITMC's office, it became clear that it was going to be impossible for us to go any further up the valley.

We had to come up with a 'plan B' the next morning, so we opted to drive further along the range to approach via the Karakol valley, which is the next major valley to the north west. It proved too difficult for the truck to get any significant distance up the steep sided Karakol valley, so a base camp was set up next to the river at an altitude of 3000m (40°41'2.88"N, 74°36'21.38"E). From here it was an 18km walk up to the glaciers, which was further than we would have liked. To make up for this though, the walk up the valley was straightforward and very scenic, if a little long. We also secured the help of some local people who used their mules to ferry equipment (as well as the odd team member!) to and from ABC 1.

Over the course of the next 15 days we established two advanced base camps, ABC 1 - 40° 36' 34.63" N, 74° 36' 35.83" E and ABC 2 - 40°33'45.90"N, 74°36'6.70"E and made two multi-peak traverses, taking in 8 peaks over 4000m. Members of the team also attempted other peaks, but were thwarted by bad weather and conditions.

Throughout the course of the expedition, we met with fairly unstable weather, with snow/rain every day apart from two clear days. Thunderstorms in the mountains were a common occurrence in the afternoons and the ground conditions on the mountains were very wintery, with plenty of fresh snow around.

Having been forced to change our plans at the last minute, we didn't have the information with us on what had already been climbed in this particular part of the range, and some of our ascents followed the same ground as Mark Weeding's expedition in 2010. These peaks are noted in the list below.

Summary of dates

20th Aug 15 to 25th Aug 15 – Preparations in Bishkek, Drive to base camp via Naryn.

26th Aug 15 to 30th Aug 15 – Initial explorations and establishing high camps.

30th Aug 15 to 4th Sept 15 – Various ascents in the Southern Fergana.

5th Sept 15 to 10th Sept 15 – Travel back to Bishkek, then UK.

Details of ascents made during the expedition

1. 'The Vershina Ridge' (PD) Paul Josse (solo) – 30th August 2015

Peak 4203m (40°34'54.34"N, 74°37'25.20"E) (Mark Weeding 2010)

Peak 4450m (40°34'25.95"N, 74°37'1.43"E) (Mark Weeding 2010)

Peak 4520m (Altitude - GPS) (40°34'8.40"N, 74°37'0.15"E)

Peak 4557m (Altitude - GPS) (40°33'56.80"N, 74°36'55.26"E)

2. 'The Podvova Ridge' (F+) Gabe Oliver, Paul Josse – 4th Sept 2015

Peak 3870m (40°36'10.97"N, 74°35'53.86"E)

Peak 4261m (40°35'50.78"N, 74°34'54.34"E)

Peak 4247m (40°36'6.89"N, 74°34'52.03"E)

Peak 4361m (40°36'40.73"N, 74°34'37.08"E) (Mark Weeding 2010)

Peak 4330m (40°36'51.51"N, 74°34'1.65"E)

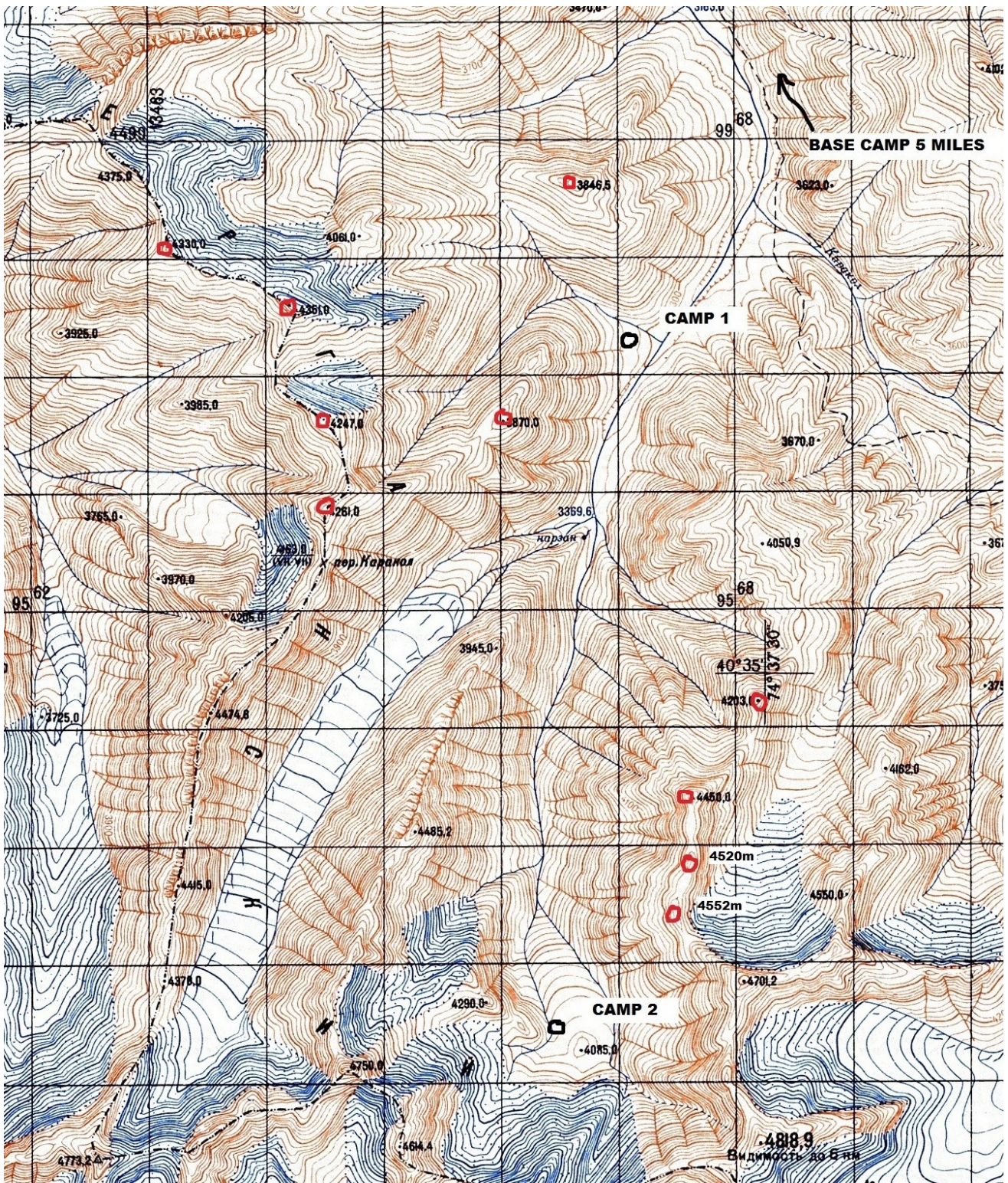
3. Peak 3846m (40°37'14.04"N, 74°36'19.07"E) Pete Nugent (Solo) – 4th Sept 2015

Peak names, first ascents, heights and positions

All of the above peaks are to be found on the Russian military map of the area (copy below with the peaks marked). All of the heights above are taken from the map, the only two exceptions to this being the peaks 4520m and 4557m on the Vershina Ridge. The altitude stated for these two peaks have been taken from a GPS.

Mark Weeding's team didn't name any of the peaks that they climbed in 2010, and we can't be sure if the other peaks that we climbed were first ascents – probably not?

It is becoming increasingly difficult to be certain with regards to claiming first ascents in Kyrgyzstan. Many expeditions have made ascents of peaks over the last few years and haven't written reports or recorded what they have climbed. We have chosen not to name the peaks for the above reasons, but have taken the liberty of giving a name to the two very enjoyable ridge traverses that we did.



Map showing the 2 ABC's, and the peaks climbed during the expedition.

The Team



Paul Josse – Leader



John Venier – Climber



Gabe Oliver - Climber



Pete Nugent – Climber



Pete Duguid – Support



Svetlana – BC support/cook



Sasha – Driver & entertainment

Planning and Logistics

Transport

The main way of reaching a lot of the mountain areas in Kyrgyzstan is by road. To drive all the way up to base camp in a 4 wheel drive vehicle has become the most common way for expeditions to approach the mountains.

Like our previous expedition in 2013, we used the company ITMC in Bishkek to handle all of our logistics such as transport, permits, cook service and food. This is run by Vladimir Komisarov, himself a well known mountaineer in Kyrgyzstan. As always, ITMC supplied a good service and Margarita, who runs the office at ITMC was highly efficient and helpful, both before and during our expedition.

ITMC use ex USSR military trucks for their larger expedition transport, Like our previous trip to the At Bashi range, we decided to opt for the 'GAZ 66' again – A very unreliable 50 year old truck that likes to break down, it made for an interesting journey!



The GAZ 66

Permits and paperwork

Kyrgyzstan is a very easy country to visit in terms of bureaucracy. UK nationals can enter the country without a visa, and there seems to be no restrictions on climbing in most places, but as this trip proved, hunting can be an issue. Some of the mountain areas close to the border with China require you to have a border permit to enter the area. Ours was easily obtained on our behalf by ITMC before our arrival in Bishkek. We passed through a military check point on the journey to base camp. Permits and passports were thoroughly checked but no problems were encountered.

Expedition food and fuel

All food for the expedition was obtained in Bishkek the day before our departure for the mountains. Most of this was bought in the markets and the bazaar. There are western style supermarkets in the centre of Bishkek, and although we could have bought everything there, it would have been more expensive.

For base camp food, we had the luxury of a cook - Svetlana, and she organised most of the expedition shopping, with some manual help from us. This made the whole job a lot easier, as she not only planned the food required but also solved the problem of language difficulties when buying supplies at the bazaar.

We didn't have too much of an issue with weight in the truck so we could take in pretty much whatever food we wanted. Food at base camp was great, we took in lots of fresh food – vegetables, meat, eggs etc. and Svetlana was a great cook, producing tasty meals and lots of snacks.

Hill food consisted of dried fruit, chocolate and cereal bars, and food in high camps was soups, noodles, instant mash etc. All of this is available in the supermarkets in Bishkek.

We had a large double burner at base camp fueled by two large gas cylinders. Cooking in ABC's was on two JetBoil stoves.

A note on gas cylinders – ITMC obtained ours before we got arrived in Bishkek. We were advised that they can be hard to get hold of during the peak climbing season, and that it is worth pre- ordering before arrival.

Our water supply at base camp was via a natural spring which was a 15 minute walk from base camp. The water from the main Karakol river next to camp wasn't suitable for drinking due to the amount of silt. All water was boiled before use.

Accommodation

We stayed in the 'Alpinist' hotel in Bishkek. This is a 'climbers' hotel and had everything we required. The staff spoke some English and were always very helpful. In Naryn, we stayed in a 'homestay' (a Kyrgyz B&B) which was also very comfortable and welcoming.

Equipment & Clothing

During August and early September the conditions in the Fergana range are similar to that of the European Alps. Everybody had their own clothing preferences based on experience. We saw a fair amount of rain, snow and hail during the trip so good shell clothing proved important. Again, everyone had their own preference for boots, but the consensus of opinion was that the best type of boot seemed to be the lightweight alpine boots such as Boreal Icemasters or Scarpa Freneys. Most people agreed that taking an expedition sleeping bag paid off, as the nights could be quite cold.

We each took our own tent for use at base camp, and we were kindly lent two Terra Nova mountain tents for use in our ABCs. Thankyou to Berghaus for the use of these

Photography

All of the team took cameras. The photos used in this report were taken by Paul Josse, Gabe Oliver and Pete Duguid.

Communications

We took some cheap two way radios for communication between base camp and ABC. These generally worked very well as long as there was reasonable line of site. They came in very useful for communication between the two ABC's.

Local People

In the Karakol valley there was several Yurt settlements, and our presence in the valley caused some interest. We were welcomed by all the local people and received some genuine hospitality and also some help with ferrying loads up and down the valley. In return, we paid them some money for mule hire and gave away some fresh food that we could spare.

Expedition Finances

The expedition was more or less self funded by the members. We also received a generous grant from the Mount Everest Foundation, which made a difference to the individual outlay for the trip. Accounts for the expedition are below:

Expedition Accounts

Expenditure

Flights - £2235
Excess Baggage fees - £144
Logistics/transport/hotels - £4820
Expedition Food - £699
Taxi's and other expenditure - £51
Meals in Town/City - £346
Mule hire - £50

Total expenditure - £8345

Income

MEF Grant - £1350
Personal contributions - £6995

Total income - £8345

Insurance is not included in the above accounts as members all arranged their own individual insurance.

The environment and waste management

From the outset we were determined to leave no trace of our having been in the area following our departure. No equipment was left in the mountains, no cairns were built, and all trash was either burned or taken out.

Our toilet site at base camp was carefully positioned well away from the river and was fully filled in on departure.



Base Camp next to the Karakol River

The 'Vershina' Ridge

Translation – 'Pinnacle ridge'

Date – 30th August 2015

Paul Josse (solo)

Grade – PD

Time taken – 8hrs

Starting from ABC 2, Pete Duguid and Paul Josse set off to attempt Peak 4450m, which looked in very wintery condition. Pete had to descend when part way up the first peak (4203m), mainly due to the effects of altitude. Paul carried on, up the easy snow ridge to the summit of Pk 4450m. It was still early in the day and the weather was holding out so he decided to carry on along the pinnacled ridge to the south. This offered some interesting mixed ground, with crampons being required for the whole traverse. The second peak (4557m) offered some steeper mixed climbing on loose ground (II/III) to reach the summit. The view from the top was great – all the peaks surrounding the Eastern glacier were visible

Paul then carried on, hoping to reach the summit of the next peak – 4701m. The weather had been deteriorating gradually, and a thunderstorm finally broke. 70m from the summit with some difficult terrain to go, Paul made the decision to retreat. A rapid descent was made to the west from the col to reach the Eastern Karakol glacier.



Peak 4450m from Peak 3870m

The 'Podkova Ridge'

Translation – Horseshoe Ridge

Date – 4th Sept 2015

Gabe Oliver, Paul Josse

Grade – F+

Time taken – 8hrs

This proved to be a very enjoyable traverse which was made more interesting by the snowy conditions encountered. Paul and Gabe had spent the night of 2nd Sept at ABC 2 on the glacier, hoping the next day (3rd) to climb Peak 4614m at the head of the glacier. During the afternoon and evening of the 2nd it snowed heavily and they woke up to find 6 inches of snow at camp. This, coupled with the extremely high winds ruled out going up any higher. Having only one more climbing day possible before the end of the expedition, they decided to break ABC 2 and head down to ABC 1, with the possibility of traversing some of the slightly lower peaks to the NW of this on the 4th. Following another extremely windy afternoon and evening, they woke up to clear skies at 5am the next morning.

The traverse offered easy snow ridges, mixed with some interesting sections of easy scrambling. The views over the Western Karakol Glacier and along the rest of the Fergana range were fantastic. The weather stayed perfect for the whole day. Upon reaching Peak 4361m, they made the decision to go 'there and back' to peak 4330m, the south ridge of this offering a steep snow climb to the summit. Descent was made down the east ridge of Peak 4361m, (with the rock requiring some care) followed by a 400m scree run down to the river.



On the Ridge (The Vershina ridge is in the background)

Attempt on the North Ridge of Pk. 4485m

Date – 31st August 2015

John Venier, Pete Nugent

Peak 4485m is the eye catching sharp summit on the right hand side of the valley as one approaches up the valley towards the glaciers. It throws up one of the most obvious challenges in the area.

Most of the North ridge of this peak offered straightforward scrambling along a loose ridge. The final few metres to the top turned out to be a steep unprotected smooth face. Climbing solo, John turned back less than 50m from the top in rapidly deteriorating weather.



Pk. 4485m on the right, looking along the North Ridge

Relevant maps and reports

Maps

Russian topographical maps – 50k – K43-26-1 & 100k – K43-126

Alpine Mapping Guild - Kyrgyzstan – A Climber’s Map and Guide, 2005

Central Asia Topographic Map Series - Naryn 66-2065-07 - 1:500,000. West Col/EWP, 2005

Previous Reports

Mark Weddings’ reports – AAJ 2011 & 2012 (Expeditions 2010 & 2011)

Dimitry Shapovalov’s report – AAJ 2008

Daniel Keller & Thomas Nunn’s report – BMC & AAJ 2013

Possible Future Objectives

Whilst it is difficult to be 100% sure on what exactly which have been climbed in this part of the range, there is still plenty of potential for first ascents for future expeditions to the area. The scope for alpine routes of all difficulties (particularly in the easy to mid grades) is huge. Detailed below are two possible future objectives that stood out for us on our expedition:

Peak 4776m

This is the prominent triple headed peak at the head of the Eastern glacier. It is very likely to be un-climbed and would make a fine objective. There are a number of potential routes up. Paul managed to get a good view of the peak from Pk 4557 and the E ridge looks to offer a straightforward route but access to the glacier leading up to the E col is barred by an icefall that might prove awkward to negotiate. The NW ridge offers easy access up the glacier to the W col, but the ridge leads to one of the lower summits and the ridge would then need to be traversed along to the highest peak. This would no doubt offer a good route though.



The Eastern Karakol glacier with Peak 4776 at its head, West col to the right

'Castle' Ridge

We spotted these impressive pinnacles from the Podkova Ridge. They are situated between the Peaks 4773.2m and 4750m as marked on the map. The traverse of these look as if they would be a great alpine traverse, and if the above peaks were included as well, it would offer possibly the finest traverse in this part of the range.

Pk 4773.2m may well have been climbed by Russian Cartographers and looks a straightforward snow climb; Pk 4750 also looks reasonably straightforward for ascent or descent.



'Castle Ridge' from the Podkova Ridge

Acknowledgements

The Mount Everest Foundation – Thank you very much for the generous grant. We are all extremely grateful.

The British Mountaineering Council – Thank you for your official support of our expedition.

Berghaus – Thank you very much for the loan of the high camp tents and for the clothing.

Pat Littlejohn – Thank you once again for your advice and help.

The team at ITMC – Thanks to Sasha for his skilful driving and for entertaining us with your dry sense of humour and dodgy singing, and also to Margarita, who always seems to hold everything together at ITMC, and who's help and advice before and during the expedition was invaluable.

Svetlana – Thank you very much for some of the best expedition food that any of us have ever had. It was great to return to base camp after a few days on the mountain. Thank you for your sense of humour, your organisation and for looking after us all so well throughout the trip.

Finally...to the Nomadic people of the Karakol valley – Thank you for your hospitality and help during our stay in your valley. From showing us where to source fresh water to ferrying loads, your help was invaluable.



Pete D with some of the people of the Karakol valley

The Compiler of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research

Report written by Paul Josse, October 2015

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Gabe Oliver on the summit of Peak 4361m

