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1. Kongur and Tugralkuluxi glacier.

Article 4

(Daniel Waugh)



2. Mustagh Ata from Kuksay glacier. Southeast ridge in centre.



3. Pk. 6740 m, southwest of Kuksay glacier.

Article 4

(Daniel Waugh)



4. Shiwakte peaks and Qongtax glacier.

EXPLORING THE 'KONGUR ALPS'

Unknown Side of Mustagh Ata

DANIEL WAUGH

The mountains south of Kashgar (Kashi) have much to offer trekkers and climbers wishing to venture into little-known terrain. While for centuries herders and traders have frequented even the remote valleys and passes, serious exploration by outsiders is little more than a century old. Noteworthy European explorers in the region included Sven Hedin and Aurel Stein. The former is remembered for his bold but unsuccessful attempts to climb Mustagh Ata in 1894, and among the accomplishments of the latter was the first to traverse of the forbidding Karatash river gorge east of Kongur in 1913. In 1922-24 during his service as British consul in Kashgar, Clarmont P. Skrine spent significant time in what he called the 'Alps of Qungur,' and became the second European to pass through the Karatash gorge. He lectured in 1925 to the Royal Geographical Society, whose journal that year published his article on the Kongur alps and a topographic map drawn from his survey.

The two dominant peaks in the area, Mustagh Ata (7546 m) and Kongur (7719 m.) were long unclimbed. Tilman and Shipton came very close on the former in 1947; the first ascent was by a Chinese/Soviet team in 1956. The first ascent of Kongur was by the strong British team led by Bonington and Ward in 1981. Mustagh Ata is now (often too casually) undertaken from the northwest by those wanting one of the longer alpine ski runs anywhere, but its challenging southeast face is apparently still awaiting a first ascent. In contrast to Mustagh Ata although equally accessible from the Karakoram highway, technically challenging Kongur is still little climbed. Its east ridge has apparently seen only one ascent (by a Japanese expedition), and its southeast ridge, whose silhouette can be seen on a clear day from beyond Karakul lake, has not even been explored.

Photos 1 to 4

Having ridden past Kongur and Mustagh Ata on a mountain bicycle in 1995, I decided to return in 1996 (the year I turned 55) and explore. My goal was to hike solo and unsupported starting on the north side of Kongur, rounding it on the east and south, and making my way over to the northwest side of Mustagh Ata. Along the way, I wished to get close-up views of the northeast side of Kongur, if possible its southeast ridge, and to explore the Kuksay glacier cirque, southeast of Mustagh Ata, for views of the ridge that rises out of its centre directly to the main summit. While I had a copy of an excellent 1:100,000 Chinese topographic map covering the two main peaks and the areas between them, for the 'Kongur Alps' I relied on Skrine's article and his 1:250,000 map, which is quite reliable for the heart of the range. The China Xinjiang Mountaineering Association provided a permit for the trek, which involved my being in a restricted border zone. I entered Xinjiang via the Torugart pass, with an expedition to Mustagh Ata led by Andrei Ershov, and subsequent to my trek was the only member of a second expedition of his to summit on Mustagh Ata in the chill of early September via the standard route.

It was a rude shock to be alone with my 40-45 kilo pack just beyond the Gez checkpoint on 23 July, as Ershov's expedition disappeared down the highway. Skrine had undertaken his explorations with a small army of attendants and pack animals (not a believer in 'toothbrush travel,' as he put it, among other things he carried into the mountains a 'tin-lined wooden bath-tub of immense solidity'), and Bonington had ridden a camel into the Kurghan Jilgha (Korgankulu) while exploring possible routes on Kongur from the north. My nearly three weeks' food and fuel supply was on my back.

Of course one turns out not to be alone in these valleys. Herders come and go; in the upper reaches their yurts and huts accommodate large families. The trails are well-trodden and often confusingly numerous. Occasionally I partook of the hospitality that was by tradition offered the stranger (generally bread and yoghurt), and twice in the second half of my trek I hired a pack animal (for a total of about two days).

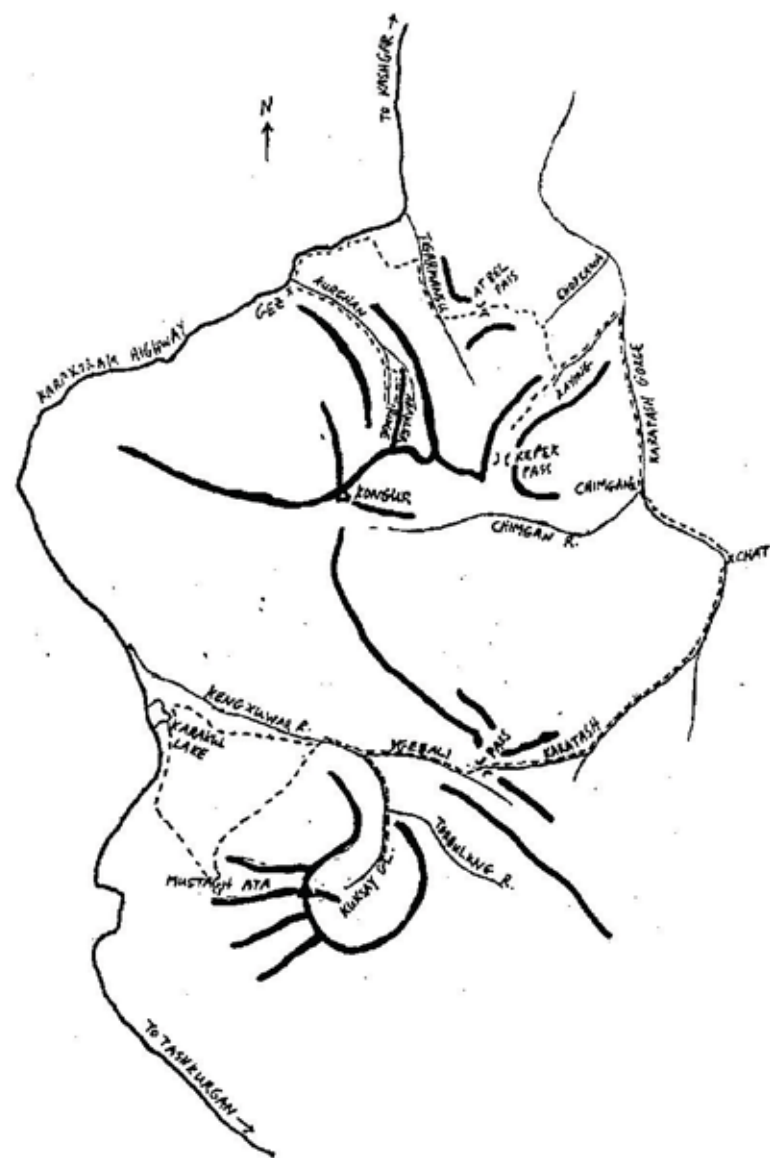
My initial exploration was up the Kurghan Jilgha from Gez. As all of the earlier explorers in the region remind us, the dust haze from the Taklamakan and normal build-up of clouds by midday may make glimpses of the higher peaks quite rare. Fortunately, in my three days in the valley I had one crystal clear day on the Arakler

ridge for panoramas of the northeast face of Kongur, its east ridge and the adjoining Shiwakte peaks (called on the Chinese map the Aglastang). For those who would climb there, a base camp could readily be established in a day or two from the highway. There are some lovely moderate routes on the Shiwakte peaks (up to about 6000 m), but it is not easy to identify a safe route to climb Kongur by its east ridge, whose lower reaches are largely very technical.

On leaving the Kurghan Jilgha, I hitched a ride 10 km down the highway to the footbridge over the Gez. There already I was off the modern map, and I promptly made a serious mistake. Misreading Skrine's map (which is vague at the edges and in any event not detailed) and misled from a half-understood exchange with passing local herders (I knew only a few words of their Kyrgyz), I entered the wrong valley. Getting to the top of the ridge at its head on the well-beaten path to the high pastures was no problem. The descent to the Tigarmansu (Tugenmansu) was treacherous, where I found myself late in the day and overly tired on steep scree above a cliff band, not quite knowing whether there was any safe way down.

Once in the Tigarmansu, I faced for the first time the challenge of fording the river, with swift water nearly up to my waist. After three fords, I left the valley and ascended toward what Skrine called the At Bel pass (about 3500 m), below which on either side are major summer encampments of the Kyrgyz whose ancestors had hosted him. Along the way, I came across a traditional shrine made with mountain-goat or ibex horns and yak tails on long poles, and irrigation works, with small channels and 'viaducts' constructed in traditional fashion, except that nowadays plastic or rubber pipe has replaced hollowed tree trunks. Beams for the construction of houses in the villages are still being cut from the forests high in these valleys and transported by donkey down the mountain trails.

From At Bel, the trail led down through the red-rock gorge so vividly described by Skrine, across to the Chopkana valley, and then over Chopkana Pass (3675 m) into his 'happy valley,' the Kaying. It is easy to see why this was the favourite haunt of Skrine and his wife Doris—a lovely green expanse, forested in the upper reaches, and surrounded by dramatic peaks. The Kyrgyz of the Kaying are as hospitable today as they were when he was there in the 1920s. Their normal route to their summer pastures nowadays seems to be over the Chopkana; in the middle of the valley, what I would assume are the early-season residences are now stone or mud-walled huts, not yurts. By early August when I was there, they



were deserted, and all the families were in the upper pastures, living in huts and yurts.

I had originally thought of trying to cross the Kepek pass at the head of the Kaying, since that would have taken me down near the southeast ridge of Kongur. From a distance though, and judging from Skrine's photos, that route seemed more treacherous than I wanted to attempt alone, even though I was equipped with ice axe and crampons. So I opted for the 'safe' route down the valley to its intersection with the Karatash (Koshan). It proved not so safe after all, as I took an unexpected and rather violent bath in the river, trying foolishly to ford at a point where a bridge had been washed out.

First glimpses of the Karatash made me wonder whether I would proceed much farther — it is a major glacial river that in the days of Stein and Skrine prevented travel in all but low water periods, since numerous fords, and risky ones at that, were necessary. At key points the trail in the Karatash valley crosses the river on cantilever bridges of a traditional design, similar to those photographed by Hedin and Skrine. In one case now however, there is some concrete and steel reinforcement. Unlike in the 1920s, it seems as though the trail is now possible much of the summer season. Where it descends to the very edge of the river, one occasionally wades though. As one enters the narrowest part of Karatash gorge above the confluence with the Kaying, where the walls of the surrounding peaks close in, across the way on a cliff can be seen remnants of the older trail, suspended precariously above the rapids.

The 15 km or so of the Karatash gorge (starting at the Kaying) brings one out to the wheat fields of Chimgan (Qimgan), a sizeable village at the broad confluence of the Chimgan and Karatash. Although I had wanted to go up the Chimgan to the southeast side of Kongur, time was now running short for me to meet the schedule I had promised for arriving at Mustagh Ata. I hired a horse to get me across the Chimgan (probably I could have forded it, but my experience in the Kaying had me wary about fording rivers) and on to Chat (Qat), with my guide leading on a donkey, sometimes facing backwards and rolling a cigarette as he rode. Since it has easy access by passes to the east, Chat is the largest village in the region, and significantly, it was the only place where anyone asked to see my documents. The 'first secretary' had to examine passport and permit, although clearly the locals could not decipher the Chinese on the latter (not to mention the English of the former) and were satisfied

to note it had an official looking seal or 'tamgha'. In Chat I had the interesting experience of trying to explain in pidgin Kyrgyz and diagrams to one of the older men how a letter from home printed out from e-mail some weeks earlier had been transmitted to me. This in a town where electricity was unknown and computers might as well be creatures from the moon.

The route from Chat across to Karakul lake and Mustagh Ata crosses what Skrine called the Karatash pass (on the Chinese map, the Kalatax) — the old route of the opium smugglers. Tired, running out of time, and somewhat uncertain of the navigation from the very generalised topography of the map, I hired a guide and a couple of donkeys to get me to the pass. He rode one animal, my pack the other, and I walked. A few km. outside of Chat the way leaves the main Karatash valley and ascends gradually through a lovely narrow valley to what the locals call the Karatash Davan. In the upper reaches of the valley, a full day's hike from Chat, is a large herder settlement, where I was taken to several dwellings for the ritual welcome of bread and yoghurt. At daybreak the next morning we were on our way through the upper pastures to the 4816 m pass (one of several, as my guide kept reminding me, to emphasise how dependent I was on him and thereby try to get more money from me for his services). Just short of the pass, one of his herder acquaintances caught up to us on a magnificent tawny yak; at the top of the pass, they went on ahead to check up on his yak herd down in the adjoining Ygebali valley.

Again on my own, I descended the Ygebali to where it enters the Kengxuwar river south of Mustagh Ata. The Kengxuwar flows out of the Kuksay glacier and around the flank of the mountain, separating the Mustagh Ata massif from Kongur. My route then took me down the Kengxuwar to a point just beyond the fan from the glacier of the same name, where it widens and the channels split around a small island. There it was possible to ford, just barely (the ford would have been easy on a donkey or camel). My last three days were then spent on the high plateau north of Mustagh Ata, as I skirted the snouts of several glaciers on my way round to the mountaineering base camp. I had promised to be there no later than 12 August, and in fact arrived in mid-afternoon the day before, nineteen days after starting the trek.

After three days' rest and resupply, I went back out for another week. My original idea had been to circumnavigate Mustagh Ata counter-clockwise, but I was informed my permit was not valid for

its west and southwest sides. So I returned to the Kengxuwar valley and, two days' hike from Karakul lake on the highway, set up a base camp in a lovely spot clearly used regularly by herders and hunters at the snout of the Kuksay glacier, where the Torbulung river enters from the south in a spectacular waterfall. Half a day's hike along the left moraine of the glacier brought me to a good vantage point to see the southeast ridge of Mustagh Ata. There was evidence of some human traffic along the moraine — a few footprints, most likely from hunters, and even a few cairns.

On the west of the Kuksay glacier cirque are several dramatic peaks in the 6700-7000 m range that presumably still await first ascents. The southeast ridge that leads to the main summit of Mustagh Ata is rotten rock near the bottom (presumably easily circumvented by a ramp from the west side), rather steep mixed climbing in the middle, and then what looks like straightforward firm to the summit. The upper third of the route may well be avalanche-prone, and the final pitches steepen substantially. The route rises vertically about 2750 m from about 4800 m at the glacier. A traverse of Mustagh Ata, ascending via this route and descending via the gentle slopes of the normal route, seems quite feasible.

On leaving Mustagh Ata in the second week of September, I learned that my interest in the unclimbed peaks and little explored areas of the region is clearly not unique. A small Japanese expedition was in the Kuksay glacier cirque (they hiked up the opposite moraine) 2-3 weeks after I had been there; while they decided against climbing their objective, the southeast ridge, some of them may have returned to tackle it in 1997. And, as we were driving through the Gez gorge on our way back to Kashgar, we met members of a photography team, on contract with the National Geographic Society (U.S.) to film for several weeks among the Kyrgyz of the Kongur Alps. Commercial treks cannot be far behind.

SUMMARY

A solo trek clockwise around Kongur from N to SW, with exploration of the Kurghan Jilgha and the 'Kongur Alps,' and into the Kuksay glacier cirque SE of Mustagh Ata, in 1998.

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