

# Unclimbed Tajikistan Expedition

British attempt on unnamed and unclimbed 6000m,  
Muzkol Valley, Pamirs, Tajikistan

27<sup>th</sup> July – 21<sup>st</sup> August 2014

By Simon Verspeak and Rebecca Coles

[simon.verspeak@gmail.com](mailto:simon.verspeak@gmail.com) / [becky.coles@hotmail.com](mailto:becky.coles@hotmail.com)

07980747804 / 07834474545



Supported by Lowe Alpine, Mountain Everest Foundation, Chris Walker Memorial Trust, British Mountaineering Council, Alpine Club, Austrian Alpine Club

Further assistance given by DMM Climbing, Lyon Equipment, Expedition Foods, Jagged Globe, RAW Adventures

## **Abstract**

Our Primary objective was the unnamed and unclimbed 6000m (c. 6123m) peak to the west of Dvuglavy, 6148m. This peak had been previously attempted by Rebecca Coles in 2011 whilst on an overland journey from Kathmandu to London. This attempt was stopped due to technical difficulties in excess of the team's skills and equipment. Due to a chance encounter with a Latvian team we discovered it has been subsequently attempted twice more by a mixed Russian/ Latvian team in 2012 and 2013 being turned back on the North ridge due to poor conditions 150m vertical metres from the summit (This team has completed several traverses of the Range).

Our attempt was on the West ridge of the peak (marked on Russian Maps as 6123m). This attempt via two separate lines was abandoned at 5900m due to poor rock preventing safe upwards progress.

Retreating back down to base camp, Coles/ Verspeak then spent four days completing a reconnaissance of a side valley but did not find a suitable objective to attempt. Meanwhile, Huws/ Vincent made two attempts, succeeding on the second, on a 5500m peak opposite the base camp. Completing this first ascent they would like to call it Peak Buffy, in memory of a friend.

## **Expedition Members**

Simon Verspeak, 29, British, Freelance outdoor instructor

Alpine experience to TD, including the Frendo and Brenva spurs, Swiss route on the Courtes. Trad climbing to E2, Scottish Winter to V. Lots of Ski mountaineering experience. Winter ML and MIA. MIC trainee. Several expeditions to Greater Ranges leading treks to 5000m and peaks to 6500m.

Rebecca Coles, 33, British, Freelance outdoor instructor

Keen climber and skier. Climbed to E1 and Scottish V. Winter ML and MIA. Alpine routes include Kuffner arête and Mont Blanc. Lots of experience of high altitude mountaineering; having climbed several 6000m peaks in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Led extensively around the world at altitude.

Rhys Huws, 31, British, Offshore rope access technician

Very competent climber has led E4 and Scottish VI. Alpine experience includes Swiss route on the North face of the Courtes in winter and the Cassin on the Piz Badile. Also a keen skier.

John Vincent, 31, British, Resort Manager for airport transfer company

Lives in Chamonix for much of the year. Wide experience of the Alps climbing and skiing. Examples include Frendo Ravel, Frendo Spur and North face of the Tour Ronde. Has been on numerous expeditions worldwide mainly hard core kayaking. Is a qualified teacher, ML, SPA and MIA Trainee.



**Team at the end of the expedition on Tajikistan border**

## **Introduction**

Initial ideas for an expedition had focussed on Alaska however Rebecca Coles suggested that Central Asia had more possibilities on a budget. She suggested that the peak she had attempted in 2011 would make a suitable objective. The team at first also contained Greg Cain but due to his recent employment at Plas Y Brenin he felt he could not take the time off. We therefore recruited John Vincent as his replacement. We were all looking for something that was adventurous and off the beaten track and this objective and destination certainly supplied that.

## **Travel**

Due to information gathered on her previous visit Coles was able to put together a better plan for accessing the valley than the route that had used in 2011. Two British expeditions had failed in the previous two years to even reach the valley and Coles's previous attempt had crossed a 5500m pass close to where the Pamir highway crossed the Ak-Baital Pass (4655m) 80 kms from Murghab. We would therefore enter via the Bartang valley to the west and follow the Muzkol River upstream to Base camp.

Flights and connections were far easier and cheaper to arrange than predicted. Due to the Muzkol valley being in the North East of Tajikistan it was deemed easier to access it from southern Kyrgyzstan and travelling south down the Pamir Highway. Turkish Airlines has just opened a new route into Osh itself negating the need for internal flights. We flew from Manchester to Istanbul and then onto Osh. John flew from Geneva and rendezvous with us in Istanbul. We had two days in Osh; buying supplies and organising transport.

We stayed in a home stay organised by CBT in Osh. Jeep transport was approximately 10 hours to Murghab. This route crosses several 4000m+ passes which has its own considerations for an unacclimatised team. We stayed two nights in Murghab at the Erali Guesthouse which was very pleasant. Murghab itself is very limited in entertainment or supplies and thankfully our driver's family was based in Murghab and his brother had a Uze (Jeep) he was willing to hire us. We negotiated and organised with the Tajiks for this transport to the Muzkol as well as donkeys and muleteers to look after the pack animals. Also on our day in Murghab we all walked up to approximately 4000m on a ridge above the town to increase our acclimatisation. The drive round to our start point took approximately 7 hours, just over half being off road/rough tracks; this took us to 3900m. The donkeys had been brought from Murghab and were a little worse for wear after this journey. We then walked 6 km to a meadow where we camped for the night. The following day we walked for 5 hours covering about 10kms. At this point sensing mutiny from our local team we unloaded the kit and over 3 shuttles (two this day and one the next) moved our equipment to a base camp near several ponds and a spring at 4300m. This walk in involved several river crossings and constant up and down the steep banks and tributaries of the Muzkol River.

## **Environment**

### Rock

The valley is very arid and all the rock we came across was terrible; generally unconsolidated and very loose. We did successfully put up several bouldering problems to V3 on boulders in the valley but even some of these had very suspect holds!

### Snow and Ice

The snowline was very high; approximately 5300m on the north sides. The south faces had only streaks of snow to the height of the peaks. The climate was very similar to alpine summer; frozen overnight and early followed by warm and therefore slushy conditions in the afternoons.

### Weather

The weather was stable throughout our stay. Most days it followed a similar pattern of cold to start quickly becoming warm and sunny. We had some cloud bubbling up through the afternoon and wind also increasing throughout the afternoon, but typically this would die down by dusk. Temperatures were just below freezing most nights at base camp (4300m). During the day it could become very warm. On the very last day at our base camp and walking out it was very cold, overcast and threatening, and we did have some snow flurries.



**Simon Verspeak on West ridge of Peak 6123m c.5600m**

## Climbing

We followed a climb high, sleep low approach to gain acclimatisation. From our base camp we walked up to the start of the glacier at 4500m. The following day carrying full packs and 5 days worth of food, we carried on up past our high point the previous day to a camp on the edge of the glacier and near the turn off to the side valley we would go up. This camp was at 4900m, near a glacial river (Marked as high camp in Appendix 3). The second day we went with light packs and leaving the camp in place up the side valley and up to the col (5500m) between our peak and Snow Leopard peak. This was approximately 40 degree snow slopes for 200m vertical, only the last 100m were this steepness. We left our ropes stashed at the top of the col and descended to 4900m camp.

The third day was an active rest day; we moved our camp from 4900m to the base of the col at 5200m (Marked as high camp 2 in Appendix 3). The fourth (summit) day we rose at 3AM, leaving camp by 4AM we reached the top of the col by 5AM. We then traversed, descending slightly to the base of the West ridge. Rebecca Coles and Simon Verspeak climbed diagonally rightwards on snow slopes up to 50 degrees to reach the ridge at the col and then following the ridge to a high point of c. 5900m. The ridge was a mix of simple (but serious) rock scrambling, snow patches and short low angled ice pitches. This was felt to AD+ in grade. This attempt was stopped due to exceptional loose rock and a lack of snow. Simon had climbed 40m above his last gear and reaching harder moves with poor snow and rock felt safe upwards progress was prevented. Rhys Huws and John Vincent climbed a more direct upwards line to reach the ridge slightly below the highpoint of Coles/Verspeak. This line was felt to be sustained at D+/TD- with poor snow at the top. Both teams retreated together rapping via abalakovs down the line below the col (Appendix 1).

Coles/Verspeak then headed upstream to look at a possible line they had spotted from a short walk up the valley. After a long day to a camp on the glacier at 4800m, they continued up the next day to discover that all the peaks in this basin had suffered from glacial retreat leaving rock slabs and walls of seracs barring progress.

In the meantime Huws/Vincent had had a few days of bouldering and had not intended a further attempt on anything. But the peak on the opposite side of the river above base camp had been tempting them for a one day hit. The first attempt was ended due to a poor choice in approach line over awkward scree and leading to an unclimbable cliff band. This retreat led them to a better line which after a day of rest at base camp they succeeded on, on the final day before the planned walk out. This line involved several hours of scree trudging before 50 degree plus snow led to the ridge. The line was climbed in a 14 hour day, base camp to base camp with only one abseil to cross the river gorge at the end of the day. This river crossing proved difficult in the afternoon leading to a long trek upstream to find a suitable place to cross. The line would be approximately D in grade (Appendix 2).

## **Waste Management**

All waste (inc. Gas canisters) was carried out to Osh. Because we attempted the route in alpine style no fixed ropes/camps were left on the mountain (other than some short lengths of 6mm on our abalakovs and one snow stake on retreat).

## **Exit**

The exit from the valley proved to be easier than the access due to a different route (on the way in we crossed early on the second day from the north to the south side of the river, mainly due to trying to cross earlier in the day to allow for increase in river flow from glacial melt in the afternoons). Due to a lot of weight carried in being made up of food we were able to return to the meeting spot with only one carry the previous day and then one big collective carry on leaving base camp. The Tajik muleteers were on time and had a note from our driver that due to another commitment he would need to collect us from the border the following day! Therefore we completed 20km out to the vehicle and the 70km off road back to Karakol village in one long day.

## **Recommendations**

The major difficulty for climbing was the poor rock quality and lack of snow on the mountains. With more snow the line we attempted would be significantly easier. There were also possibilities for a harder more direct line on the north side of the West ridge (Closer towards the summit). With more snow possibilities also exist on the East and North Ridges.

Other objectives may exist...

We borrowed a SPOT device from the Alpine Club instead of a SAT phone. This was an excellent alternative albeit with limitations.

## Budget

### Expedition expenditure:

Travel - flights	£2245
- In-country	£1054
Food & Stores	£717
Equip (SPOT hire)	£50
Accom	£476
Hire of Labour	£522
Insurance	£881
Other (specify) - visa	£340

### Expedition Income:

#### Grants

MEF	£2000
AC	£1000
AAC	£600
CWMT	£1000
BMC	£650
Lowe Alpine	£750

#### Personal Contributions

£285

**Total: £6285**

**Total: £6285**

Costs in both countries were significantly lower than predicted.

## Appendix 1



**This photo shows the north side of the west ridge of unclimbed 6000m (6123m) Peak**

Yellow line – Huws/Vincent 600m D+/TD- (Top of line c.5800m)

Blue line – Coles/Verspeak 350m AD + (to c.5600m thereafter the ridge was followed to c.5900m)

Red line – Abseil line, approximately 8 raps of 60m

The high point of the team (c.5900m) is the tower just above and left of the top of the yellow line.  
The summit is just to the left out of shot.

## Appendix 2



**Peak Buffy, 5553m. Right line shows ascent, yellow descent. 1200m, D.**

### **Appendix 3**

#### Latitudes and Longitudes

Drop Off point = 38°36'24.7"N 073°14'27.3"E

Best river crossing = 38°33'35.7"N 073°22'57.1"E

Base Camp = 38°31'0.30"N 073°26'12.8"E

High Camp = 38°28'57.2"N 073°23'28.7"E

High Camp 2 = 38°28'50.2"N 073°22'25.9"E

## Thanks

This trip would not have been attempted without the kind support of several companies and individuals who either donated funds, lent kit, offered advice or generous discounts on purchases.

We are grateful to:

- Lowe Alpine – Both funds and kit. Particularly rucksacks
- The Mount Everest Foundation
- Chris Walker Memorial Trust
- The Alpine Club – Grant and SPOT hire
- The British Mountaineering Council
- The Austrian Alpine Club
  
- DMM Climbing – Ropes purchased and loan of a set of axes
- Lyon Equipment – discounts on Petzl equipment
- Expedition Foods – discounts on dehydrated meals
- Jagged Globe – Medical advice
- RAW Adventures – Lend of two multi fuel stoves
- Alex Ekins and Rob Greenwood – For agreeing to be our ‘emergency’ contacts!