

Hüddosk Karavshin Expedition

Expedition Report

Ak-Su Valley – Karavshin, Batken, Kyrgyzstan

Dates	16.07.2026 – 07.08.2026
Team	Arda Ünlü, Cem Puhaloğlu, Emin Kadıoğlu
Report prepared by	Arda Ünlü, Emin Kadıoğlu

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HÜDDOSK

Hacettepe University Mountaineering and Outdoor Sports Club (HÜDDOSK) is a long-established student society that has been at the forefront of Turkish mountaineering since 1976. Our founders shaped the spirit of the club through countless summits stretching from the Aladağlar to Ararat and from the Kaçkar to Cilo (Turkish Mountains).

At HÜDDOSK, the mountains are where friendships are forged and where solidarity and patience are learned. Many firsts have left their mark on our club's history.

Our mission is not simply to produce good climbers, but to raise individuals who love nature and who give something back to mountaineering and to the environment around it. HÜDDOSK members have always placed the protection of nature ahead of climbing itself. Guided by our philosophy of "Talk less, climb more", we continue to develop both ourselves and our club across a wide range of disciplines – from high-altitude mountaineering to rock walls, from winter climbing to hiking.

Foreword: How the Idea Came About

After the Kazbek trip Emin and I did in 2025, we were already wondering where to go the following year while waiting for the bus in Stepantsminda. Lenin Peak in Kyrgyzstan, where he had been before, was the first idea that appealed to us, but going somewhere we could rock climb rather than chase altitude started to look far more attractive to both of us.

Since Emin was doing his master's in Beijing, we thought about doing something there. While we were going back and forth between China and Japan, the idea of expedition to the Karavshin region – which I had first heard of through the film *Dawn Wall* and then discovered properly through Tyler Karow's video – came to the fore. Ever since I started climbing, my goal had always been to climb crack routes on a huge granite wall. For some reason, that had been the ultimate aim behind every mountaineering and climbing activity I had ever done. The fact that Kyrgyzstan has giant granite walls that are so much easier to reach than the other examples around the world struck me as a huge stroke of luck for us.

1. Logistics and Travel

1.1. Local Transport, Permits and Base Camp Services

To get information about logistics, an acquaintance of Emin's gave us the number of a man named Yunus (Zhunusbek Karazakov). Since he speaks Turkish, communication was relatively easy. "CentralAsia.Tours" is the only company providing transport to Karavshin, mules, permits and base camp services, and Yunus turned out to be the man in charge of it. He gave us a supposed "Turkish discount" and answered our questions.

Karavshin is about a three-hour drive on rough mountain roads from Batken, plus a six-hour walk. A solid 4×4 is essential. People who come here stay a long time (at least two weeks), so they bring big loads and put them on horses. Each horse can carry 60 kg, but since they usually load two bags per animal, they may not reach 60 kg. If you want a donkey, it costs half as much and carries half the load. The trail has dangerous slopes where there is no room for error.

Yunus set up a base camp in the area about four years ago. There is a toilet, tents, internet via Starlink and electricity from solar panels. They also provide meals. From someone who came on the full package, we learned that if you go with CentralAsia.Tours the price is $1,500 per person: transport from Osh, mules, meals, accommodation, permits and everything else included. We used the permit, transport and horse-hire services, and we used the Starlink while we were there.

1.3. Insurance and Registration

Emin did some research on search and rescue and medical insurance.

In Kyrgyzstan, search and rescue operations are run by the Mountain Rescue Service [2], which is part of a private company [1] accredited by the Ministry of Emergency Situations. This company will not send a helicopter for you if you do not have search and rescue insurance. So before you go, you need to buy a policy that meets their conditions and notify the Mountain Rescue Service of it. To do this you have to fill in the form on their website before your start date and send it by email. Their website also has a blacklist of insurance companies they have had problems with in the past.

For search and rescue insurance we chose the two-week plan from the US-based company Global Rescue. This company is also recommended by the Kyrgyz Alpine Club [3], which belongs to the same parent company as the Mountain Rescue Service. For medical cover we bought an "IMG Insurance" package as an add-on. This package covers accidents that might occur during the activity we were doing. When taking out insurance, you need to pay attention to what the policies actually cover.

In addition, the official MES (Ministry of Emergency Situations) website [4] has an official online form called "Registration of tourist groups". Under the regulations, tourist groups are required to notify MES ten working days before starting their trip. The form asks for very detailed and specific information. According to Yunus, only some Russians fill it in; nobody other than Russians bothers. Still, it is worth knowing about. We did not have the data to complete this form, so we did not fill it in.

One mistake we made was not focusing enough on getting a satellite phone. It really is essential. If we had had an accident with no other party on the route, it would have been a lifesaver. We later learned that you can rent a satellite phone in Kyrgyzstan for $5 a day.

1.4. Shopping in Batken

Since Batken was our last stop before the start, we had to do our shopping there – but Batken is not a good place for varied or comprehensive shopping.

If there are specific items or outdoor products you are after, you definitely will not find them in Batken. Yunus brought us the butane-propane canisters. There are a few large supermarkets in Batken. There were things we were surprised not to find there: instant soup, honey, tinned tuna, dried meat and dried vegetables were all unavailable. The tinned meat was quite good. The shops here do not check expiry dates. Somewhere on the packaging there is a "production date", and somewhere else a note on how long it can be kept from that date. Shopping would have been impossible without Google Lens. The supermarkets have no fresh fruit or vegetables – everything was rotten. From the supermarket we got mainly dry goods, cleaning supplies and snacks. We covered the rest of our needs at the Batken bazaar: potatoes, onions, carrots, nuts and dried fruit, a pan and a pot, a large LPG cylinder, a sheet of nylon fabric to use as a tarp, sacks and so on.

For a table and chairs we again talked to Yunus, and they said they could rent them to us. Trust us: you do not want to eat three meals a day hunched over a rock for weeks on end. You spend far more time at base camp than you expect, and your comfort there directly affects your climbing performance and motivation. So when you are shopping, do not let cheapness, simplicity and light weight be your only criteria. It is important to get two or three empty 5-litre bottles before you go. We packed all our kit into sacks and tied them tightly, distributing the weight evenly for the horses.

1.5. The Approach: From Batken to Ak-Su

The car picked us up in Batken and took us on a long journey. Hours later, after steep, stony roads, we reached the entrance to a valley. There was fighting in that area once. Then the horses were loaded, and we divided 90 eggs between us, put them in our packs and started walking.

The approach to the Ak-Su valley is not enjoyable at all. You walk 21 kilometres through dust and dirt along the flank of a river. In many places there is no way for the horses to pass, so causeways have been built out along the cliff edges with branches and reinforcing bar. You cross around ten bridges, and the further along the trail you get, the more dangerously the bridges are built. The horsemen are not your guides – they are just carrying your gear. They will not take you to base camp, and if you fall behind they will not wait for you. When they get tired they get on the horses and gallop off ahead. It is worth downloading Maps.me.

For most of the way the scenery is barren and the mountains small. You arrive at Ak-Su towards evening and settle into base camp.

1.6. Base Camp and Camp Life

There is running water at base camp: a pipe has been run from a stream between Odessa and Kyrchitka. The sun does not reach base camp until 11:15. A Starlink was wired directly to the solar panel through an inverter, so we only had internet when there was enough sun. We brought a sleeping tent, a gear tent and a tarp for a kitchen. We pitched the tarp next to a large boulder using our poles and some rocks, and it was incredibly useful. Having a permanent sitting area sheltered from both sun and rain made a big difference to our comfort.

There are printouts of lots of topos at the base camp.

Quite a few people got sick with diarrhea from the water. We were hardly ill at all, but we don't know whether it was the base camp food, the water, or the horse dung lying around everywhere that was making people sick.

There was plenty of dry firewood about, so we generally cooked over a fire in a designated spot at the foot of a rock. There was no way our gas would last three weeks given how inefficient it was in that wind, so – without overdoing it or damaging the surroundings – we built a small stove (and later even an oven) and did our cooking there.

We had planned to throw a jerrycan into the river, tie it off and keep perishables like cheese, butter and sausage in it, but the river is quite powerful and quite far away. So instead we designated a hollow at the foot of a permanently shaded tree as our "fridge" and stored our food there. Our sausage and cheese kept until the last day.

A mice took a liking to our gear tent. When we realised that the only dry goods they were interested in were the nuts and dried fruit, we hung them here and there – but the mice could climb up to all of them. So we tied the bag onto the middle of the tarp's guy line with a prusik, and discovered that however good mice are on slab, they are no tightrope walkers.

When the sun is out it is warm, though not oppressive. In Batken I thought I was going to pass out from the heat one day. It can get pretty cold at night in the valley, but there is no need to overdo the clothing. On the long overcast days at camp I generally wore a base layer top and bottom with a light jacket over it; a thick fleece would do. We brought no footwear apart from approach shoes and sandals, and we rarely wore shoes in camp. We took light, small 0 °C sleeping bags and used those on the routes as well.

When it rains, it rains hard, and waterfalls pour off the walls. There were even two days of non-stop debris flows in the scree slopes. Never pitch your tent anywhere that looks like a watercourse – at some point that water will definitely run through there. In fact, don't set anything up on ground that isn't green.

The toilet is three and a half sheet-metal walls and a pit. Bring plenty of tissue, hold your nose and don't look down. Or do look, and get a general sense of the health of everyone in camp (nobody was healthy).

There is a shepherd named Nlmat Jangirov and his family in the valley. Their summer camp is a little way further on, across the river. You can buy basic supplies and dairy products from them. He makes legendary Kaymak and Yoghurt. One litre of raw milk costs 150 som. If there are enough of you, you can even have a lamb slaughtered.

A portable solar panel will be a good friend. I'd recommend plugging your big power banks into the panel and not missing any of the sun between 12 and 4. Music, books and card games matter. Boredom is your worst enemy :D

We made mistakes like bringing too many clothes and a camp shower. The weather is generally cold and you don't sweat. Around midday the running water warms up, and you can put it in a jerrycan and wash. You can do laundry too if you want. Three or four items of clothing would have been enough, but we loaded ourselves down with a ton of stuff. Between one airport and the next bus, there are plenty of moments when you're carrying the whole load on your back.

2. The Area and the Routes

2.1. The Ak-Su Valley and the Climbing History of the Area

The Ak-Su Valley forms the eastern arm of the wider Karavshin region in the Turkestan Range (Pamir-Alai Mountain system) in south-western Kyrgyzstan, known in the international climbing community as the "Patagonia of Asia". The first recorded visit to the area was by the Soviet mountaineer Vitaly Abalakov, who explored it with geologists in 1936; its real climbing history, however, begins in the 1980s, when the area hosted the USSR's technical-class mountaineering championships. After the collapse of the USSR the region opened to international climbers in the 1990s and gained worldwide fame for its granite walls. The valley is known for its multi-pitch granite faces, a difficulty range running from alpine grades up to 6B (Russian system), and solid rock well suited to free climbing. The climbing season runs from mid-June to the end of October.

2.2. The Routes We Climbed

Route	**Wall**	**Length and Grade**	**Date**	Team
Middle Route	Petit Tour Russe	300m, 6b+ (bolted anchors)	20 July	Arda, Emin, Cem
The Missing Mountain	Pamir Pyramid	600m, 15 pitches; first 6 anchors bolted	25-26 July	Arda, Cem
Perestroika Crack	Peak Slesov (Slesova)	800 m; 7b max, 6c obl., C1+	31 July - 3 August	Arda, Cem

3. Preparation and Planning

3.1. The Planning Process and Research

Towards the end of November 2025, an eight-month process of planning and preparation began.

Researching an area like this online turned out to be quite difficult, of course. A lot of information is available in Russian, but since Russians aren't especially interested in free climbing, the route information can be confusing. The people who established the free routes here were mostly French, Italian and American. We asked Derya to translate a French report for us, and she was kind enough to do it. During this process we collected every report, every source, every video – everything that existed online – In a shared Drive and went through it all over and over. We'd also like to thank Mahmut Oflaz, who shared with us a link to a Drive full of enormous Russian PDFs.

We set up a shared Google Drive folder and gathered everything that might be needed there: emergency numbers, insurance policies, the first-aid list, the routes – everything. [6]

3.2. Big Wall Techniques: Hauling, Aid and Top Rope Soloing

For moving quickly on big walls of this kind, there are methods used around the world that are more efficient than the standard lead-and-follow system we always use. Especially on routes where you'll spend several days and can't melt snow, it becomes unavoidable to carry litres of water, plus food, clothing, sleeping bags and equipment. Since carrying loads totalling as much as 30 kg in backpacks would be impossible while climbing at grades up to 7a, we had to learn a bag-hauling system. We decided to use the haul bag (or rather its equivalent) that Emin had. Because the systems we'd be using were of a kind we weren't familiar with – and because there was nobody in Türkiye to show us the way – we researched everything down to the last detail. Things like releasing the bag on traversing pitches, pulley systems and docking the bag at the anchor intimidated me. Just as I was about to abandon the haul bag idea altogether and decide not to meddle with something we didn't understand, I thought I'd ask Aykut Türem as well. He sent us photos of the portaledge and haul bag they'd used on their new-route attempts on the north face of Büyük Demirkazık, which gave us the confidence to give hauling a try.

Alongside hauling and aid, we added top rope soloing. Another way to speed up on long walls is the system called fix and follow: the leader doesn't belay the second while hauling, but simply fixes the rope to the anchor and waits for the second to come up on their own by top rope soloing or jugging. For this we had to buy and borrow a couple of Micro Traxions.

3.3. Training

I started practising aid climbing with Hasan on hard, steep routes at Karakaya, the rare gem of a crag right on our doorstep. Between hooks hung on tiny crimps, stoppers wedged into hairline cracks, a pile of aiders, two cow's tails, daisy chains and so on, my hands more or less got used to it and I grasped the logic of it. Emin, meanwhile, had no trad climbing experience at all yet. He led for the first time with me in February on a 150-metre multi-pitch route on the east face of Sivri Dağ. On his first lead he

took a six-metre fall, which very quickly gave him confidence in the gear. That climb was also a trial run for us, and it went almost without a hitch. From then on he started training at the Bai He (白河) crag near Beijing, which has good cracks, and focused exclusively on trad climbing. He was fortunate in his partners and his gear. After the club's Alpinism 101 course, Cem also decided to join the expedition and got involved in the preparations.

Aid climbing was covered, but we were planning to climb trad at harder grades than we ever had in our lives. Even the easiest pitches on the routes were at least around VI+, and crack climbing was not a discipline we knew well. That's why I built a crack machine in our house out of 20×5 timber. The painful training sessions we did climbing sets on this overhanging, #2 Camalot-sized hand crack gave certain muscle groups a serious workout.

As a test for myself, I redpointed Fury (6c+), one of the hardest routes in Sivrihisar. Making what I believe was the second ascent of this crack route on gear psyched me up enormously.

Cem and I worked on our speed by doing a few alpine sport routes in Aladağlar. Emin was training by climbing granite cracks; before coming out, he redpointed a 6c+ offwidth.

3.4. Equipment

Meanwhile, everything we would need out there – and I mean everything, from underwear to the solar panel – was recorded in the spreadsheet on our Drive[6].

Most of the routes in Ak-Su feature offwidths. We couldn't find the #5 and #6 cams these pitches would require in Türkiye, so Emin had to borrow them in China. He also found an 8 mm static rope for hauling. He bought talon hooks, sky hooks and cam hooks for the aid pitches. While we're on the subject, we'd like to thank Michele and Li Yinghao for lending us their cams and Micro Traxion.

3.5. First Aid and Health

We prepared the kit with Mehmet Yağar from Anümat, who had been looking closely into the subject recently, got his help putting together our first aid kit and the smaller kit we call "alpine first aid" for taking on routes. We also showed the list we'd prepared to Usar Yıldız for her approval and thoughts.

4. Day-by-Day Account

Days 1–2 | 16–17 July

On 16 July I met Cem, we left our homes and set off on a journey that would take days. Following the steps described above, we reached first Bishkek and then Batken. The flight from Bishkek to Batken was quite delightful.



(Bishkek - Batken flight)

Day 3 | 18 July

On 18 July we set out by car from our hotel in Batken towards Karavshin. The road was terrifyingly steep and stony. We climbed to 3,000 metres, then dropped back down to 2,000 through a mountain pass. At a point in the Karavshin valley the road came to an end. We ate bread and kaymak in a wooden hut. Our sacks and packs were loaded onto the horses here.

We started walking at 14:20. The trail was uninteresting and dangerous. There were one or two springs along the way where we could refill our water. We reached base camp at 21:30. The walk is 21 km with 1,100 metres of ascent. We ate before we had fully set up and went to bed around 23:00. Everyone felt wrecked; we each took an aspirin.



(trek to base camp)

Day 4 | 19 July

We woke up around 09:30. We ate and pitched the tents. We found a suitable spot for the kitchen and set up our tarp.



(living room)

At 14:00 we went to Good Morning Crag, an area with slab sport routes, to practise some rope techniques. It's five minutes from camp, but the routes and the bolt spacing are terrible.

We got on a 6b route and practised top rope soloing and jugging. We decided to try the Middle Route on Petit Tour Russe the next day. We prepared our gear that evening.

Day 5 | 20 July

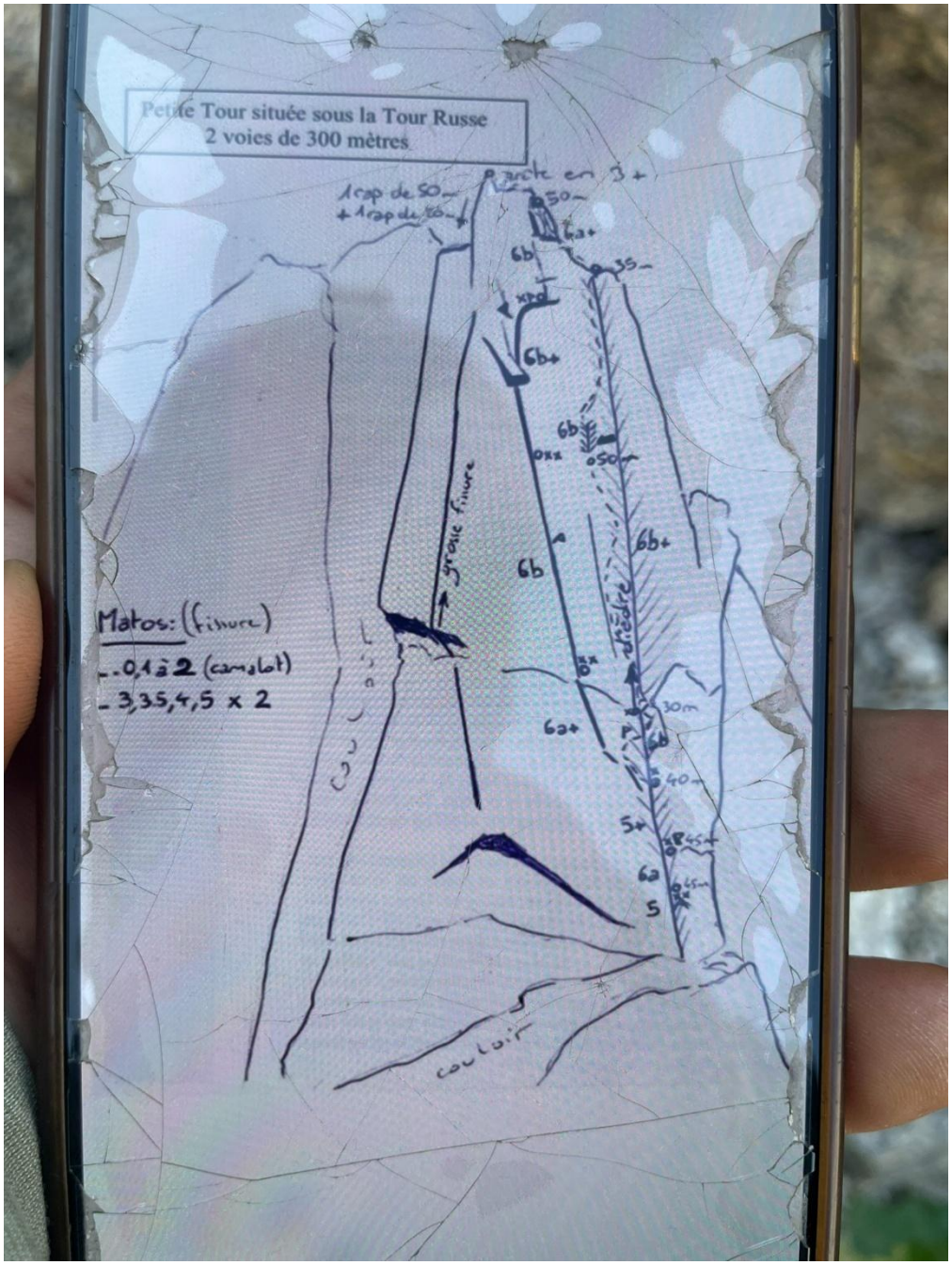
Petit Tour Russe – Middle Route

We woke up at 07:15, finished our last preparations and ate. We started walking at 09:00. We climbed steeply up the scree to the right of the tower, then turned onto the sloping grass ledge on our left. From the rocks above the ledge we crossed left, then climbed diagonally right again from the scree gully we reached.



(approaching)

We were below the route at 10:10, but waited for the Catalan team ahead of us and got on the first pitch at 10:45. There was another Catalan team of three behind us.



(topo)

Cem led the first pitch and I led the second, wandering off route a bit. Emin led the third, and since the distance to the next anchor looked far too short, we decided he should carry on. That was our first blunder. Then, because he failed to spot the piton placed as protection, he ended up at the anchor of the route to the right instead of at the next anchor – that was blunder number two. In fact, mistake two made up for mistake one: if he had continued to the proper anchor, the rope wouldn't have been long enough. That's how we understood why the pitch had been kept short. In any case, we had drifted right of the actual route. Our starting position required us to come up with a clever plan.

I tied in to lead, redirected off the anchor and lowered about 10 metres. Then I ran across the wall and swung to the left. Connecting with the crack system in the middle, I started climbing. To stop the seconds taking a high-factor fall, I removed each piece after placing the next and climbed about 20

metres that way. This meant that from where they were, the seconds would be swinging off a piece about 10 metres above them rather than off a main anchor below.

Then a magnificent 6b splitter crack began. It was hand size, and there was nothing at all on the wall apart from this crack – not a single hold or foothold on the surface. Pure crack climbing, and an incredible pleasure.

The next pitch was a 6b+ offwidth. Emin, our specialist in the field, tied in and set off. After a strange roof, two cracks appear: a hand crack on the left and, on the right, an offwidth bigger than any piece we had. It didn't occur to Emin to go left, so he carried on up the offwidth, created a 15-metre runout and scared himself witless. You could go left and then traverse right; there's a piton on the traverse.



(the crux pitch)

The next pitch was a 6b finger-to-hand crack. I led it, and we agreed it was more like 6b+ overall.



Although there was no need, we climbed two more pitches at grades 5 and 4 to reach the summit. We got to the top at 18:00, far too late, and started down.



(the team at the top)

Here we learned something interesting: nobody ties stopper knots in their rope ends when rappelling on crack routes. The reason is that if you rappel less than a full rope length, the knotted ends you throw down will most likely not come back when you pull the rope. We did it our usual way anyway, and our rope got stuck over and over. We got off the route at 20:30 and switched to headlamps. After an ugly descent we reached camp at 21:45.



(descending)

Day 6 | 21 July

We woke up at 09:45. Almost immediately the rain started, and it lasted for days.

We talked about the previous day's climb and went over our mistakes and the things that had slowed us down.

Around midday we heard a rumble. When we looked towards the river that had started flowing out of the scree between Slesova and Ortoruybek – the one we'd walked through the day before – we were stunned to see huge boulders instead of water. And these boulders were coming towards camp at an impressive speed!

The debris flows continued all day. The whole base camp worked together to try to save the tents. Although the mud and rock flow swallowed a few tents, the barrier we built did its job.

With the overcast weather, Emin's morale sank badly during the day. To lift spirits, I made buttery meat rice.

Day 7 | 22 July

We woke up late; waterfalls are pouring off the walls and the sky is completely overcast. It's raining constantly. Streams are running through every part of camp. Still no internet.

Emin said he wanted to leave and arranged to go with the Catalan team.

At 15:00 I walked up to the base of Pamir Pyramid, the pyramid-shaped rock wall in front of Slesova. There are three or four routes on this 600-metre wall, and there are perhaps 10–12 bolts on the whole face.

The old base camp was right at the foot of Pamir Pyramid and is now empty. The old tent platforms and so on are still there.

I walked to the base of Pamir Pyramid and looked for the start of The Missing Mountain, the most popular route on the wall. I didn't have much luck. I filmed some videos to ask the others in camp, and headed down as the rain started.

Back in camp I showed the photos to Jeppe, a Dutchman, and learned where the start is. He explained that the first five pitches have bolted anchors and that after the seventh pitch you reach a huge corner. On the question of taking #5 and #6 cams, he gave us a sceptical "your call".

We built a stone stove inside our kitchen. We collected firewood, pitched the second tarp and made a woodshed underneath it.



(huddosk bakery shop)

Day 8 | 23 July

Emin left at 07:30. It was heartbreaking.

Our spirits lifted when the sun came out. We discussed strategy for The Missing Mountain and got our gear ready.

We had a go at cooking beans, which took an hour and a half.

Day 9 | 24 July

We woke up around 05:45. As soon as I got out of the tent I felt a terrible pain in my stomach. I'd wrecked my guts and had appalling gas. We had to cancel the climb. I took a Raflor and went back to bed.

I woke up at 11:30, cooked the remaining beans properly and ate them. I'm defying the beans, trying to fight against another day spent at base camp in beautiful weather, but it's no use.

At 17:45 we practised hauling on a tree.

Day 10 | 25 July

Pamir Pyramid – The Missing Mountain (day 1)

We woke up at 05:30. We had breakfast and started walking at 06:40. I got on the first pitch at 07:40.

The first pitch follows a thin crack and then several systems that keep going left. At that hour of the morning, this VII− pitch felt hard.



(the first pitch)

I led the next pitch too. I couldn't see the crack that starts after a five-metre slab section, so I deviated from the topo, walked left along the ledge and started climbing from there. That left me facing a 10-metre slab runout. It was about 6a, but it still scared me.

I led one more pitch, following a small dihedral. About 6a.

Then a large, left-leaning dihedral appeared about 30 metres to our right. Cem led, climbing up and rightwards on the slabs without entering the dihedral. This pitch also has strange runouts and cracks that don't connect. 5c.

Then, from a downward-facing crack described as a right-leaning arc, I traversed right and entered the left-leaning dihedral. It's given 6a, but the feet and hands were poor and I thought it was harder. Still, it was an extremely high-quality pitch. Watch out for rope drag, since it zigzags.



(the left-leaning dihedral)

I chimneyed up between the flakes above us and exited the dihedral. 5c.

You arrive at a sort of ridge, quite low-angled. They call it grade 5, but it would be 3+ in Aladağlar. Towards the end of the ridge I passed the last bolted anchor and built a gear anchor on the big ledge beneath the giant corner system.

Instead of going right into the corner system, you follow the line branching right at a Y-shaped crack and make a short traverse under a small roof. Despite the 5c grade, the traverse was hard and both my feet cut loose at one point. I'd say 6a.

From here I kept going on each pitch until I ran out of gear or the rope drag became excessive. Although every pitch is described differently in different sources, most of the descriptions were incomprehensible and only confused us. There are mentions of caves, left-facing flakes and something described as "rope around the rock", which I think refers to a horn. My advice is to follow the corner

without wandering too far left or right. Most of the pitches here are 6a–6b, but they felt much easier to me than the grades on the first half of the route. There isn't really a clear line anyway.



(the giant corner)

On the thirteenth pitch we came to a large roof, the most distinct feature we encountered along the corner. While climbing this pitch we actually saw Max – a Kazakh member of the Russian team – rappelling. He passed me his radio and put me on with Masha. She asked if we needed help. They were bivouacking at the place called the Shoulder, between Pamir Pyramid and Slesova, in order to get on Perestroika Crack. I told them that although we were a bit slow, we were fine, and thanked them profusely. I escaped left from the roof and reached a ledge. Since I had 30 metres of rope left, I got on the so-called offwidth pitch. But because a #3 fitted both the start and the end of the offwidth, I didn't place any large gear.

At exactly that moment it started to hail. I climbed a bit further, but ran into another offwidth. The wall got wetter and wetter. Unable to take any more hailstones hitting my back like bullets, I built an anchor. Cem jugged up the pitch. We fixed the rope and rappelled together to the ledge just below.

The only way off this route was over the summit. We had no pitons at all, and on the last six pitches we hadn't found any fixed gear for rappelling. We would have to reach the summit, descend to the Shoulder and rappel twice more from there to reach the scree slope where the debris flow had been.

It was getting on for 20:00. It would be dark soon, and the sun had long since disappeared behind the walls. Ahead of us we had an offwidth, a 6b slab layback (described as a chimney) and a grade 4 scramble pitch. There was no way we were finishing this route that day. I felt like shouting "Come back, Max!", but he must have long since returned to the Shoulder, and there was no way to reach them.



(the forced bivouac)

We were going to spend the night on this ledge. We had no down jackets and no sleeping bags with us – just a single space blanket. We spread the ropes out beneath us and got into the bivy bag. Night fell and our bivouac at 3,600 metres turned to ice. We were wet, and the inside of the bag was getting soaked with condensation. From 9 until 6 we had an extremely broken and even more extremely intimate night.

Day 11 | 26 July

Pamir Pyramid – The Missing Mountain (day 2)

We had a gel and a Snickers bar for breakfast and agreed that the coldest night of our lives had gone better than expected. We waited a while for the sun, but it never came.

We started climbing around 07:30. I finished off the now nearly dry offwidth. My hands were still freezing.

I reached the bottom of the 6b chimney and built an anchor. Since they call it a chimney, I tried to get inside it, but when I couldn't even turn my head I started to panic. I tried climbing it like an offwidth, but that was very hard too. I came down and Cem tried the chimney; he couldn't do it either. This time I tried to climb the slab, but I didn't have the strength. Cem got on again, used the holds I'd found on the slab as footholds, laybacked and somehow got up.



(the crux pitch)

We simul-climbed the last pitch too. A hundred metres later, at 12:15, we reached the summit. From the top we studied Perestroika Crack on Slesova and our Russian friends on the route. The single crack running for 300 metres looked incredible.



(the southwest face of Slesova)

Then we started rappelling. On the last rappel our rope got stuck. Nothing we tried freed it, and the rock was too loose to climb. In the end I resorted to a tactic I wouldn't recommend to anyone: I tied in to the other end of the rope, Cem belayed me while I jugged the stuck strand, and I climbed up placing gear. Although I didn't want to risk pulling down the block the rope was caught on, I couldn't stomach leaving Emin's rope behind.

I got the rope free. I wrapped cord around a wobbly horn and rappelled off it. We got back to camp at 17:45.

Day 12 | 27 July

We woke up at 09:00. Everything hurts badly.

At 15:00 we went over to the shepherd's camp on the far side. We crossed the river on a wooden bridge, holding a cable strung between two bolts.

The shepherd, Nlmat Jangirov, offered us tea, Kaymak, Kefir and Ayran. He's built himself a nice house out of stone and wood. He knows a bit of English and Turkish. We chatted with him and bought Kaymak and Yoghurt. He promised to bring milk the next day, and we left.

Day 13 | 28 July

The night was freezing. We got up at 9, made eggs and ate Kaymak.

15:05: the shepherd brought the milk; we barely managed to boil it on the stove. We had coffee with milk.

We decided to get on Perestroika Crack (7b max, 6c obl., C1+, 800 m), the most popular route in the area – the one we'd thought since arriving that we'd never manage.

Day 14 | 29 July

We got up around 10. We planned and prepared the food for the route. We planned to spend two nights on the wall.

We practised hauling at Good Morning Crag and climbed a 6a slab.

Day 15 | 30 July

We got up at 11 (jeez).

We prepared all the technical gear for the route.

16 | 31 July

Peak Slesov – Perestroika Crack (day 1)

We got up at 9.

We finalised the food for the route and baked bread. We packed the sleeping bags and made our final preparations.

At 14:50 we ate our last meal.

At 15:15 we started the approach. The scree is very unstable and infuriating.



Before reaching the black face where the rappels off the Shoulder are, we made a short traverse across the slabs towards the ridge on the right of Pamir Pyramid and climbed up the grassy ledge. We found an anchor here and started climbing at 17:30. We both have very heavy packs, because hauling on these pitches is a very bad idea.

The first pitch, given grade 5, follows a corner going right, then links back into a corner via a roof traverse to the left. I'd say it was at least 6a.



(the first pitch)

Cem led the second pitch. He followed the corner all the way to its end. 5c.

I led the third pitch; my aim was to cross right before reaching the summit and get to the bivouac site on the south ridge of Pamir Pyramid, but I couldn't get across. I built an anchor ten metres below the summit. 5a.

Cem went to the summit and down to the point where we'd rappel, redirecting my belay through the anchor. I joined him and then let him lower me off the same redirect. From an hourglass thread I rappelled straight down to the bivouac site. This bivouac is far flatter, more sheltered and safer from rockfall than the one below Slesova.

Cem arrived just as it was getting dark, and we set up our bivouac and demolished the meat rice we'd brought with us. We stashed the container and some spare oats on the ledge.

It was a bright night. I kept waking up and studying the enormous wall in front of us.

Day 17 | 1 August

Peak Slesov – Perestroika Crack (day 2)

We woke up at 06:45, ate oats and got ready.

At 09:00 Cem led the fourth pitch. He climbed the corner just left of the big roof on the right and the plaque at ground level, and reached a slab with underclings. He got past that too and headed left. He clipped a museum-piece bolt and then reached the anchor. 6c (VIII−).

I led the fifth pitch, which starts with a hard finger crack that turns into a hand crack. From this point you enter what is probably one of the longest single crack systems among the crack routes of the world, running for 300 metres. 6a.

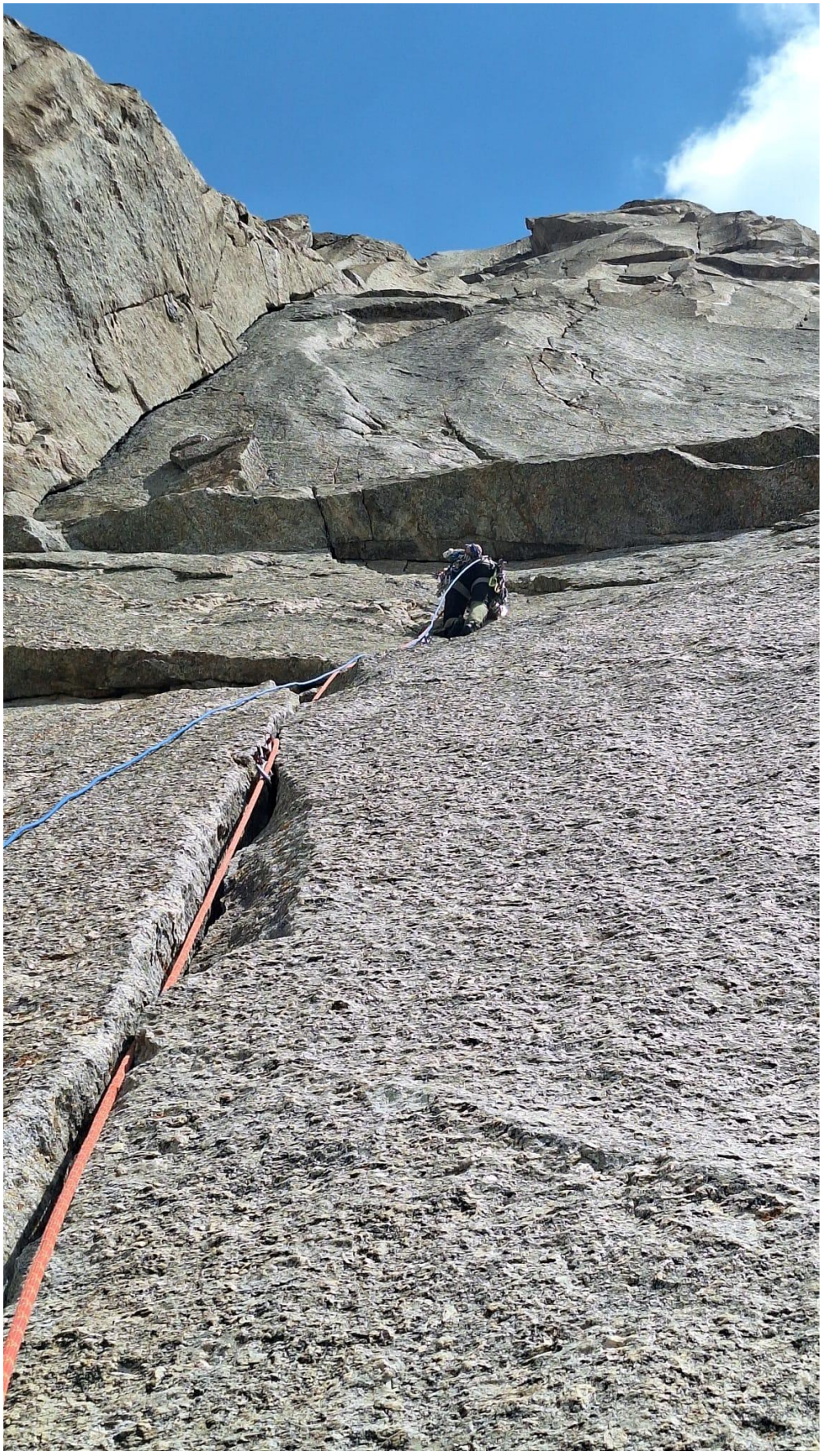
Cem led the sixth pitch. It starts with a hand crack and then has five or six metres of squeeze chimney. The end is climbed like an offwidth. There are footholds inside at the start, so it isn't very hard, but it's unpleasant. This was the only pitch where the bag came close to jamming while hauling, but I sorted it by pushing from below. Using a swivel and a docking line was very helpful on these constantly left-leaning pitches. In any case, the fact that there is nothing at all on the enormous face apart from a single splitter made hauling much easier. 6a+.



(the small offwidth)

I led the seventh and eighth pitches. Both are around 5c if you know how to jam.

I led the eighth pitch: after finger and hand crack you pass a roof. Above the roof there's a thin crack. I jammed my fingers in and got through it with my feet cut loose. After that you climb a corner heading left and arrive at the giant dihedral. 6b.



(the 6b roof)

Cem led the ninth pitch. This corner crack is first a #5 offwidth and then a #4. After that you reach a very small ledge and it goes back to #5. Cem laybacked as far as the ledge. He said he was struggling far too much and didn't want to continue, so he came down. I climbed the rest using offwidth technique (arm bars, heel-toe jams, chicken wings), giving it everything I had. At the start of the section above the ledge there was a finger crack inside the crack, and I used it a lot. I knew there was an intermediate anchor on the ridge to the left. At a point where chockstones blocked the dihedral, I placed a #2 and escaped out of the offwidth. I made a footless traverse to the ridge and, following it, reached the ledge in the middle of the route called "Glasnost Bivy Ledge". 6b+ (VII+)?, 60 metres.



(the first hard offwidth)

Since we reached the ledge around 17:00, we settled in early and rigged a lifeline running the length of it. The ledge is wide enough for two people to sleep comfortably, three slightly uncomfortably, and a fourth only with God's help.

A Slovenian team came up behind us. They said they'd got their #5 stuck in the dihedral. They told us that if we could lend them our #5 for the next pitch – another offwidth at the same grade – they'd fix our rope to the anchor. Even though we felt this was something that compromised our own ascent, faced with the nauseating thought of climbing another offwidth we accepted the offer.

At 20:00 we made instant noodles, ate, watched *Better Call Saul* and went to sleep. It wasn't especially cold that night, but even though I was in the most comfortable spot, the ground was pretty uncomfortable

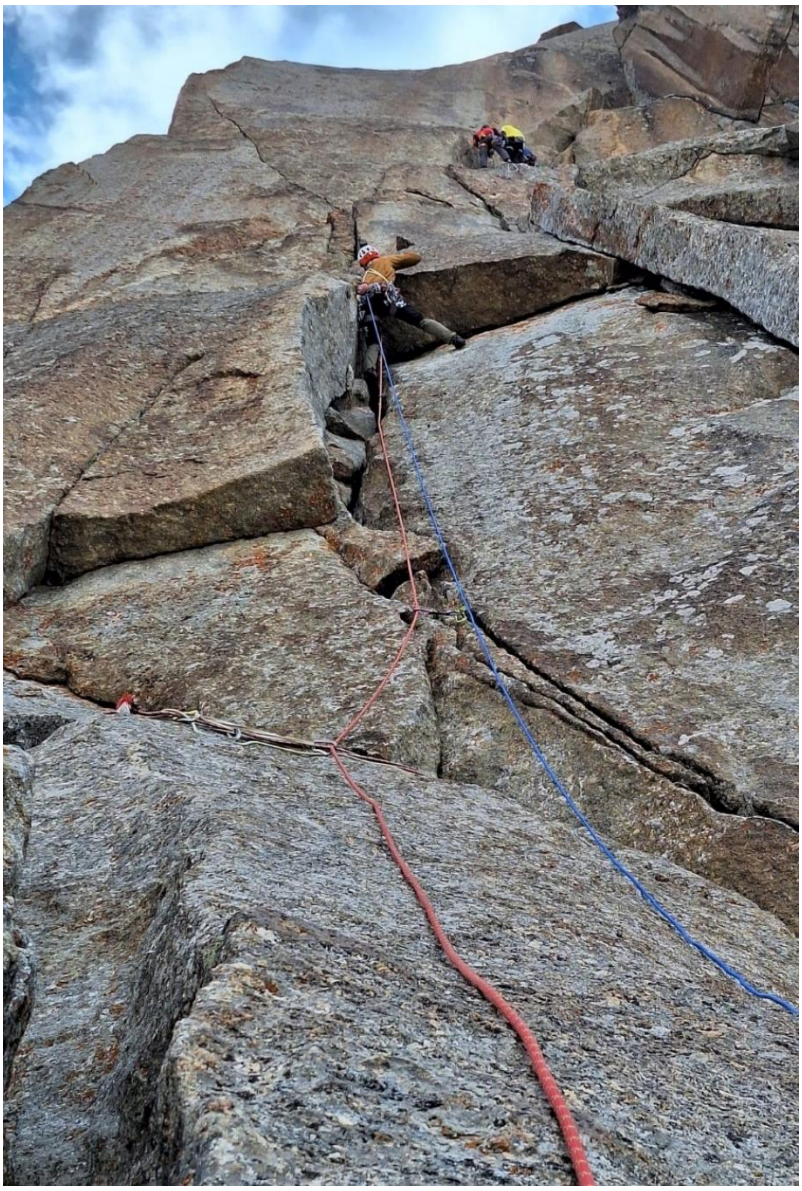
Day 18 | 2 August

Peak Slesov – Perestroika Crack (day 3)

We got up around 7 and ate flatbread with egg. We got disapproving looks from the Slovenians, who were eating fancy freeze-dried meals. We left the haul bag here but are still doing fix and follow. The leader still carries the haul line up to the anchor and coils it there without clipping it to anything, as if the bag were on it. That way the second's pack is lighter.

We started climbing around 9. Because they'd fixed our rope too far to the left, on the eleventh pitch I made a loose traverse and got back onto the line. 5c.

On the twelfth pitch I climbed straight up to a roof. Although this roof is the same grade as yesterday's, it felt harder. After it you link into a corner and reach the sloping ledge below the first crux. 6b+.

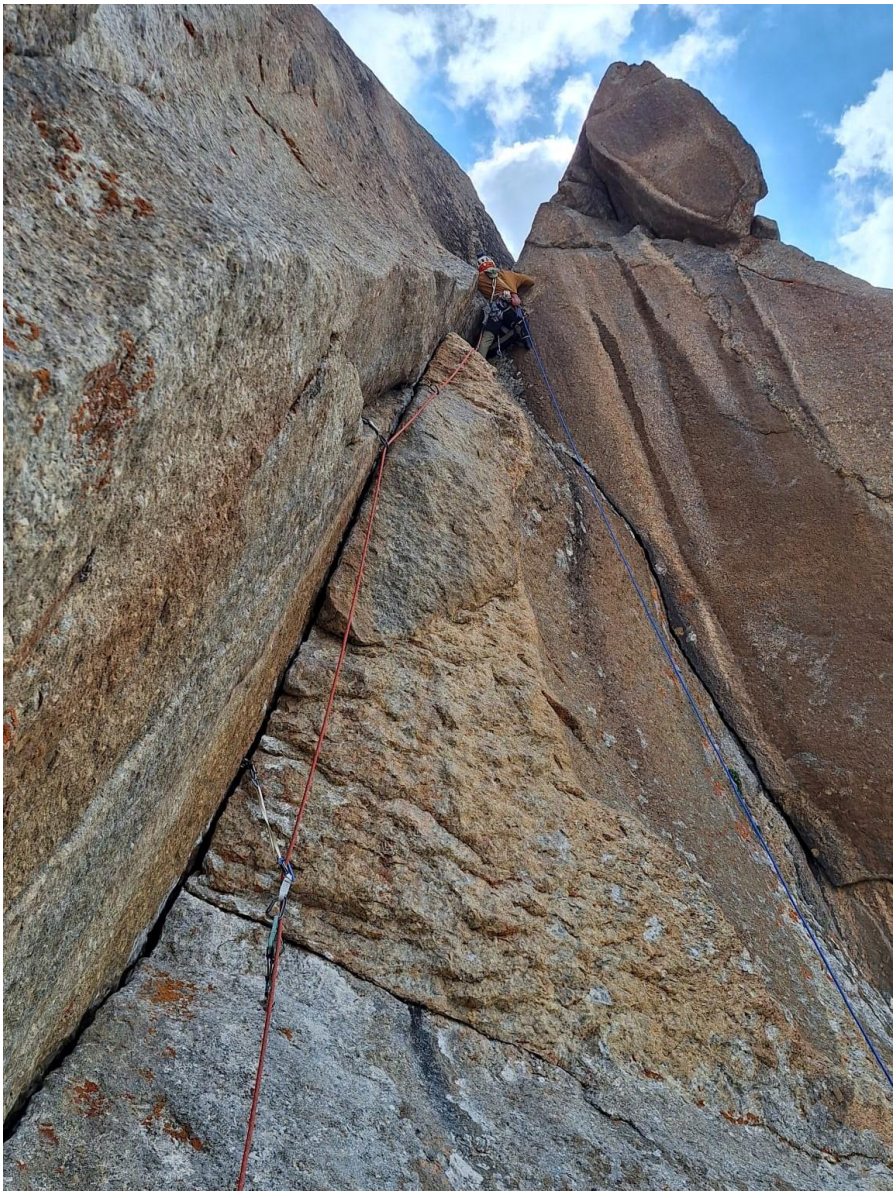


(the second roof)

The thirteenth pitch involves a corner-like crack that should be 7a and a roof that looks like it leapt out of a Cubist painting. I had a look at the route. Just then our rope got stuck somewhere below. Cem said he was starting to struggle and that, since the rope was stuck anyway, it would make sense to go down.

I rappelled, freed the rope and jugged back up. We lost about 20 minutes. Since we could bail off the route whenever we wanted anyway, I suggested carrying on. We had enough food and water.

I got on the pitch we'd planned to aid and started free climbing it. The feet and hands were terrible. I got quite high, but had to take before reaching the roof. I French-freed the rest of the crux. Then I arrived at a corner like an open book. Barely managing to climb this unprotectable, moss-filled corner slab, I reached the base of the second crux. 7a (perhaps easier).



(the first crux)

The second crux takes underclings to an overhanging mini-dihedral. The crack inside this dihedral doesn't take gear easily. I got into the dihedral, sat straight down in my harness, got out the aiders and started aiding. I moved up back-cleaning black and blue Totems. In the middle section I had to use a cam hook, a fixed beak and a black Totem cam that I could only get half-seated. That's why I thought C1+ was the right grade for this pitch. Once I reached the slab above the dihedral I put the aiders away. I climbed up the corner, but since I'd left most of my small gear in the dihedral I couldn't place any intermediate protection. Then I reached a traverse protected by two pitons, with terrifying-looking crimps and imaginary footholds. I hadn't read about this section anywhere. I didn't have a single quickdraw left on me. I clipped a carabiner to each piton and reached a nice ledge. I let out a deep sigh. C1+, 6b+ obl.



(the second crux)

We'd agreed that Cem would lead the sixteenth pitch, but he didn't want to. So I got ready and started climbing. At this point I went into a kind of trance and was able to focus purely on climbing without thinking about anything. My pain and fatigue vanished. You climb a finger crack corner and arrive at a hand-sized splitter. After the splitter there's a hardish slab sequence. There are three bolts in total here. Two are museum pieces and the third is right next to one of them, so think of it as two bolts eight metres apart. Muttering "I'm on toprope, I'm on toprope", I grabbed the crimps and reached the easy ground with a series of hand-foot moves. Then an anchor on the ledge. They've given the pitch 6c overall; I think it might be easier. If that slab section were a route at Karakaya it'd be 6a+ at most.



(the slab section)

The seventeenth pitch is a uniform thin hand crack. Very enjoyable. At one point it splits in two; the left is easier but looser, while the right is better quality and harder. So the route goes right – in Aladağlar it would be exactly the opposite :)) 6a.

On the eighteenth pitch you link into a corner system that you stay in all the way to the summit. Follow the cracks. 5c+.

I got on the nineteenth pitch expecting 6a. The finger crack at the start felt a bit hard, but I carried on. Through some ledgy terrain I arrived at a strange roof. I thought it must be easy. I moved up under it, and the reality I'd been denying hit me right between the eyes: I was on the 6c (VIII−) fist crack roof that was supposed to be on the next pitch. And I hadn't taken the big cams with me. Using my hands, arms, knees, everything I had, I got through the roof shouting my head off.

The twentieth pitch starts easy and loose but then reaches the summit ridge via an overhanging boulder problem with good jams.



(the team on the summit)

At around 18:45 we reached the ledge just below the summit. Since it was very loose we decided not to go to the very top, and started down. Because our static rope wasn't certified, we had to untie and re-throw the knot at every rappel, since we were descending using the biner block method with GriGris. This method meant no load ever went on the static rope and we could use it purely for pulling our rope down. But not being able to switch which side the block was on cost us time at every anchor.

Our rope got stuck on the first three rappels. We lost a lot of time freeing it. It stuck again on the fifth rappel, and rocks knocked down by the team above us hit my helmet. I had to wrap a sling around a block to make an anchor for myself so I could free the rope.

We reached the ledge, where the Slovenians had left us a litre of water. It was like medicine for our parched throats. I shouldered the haul bag we'd left there as well.

While rappelling the offwidth pitch I prayed to the rope gods that it wouldn't get stuck. I descended first to the intermediate anchor on the ridge and then to the main anchor using the saddlebag method. No power on earth could have made me climb that offwidth that night.

We came to the crack pitches. We hadn't tied any stopper knots so far and had no intention of starting. We rappelled through here quickly, but since the cracks lean left we constantly had to swing right, and

in the dark we had to be very careful not to miss the anchors and shoot off the end of the rope into nothing. Our rope got stuck once more along here, but a team coming down from above freed it.

We reached the Shoulder at 01:45. We went to the ledge where we'd slept on the first night and slept there.

Day 19 | 3 August

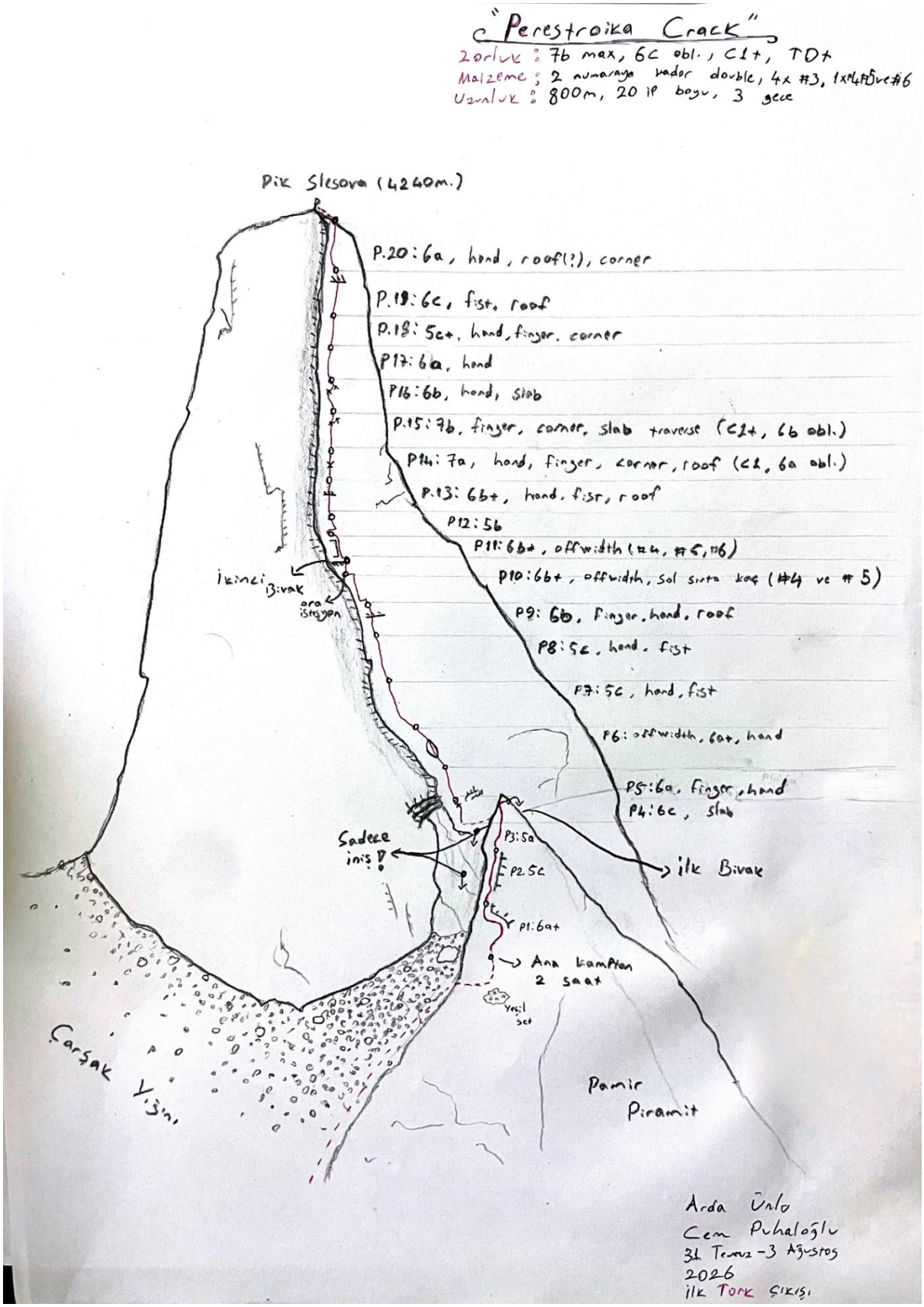
We got up around 08:30. We ate dry bread and started rappelling.



(rappelling from the Shoulder)

We touched down at 10:15.

We descended the wretched scree and got back to camp at 11:40.



(Perestroika Crack Topo)

Day 20 | 4 August

We got up around 9 – no mercy for the eggs, we cracked seven.

The Russian team had left us food, and we're making up for weeks of hunger.

It rained; people's tents blew away.

I repaired the inverter for the internet.

Day 21 | 5 August

09:30, woke up.

Packed up the climbing gear and the food.

11:00, we had the most elaborate breakfast of the whole camp.

15:00, the rain started; we couldn't pack up the tent.

20:00, it hadn't stopped; the tents stayed wet.

Day 22 | 6 August

05:45, woke up.

Packed everything.

07:45, loaded the horses.

08:15, set off.

Around 12 we reached the hut – utterly exhausting.

Around 5 we reached Batken.

22:00, arrived in Osh.

Day 23 | 7 August

06:00, woke up.

07:30, boarded the plane.

09:30, arrived in Bishkek.

10:30, Emin the chief met us. He collected his gear and was discharged from duty. He went off to hitchhike towards the China.

We did the post-trip clean-up, gave the tents a thorough wash and dried them.

Our expedition had all but officially come to an end. The rest was just tourism.

5. Reflections

5.1. Arda

The Karavshin Expedition has a place in our hearts as the first long expedition any of us had ever organised. It proved to us that climbing walls of this size, spending weeks in remote areas, living at base camp without buying in services, and seeing big dreams come true are not blessings reserved for other people.

Pulling off a climb of a kind I thought a Turk could only ever watch in videos – one I doubted we could do right up until we'd done it – and then realising afterwards that we hadn't actually done anything all that spectacular, left me with mixed feelings.

How can I put it – it's a bit like going to Paris and having your photo taken with the Eiffel Tower. Anyone could go there and do the same thing; it's only valued because the number of people who actually go and do it is "small". Dozens of Turkish mountaineers could have pulled off this climb – they just… haven't yet, and probably nobody will even come and try. It all comes down to a chain of obstacles involving logistics and time.

If we achieved anything at all, it was daring to dream that this was possible: finding the courage to believe in that dream and overcoming every logistical obstacle in the way.

I don't think the ED (Extrêmement Difficile) alpine grade given by the teams that made the first repeats of the route is appropriate. The fixed rappel anchors probably didn't exist, or weren't in good condition, back then. The fact that bailing is so easy, that the obligatory grade is no harder than VIII–, and that the objective dangers are relatively low (no avalanche risk, rare rockfall, low altitude, superb rock quality, no glacier travel, weather that generally isn't very cold) means, in my view, that you can commit to the route with a far clearer head. Because it contains 6c obligatory climbing, I'd suggest TD+ (Très Difficile).

Emin's early departure hurt all of us deeply. I would have loved for all three of us to reach the summit of Slesova. I was genuinely sad that my original partner in the plan, the person I'd been planning with for nine months, could only spend a few days out there with us.

The fact that trad climbing isn't developing in Türkiye has started to make sense to me. In Türkiye, trad climbing is no different in style from sport climbing. One has bolts and the other doesn't; that's the only difference. Crack climbing, though, adds a whole new dimension to trad. The difference isn't just the mental commitment and the style of protection – it's an entirely different kind of climbing. And people who want to climb in that style are forced to apply trad principles properly.

I also think that the loose rock and poor protection you meet on long walls in Türkiye are deterrents. The absence of long chains of high-quality, hard pitches means the only variable people can push their limits on is the risk margin, and that too is a deterrent.

What makes one alpine climb in the Turkish mountains harder than another is not so much a higher climbing grade as the climb being more committing, riskier or longer. The geography only allows progress in that direction. Of course, this is a very long discussion, and as someone who hasn't achieved anything particularly noteworthy in the Turkish mountains, I don't have much standing to

speak on it. But what I mean is that this expedition made me think the reason trad climbing isn't developing in Türkiye may not actually be the fault of Turkish climbers.

5.2. Cem

Even though I'd known about this expedition, planned by Arda and Emin, months in advance, and even though Arda had invited me, factors such as my lack of confidence in myself and my reluctance to make plans far ahead meant that until about a month before the trip I still hadn't decided or planned whether I was going. As a result I hadn't researched the area or the routes, hadn't bought my tickets and hadn't sorted out my gear. Both my physical and my mental preparation ended up being extremely rushed. Right up to the moment Arda and I set off from Ankara, I didn't feel ready; until the day before, thoughts of not going were still nagging at me. From the moment we left, the thought "it's too late to back out now" more or less forced me into feeling "ready". As soon as we were on our way, most of my misgivings vanished and the whole expedition turned into a spellbinding experience.

Having experienced an area and routes that I'd only ever watched from my sofa, and thought I could only ever experience that way, is still not something I've fully processed.

Because the climbs Arda and I had done previously in Aladağlar had taught us each other's approach to multi-pitch routes, each other's anxieties (mostly mine) and each other's pace, I think we moved together fairly smoothly on the walls. Although I've known Emin longer, I was excited because we'd spent far less time together climbing and mountaineering; climbing and spending time with him on this trip was a refreshing change for me. The fact that the three of us only got on one route together, and that Emin went back early, left me with a real pang of regret – especially since I saw myself as the weakest link in the team and had assumed that if anyone was going to pull out of a climb, it would be me.

Despite everything, we didn't let our friend's early departure damage our motivation; I think we spent the rest of the trip very productively.

As for the climbing in the area: since I was the least experienced of us at crack climbing, and since almost every route there follows long crack systems on big granite walls, I spent most pitches well outside my comfort zone, thrashing helplessly across the rock and inside cracks with my feet, legs, hands, arms and my whole body. As I climbed more, I got to the point where I could apply crack technique with at least minimal efficiency and felt able to keep up with my friends. Although I can now see the appeal of crack climbing, it still isn't a style I'd choose.

From what we experienced, the climbing in the area really is very high quality and the standards are very high. Unlike in Aladağlar, the routes don't follow the easiest lines but the clearest and best-quality ones, regardless of difficulty. The people who put the routes up back then chose these lines even when they couldn't free climb them, using aid where necessary to make those sections part of the route. I'm genuinely glad to have experienced that vision.

The "Middle Route" on "Petit Tour Russe" is ideal as a full- or half-day route. Its bolted anchors (even if the 6 or 8 mm bolts shocked us at first) made us feel relatively comfortable on the route. The route is also the descent line for every route on the formation, which gives you the freedom to turn back at whichever anchor you like. Climbing and descending the route took us a full day; being three on the

route, it being the first route we did in the area, and it being the first climb the three of us had done together all made us relatively slow. The two-person Catalan team ahead of us climbed this route first, then descended to the last point where it intersects "La Voie de Droite", the route to its right, climbed that one too, crossed paths with us on the descent while we still had three pitches to go, and got back to camp – leaving us stunned by their speed.

"The Missing Mountain" on "Pamir Pyramid" is a very enjoyable full-day route of 15 pitches, with bolted anchors for the first six and none after the ledge you reach above the sixth anchor. As on most routes, my enthusiasm and nerve ran out at an early point on the route, and suppressing my urge to turn back, I "handed over" the entire rest of the route to Arda. While Arda was climbing the third-to-last pitch, both we and the route got soaked, which meant Arda and I had to spend a very cold and very intimate forced bivouac. Shivering, we managed to sleep for some vague stretch of time. Trying the "chimney" crux on the remaining pitches again and again the following morning and finally getting up it did wonders for my morale; even though our rope got stuck on the last rappel of the descent, I was the happiest person in the valley that day.

"Perestroika Crack" on "Peak Slesov" is one of the most popular routes in the Ak-Su Valley. After arriving in the area and climbing our first route, we had doubts about whether we could do it. For a while we thought about doing two shorter, easier routes instead. But after climbing The Missing Mountain our confidence came back, at least a little, and I'm very glad we decided to get on it. The route genuinely demands commitment; I don't think it's possible to do it in a single day. At least one night is spent on the route, either on the shoulder between Pamir Pyramid and Slesov, or on the "big" ledge at the end of the tenth pitch. We took three nights' worth of supplies to give ourselves as much time as possible. Since we'd be hauling anyway, we weren't stingy with anything except water – afterwards we wished we'd taken a bit more. On this route too, I had my classic burnout on the last pitch of the first day. That's why the following day was also completed under Arda's lead. We spent three very comfortable nights on the route in total. It would be no exaggeration to call it the most satisfying route of my climbing career.

Spending three weeks in the Ak-Su Valley really was a spellbinding experience. Packing up our kitchen tarp and our tents to leave gave me a bittersweet feeling. I can say that the time we spent in this area permanently changed the way I look at climbing and at other mountain terrain.

5.3. Emin

I've always been drawn to things outside the ordinary. This trip was an adventure for me too; I was motivated by a passion for adventure rather than for climbing.

Arda is someone without equal for me. There is nobody else I know who would be willing to plan and carry out something like this, nobody else I could go with. What's more, Arda's passion for this trip was always greater than mine, and that made me genuinely happy. We'd focus on how exciting the ideas we threw out were rather than on whether they were possible, and work out whether they were possible afterwards. I've met very few people in my life I could do that with.

When this idea first came up I hadn't done a single trad lead. But it didn't matter, because that wasn't an obstacle. Reaching a decent level at trad climbing happened quite quickly for me. Even so, Middle

Route was only my third trad multi-pitch route… I could imagine how important experience is on an outing like this, but my trust in Arda and Cem hid that worry from me.

After the first climb, though, things changed. I skipped an anchor thinking "the pitch is short". I didn't take a nut and then needed one. I changed direction because I couldn't see the piton on the wall. Belaying from above, I threaded the rope into the ATC the wrong way round and then corrected it. Instead of the easier, safer line, I chose the hard one because I hadn't thought it through, and ended up with a 15-metre runout on a 6b+ pitch… Normally that kind of fear would motivate me. But these simple mistakes I was making slapped my inexperience right in my face and I started to feel inadequate.

Of course, that wasn't the real reason I left camp early. A few personal reasons, combined with the loss of motivation that came with feeling inadequate, made being there painful. And I decided it would be better to go back.

I left behind all the equipment that would be needed and went back to Bishkek. Having arrived in the mindset of "we'll aid our way up and put up our own route", that wasn't how I'd have wanted to leave.

The others decided to climb Perestroika and they did it. That made me tremendously happy and, at the same time, jealous. I'm proud of Cem and Arda for the willpower, determination, motivation and success they showed.

It's also fired me up enormously: I need to go and prove myself… so I can win back my friends' trust. Here we go….

6. Useful Links

- [1] Central Asia Travel: centralasia.kg
- [2] Mountain Rescue Service: rescue.centralasia.kg
- [3] Kyrgyz Alpine Club: kac.centralasia.kg
- [4] MES (Ministry of Emergency Situations): mchs.gov.kg/en/registration_tourist_groups/
- [5] centralasia.tours
- [6] Drive Link: drive.google.com/drive/folders/1lavQzAC5nTKw20J8_IdKvmYogci3CYG-?usp=sharing
- [7] Global Rescue: globalrescue.com
- [8] IMG Insurance (add-on package)
- [9] Asman Airlines: asmanairlines.kg/ (tickets can only be bought on their own website)
- [10] Maps.me
- [11] huddosk.com