

Shaksgam Expedition 2014

Xinjiang, China, June-July 2014



Mount Everest Foundation Expedition

(Expedition Reference 14/12)

Final Report

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Contents

1	Aim	3
2	Summary	3
3	Introduction	3
	3.1 Purpose	3
	3.2 Geography	3
	3.3 Access	4
4	Team	4
5	Preparation	5
	5.1 Conception	5
	5.2 Objective	5
	5.3 Permission	6
	5.4 Logistics	6
	5.5 Insurance	6
	5.6 Medical	6
	5.7 Travel	7
	5.8 Finances	7
6	Expedition Log	8
7	Conclusion	22
8	Acknowledgements	22
Appendix A	Bibliography	22
Appendix B	Contact Information	22
Appendix C	Maps	23

1 Aim

The goal of the expedition was to explore the mountains north of the upper Shaksgam River in the region opposite the Gasherbrum peaks, in the part of the Karakoram range contained within the western Chinese province of Xinjiang. The specific intent of the team was to reconnoitre and possibly climb the peaks Durbin Kangri I (6824m), Kaimuk Kangri (6952m) and Burnag Kangri (6821m), while one of the accompanying teams intended to attempt Durbin Kangri II (6755m); all peaks are unclimbed.

2 Summary

The expedition was led by Bruce Normand (Scotland), climbing with Jesse Mease (USA). This pair shared logistics with, but climbed independently of, the German trio of Lukas Brexler, Harald Kirchenhofer and Christof Nettekoven and the Slovenian pair of Ales Holc and Peter Meznar, while some climbing, camps and carries were shared with Rob Duncan (USA) and Dmitry Shapovalov (Ukraine). The expedition spent five weeks in the Shaksgam region, from mid-June to late July 2014. Some of the sub-teams made ascents of acclimatisation peaks but all of the high peaks were unclimbable due to dangerous approaches and conditions. The Slovenian pair disappeared and could not be found either by a ground or a helicopter search; they are presumed dead.

3 Introduction

3.1 Purpose

The goal of the expedition was to climb unexplored mountains in western Xinjiang. The trekking reconnaissance of the upper Shaksgam region performed by a Russian team under the leadership of Andrei Lebedev in 2010 revealed a wealth of peaks in the high 6000m range, which had never been visited by a team equipped to climb them.

3.2 Geography

The Karakoram range is split among Pakistan, India and China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, with the Chinese border set by the watershed running through the 8000m peaks. When viewed from the north, the apex of the range is in fact around Teram Kangri, somewhat east of the 8000ers; the Shaksgam River rises from the glaciers on the northwest side of this peak, draining north and west past the glaciers spilling off the 8000ers. To its north are 2-3 further chains of jagged Karakoram 6000ers, beyond which the mountains change character to the rounded hills of the Kun Lun. The Zug-Shaksgam River parallels the upper Shaksgam through the Karakoram peaks and defines the access to the least-explored areas. A map of the exploration region may be found in Appendix C.

The strong rain-shadow effect of the 8000ers means that the glaciers in this part of the range are small, leaving much rotten rock exposed, and they end around 4500m (*cf.* 3400m on the Pakistan side). Further, an almost complete lack of grazing pastures means

that trails into the mountains are non-existent. River-crossings become a very serious issue in summer, and the difficulty they pose is compounded by the presence of several layers of limestone within the poor, sedimentary rock structures, which tend to form extended slot canyons in the approach valleys.

Historically, the Gasherbrum region has seen significant climbing activity and the upper Shaksgam a limited number of visitors. However, visits to the region north of the river and into the parallel Zug-Shaksgam ("false Shaksgam") valley can still be counted on the fingers of one hand (Mason 1926, Shipton 1930, Lebedev 2010).



Left: Gasherbrum I and II seen from the Aghil Pass (4810m). Right: view of peaks in the upper Shaksgam beyond the inflow of the (barely visible) Gasherbrum Glacier.

3.3 Access

The relentless infrastructure improvements of modern China have made the access to this extremely remote region quite feasible. The meeting point for expeditions to the northern Karakoram is Kashgar, on the western end of the Taklamakan desert. While the road southwest passes Kongur and Muztagh Ata (Pamir) on the way to Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the road to the southeast skirts the desert to the town of Kargilik, then turns south and climbs to a 5000m pass over the western end of the Kun Lun. A brief descent to the Yarkand River and 40km of good gravel road bring one to the Kirghiz village of Ilik. In fact the road is being pushed further down the Yarkand with a view to linking up to Tashkurgan, largely for military purposes on a sensitive border, and this military presence makes access to the region complex. From Ilik it is a trek of two days with camels to the base of the 4810m Aghil Davan (pass), on the third day one crosses the pass, on the fourth one may reach the Kulqintubulak River, which was the access point for the aims of the current expedition, and a fifth takes trekkers to Gasherbrum base camp.

4 Team

In such a remote region and with a complex and expensive permit situation, it makes sense to have a large team. In keeping with the alpine-style ethos of all the climbers involved, this "expedition team" was made up of three autonomous climbing teams. The MEF-supported expedition team members were Bruce Normand (Scotland) and Jesse Mease (USA), who were accompanied by support members Rob Duncan (USA) and

Dmitry Shapovalov (Ukraine, resident in Canada). This group was accompanied by a group of three German climbers, Lukas Brexler, Harald Kirchenhofer and Christof Nettekoven, and a pair of Slovenians, Ales Holc and Peter Meznar. The agency for this nine-man team was New Land International of Kashgar, which obtained the appropriate permits from the CXMA (China Xinjiang Mountaineering Association) and the relevant military regions. They also provided jeeps, camels and a trekking guide and translator for the approach, but all cooking, base-camp and equipment logistics were arranged entirely by the climbers themselves.

5 Preparation

5.1 Conception

The motivation for the expedition was the pictures of the North Face of Durbin Kangri I posted on the internet by the Lebedev trekking expedition. This raised the awareness of the team members that another collection of unknown high-6000m mountains with steep ice and mixed conditions could be found in this region. In fact Normand raised an expedition team in 2012 but had to cancel at the last minute due to a cracked heel bone incurred in a trivial cragging accident. In 2013, the team applied but was denied permits at a late stage by the military authorities. The 2014 expedition was therefore a case of "third time lucky," after a fashion, and the author would like to express his thanks to the MEF for its patience and generosity in supporting the expedition throughout this painful process.

5.2 Objective

The highest peaks in the area may all be found on Google Earth. As noted above, these are Durbin Kangri I (6824m) and II (6755m), Kaimuk Kangri (6952m) and Burnag Kangri (6821m). None have a climbing history and, in fact, before the current expedition there were no worthwhile photographs of any of them other than the Lebedev team's pictures of the North Face of Durbin Kangri I. Its summit and upper North Face can, however, be seen clearly from the point where trekkers to K2 and the Gasherbrums arrive in the Shaksgam Valley. Little was known about rock and ice conditions on these peaks, at any time of year, and the Lebedev team's trekking account highlighted long distances, warm temperatures and river-crossing problems.



Left: Durbin Kangri I from the northwest. Right: Durbin Kangri II from the south.



Left: Kaimuk Kangri from the west. Right: Burnag Kangri from the northwest.

5.3 Permission

All trekking and climbing activity in Xinjiang is controlled by the China Xinjiang Mountaineering Association (CXMA). The fee for a climbed 6000m peak is 10000RMB and for an unclimbed one there are extreme surcharges which need to be avoided. The CXMA also charges 553RMB per day for a liaison officer (LO), but frequently this person is not allocated to the team and the money simply absorbed. Sirdar and coordination duties are provided by a guide from the agency responsible for logistics.

5.4 Logistics

The agency in charge also provides jeep and camel transport as far as base camp. It is not possible to arrange these separately and independently in order to obtain a better ("non-package") price, because the agency maintains a financial stranglehold on jeep and camel drivers as well as on most of its Kashgar competitors. For more basic logistics, the team members bought their mountain food in supermarkets and markets in Kashgar and their kitchen and base-camp equipment in a hardware market there. The one item difficult to obtain in Kashgar is quality Korean gas for mountain stoves, and the leader had to have this shipped in separately, resulting in a rather high price of 27RMB per canister.

Climbing equipment consisted of standard half ropes (60m x 8mm), rock (nuts, cams, pitons) and ice (mostly short screws) racks, cord and a V-threader. No fixed rope was used. The teams carried two-man bivouac tents and Jetboil stoves. Each independent team had a satellite telephone (two Iridium and one Thuraya), which they used to stay in touch via messages to wives and friends in their home countries.

5.5 Insurance

Normand has full-coverage health insurance from a Chinese company, Now Health International, apparently unconcerned by "risky activities," which also provides evacuation insurance from AXA as part of its package. Mease has health insurance through US company United Healthcare with global rescue through the AAC.

5.6 Medical

No vaccinations are required for travel in China. Shapovalov coordinated a comprehensive first-aid kit for all the teams to use in base camp and individual teams

prepared their own climbing kits, albeit with key antibiotics and painkillers sourced from the US. Neither member of the MEF team used any altitude medication.

5.7 Travel

The North Americans flew to Beijing and proceeded to Kashgar by train (64 hours). The Europeans all flew with Turkish Airlines to Bishkek and shared a minibus to cross into China at the Torugart Pass. Normand arrived in Kashgar on a domestic flight.

5.8 Finances

Full financial details are presented in tabular form. Numbers are quoted for convenience in UK pounds (GBP), and at the approximate average exchange rate prevailing in spring and summer 2014, 1.00GBP = 10.40CNY. Numbers are quoted only for the two-man team of Mease and Normand, with shared costs indicated by “*2/9.”

Expenditures

Item	GBP
International travel	1180
Domestic travel	580
Insurance	760
Climbing equipment	240
Medical supplies	80
Permit fees (CXMA, military, ecological)	2200*2/9 = 490
LO salary	3100*2/9 = 690
Jeeps	4100*2/9 = 910
Camels	2700*2/9 = 600
Food and fuel	290
BC equipment	60
Accommodation	120
Meals	40
	£6040

Income

Normand was the grateful recipient of grants from the MEF and BMC.

Donor	GBP
Mount Everest Foundation	£2450
British Mountaineering Council	£800
	£3250

This money was used to pay the two-man team's agency costs of £2690, with the remaining £560 used against Normand's expenses. Personal contributions from the two climbers were then £1940 from Mease (including international airfare) and £850 from Normand.

The author would like to thank the expedition's sponsors for their generous support.

6 Expedition Log

12th June

Duncan, Mease and Shapovalov arrived in Beijing and met with Normand to collect gear and money.

13th June

Duncan, Mease and Shapovalov continued by train across China to Turfan and thence to Kashgar.

15th June

The two Slovenians and three Germans arrived in the morning in Bishkek and continued immediately overland to a tent camp on the Kirghiz side of the Torugart Pass. Normand flew from Beijing via Urumqi, arriving in the evening in Kashgar.

16th June

Duncan, Mease and Shapovalov arrived in Kashgar and were delivered to the chosen hostel at noon. A shopping trip with Normand followed. The German and Slovenian teams arrived in mid-afternoon, already accompanied by Adil Kurban, a young Uighur with excellent English who would be the team guide throughout. While Normand and Shapovalov went to the agent to pay the team fees in full and finalise arrangements, everyone else went shopping again.

17th June

The morning was spent on final purchases at the market, such as dried fruit and base-camp (BC) equipment. The team then loaded into 3 Landcruisers for the 250km drive on new highways to Kargilik for the first overnight stop.

18th June

The road south climbs out of Kargilik through zones of spring pastures and then into rocky canyons, crossing a pass in the Kun Lun foothills at 3800m. In cloudy weather, the drive continued down and then up to a pass of 5018m where the road crosses to the south side of the main Kun Lun Range. This road then descends to the Yarkand River at Mazar (3800m) and turns east again, following the Yarkand up and onto the far western end of the Tibetan Plateau. The route to the Shaksgam turns west to descend the Yarkand on 40km of good gravel road to the Kirghiz town of Ilik, perched on a dry plateau above the river and on the other side of a military post which has been known to make considerable trouble for trekkers in the past. The team was allowed through with no inspection and proceeded to unload and repack in Ilik. Water and a roof were provided by the senior

camel driver, an elderly man named Daniyar who apparently had the only contract with New Land of anyone in the village.



Left: camel preparation in Ilik. Right: the team with loaded camels in Ilik. Westerners from left to right: Meznar, Shapovalov, Duncan, Mease, Nettekoven, Kirschenhofer, Normand, Holc.

19th June

Despite extensive warnings, the team had brought too much equipment and would officially require 8 camels, whereas the driver had brought 7 as instructed. After a short negotiation, it was agreed that he would carry the gear on 7 camels but not quite as far as in the original agreement, which had for reasons of conformity with the norm been made to Gasherbrum BC. Learning that they were not expected to cross the full Shaksgam River (required just below GBC) brought smiles of relief to the faces of the camel men. The animals were then loaded and some team and villager photos taken before the trek commenced.

The first 5km out of Ilik are a jeep trail on the terraces above the Surukwat River. A cloudy morning broke up and the sun came out as the trail dropped off the edge of the terraces and down to the river, affording spectacular views of multiple terraces narrowing to a canyon where the river cut its way out of the mountains. The main rivers were flowing thick with typical Karakoram mud, and camp for the night was made at a junction with a clean side stream.

20th June

Day broke to the sound of falling rain on the tents. This became more persistent but then subsided, allowing everyone out for breakfast. However, the camel drivers were reluctant to leave, looking carefully at the clouds because, we understood, the next section of trail cuts across a terrace of vertical packed mud and stones fall out of it when it rains. Well before noon, the sun made a more valiant effort to appear, the camels were packed and the caravan trekked on. Sure enough, the trail entered the narrowing canyon in 1km, crossed the river, zig-zagged up and traversed high above the narrows. After dropping back to the river and rehydrating at another clean side stream, the team carried on beside the rushing river through another canyon and up onto new terraces as the sky turned increasingly darker shades. This brought them to a broader and flatter zone where the river off a steep glacier directly ahead was joined by major side channels from the Surukwat (right, west) and Aghil Davan (left, east) sides. Camp was set among the

earthen walls of a summer pasture as the skies opened, the rain turning to snow as night fell.



Left: camel train. Right: canyon and terraces of the Surukwat River.

21st June

The morning found snow on the ground and on the camels, but clearing clouds soon resulted in this melting away. The trek turned up towards the Aghil Davan and passed two other small summer settlements on its way to a lake almost at the pass. Snowy flanks appeared to the left and rocky cliffs guarding snow summits around 6000m to the right. The partial pasture land disappeared completely on the other side of the pass, a dry and stony descent of over 1000m to the Shaksgam itself. An afternoon storm blew through without dropping any rain, but combined with the final exit from the descent canyon to provide a dramatic up-valley vista (similar to the photo on P1). The trek continued for another 5km on a wide terrace above the river, then dropped through a further small canyon to the river's edge for a sandy camp with a trickle of fresh water filtered naturally by riverbed sand.

22nd June

Overnight rain continued during the camel-loading phase but stopped as the team began a grey riverside trek. The hot-spring oasis of Durbin Jungal is only 5km from the camp, but reaching it requires crossing half the Shaksgam to a broad central sand bar and then crossing back. The local method for this is simply to jump on top of the loaded camels, which seemed remarkably unperturbed by such behaviour, and then to have them wade through. However, after loading the "first" train with the junior camel driver, Brexler, Holc, Mease, Meznar and Nettekoven, Daniyar decided the river was fine and started wading. The others therefore took their first plunge into the muddy, icy, rushing waters, making the 1km across several braided streams with no loss of footing, no steps deeper than mid-thigh and no hypothermia.

At this point the camel drivers no longer knew the way, as the team plan called for a BC 3km off the Shaksgam, up the Kulchintubulak River to its first major junction (see map in Appendix C). The team members therefore led swiftly up this wide, flat and stony

riverbed to their chosen point and unloaded the camel train next to, but not directly under, the muddy cliffs of the northern edge. Although this point seemed unnecessarily far from the river, Daniyar sounded the prescient warning that this would change. The camels left with Adil, who would spend the expedition in Ilik, leaving the team to pitch its BC tents and cooking shelters. The altitude of this BC is approximately 4100m.



Left: scrambling in the Kulchintubulak valley. Right: first view of Durbin Kangri North face from ABC.

23rd June

On another predominantly cloudy morning, the team members began their exploration preparations. Duncan, Mease, Normand and Shapovalov aimed to reconnoitre the main Kulchintubulak valley, the approach to the North Face of Durbin Kangri I and the crossing to the Zug-Shaksgam. Accompanied by Kirschenhofer, they set off with a light load of food, fuel and climbing equipment, soon finding themselves scrambling over boulders and jumping the river at frequent intervals. The crumbling canyon had long scree walls interspersed with large rocks and the occasional hands-on rocky section; the waterfall which had presented problems to the descending Lebedev team was easily passed on the left (north), giving onto a 1km flat stretch at around 4500m.

From here the canyon narrowed to an ice-filled gully with clear rockfall danger and water rushing far beneath the surface. The team moved swiftly through this to the snout of the glacier, which terminated at ice cliffs some 30m in height. The Lebedev team had abseiled at this point the team had come equipped to climb here if necessary. However, a brief step under the ice cliff gave access to a zig-zag route across loose ledges, pioneered by Mease, and thence to scree drainages on the south side of the glacier proper. The climbers then continued to ascend steeply up the snow-covered morainal debris on this side of the glacier, which fell off steeply to their left, until a flat section, which would become ABC, was reached at 4800m. This point gave a good view of the remainder of the glacier, extending up to 5200m before curving left and up to the Kizil Davan, the 5700m pass to the Zug-Shaksgam side, and an excellent view of the North Face of Durbin Kangri I, rising directly from the glacier in a single, steep sweep to the 6800m summit.

With the time at 4pm and the sun finally appearing somewhat more resolved, the team members stored their loads by a large boulder and made an uneventful descent to BC in 3 hours. Holc and Meznar, who had decided to explore the neighbouring canyon leading to

the North Face of Durbin Kangri II, were not in camp, and returned after dark having climbed to 5000m at a pass far above it.

24th June

With Shapovalov resting to shake off a respiratory infection and Kirschenhofer making preparations with his team, Duncan, Mease and Normand returned to ABC with heavy loads, prepared to spend up to 10 days there for acclimatisation.

25th June

The three climbers awoke somewhat after sunrise, and with morning clouds clearing decided to go to the Kizil Davan, both to acclimatise and to view the North Face of Durbin Kangri I from as many angles as possible. This turned out to be a generally poor and painful idea, turning into a 7-hour slog in deep snow and reflector-oven temperatures. The trio was rewarded with good views of the full glacier basin and the face, limited views (due to afternoon clouds) over to the Zug-Shaksgam and the hope that their trail would make this passage much easier next time. Shapovalov had arrived in ABC to rejoin the acclimatisation phase.



Left: glacier approach below P6184. Centre: full North Face of Durbin Kangri I. Right: Mease during an acclimatisation climb.

26th June

The three climbers required a rest day and spent it reading at ABC. The weather remained somewhat unstable, with shifting clouds and the occasional squall. Shapovalov performed a reconnaissance of a rock fin above the north side of the glacier, finding the quality to be similar to everything else in sight, namely execrable.

27th June

The weather forecast delivered by satellite telephone was good for the next several days. The four climbers had decided to move to the pass for two nights of sleeping at 5600m, and a pre-dawn departure combined with a rock-solid trail saw them arrive at a flat camp site by 8am. Dropping their loads, they decided immediately to use the day by climbing

one of the line of rocky peaks to the north side of the pass, and therefore set off up a long, south-facing snow flank before the sun could heat it. This led to a deep gully made marginally easier by avalanche debris and then to a deep snow slog gaining a snowy crest connecting some of the rocky peaks seen from below. The team then followed this crest to a high point of 6184m (GPS height). The views on a perfect day included Gasherbrum I, both Durbin Kangris and various peaks in the Zug-Shaksgam, although Kaimuk Kangri blocked many of the latter and Durbin Kangri I plus its eastern extensions blocked the primary view of the 8000m peaks, including K2. The team descended the rapidly softening snow and spent the afternoon trying to beat the heat in their glacier camp.



Left: Gasherbrum I from P6184. Right: peaks between the Shaksgam and Zug-Shaksgam.

28th June

The view up-glacier from ABC contains a striking red rock spike. In fact this is "only" the end of a line of low peaks on the southern side of the Kizil Davan, but it seemed like a good target for another acclimatisation foray. The team was up before dawn and walked down the glacier to the foot of the 300m snow flank, studded with protruding rock shields, which made up the N side of this feature. After climbing up some gullies into this face, the climbers found the snow to be soft and mushy everywhere, the rock to be friable and unprotectable, and the snow depth over the rock shields to be worryingly thin in places. This peak no longer appeared to be a remotely safe or enjoyable idea. Back at the acclimatisation camp well after sun-up, Duncan and Mease decided it was too hot for any further activity while Normand and Shapovalov went up to Kizil Davan and turned south, climbing up a few short pitches and engaging in a further snow slog to reach the highest point, 5858m, on the immediate south side of the pass. Again the afternoon was spent avoiding the heat and the night sleeping at 5600m for acclimatisation.

29th June

The weather forecast was remaining robust and the climbers were considering that now might be a good time to embark on their North Face route. Thus they packed early and made the descent to ABC, taking the opportunity to look at the face in detail. One very clear ice line descended from high on the peak and just left of centre, apparently offering ice gullies, snow fields, an hourglass-shaped ice "pillar" leading to more gully ice and a mixed exit to the summit serac. With the rock in such poor shape, ice would be critical,

and with the morning sun actually hitting this NNE-facing face from 5am to noon, there was already some danger that the ice could be melting out.

During the descent, the team met Brexler and Kirschenhofer, who were aiming for Peak 6076, a snow cone in the basin between the two Durbin Kangris. They were on a shorter schedule, having to leave from BC on 5th July, and Nettekoven was forced to bow out for fitness reasons related to a recent medical procedure for heart arrhythmia. Shapovalov decided to join up with this pair. The afternoon for the Durbin Kangri team was spent at ABC making final preparations for a four-day push (with 1 night of fuel reserve) on the face.



Left: upper North Face of Durbin Kangri I with candidate ice line at left. Right: Mease searching in vain for climbable ice low on the route.

30th June

The climbers made an early start, but unexpectedly deep snow from a failed overnight freeze caused slow going. By first light, Normand was leading up the snow face skirting the seracs at the base of the face, completing the traverse below the target gully and breaking out the ropes just as the sun came onto the climbers. However, at this point all the planning went south. The grey ice turned out to be entirely hollow, with water pouring down huge gaps behind it. Mease thrashed around on both side of the starting gully, finding at best snice and elsewhere only soft vertical snow. Large amounts of old ice were thrown off the mountain but the rock beneath was in no fit state to be climbed, breaking off when touched with an axe (but not quite soft enough to be climbed like ice). Protection was non-existent. Normand, at the belay, was watching his ice-screws melt downwards and had no illusions about the consequences of a fall by Mease. The latter slung one of climbing history's more questionable V-threads in the snice and was lowered back to the belay without incident. The attempt was over, the face unclimbable. The team retreated to ABC. Later in the day, Brexler, Kirschenhofer and Shapovalov summited P6076.

1st July

The ABC team was largely out of food, as well as of ideas, and packed to descend to BC and regroup. The trio from P6076 descended from their high camp and the trio from Durbin Kangri helped them with equipment transport. The moraine descent was already showing strong changes and subsidence with the warmer conditions. Below the glacier

snout, the group met up with Nettekoven, who had stayed at a 4500m camp. All of the climbers then made the afternoon descent to BC, finding the river to be unaccustomedly high and incurring lots of wet feet. At BC they found Holc and Meznar returning from a shower trip to the hot spring at Durbin Jangal.

2nd July

All of the climbers remained in camp, eating and regrouping. The Germans packed to leave and Shapovalov decided for personal reasons to leave with them. The Slovenians had spent the interim week high in their chosen valley, finding a long slot canyon on the ascent and many crevasses on the glacier. They had made the ascent of a c. 6200m snow peak with a small rocky summit, obtaining evening views from K2 to the Ogre, and proposed to name it Kamnik Peak after their home village. The weather forecast had by now changed markedly from the one suggesting that an ascent of Durbin Kangri was on, with rain and snow promised for the following days.

3rd July

Rain fell, most intensely in the morning but lasting much of the day. The Slovenians packed 10 days of food and decided to leave anyway, the logic being to ascend while their river was low and gain further acclimatisation while waiting at their ABC.

4th July

The weather remained cloudy with occasional rain, but it looked as though much more precipitation could be falling on the surrounding peaks. Brexler and Shapovalov made an ascent of a 5400m rock peak above BC (above the Slovenians' pass), carrying climbing equipment but using it only for two broken pitches. The others watched the weather forecast, which was now for an improvement followed by a good spell, and discussed the possibility of climbing Durbin Kangri by its Northeast Ridge; photographs taken from P6184 suggested that this mostly-snow route could be climbed without excessive objective danger (mostly seracs).

5th July

The camels arrived early on another cloudy morning and left with the four departing members. Duncan, Mease and Normand left later for the shuttle back up to ABC, taking another 10 days of supplies. The weather there remained cloudy with occasional snow flurries and little evidence of the forecast improvement.

6th July

At 3am the sky was cloudy with further dustings of snow. No refreeze had happened and no weather stability was in sight. The team went back to sleep. At 8am the sun was out and the clearing was under way. As the climbers emerged from their tents, a huge powder/serac avalanche swept off the northeast flank of Durbin Kangri and crossed the glacier, leaving behind it a huge dust cloud. The idea of climbing this side of the peak dissipated with the settling cloud. The day proceeded to become warm and many more snow slides occurred. With their options shrinking, the climbers resolved to head next for the Zug-Shaksgam valley with a week of supplies, hoping to find more amenable conditions on Kaimuk or Burnag Kangri.

7th July

The trail over the pass had deteriorated considerably, with both new and old soft snow, and was again a fight. Some major serac collapses had occurred along the bottom of the North Face of Durbin Kangri I but the avalanche which had swept the proposed route, now no longer looking at all viable, had left little trace. The weather remained somewhat cloudy. The other side of the Kizil Davan was a short and crevasse-free snow slope leading to long scree slopes with very red rock giving way to impressive slabs on the left (north) side. However, the drainage river formed a cave-like canyon against these cliffs and a wading river-crossing was necessary to gain the right bank for the remainder of the descent. This area was composed of very curious collapsing soil layers that tended to form crevasses. The trekkers were moving out of the human zone and into one inhabited by large numbers of goats, which moved more in swarms than in herds when frightened. At the base of the long descent, the team members waded the relatively benign Zug-Shaksgam and hiked up a drainage of clear water, past a camp used by Mason in 1926, to pitch their own camp for the night.



Mountains of the Zug-Shaksgam. Left: Burnag Kangri and its northern neighbours. Right: P6490 and its neighbours.

8th July

The forecast hot and sunny weather had finally arrived. The day began with an uphill hike to avoid a constriction in the river, followed by a 200m descent forced by a canyon wall formed by the glacier draining the northwest side of Kaimuk Kangri. The trekkers waded up several sections of the Zug-Shaksgam until confronted by a slot canyon that was too narrow (high-flow) and long to confront safely. Fortunately, this section could be by-passed on loose scree slopes to the left. Another mellow wading section brought the team to the confluence of the Zug-Shaksgam with the river draining from the south side of Durbin Kangri I, again through deep canyons. This open area gave very impressive views of the Durbin Kangri I massif, none of which seemed to offer easy options. At this point it was possible to follow a long terrace system on the north bank of the river, which afforded some views of the forepeaks of Burnag Kangri and of a very impressive rock tower far back above the canyon systems. Indeed, all the rivers were at this point flowing in canyons made of vertical mud walls up to 50m in height, and getting down to the river was becoming a problem. The terrain was such that the climbers were unable to establish whether any of the drainages off Kaimuk Kangri could possibly lead to the feasible route apparently visible on Google Earth. One of these drainages was a steep canyon which

definitively cut off the terrace, and a delicate descent in a steep mud gully was necessary to wade the river and gain a flat spot for the night.



Scenic wading in the Zug-Shaksgam.

9th July

With the weather still excellent and the team location now close to the northeastern drainage from Burnag Kangri, this seemed to be the best opportunity for a route. Some initial scouting on the terraces above the river to the south indicated that the canyon had to be gained right at its base, and some time was lost searching for the access. This canyon then proceeded well for about 2km until it narrowed to a slot. The climbers began to wade, and to scramble up and around short waterfalls. The slot opened, giving hope, but then narrowed again, and finally became something like a tunnel shaft. Mease attempted to look around the first corner, but after 50m of dangerous wading could find no sign of an ending. The borderline-hypothermic team was forced to retreat, none the wiser as to how to approach Burnag.

10th July

The team was unable to obtain weather updates while in the Zug-Shaksgam. Building clouds the following morning suggested that the current window was already past its best and, with no inkling of a feasible route on any of the neighbouring peaks, the team decided to start its return. With the clouds turning to thick overcast, they were able to make their way back out of the Zug-Shaksgam and half-way up the Kizil Davan.

11th July

Clouds and occasional snow flurries followed the team up to and over Kizil Davan, where the sunlight then obligingly increased to further soften the route down the glacier to ABC.

12th July

The team made a slow and tired start from ABC, toting monstrous packs containing everything that had been there. The possibility of returning to this point, given the long distances, lack of safe climbing and continued decay of the surroundings, seemed remote. The moraines above the lower glacier had subsided spectacularly and the original ice-filled canyon below the glacier snout was now a dangerous eggshell of old ice over a semi-subterranean torrent. With the descent dragging well into a very hot afternoon, the team was forced into several wading manoeuvres at the limit of being carried away by the

rushing stream. The Slovenians were not in BC, where the main cook-shelter tarp had been shredded by some high winds. The satellite telephone was reanimated and contact re-established with the outside world.



Left and centre: dangerous wading to approach Burnag Kangri. Right: ramparts of Kaimuk Kangri from the south.

13th July

On another hot day in BC, the team recovered by watching the rivers rise to very impressive levels, the bright red Kulchintubulak river and the black torrent flowing out from the north side of Durbin Kangri II both spreading into many braided streams across the entire kilometre-wide valley floor. Normand's wife, Emily Cheng, informed the group that she had been contacted by Holc's wife to ask if there was any information concerning the Slovenians. They had not been heard from since the evening of 5th July.

14th July

The team had few options for tracing the missing Slovenians other than to follow their tracks into their approach valley. With the river raging out of a slot 500m from BC, it was decided that bypassing the lower canyon would be prudent, and instead the would-be search party climbed 900m above BC to cross the pass which the Slovenians had reported using on their first acclimatisation day. In fact the drainage on the other side was disappointingly steep and direct, dumping the team back to the river barely 1.5km above BC. The river was already strong but a crossing was effected, which led straight to some deep footprints left in the mud by Holc and Meznar, who clearly had not descended again by this route. The valley was passable for 1km, during which the team passed several cairns left by the Slovenians, but then it narrowed to a slot. Once again the team started to wade, hoping for a quick end to the icy, muddy and dangerous exercise, and once again was disappointed. The slot was shady and lined in many places by ice shelves, on which the Slovenians' prints could be seen from a time when the river was presumably ankle-deep. After yet another turn, a long stretch came into view with no respite, rising waters and increasing ice shelves. Duncan, who went for a further recce but returned frustrated, recalled hearing Meznar say that this slot was very long. Once again the team was forced to retreat before hypothermia and rising waters caught up with them. This way was impassable without a refreeze higher up. The descent was quick, apart from the last very

dangerous ford, and the return over the 5000m pass slow. The team alerted the Slovenians' contacts that this was indeed an emergency situation, as at minimum the pair could be trapped by the waters, out of food and out of telephone battery.



Wildflowers and peaks of the Zug-Shaksgam.

15th July

A rest day was required. Significant further telephoning was done, mainly to Cheng, who worked tirelessly on communications among 3 continents for the next 10 days. Further details of the last communication were gleaned from Slovenia: the missing pair had texted to say that they were camping at 5600m, presumably at the base of Durbin Kangri II North Face, and were still waiting for reasonable weather. The Slovenian Embassy in Beijing was advised to begin diplomatic representations for a helicopter search. Despite strong cautions to talk only about "missing trekkers," the Slovenian side managed to tell their national media all about "missing climbers," which at the time of writing may complicate the families' insurance claims.

16th July

The only option left for a ground search was to climb back up to ABC and to the summit P6076, then drop behind this and reascend to the east ridge of Durbin Kangri II in an effort to look down into the glacier basin where Holc and Meznar were last heard from. The team packed up and started back up the river towards ABC, but were brought up embarrassingly short. Some of the river-crossings part-way up the canyon were now deeper and more dangerous at 8am than they had been at 4pm four days previously. Yet again, the search effort was completely stymied. Back at BC, the news from the agency was that in their view helicopters were unnecessary; the much tougher locals with their camels would solve the problem when they arrived on the 19th.

17th July

Another day passed in heat and high rivers. The Slovenian Embassy appeared unable to accelerate the helicopter process, and Cheng reported long and fruitless exchanges with the agency and the Xinjiang Department of Foreign Affairs (the interface to the military) trying to explain the real situation.

18th July

The team members cleaned up the camp, including folding down the Slovenians' BC tent and packing up their kitchen and gear barrels. A cold front passed, which caused the

rivers to become remarkably low for a short time, but it was now too late for a ground search and the forecast was for still warmer weather, with freezing levels above 6000m, by the 21st, suggesting a high likelihood of being trapped.



Left: Ales Holc. Right: Peter Meznar. Photos courtesy of Christof Nettekoven.

19th July

Adil arrived with Daniyar and 3 camels. He sized up the slot canyons and some photos of glacier trekking, then informed his superiors that a helicopter would be necessary.

20th July

The camel drivers were rightly very worried about the Shaksgam crossing downstream of Durbin Jangal. The team therefore used the last of the cold weather to make the 10km walk from BC, past Durbin Jangal, through half the river, this time with all members on camels, and back to the site of the first camp in the Shaksgam, 5km from the foot of the pass. This point was also the base of another valley which could in principle be used to climb over to the search-zone glacier, by-passing the slot canyon, in two days of work.

21st July

The team was told to stay put and that a helicopter was in the air, but nothing arrived all day. In fact the Chinese have built an airstrip of sorts only 40km down the Shaksgam and it is presumed that the helicopter was moved to this location.

22nd July

A large military helicopter arrived early in the morning and took one member, Mease, for the search. Despite all the efforts at communications over the previous week, the Chinese side was clearly expecting to pluck some trekkers off an island in the middle of a river, and had brought a cohort of cameramen but no competent mountaineers, searchers or

even binoculars. Mease, who was forbidden to carry a camera, was flown over the Kizil Davan, as the pilot initially refused to follow the slot canyon. After failing to find another pass back over to the search-zone glacier, the pilot then had to retrace his path. Mease was dropped back at the new camp while the helicopter left to get more fuel. The pilot was also given our trekking map and could compare this with his charts to plot a proper course. The day turned very hot but the helicopter nevertheless returned around 2pm. This time the pilot gained height first, then flew far above the slot canyon, then crossed the lower glacier but turned before the end of the upper glacier, again worried at the narrowing walls of the basin. Neither Mease nor the other passengers were therefore able to take a detailed look at the primary search zone, but from a distance there was no sign of major avalanche activity or of any of the bright colours for be expected from tents, packs, jackets or any other climbing equipment. Mease was returned to camp again and the search would continue in the morning.

23rd July

This time the helicopter dropped several XDFA officials but left without picking up any of the team. It can only be assumed that they performed exactly the exercise Mease had given to the translator, crossing and scouring the upper basin in the cold, dense air of the morning. The XDFA staff asked many of the same questions again, which may have been policy or may have indicated that they were still entirely clueless. As the helicopter returned, the general in charge motioned that nothing had been seen. Some hours later, presumably after the military debrief, the team was called to be officially dismissed from the search scene. In enduring hot and cloudless weather, the camel train and trekkers climbed the Aghil Davan, "enjoying" beautiful but extremely bittersweet final views of the Shaksgam, the Gasherbrums and Durbin Kangri I. Camp was made at the first set of summer-pasture huts below the pass.

24th July

Normand, with a flight out of Kashgar on the 25th, left early to accompany the camel train and baggage to the single Landcruiser the agent had sent to Ilik on time. He was back in Kashgar at 8pm, facing another debrief from New Land and the XDFA, including a complete autopsy of the Slovenians' baggage. Duncan and Mease, waiting for a later Landcruiser, hiked out more slowly and spent the night with Adil and Daniyar in Ilik. During the hike, the helicopter was seen passing overhead again, but another negative result led to the Slovenians calling that afternoon for the search to be cancelled.

25th July

Normand repacked the team's baggage, shipping his and the Slovenians' to Beijing, then flew back there himself, arriving in the late evening. Duncan and Mease returned to Kashgar by road the same day, bringing the Shaksgam Expedition to an end.

Epilogue

Ales Holc and Peter Meznar did not reappear miraculously in the days or weeks following these search efforts. They are now presumed to have died in a trekking or climbing accident on or around 6th July. Both were experienced climbers with a long track record of difficult ascents in the high mountains. Both were family men, each

married with 3 children aged up to 12. Most of all, both were warm, witty, open and lively characters whose friendship and love will be missed by many. The Shaksgam Expedition team members extend their sincerest condolences to the Holc and Meznar families, as well as to all the friends and climbing partners who will miss Ales and Peter.

7 Conclusion

The expedition failed in its declared aims of climbing any of the high summits to the north of the Shaksgam River. It encountered poor rock and extremely warm temperatures resulting in rotten ice, deep snow and dangerous river crossings, all of which precluded any serious alpine climbing activity. The expedition members would like to honour the memory of Ales Holc and Peter Meznar, who disappeared due to a presumed accident while exploring this challenging region.

8 Acknowledgements

The expedition acknowledges with gratitude the generous assistance of the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council.

Appendix A: Bibliography

The upper Shaksgam has been chronicled by Mason (1926) and by Shipton in his book "Blank on the Map." However, by far the most, and most current, information concerning this region can be found in the writings of Andrei Lebedev about his 2010 trekking expedition. The Lebedev team prepared an exhaustive account which can be found on risk.ru, has posted hundreds of pictures to panoramio and has annotated Google Earth with some of these pictures.

Appendix B: Contact Information

China Xinjiang Mountaineering Association

All trekking and climbing activities in Xinjiang must be approved by the CXMA. They must be contacted through an agent. After the experience of this expedition, the author recommends that prospective visitors to western Xinjiang use the services of Taher Anwar at Kashgar Advantour (kashgaradvantour@hotmail.com), who is far the most knowledgeable and honest agent in the region.

Expedition members' contact information

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