

The Shkudara range, south-west Pamirs, Tajikistan.

TIM SPARROW

Top Marx in Pamirs for AC climbers

As my last foray abroad into the Greater Ranges finished with a painful poke between the eyes from a rifle muzzle, along with being relieved of money and gear, I was somewhat apprehensive to read internet reports shortly before leaving that Osama Bin Laden was reputed to be lurking somewhere in the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan. The Tajik government were quick to dispel this as a myth, though wife and family took some convincing, especially as we were to visit the Wakhan valley, along which runs the Afghanistan border. The only barrier to passage was a shallow river. However, the area was politically safe, we were assured, and no problems would be encountered with trigger-happy locals wanting to acquire some Western goods. Thankfully, this proved true.



17. Looking across the Wakhan valley to the Hindu Kush.
(*Tim Sparrow*)

Historically, the valley is very rich, with the remains of ancient castles and vestiges of civilisations covering three millennia. In the late 19th century the Russian Empire pushed south through here in a vain attempt to wrest control of India from the British. The famed meeting of Captain Younghusband with Colonel Yanov at the height of the 'Great Game' took place in this valley, with both convinced they were well within their own country's domains. Owing to the superior Russian numbers, Younghusband retreated gracefully, Yanov apologetically sending him back south with a haunch of venison. Shortly afterwards, the Pamir borders were drawn up, with a narrow finger of Afghan territory following the Wakhan valley, across which the two sides agreed not to venture.

With enticing pictures of rarely visited peaks, Phil Wickens tempted Club members to join him; like the other six members of the trip I was hopelessly ensnared and unable to say 'no'. We were aiming to make first British ascents in the rarely visited Shakdara range of the Pamirs, including Pik Karl Marx (6723m) and Pik Engels (6510m). Karl Marx, formerly known as 'Peak of the Peacemaker Tzar', was first climbed in 1946 via its snowy west face by a Russian team led by Beletski. Pik Engels, formerly 'Queen's Peak', was first climbed in 1954 by a team led by Gvarliani.

The range was very popular with Soviet climbers in the 1960s through to the 1980s. In 1982 the annual Soviet mountaineering championships resulted in many hard, mixed routes on some of the awesome north and east faces. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war that ravaged Tajikistan put an end to this activity and the range sank into quiet obscurity until recently. In 2004 a Russian group made a traverse of most of the range and in 2005 a multinational group of western NGOs working in Dushanbe visited the Shaboy valley from the north, hoping to climb both Engels and Marx. Finding the glacier approach extremely hazardous, they nearly reached the summit of Engels by a new route but were unable to access Karl Marx. As no British climbers, and seemingly no non-Soviet climbers, had climbed these mountains we were in an enviable position.

Arriving in Dushanbe's sizzling summer temperatures by the only Tajik Airline plane allowed to fly in Europe gave us our first headache. We had a five-week invitation but could only be granted a four-week visa at the airport. This would curtail later activity. Rick Allen, now resident in Dushanbe, collected us and took us to his Great Game travel company's guesthouse where most of us simply slept and sweated. All our food, except dehydrated hill food, was purchased in the bazaars of Dushanbe. Buying 50 loaves of bread and sealing them in plastic bags was not a good move in the prevailing temperatures.

The two and a half day journey, via Khorog, would be considered one of the great road trips of the world if it were better known and more accessible. The road for the most part followed the gorge of the Panj river, which drains the entire southern half of the Pamirs before its waters evaporate in the Aral Sea. For a whole day we bounced along rough dusty roads, gazing open-mouthed at Afghanistan across the rough, silt-laden river. The contrast between the countries left a deep impression. The Tajik side had a road, electricity and the ability to travel freely; the Afghan side had no electricity and only a narrow donkey track, which spectacularly forced a way through sheer cliffs along suspended walkways above the river.

Having arrived in Iniv, from where our maps indicated a herders' path leading into the Nishgar valley, we hired donkeys or 'Pamir Jeeps' to carry our supplies to Base Camp (excluding 50 loaves of fermenting bread). We sited this in a pleasant grazing meadow at 3800m, below the junction of the branches of the Nishgar valley. First impressions indicated a lot of scree.



18. Base Camp in the Nishgar valley with Pik Karl Marx looming beyond.
(*Tim Sparrow*)



19. Piks Karl Marx and Nikoladsye, looking up the East Nishgar glacier.
(*Tim Sparrow*)

Exploration of the West Nishgar glacier

Altitude headaches attended our arrival at Base Camp but did not prevent an exploratory visit up the West Nishgar valley where we hoped to acclimatise. Indistinct tracks led over loose, interminable boulders to a gear stash at 4725m from which we returned nursing worsening headaches. Two days later the whole party relocated to scratch a camp out of the boulders before dividing into three groups. From here, some decided on a single carry to a higher camp on the glacier at 5174m, while lesser (or more cunning) mortals opted to do this in two stages.

Heavy overnight snow on 12 August forced a switch of plans, so instead of attempting Ovalnya, Phil, Rick, Derek and Kai set off in mist to explore the Riga Pass. In brightening conditions they reached a small top at 5685m, overlooking the pass, which provided excellent views towards Litovskiy to the south and Karl Marx to the east. An easy descent led back to the camp in deteriorating weather.

Meanwhile Steve, Alex and I came up from the lower camp having climbed high and slept low. With a break in the poor weather, it seemed wise to gain a bit more acclimatisation, so we headed for a rounded peak labelled only as 5635m. Simple snow slopes led to a ridge followed

southwards to the summit, graced with a prominent boulder. Having no name, we christened it Great Game Peak. Others proposed a Soviet-style name, 'Peak of the Glorious Committee of the 150th Anniversary of the Alpine Club', but it wouldn't fit on the map. With no record of any ascent or cairn it may have been a first ascent but it seems unlikely.

Poor weather on 14 August sent all but Derek and Kai scurrying back to Base Camp. The pair still harboured the hope of climbing the impressive south-east face of Litovskiy's north summit. Despite overnight wind and snow, it was calm the next day and Derek and Kai set off. Arduous post-holing led to moderately angled snow gullies (30°) then upwards through several small rock buttresses to the broader, 70° upper slopes. A leftwards traverse on snow and ice gained the compact, corniced summit at 5905m. The continuing traverse to the higher south summit looked an interesting proposition. The pair abseiled their ascent route and returned exhausted to Base Camp that evening.

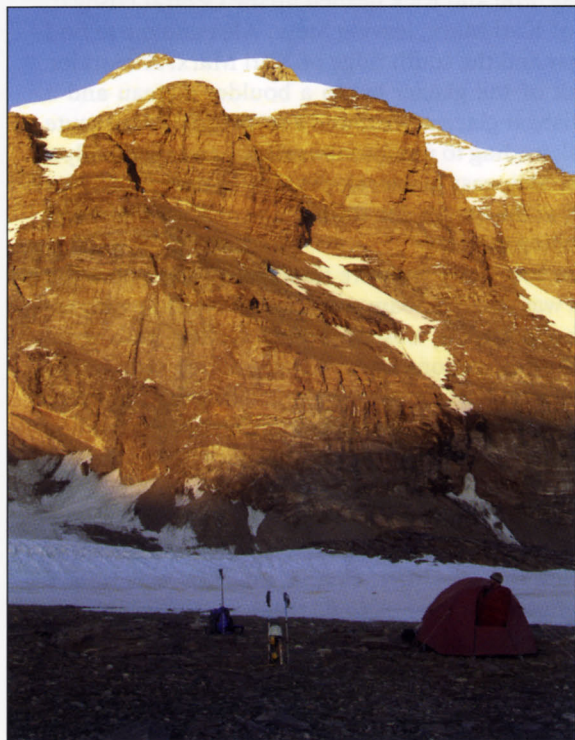
Exploration of the Central and East Nishgar valleys

On 16 August, Phil, Rick, Steve, Alex and I headed up the Central Nishgar valley, turning a rocky bluff (nicknamed 'The Beast') which barred access via a slog up steep scree on its west side. Camp was made on a sandy plateau at 4430m. Next day, Phil and Rick headed up the Central Nishgar, heading for the west face of Karl Marx, leaving Steve, Alex and me to find a route up the East Nishgar and the south ridge of Karl Marx. A moraine ridge on the true left bank of the glacier led to a boulder plateau and a crossing of the Far East Nishgar glacier. We found a surprisingly easy route through the ensuing icefall, leading to monotonous slopes and eventually a camp at about 5300m. Next day, easy glacier slopes led to a camp at 5800m below an impressive bluff, at the end of the south ridge of Karl Marx and the junction of two steepening glaciers.

Early starts were not our forte, and we were reluctant to stir before the sun warmed the tent. So it was about 8.30am when we set off to investigate the eastern branch of the glacier, the western branch having fresh sérac debris. We continued our investigations unexpectedly all the way to the summit. Once through the initial icefall, Alex led a plod through a cwm to a wall of steep snow and a col at about 6200m. Claiming fatigue, he handed the lead to Steve who ploughed up the broad east ridge until he too ground to a halt about 250m higher in the soft sugary snow. I took up the baton and ploughed on until I crested a cornice guarding the south ridge. The grind continued up the easy ridge until I too weakened. But by then there was no further to go, the view to the northern Shaboy and Khartsak valleys opened between the snow flurries and we claimed the first British ascent of Pik Karl Marx – disrespectfully ahead of the expedition leader! Descent was by the same route. From near the summit we spotted Phil and Rick as two tiny dots arriving to camp on a col at the top of the west face.



20. Alex Rickards and Steve Hunt at their top camp on the East Nishgar glacier.
(Tim Sparrow)



Left

21. Alpenglow on
the west face of
Pik Tajikistan.
(Tim Sparrow)

After a rest day, Steve, Alex and I reascended the eastern glacier to attempt the peak Nikoladsye. We gained its north ridge by a long ice slope of about 60° in the middle of which my arms and legs decided to stop working, necessitating a switch of lead. When Alex reached the ridge he began squawking excitedly, having been confronted with a near vertical drop of unfathomable proportions on the other side. Steve took over, threading a route through a large letterbox and on up the mixed ridge. Several times he was forced out onto the frighteningly exposed east side to climb short mixed pitches between easier snow gullies on the main ridge. Stances were good; belays were not. The summit (6340m) was several hundred metres away from the ridge top, where a small cairn was found. Descent was by the same route, the ice slope part abseiled, part down-climbed. The route was only a 500m ascent from camp and we had expected to knock it off and be back in time for an early tea. In fact it was nearly dark on our return, the penalty for lazy starts and complacency. Next day down at Base Camp an excessive quantity of Laphroaig was consumed – maybe more than our fair share – in summit celebration.

Phil and Rick's trip

Phil and Rick completed their ascent of the west face of Karl Marx after finding a route into the Central Nishgar valley. The ubiquitous scree led to the glacier snout, which was reached by precarious boulder-hopping. Rows of ice penitents and boulder-topped ice pinnacles lined the route up the relatively flat and safe glacier amid tremendous views of the west faces of Karl Marx and Pik Tajikistan.

A comfortable camp was placed above a small glacial lake, from where they recce'd the lower west face of Pik Karl Marx before climbing Pik Sosedniy; at 5894m this provided worthwhile acclimatisation. They ascended via a straightforward snow ridge to an enjoyable icy step, followed by a lower summit and, finally, the true summit. This was an excellent vantage point from which to assess the route up the west face of Karl Marx and take in the immense view to the north. Glaciers dropped dramatically below to a sea of brown hills that stretched into the distance. Beyond them, barely discernible against the horizon, lay Pik Revolution and the mountains at the head of the mighty Fedchenko glacier.

From a camp high on the Central Nishgar glacier an unusual pre-dawn start was made up the lower slopes of Karl Marx. Well-frozen snow allowed steady progress across rock-studded slopes towards a small but unstable sérac band. The sun rose, but Phil and Rick remained in the cold shade, working their way up a steep ramp between lines of huge crevasses. Their breathing became harder but persistent plodding took them above the surrounding summits. At two-thirds height their progress was rudely interrupted by a massive crevasse. Stretching the entire width of the face, its only weakness was a very narrow and precarious snow bridge.

Above the crevasse they met the sun and headed across the upper snowfield towards a large flattening where the west face met the west ridge. As the pair made camp, three tiny dots appeared on a snowy ridge far above them. Hunt, Rickards and Sparrow! Antlike, they reached the summit rocks of Karl Marx, faint flashes of their cameras piercing the intermittent cloud that swirled around them.

The following morning Phil and Rick awoke to dense cloud. However, as the morning progressed, several brief clearings exposed sections of ridge above, so using compass bearings they headed up until eventually they sat on a pile of scree below a steep and overhanging mass of rock. The summit was little more than a rope length above, requiring a delicate traverse on steep snow and ice-covered scree. The wind and snow started up for added effect. Retreat to the flat scree was inviting but one more delicate pitch allowed them to reach the snowy south ridge and within minutes they stood on the top of Karl Marx. It stopped snowing and, for a brief moment, the clouds parted, revealing blue sky, dirty glaciers below and, southwards, a faint line of footprints disappearing down the ridge.

An earlier radio conversation with the other three had suggested it would be easy to traverse the mountain, using the southern approach for descent. Their route description proved invaluable in locating the correct route in the whiteout. A brief clearing revealed the 6200m col far below, so with a fresh compass bearing they dropped out of the cloud. The remainder of the descent, involving the traverse of an unknown icefall, was hard work owing to a heavy layer of fresh snow.

To the west of the Central Nishgar glacier lies Ovalnaya, its beautiful east face rising above the lake camp used earlier. Returning to this valley to collect some stashed food and equipment, Phil and Rick set off the following morning up Ovalnaya's increasingly steep slopes towards the serrated north ridge. This gave a fantastic route, exposed and with numerous short pitches of solid water ice, ending abruptly on the short summit plateau. In descent they followed the ridge in its entirety, weaving around rocky gendarmes to reach the northern secondary summit, and then down steep slopes towards camp.

Derek and Kai's trip

On 17 August, after a day's rest at Base Camp, during which Kai made repeated attempts to repair his punctured Thermarest, Derek and Kai followed the others into the Central Nishgar valley. Usuf, our Pamiri Base Camp manager, had previously ferried tent and rope up The Beast to the sandy camp used by the others. The views to the Hindu Kush in the south and to Karl Marx in the north were impressive. Next day, in glorious sunshine, they continued up the rocky moraine leading to the glacier snout, and on to a snowy plateau at 5215m under the rocky south face of Sosedniy and looking across to Karl Marx's vast western glacier.

Continuing north the following day, they traversed just below the Lazar Pass in the hope of attempting Karl Marx from the north-west. Dangerous



22. West flank of Pik Karl Marx. (*Derek Buckle*)



23. Kai Green crossing a snow bridge on the west face of Pik Karl Marx. (*Derek Buckle*)

séracs on this face prompted a rapid reassessment and alternative thoughts of the west ridge. A snow ramp afforded relatively easy access to the steep (60°) ridge, which was climbed to prominent rocks at 5840m. With no ground suitable for a tent, two narrow bivvi platforms were cut, Sosedniy and Ovalnaya providing a dramatic backdrop. As the night chilled, Kai was again carrying out emergency repairs to his Thermarest after an argument with a ski pole created a substantial tear. His partner, on his Karrimat, was unsympathetic.

With poor weather at dawn, the appeal of continuing on Karl Marx waned. A better alternative presented itself. Early on 20 August, Derek and Kai down-climbed to the east ridge of Sosedniy which provided an easy ascent over snow and scree to a summit cairn at 5928m. Descending by the same route they traversed the upper glacier to camp beneath the west face of Karl Marx at 5586m. More Thermarest repairs were necessary before adjourning. Full marks for persistence, if not for efficiency.

Having seen Phil and Rick climb the west face earlier, Derek and Kai decided to follow suit, tracing an essentially similar route up the steep, heavily crevassed glacier and over the massive bergschrund at three-quarter height by the precarious snow bridge from which another rising traverse to the left gave access to the windswept col where camp was established at a height of 6388m.

After a cold, blustery night, morning was little better with poor visibility and light snow and wind. Conditions were uncomfortable but not impossible, so they continued, hoping that they would be able to follow their upward tracks on the return. Being unable to see the vast drop below made the final delicate pitches less nerve-racking but it was nevertheless a relief to reach the summit at 6736m, even though there was no view. Returning the same way the wind had removed their tracks so it was with some relief that they saw the tent appearing out of the gloom. Next day, in fortunately clear weather, they descended their route of ascent. Back on the glacier, camp was made below Ovalnaya at 5361m where they met up with Rick and Phil. This was their only contact with others above Base Camp. Truly empty mountains.

From this camp the east face of Ovalnaya looked inviting, Phil and Rick having expounded its virtues. With excellent weather on 24 August there could be no excuses. Phil and Rick returned to Base Camp while Derek and Kai set off early and repeated the east face route.

The Far East Nishgar glacier

Tim, Steve and Alex, having cunningly manoeuvred to be in front for Karl Marx, found time for a final foray. Reascending The Beast, we camped at the boulder plateau at 4800m and next day continued on scree, 'up the down escalator', alongside the steep icefall of the Far East Nishgar glacier. From below, it seemed that Pik Tajikistan (6585m) would be possible up



24. Alex Rickards and Steve Hunt camping below the Far East Nishgar glacier. (*Tim Sparrow*)



25. Alex Rickards and Steve Hunt descending the south ridge of Nikoladsye South. (*Tim Sparrow*)

easy snow, but the reality of a major wall was hidden from view. We camped on a plateau beneath this and reflected through the evening, as we watched thunderstorms beyond the Hindu Kush in Pakistan, that the only outside evidence we had seen of the human race for three weeks were the satellites overhead.

Next morning, we ascended a small icefall and followed the true left side of the glacier to an attractive peak of about 6250m, to the south of Nikoladsye, which we called, unsurprisingly, Nikoladsye South. Near the summit we exhumed a cairn to find a wrapped chocolate bar and a note which indicated that the peak had been visited in 1958 by a team of Soviet climbers. We added our own names, left some sweets, but eschewed the 48-year-old chocolate. The marble of the south ridge was so soft we kept crampons on. Back in base camp next day, with the donkeys due that evening, the legendary cooking of Chef Wickens produced a feast out of scraps.

The return to Dushanbe was not without incident, involving collapsing donkeys, punctures and breakdowns, all part of the game for our drivers, it seemed. Due to visa extension problems, we had a few days to spare in Dushanbe so we escaped the heat to the Fann mountains just to the north. However, instead of some potentially exciting rock climbing on a recommended peak, we were duped into fitting a three-day trip into two. This allowed only an unpleasant slog up a scree couloir to a col, only to find that we had no time to summit, just time to hurtle straight back down the couloir and race back to the road to meet our lift back to town. Still, it was a beautiful valley and the hospitality of a local shepherd was memorable.

The Shakdara mountains of the Pamir left a deep impression on us all. Wild and empty, the southern valleys offer ample opportunity for middle grade exploratory mountaineering in a remote setting. The Tajik people and those of the Wakhan in particular were hospitable and welcoming and the Wakhi are privileged to live in such a dramatic valley. As Phil commented on leaving the enclosed valleys of the high mountains and seeing once more the vastness of the Wakhan: 'I do love the mountains, but I think I like the spaces between them even more.'

Summary: An account of the Alpine Club expedition to the Shakdara range, south-west Pamirs, Tajikistan, in August 2006, led by Phil Wickens. Four glacier valleys were explored and successful ascents made of seven mountains, all first British ascents.

From the West Nishgar valley, **Litovskiy North** (5905m) was climbed by Derek Buckle and Kai Green. **Great Game Peak** (5635m) was climbed by Tim Sparrow, Steve Hunt and Alex Rickards. From the Central Nishgar valley, **Pik Karl Marx** (6736m, GPS reading), **Pik Ovalnaya** (5780m) and **Pik Sosedniy** (5894m) were climbed by Buckle, Green, Phil Wickens and Rick Allen. From the East Nishgar valley, **Karl Marx** and **Nikoladsye** (6340m) were climbed by Sparrow, Hunt and Rickards. The same trio also climbed **Nikoladsye South** (6250m) from the Far East Nishgar valley.



26. On the summit of Pik Karl Marx. *From left clockwise: Alex Rickards, Steve Hunt and Tim Sparrow. (Tim Sparrow)*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The expedition members would like to express their gratitude to the British Mountaineering Council, the Mount Everest Foundation, and also to the Alpine Climbing Fund (sponsored by First Ascent) for financial assistance.