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# Unknown Heartlands of China's Wilderness

## Four Years of Exploratory Mountaineering in the Chang Tang Plateau



Jeff on his way down from the summit of Jiao Feng



Summit view looking south from Jitanzhoma



Unclimbed Gyalongsum from Jitanzhoma



Kalurung from Jitanzhoma



Burog Co and the Zangser Kangri Range



Nadine looking at Kangzhagri, still three day's walk away

## **2007 Kangzhagri – a second attempt, four years later**

In 2003 Nadine Saulnier and I crossed the Chang Tang plateau. It was the first time it was ever crossed from the north to the south completely unsupported. It took us 46 days and we almost paid for it with our lives. In a way it was a success, but we had failed to reach the summit of Kangzhagri, arguable the hardest to reach of all 6,000 m peaks. When we in the winter of 2007 got to know other expeditions planned to make an attempt to climb the mountain we decided to give the peak a second try. We knew the “competitors” were going during the drier and more suitable fall season and that had been the reasonable thing to do also for us, but we saw no choice but making an attempt in the middle of the summer, during the season of heavy precipitation. All in order to get there first.

We bought all provisions locally in the small dusty towns in the Qinghai Province and packed our bicycles with 50 days worth food and fuel. We had no interest in using motorized vehicles as we considered it a failure in terms of going by fair means. Also, we doubted we could reach the peak at all if using this setup. A huge, badly planned, heavy Swedish expedition had proven that early in the year and it had gotten hopelessly stuck over 200 kilometers from the peak.

When we started our trip from the little town of Huatugou our bikes weighted about 80 – 90 kilos each. As soon as we reached the plateau proper the monsoon weather struck us with full force. Rain, thunderstorms and blizzards became our companions during the whole journey and at one point we didn't see the sun for nine consecutive days. Needless to say we couldn't cycle much. Our steel horses were our pack animals and one of the few alternatives to bring in enough provisions for a venture like this. After we had crossed the Kunlun Shan we decided to leave the bicycles as the terrain got really muddy and tough. We packed our backpacks with food for 15 days and set off for the peak on foot, which was still about 85 km away.

27 days and about 600 km after we had left Huatugou we were finally at the foot of the peak. By incredible luck we had a clear and quite calm morning and our way to the summit was relatively uneventful. We had some encounters with small crevasses, but apart from that it was an easy climb to the summit of one of the world's most inaccessible and desolate peaks. It took us about two weeks to get back to civilization again and from there Nadine went home while I continued to Kashgar, the old Silk Route town in Xinjiang.

## **Dahongliutan Kunlun**

After some climbing in the Kongur and Muztagh Ata area I teamed up with Jeff G. and went to the Dahongliutan Kunlun. As acclimatization for higher targets we first summited Sirenshou (6,214 m), a peak south-west of Highway 219. Two days later we climbed another 6,000 m peak close by and were struck by surprise when we found a large military cairn on its summit.

Yet some days later we were at the foot of Qierlizuoke Feng (6,802 m), the highest peak in the area. The night before our planned summit day it was snowing heavily. There was a lot of fresh snow on the peaks the following morning and we had to turn back at roughly 6,350 m due to severe avalanche danger. As a small compensation we successfully summited Jiao Feng (6,370 m) two days later, where we escaped being avalanched with small margin.

## **Biking towards Tibet and some mountains along the road**

Jeff left for home and I continued my bike ride towards central Tibet. On the way I hiked to the summit of little Satsum Kang (5,951 m) just beside the road and made a failed attempt on Sirengou I

(6,503 m). Also here there was a lot of fresh snow and I found it smart to head down before disaster struck. The highest point I reached was about 6,400 m. Some hours after I had left the peak a small avalanche swept over the route I had been on.

I later made a stupid choice of route on Guozha Kangri (6,262 m). Only a dozen vertical meters below the summit I had to turn back due to a very unstable cornice on the summit ridge. It was a humbling as well as disappointing experience to have failed on three out seven targets in a short period of time.

### **The Toze Kangri Massif**

Close to the little settlement Sumxi I met up with three other climbers, also traveling by bicycle. On small roads we made our way towards the Toze Kangri massif in the outskirts of the Chang Tang. As they kept a slow pace and I arrived at the main massif days ahead of them I climbed some small peaks in the area. I was very surprised to find a summit cairn on a little peak (5,796 m) NNW of the main range.

When the rest of the gang arrived I summited what probably is the secondary peak in the range with one of the other persons in the group. I say probably as the GPS readings from the summits are very close. This summit we called Toze Kangri SW (6,366 m). Two days later I soloed the highest summit in the Toze Kangri range, the NE peak which measured 6,369 meters by GPS. Yet again two days later I stood on Toze Kangri Pyramid (6,029 m), a smaller peak in the west part of the range.

I had plans for more peaks in the area, but after an accident with involving gasoline and food I had to get back to civilization a.s.a.p. The following month I crossed the Gangdise range and made my way to Lhasa, where I also spent New Year. The winter was spent trekking smaller peaks close to Lhasa.

### **Winter and early spring climbing in central Tibet**

In early 2008 I made an unsuccessful new route attempt on Kaluxung (6,674 m). Fierce winter winds almost blew me off the summit ridge and I had to turn back about 100 meters shy of the summit. In equally violent winds I managed to make it to the summit of Jitanzhoma (6,028 m) a peak in the outskirts of the Noi jin Kangsang massif.

After the riots in Lhasa in March it was very hard to travel freely in Tibet, but I made it to Pulha Ri, a 6,424 meter peak in the western parts of the Lhakoi Kangri Range. The peak wasn't difficult, but frozen waterfalls in the gorges leading to the peak made the expedition demanding and as usual during the cold months the winds were strong and unpredictable. On summit day there was a break though and I had wonderful views of the high Himalaya and it was a great feeling to enjoy the scenery showing six of the world's 8,000 meter peaks in splendid sunshine.

### **A long Chang Tang traverse again**

My journey had taken me to Golmud in the Qinghai province and in early summer of 2008 I met up with Nadine Saulnier and M. A. We equipped ourselves with provisions for 60 days and once again we were heading into the wild, desolate and barren Chang Tang Plateau.

Oddly enough the weather was completely different from the year before and we didn't have more than half a dozen snowy days. On our journey towards the interior of the plateau I was suffering not having the time to climb anything in the Ayalik, Qimantag and Fujian Ranges and when we had crossed the Kunlun and passed on the southern side of Ulugh Muztagh (6,973 m) it was almost painful passing it without giving it a closer look. After 36 days in the sole company of wolves, wild yaks and chirus we finally arrived at our first target of the journey – Kukuxili, or Songzhiling (6,388 m).

On summit day the weather was very bad and at times we had visibility down to only a meter. The peak's location and our small supplies of food made us push on regardless of the fact that we had no idea where the summit was located, nor what the rest of the climb looked like. With the help of GPS coordinates we finally found the highest point of the peak where we placed a horn of a chiru as a tribute to these beautiful animals of the plateau.

As our plan was to cross the plateau we went dead south from here towards our next goal.

## **Burog Co and Purog Kangri**

Nine days after we had left Kukuxili, on day 47 of our journey, we arrived at Burog Co, a large beautiful lake at roughly 5,200 m. On both sides of the lake large glaciers on the mountain ranges are feeding the lake with melt water and we aimed for the west side as our plan was to make an attempt on Purog Kangri. The peak was an easy walk so if we may have been a little bit disappointed by the ease of the climb the views made up for it. They were absolutely astonishing and it's for sure one of the most beautiful places I have ever been to. It's also the only place where I have seen larger mammals over 6,000 m. A group of chirus had escaped the "summer heat of the lowlands" and were basking in the sun on 6,150 m.

When we finally reached Gomo Co on day 53 we were down to our last meals and we gratefully accepted some rice and tea from the first nomads we met close to the lake shore. They were the first human beings we had seen for 39 consecutive days. The total length of this traverse was roughly 1100km and took 55 days.

## **2010 – Altun / Arjin Shan**

In the fall of 2010 I once again arrived in Huatugou and I was happy to be back for another expedition in the highlands of western China. As usual my bicycle was my pack animal, porter or mula. My company this time was Lars B. and we first focused on Aleke Tag (6,080 m), which sometimes also goes under the name Akato or Yusupu Aleketag. The mountain is located in a very dry area and I was surprised that the glacier system was as large as it was. The views from the summit were splendid with the Taklamakan Desert in the north and the Kunlun Shan with all its sub-ranges and the eerie emptiness of Chang Tang in the south.

Qimantag Shan is a small obscure range at the northern shores of one of the world's largest saline lakes, Ayakkum Hu. Our plan was to make a first ascent of the highest peak in the range, but due to really bad weather we failed with the navigation. We reached a peak which probably is the second or third highest in the group. Its elevation measured from the summit is 5,551 meters.

After crossing the incredibly muddy Fujian Shankou (a mountain pass of approximately 5,100 meters) we went for a lonely peak which doesn't really belong to any of the more distinct ranges in the area. Fujian Feng (5,866 m) was climbed quickly and Lars joked that it almost felt like a rest day to climb a 6,000 m peak, compared to hauling the heavy bikes through mud and ice cold rivers day after day. I concurred.

Usually, when on expeditions like the described, one can't get close enough to climb the peak from where the bikes have to be left behind. It had always been some days walking from the last "bike camp" to the Mountain "BC". When we arrived at the east end of the Ayalik range we were surprised to find out that we only had 4 km to the summit of "Ayalik East" (5,952 m) from there we had had to stop hauling the bikes.

We were very lucky in terms of timing and just when we arrived at the summit a fierce wind started

to pound us. With mild frost bite on two fingers we made it back to the tents.

We traveled along the full length of the Ayalik Range until we arrived at the foot of the highest summit. It was the trickiest of the climbs on the journey and avalanche prone slopes, unstable corniced ridges and gullies with massive rock fall almost made me turn back. Finally I reached the summit, which actually is a huge boulder on top of a narrow ridge. I was happy to reach the 6,167 meter high summit, but also a bit sad as I knew this was the last summit on that year's trip.

## Central Kunlun 2011 – 2012

In 2011 M. and I completely failed to get anywhere in the maze of gorges and sandy areas in the foothills on the northern side of the Kunlun Shan. We went back in 2012 and the first target was the lonely and highly coveted peak Ak Tag. The peak marks the highest point in between Ulugh Muztagh and Qong Muztagh and a few expeditions have tried to reach its 6,758 m high summit. Most had stranded very early as the gorges leading to the plateau are very hard to navigate and also dangerous due to flash floods and rock fall.

About a fortnight after the start from Kashgar we finally reached the lake some 30 km far from the peak. M. had decided to go home and I was all of a sudden alone on the project. A blizzard struck on 5,800 m and I had to ride it out for 48 hours. As there was a lot of fresh snow I had to resort to some shorter passages of rock climbing in order to stay safe from avalanches. The northern side of Ak Tag is a 700 m almost vertical wall, but the southern side holds no technical obstacles apart from a small vertical ice wall just below the summit ridge. In wonderful weather I reached the summit and I once again had the fantastic opportunity to gaze out from yet another previously unclimbed summit. The original plan had been to continue to other virgin summits in the area, but as I my partner had bailed out I found no other solution than turning back to civilization. I comforted myself with the fact that the mountains would be there for a very long time to come and I promised to return as soon as I got the opportunity.



	Name	Alternative name	Altitude	Prominence	Location	Result	Notes	
<b>2007</b>	<b>Kangzhagri</b>		6,323	1,288	35°33'25"	89°34'40"	Summit	
	Koskulak		7,028	9,68	38°13'54"	75°06'45"	Failure	Eye problems/contact lenses
	<b>Sirenshou</b>		6,214	9,64	35°49'33"	79°13'42"	Summit	
	"Military Peak"		6,207		35°49'28"	79°12'34"	Summit	
	Qierizuoke Feng		6,802	1,476	36°01'18"	79°27'38"	Failure	Avalanche danger
	<b>Jiao Feng</b>		6,370		35°57'54"	79°26'41"	Summit	
	Satsum Kang		5,951		34°41'11"	80°12'28"	Summit	
	Sirengou I	Dong Luokezong Shan	6,535	1,243	34°47'14"	80°17'21"	Failure	Under equipped/avalanche danger
	Gouzha Kangri		6,262		34°30'41"	80°20'52"	Failure	Cornice danger
	P5796		5,796		34°58'53"	82°07'15"	Summit	
<b>2010</b>	<b>Toze Kangri SW</b>		6,366		34°44'17"	82°19'51"	Summit	
	<b>Toze Kangri</b>		6,369	1,197	34°46'32"	82°21'52"	Summit	
	<b>Toze Kangri Pyramid</b>		6,029		34°41'44"	82°12'56"	Summit	
	<b>2008</b>	Many trekking peaks including Mindruk Sari, Druk Zhruk, Gyaphetri, Bumpari						
		Kaluxung	Kalurong	6,674	1,458	28°51'02"	90°12'25"	Failure
<b>Jitanzhoma</b>			6,028		28°51'40"	90°08'09"	Summit	
<b>Pulha Ri</b>			6,424	1,198	28°58'01"	87°16'40"	Summit	
<b>Kukushili</b>		Songsniling	6,388	1,342	35°39'48"	85°37'03"	Summit	
<b>2010</b>	<b>Purog Kangri</b>		6,436	1,054	34°24'45"	85°38'00"	Summit	
	<b>Aleke**</b>	Akato or Yusupu Aleke Tagh	6,080	1,923	38°11'24"	88°54'30"	Summit	
	<b>"Qimantag III"</b>		5,551		37°45'55	89°19'12	Summit	
	<b>Fujian Feng</b>		5,866		37°25'29	88°07'29	Summit	
	<b>"Ayalik East"</b>		5,952		37°23'12	87°55'18	Summit	
<b>2012</b>	<b>Ayalik**</b>		6,167	1,728	37°23'18"	87°36'24"	Summit	
	<b>Ak Tag**</b>	Sichaxuefeng	6,758	1,920	36°43'27"	84°36'06"	Summit	

Peaks in **bold letters** are to my best knowledge first ascents

\*\*So called Ultras, peaks with a prominence higher than 1,500 meters

Altitudes given are measured by GPS from the summit, or from the official peaklists (Jurgalski, de Ferranti & Matzlish works)

Prominence stats are also from the above mentioned lists

Coordinates are a mix of GPS, official from lists and some are from Google Earth (these should be correct within a few meters)



Summit view looking east from Ak Tag



Pulha Ri



Typical campsite and Nadine in Tula Valley



Summit view from Jiao Feng



Summit ridge and huge cornice on Kaluxung



Kaluxung



Burog Co (lake) and the Zangser Kangri Massif seen from high on Purog Kangri



Ak Tag and a bright blue lake



First sight of Kukushili after 35 days in the wilderness



Crossing a muddy river close to Gomo Co



Typical campsite and Lars in the Ayalik Range



Janne in the middle of nowhere on the Chang Tang after a night of snow