

Pamiri Exposure 2017: Tajikistan!

“You are the first,” our host, Odina, said to Spencer and I upon asking if anyone in the village had ever seen or heard of climbers going into the valley where we were headed. Based on research in various international climbing journals, we had both figured the answer would be no, but it remained surprising considering we were heading to the north face of the highest mountain in the range, and surely someone over the years must have attempted it. All along, we had only one photograph of the mountain from this side, but the lower face was partially obscured and taken from some distance away. Everything else was a mystery – exactly the way we like it!

As the donkeys set off from Odina’s home in Bassid and we followed behind them into a narrowing canyon, we knew the next few weeks would be unpredictable. We were headed to a smaller village called Devlok, about 5 miles up the Devlok River – a tributary of the Bartung Valley. Getting to this point was already a small accomplishment. Late the previous night, we had arrived after a non-stop 17 hour drive from Tajikistan’s main commercial airport in the capitol city of Dushanbe – on the opposite side of the country (although our driver, Iftikhor, did have to stop briefly a half dozen times to pay bribes to security checkpoint personnel and police officers). The drive was mostly on a dirt road called the Pamir Highway, which towers above the torrential rapids of the Panj River – the boundary between northern Afghanistan and the Pamir Mountains of eastern Tajikistan. Upon branching off from the Panj River into the Bartang Valley, the road became narrower, more rugged, and the valley much less populated.

I had slept a total of six hours in three days, having arrived at the airport in Dushanbe at 3:30 am after 30 hours of airports and airplanes to immediately find Spencer, hop in a landcruiser, and drive all day and into the night in a shaking, bouncing vehicle. We caught some sleep at Odina’s house and were up early to start repacking the bags for our donkey-assisted trek. By mid-morning we were off, passing the last houses of Bassid as we followed our two donkeys and their “driver”, Nazar, up the narrow trail towards Devlok. It had all passed so fast, and I was still moving.

Devlok, for us at least, is an idyllic place at the confluence of two glacier-fed rivers that have been partially diverted into channels that, over the centuries, have transformed a barren landscape of talus and rock into lush forests, hay and wheat fields, apricot trees, and gardens of many varieties, just like many of the villages elsewhere in the region. As early as the 1980’s, during the Soviet times, the entire Bartung Valley and all of its tributary valleys were inaccessible by vehicles, and everyone walked and used donkeys to get around the vast expanses of the Pamir mountains. Devlok is reminder of those times before roads, and presumably before tourists began occasionally visiting the region. But even down in Bassid, which has been connected to a road for years, remained without electricity until 2015, when Odina’s decade-long quest was realized and the installation of small river turbine was completed for the village’s several hundred residents.

As the donkeys were unloaded for a foraging break in Devlok, we were guided down a trail to a hut where goat milk yogurt, black tea (the local hydration staple consumed in impressive quantities with every meal), and bread were served to us by strangers who expected nothing in return. Further up the valley, the only bridge in several miles hung over a raging rapid. Thin logs tied together by twine and filled in with sticks and rocks, it seemed impossible that the donkeys could cross it, but after unloading them they crossed with unexpected ease, bringing us to a series of hay fields where teenage girls reaped hay by hand with a sickle, which they would later carry on their backs seven miles to Bassid to feed to goats and donkeys during the coming winter.

From this seasonally inhabited place, the “trail” turned to virtually nothing; scree above the powerful river, where one of the donkeys lost footing and slid towards the river. Immediately dumping our packs, we rushed down to the donkey to push him back up to the trail, narrowly avoiding a much worse outcome. By this time, late in the afternoon, the heavily loaded donkeys were slowing to a crawl. On steeper sections we pushed them from the rear to keep them moving. Constantly we’d need to stop and readjust the balance of the bags on their backs, and go ahead and pull them by their halters. And by dusk, after another section where the trail skirted precariously above the river, forcing us to unload everything and carry the bags across so the donkeys could pass, we turned a corner and finally greeted our main objective, Patkhor Peak.

I began yelling so loud in excitement upon viewing the face for the first time, Nazar must have thought I had already lost my mind so early in the trip. Spencer came up behind me shortly after, and we both stood there, speechless, looking at a mountain starkly similar to K2 as seen from Concordia, in Pakistan’s Karakoram Range. “It’s the perfect mountain,” Spencer declared as I simply tried to compose myself while thinking of what it would take to actually climb it. I was elated and excited, yet also thoroughly intimidated. This was a big project, and the wonder and easygoing demeanor of the day spent trekking into the wilderness quickly turned to a sense of duty. We were on a mission to climb this thing, and the next couple weeks would be entirely dedicated to figuring out how exactly that would unfold. As darkness set in, we rolled out our sleeping bags among the last pastures where villagers regularly venture, and in the morning set off into the final stretches of terrain leading to the face, without a clue as to how far the donkeys would be able to go.

By nine in the morning we had covered a couple miles and came across an avalanche path that formed a snow bridge across the river which the donkeys barely crossed, even after fully unloading them. Had they fallen at the steepest part, they would have been swept into the river and under the snow bridge, possibly drowning. I was astonished as to what Nazar was willing to risk with his animals, yet I also realized that the wages we paid him are substantial for him and his family, and an employment opportunity like this doesn’t come around very often for him. After all, we were the first expedition known to have ventured to Patkhor from the north, and it was possible that the ground we were now traveling may never have been explored by donkeys before.

After another mile, Nazar attempted to cross a knee deep tributary creek without unloading the donkeys. The first one stumbled and nearly fell into the creek fully loaded with our bags, forcing us to unload the animal while in the middle of the creek, and then unloading the other for the crossing. Loading and unloading became routine, and we wondered how far we'd make it that day at this rate, as Nazar spoke no English. Initially we had hoped that the donkeys would take us all the way to the base of the north face, yet that was becoming increasingly unlikely. In the distance, the valley steepened on both sides and became more complex.

We reached a knoll above the river and looked further into the valley, and it was clear that the donkeys would not be going any further. Nazar gestured that this was it, and we began unloading them for the last time. Two hundred pounds of gear, food, and fuel sat in a pile, not anywhere close to the base of the north face. I have no idea what Nazar was thinking, but I can only guess he thought we were a bit crazy. He certainly knew that getting beyond that point with this much stuff and no pack animals isn't easy; after all, aside from Bo White's hike to somewhere near this point several years ago (which produced the only photo we had ever seen of the face), we had not heard of anyone traveling beyond that point, though it's certainly possible.

With a half day left and Nazar gone, we decided to carry a full load of climbing gear into the valley. We traveled along the west side of the river until the slopes became too steep and loose to navigate safely. Fortunately, we found a small snow bridge that just barely allowed access to steep and loose talus slopes on the other side of the river, and after thrashing up it, arrived on the glacial moraine on the east side of the river. From there, we could see that this terrain could be navigated without too much difficulty, and I remembered that a large snow bridge near where Nazar and the donkeys left us would, theoretically at least, allow us to cross back over the river to our cache, thereby avoiding the dangerous snow bridge we had just crossed.

We carried our loads further up the moraine until we found a place close enough to the north face (still a few miles away though) and relatively flat enough to establish a base camp. Dumping our loads there, we headed back to figure out how to cross the big snow bridge and end up where we started. Fortunately, descending to the snow bridge was possible, but certainly not pleasant. It was incredibly loose, and we both dislodged thousands of pounds of rocks as we went down, but it remained our only route to base camp, and we'd need to haul loads up it the following day.

In the morning, we sorted 16 days of food and fuel, packed up camp and loaded our 75+ pound packs, but leaving some less essential items, food, and fuel in a cache. Heading up the scree above the snow bridge was tedious and required notable concentration; indeed, falling over backwards with a heavy pack, while not fatal, could have been ugly, but within an hour after leaving camp we were at the top of the slope safely, and by that evening had basecamp set up and fully stocked after an hour or two of leveling rocks for tent platforms. Everything we did, we figured, would be a first ascent, and we felt a bit giddy with the opportunities ahead of us.

The goal now was to reconnoiter the face from every angle to identify a route to climb, and just as importantly, to find a safe descent route from the summit. This reconnaissance would also provide much needed acclimatization, as essentially every direction was up. Our base camp only had a view of the upper two-thirds of most of the face, but adjacent to our base camp was a minor peak that appeared to offer the best views of the face itself, so we climbed it the following day. Sitting on the summit at about 15,600 feet, we inspected the face carefully with binoculars and found two possible lines; one directly up the north face primarily on ice to join the summit ridge a bit above 19,000 feet, and the other following a long ice slope to join the west ridge to the summit. Both looked awfully imposing, and we were learning that the rock quality was terrible in most places. From this angle, even if we could climb the face or the west ridge, getting down was going to be the problem.

The following day, we ventured onto a different peak in order to gain a view of the northeastern part of the face, climbing to just over 17,200 feet and discovering a long couloir that gains Patkhor's upper face at about the same altitude. This, we figured, could offer a bypass to the dangerous bergschrund and ice pitches of the lower part of the north face proper. Still, however, there was no logical or safe looking descent route anywhere on the mountain. To unlock this mystery, we'd need to climb the mountain to the northwest of Patkhor and study the west ridge from a better angle, and see if we could piece together a descent route on the west face of the mountain.

After a rest day, we packed two days of food and fuel and headed up to the base of the glacier on this 18,100 foot unnamed and almost certainly unclimbed mountain northwest of Patkhor, where we set up a camp at about 15,200 feet. The climbing above didn't look terribly difficult, yet it would be technical in any case. I figured we'd summit and be back to high camp by 2 or 3 pm. We started up the glacier, roping up when the crevasses started to present themselves, and continued to a steep snow slope which we climbed unroped to a saddle under an 800 foot ice headwall. Using all of the 5 ice screws we brought for this outing, we simul-climbed the section with one belay, placing screws every 75 feet or so on ice up to 70 degrees steep. This exciting section gave way to moderate snow fields and I thought I could see the summit not far above. Turning a corner around some rock formations, the actual summit appeared at the end of a steep summit ice ridge which we'd need to traverse. It was at the beginning of this ice traverse that I captured one of the best images of the entire trip – that of Spencer leading off towards the summit, placing ice screws and simul-climbing with a whole lot of air under his feet.

By the time we left the summit it was already after 4 pm, and we'd need to rig V-thread rappel anchors down most of the ice headwall, which takes considerable time. But fortunately, Spencer had an excellent idea to bypass the rappels entirely and traverse around them to the west. After descending loose talus and scree on a ridge to the west of the ice headwall, we were able to cross a bergschrund and regain the base of the ice wall, and 2 hours later we were at high camp, just before dark. But since we had planned on being back to base camp that night, we were almost entirely out of food, so while Spencer ate a couple extra GU's for dinner, I drank some tea and had a handful of crackers. Laughing at the situation and stoked about our

day and our summit, we soon fell asleep under crystal clear skies and no wind, then descended to base camp the next morning without breakfast.

With the days moving along, we agreed to give the north face an attempt, but before doing so, we took a day and split up. Spencer would trek up to the base of the couloir on the northeast side of Patkhor – the route he believed would offer the best chance for success – to have a close look, while I would head back down to our lower camp/cache to back-carry some items we no longer needed at base camp, and to restock our food and fuel supply and replace my broken solar panel with Spencer's, which was at our cache. We took a rest day, then headed to Patkhor.

We both knew that to succeed, we'd need to descend the same route we climbed, which in my view would be incredibly dangerous, but I was willing to go up and see how it might unfold. As usual, I would go until I felt that the risks were unacceptable, and then turn around. If that time never came, we might succeed. This was worth a shot – an honest attempt – even though the chances seemed slim. Spencer, in his admirable omnipresent sense of optimism and positivity, showed no signs of hesitation or impending failure as we approached Patkhor with 4 days of food and fuel and full climbing gear.

The climb began by traversing around a large bergschrund in order to gain the couloir. Unroped, we climbed carefully above the gaping 'schrund until conditions eased up and allowed for some enjoyable front-pointing. Higher up, the conditions turned into enormous channels of ice and very firm snow, allowing us to remain unroped, as a fall would likely only result in getting stuck in one of these runnels. It was fun, gymnastic climbing involving all muscles and motions while traversing between runnels, climbing deep within them, and climbing around difficult sections -- unlike anything I've ever climbed before.

But as the day wore on, my earlier concerns that we'd have no place to pitch our tent were becoming real. There were only a few sections where it would be possible to pitch a tent, and they would involve serious labor to clear a platform big enough for a two-person tent. As we climbed higher and higher with evening approaching, we both searched for a site until Spencer liked what he saw, and spent the next 90 minutes chopping away at solid ice with an ice axe until we had a platform just barely big enough for the tent. Sitting thousands of feet up Patkhor, with mostly air under us, we anchored off the tent to a couple ice screws and crawled in for a night of excellent sleep.

In the morning, we shot some of the wildest photos from the entire trip as the clouds were clearing from the only precipitation we received during the entire trip – a dusting of snow overnight. We packed up camp and continued upwards. Spencer's preferred line branched left, and we pulled out the rope to climb some mixed rock and ice. Looking above, the ice turned to mostly rock, and some natural rockfall from above came close enough to me to explain that I was uncomfortable with this route variation and that I'd prefer to stay on the snow and ice where we had come from. He agreed, and we rappelled off a V-thread back to the main couloir.

We continued up it until reaching the top, which ended at a notch in the ridge that separates the northeast face from the north face.

Finally, we could see most of the route above us, and I made myself comfortable in this spectacular setting. We were perched at 17,200 feet, halfway up an immense unclimbed and unattempted face easily the size of the north face of the Eiger but much higher. We were standing at a point we'd been looking at through binoculars on multiple occasions -- a place that seemed so improbable just a week before. But above us towered nearly 3,000 feet of incredibly steep terrain where a fall while unroped would likely be fatal. The rock was terribly loose, and the route was complex, with a 500-600 foot ice traverse that would make our ice traverse from our prior summit seem like a walk in the park. Above that, the ice steepened, with sections that could easily be vertical if not overhanging in places, before joining a steep and corniced summit ridge with incredible exposure on both sides.

I figured that virtually everything ahead would be climbed pitch by pitch -- as many as 30 of them by my guess -- and that descending would probably be mostly rappelling on either V-threads or on highly questionable rock anchors, which we probably didn't have enough of to leave so many behind on the descent anyway. Upon looking at the upper face, I almost immediately knew I was out, but how would I explain this to Spencer? I assumed he wanted to keep climbing, and I was right. The moment turned emotional quickly.

Five of the people I've climbed with over the years are no longer with us due to mountain accidents. One of them I watched fall to his death, and our team spend days recovering his body and returning it to civilization. I've lost friends and dammit, I don't want to join them in the clouds and stars just yet. I explained this to Spencer, trying to keep my composure, and told him my decision was made and that I'd deal with whatever repercussions would come of it. But he reached out his hand, put it on my shoulder and said, "it's OK man, I respect your decision."

"I've only lost one partner," he said. I asked who it was, and at that moment, perched on this mountain, contemplating life and death, we both realized for the first time that she was a mutual friend of ours. Spencer had taught her how to rock climb years ago while in college, and in the short time I knew her, I belayed her and cheered her on through her first ice lead ever in Colorado. I felt this was the time we were both supposed to learn of our common friend -- a reminder of the brutality of the mountains, and their lack of bias for whom they take.

As I began the long downclimb of the couloir, I stewed on the inevitable agony of defeat I knew would come -- the feeling that the expedition was a failure, that I was weak and cowardly, and that I had turned back my partner who wanted this face more than I did. Shortly after dark, we stumbled into basecamp. The story of Patkhor Peak was over. There would be no more attempts. This, I figured, would eventually carry on to some future team with a better strategy; perhaps finding a descent route on the south side of the mountain (from which it had been climbed), and trekking out that way -- a huge logistical undertaking for which we were never prepared. Or who knows, maybe someone will just go for it and rappel the route. Maybe they'll be fine, or maybe they'll never come home. Only time will tell.

With a few extra days on our schedule, we packed up basecamp and carried a heavy load back to our lower camp. Laying in the tent that evening, staring into the sky, the smiling face of Nazar instantly popped into view. We didn't expect him until the following morning per our satellite text messages but there he was, with nothing but the clothes on his back, some tea, binoculars, a big chunk of bread, and a sleeping bag. The next morning we were gone, heading back to Devlok to go rock climbing on thousand-foot tall granite walls that are virtually unclimbed. The donkeys brought most of our stuff back to Bassid while we held onto our camping and rock gear for the next couple days.

We had identified a rock tower we figured would go in 7 or 8 pitches, and the following day we attempted it, making it about three-quarters of the way up and covering five pitches until we started rappelling to beat the darkness. The next day we attempted another formation but couldn't find a good place to start, so we ended up cragging a bit before calling it a day. With our time up, we packed up camp and headed back to Bassid, looking forward to seeing Odina and sharing our story with him.

When we had a chance to share our photos with Odina, a life-long resident of Bassid, it was clear that many of them were new to him. Word had gotten around town that the Americans were back there trying Patkhor, and we met a few people who had heard about us and were curious to know how it went. We told stories over endless tea and bread in Odina's house, and heard his stories about growing up; the hard work walking a dozen miles a day to fetch firewood, what life was like during Soviet times and the Tajik Civil War and before the Bartang Valley was accessible by vehicle, the success of building the hydroelectric plant and what that meant to his village, and many of the other things we learned of his culture and its rich history.

Our expedition included a failure on Patkhor Peak, but it didn't seem like a failure at all anymore. I was grateful for everything; for Odina, for Bassid, for Spencer, for the cyclist who had ridden his bicycle from France to Kyrgyzstan and inspired us all, for having the chance to experience this amazing region and meet its people, and for knowing that in a matter of days I'd be home in the mountains of Colorado, surrounded by good people and beautiful places. No, this expedition was not a failure, and I'm thankful that I know why it wasn't.