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# The Great Game

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DAVID KEATON

## Exploratory Mountaineering in the Muzkol East Pamir

(Plates 20–22)

*Now I shall go far and far into the North,  
playing the Great Game ...*

Rudyard Kipling, Kim, 1901

**M**arco Polo was here. Well, almost. On his extensive Silk Road journey in 1274 he slept on the shores of Lake Sarikol just south of the Muzkol mountains. Polo, in *The Travels*, wrote that the Pamir are 'said to be the highest place in the world. So high you see no bird flying, fire burns with a pale flame and gives off so little heat that you may put your hand in it.'

The Pamir region, called the Roof of the World by the Persians, has endured a long and tumultuous history beginning with cryptic legends told by Herodotus and stories of dragons and haunted lakes from 5th and 6th century Buddhist pilgrims travelling between China and India. Later, Genghis Khan would use the nearby Silk Road corridor to launch his European invasion. In the late 19th century it was the arena for the so-called 'Great Game', the shadowy struggle between Czarist Russia and the British Empire for control of Central Asia. One consequence was the first in-depth exploration of the Pamir by Fedchenko, Korzhenevsky, Younghusband, Elias and others.

Despite this long tradition, the Muzkol range remained largely forgotten to the 20th century. Under Soviet rule, access was forbidden because of the region's sensitive position in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan province near the Chinese and Afghan borders. The Muzkol was terra incognita until Soviet topographers visited in 1946. The first climbers did not appear until forty years later when the Leningrad Sport Team of the Soviet Army explored the remarkable granite walls of Peak Bitkaya (6074m) and Peak Nymra.

I first heard about this obscure corner of the SE Pamir from Sergei Arsentiev, a former Soviet team climber, and his American wife Fran Distefano Arsentiev who had been among the earliest climbers in 1994. On their return they recommended the area, and mentioned St Petersburg geologist and Master of Sport Sergei Semiletkin, who had plans to return. It had been Semiletkin who helped pioneer the first climbing expedition to the Muzkol in 1986.



20. On the first ascent of White Pyramid in the Muzkol Range, East Pamir.  
(David Keaton) (p127)



21. Horns of a Marco Polo sheep, Muzkol Range. (David Keaton) (p127)



In 1998 I joined Semiletkin's second expedition to the north-west sector of the range, jointly led by British expedition organiser and map-maker extraordinaire Andrew Wielochowski. Technically the Muzkol was open to climbing, but barely. As I learned, Sergei was one of the few people who knew how to get in. Our group numbered seventeen climbers, three from Russia, nine from England, two from Wales and three from the US. The commercially-organised expedition included some of the first Westerners to visit the Muzkol and was only the third climbing expedition to the northern or Zartoshkol sector of these mountains. One of the keys to our adventure was a prized Soviet military map labelled 'Top Secret'. Within its folds, two sub-ranges are listed under the heading of Muzkol. The southern peaks clustered around Soviet Officers Peak, the highest in the range at 6233m, were listed as the Muzkol, with the northern peaks grouped loosely about Zartosh Peak identified as Zartoshkol range. Whatever the name, very few people had been allowed to penetrate this aesthetic lump of high Asia.

Our team gathered at Tashkent airport on 10 August where we were met by our capable in-country organiser Sedoulla and Russian climbers Igor Gavrilov, Valeri Rezhnik, and Semiletkin. Over the next several days they deftly negotiated our well-worn yet sturdy Soviet transports through numerous border crossings and security checkpoints. With Afghanistan on the horizon, Tajik checkpoints were much more serious and guards typically

boarded our truck with grim faces and AK-47s. Each time the truck creaked to a halt we could never be certain that we would be allowed to continue. Nevertheless, much of the approach to the Muzkol is identical to the better known Peaks Lenin and Communism in the High Pamir.

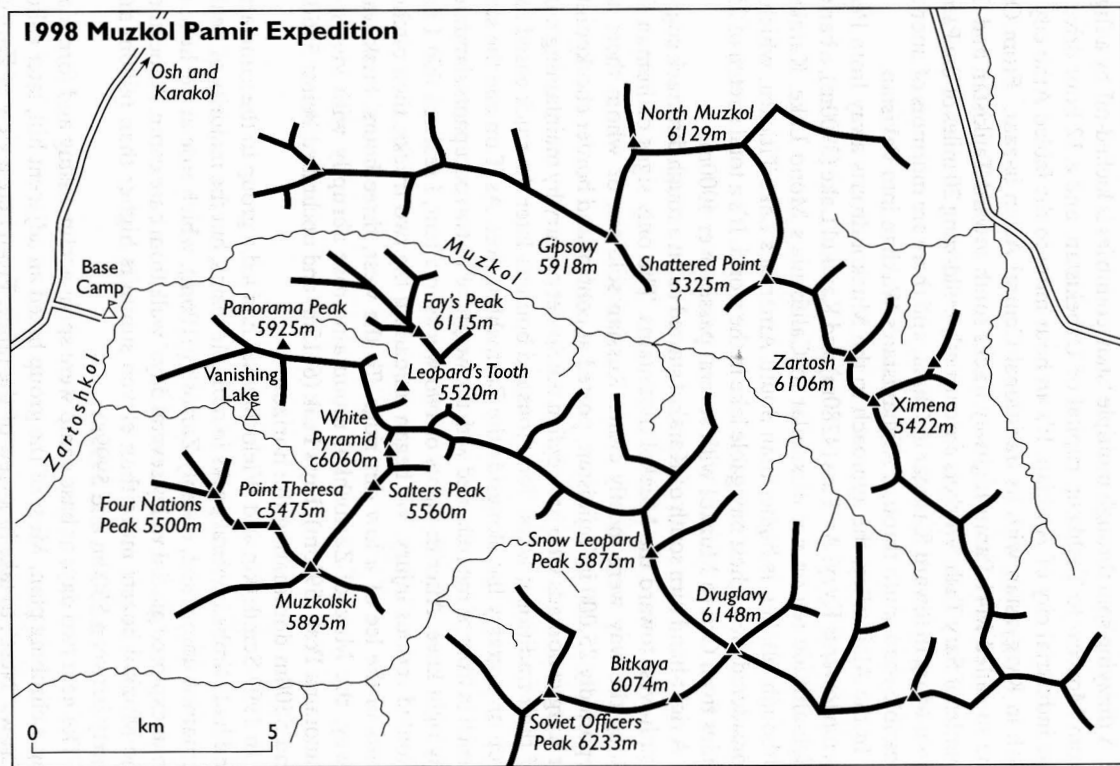
A dizzying spin through multiple 'stan' countries is kicked-off by a flight from Moscow to Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, and a 12-hour drive to the industrial city of Andijan. It's an hour more to the fabled Arab city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan with its traditional Central Asian bazaar. From Osh the so-called M41 Pamir highway tracks south toward Tajikistan and the hamlet of Sary Tash. Workers are currently bulldozing 20 miles of the Pamir from Murgab toward Kashgar in China, and there are murmurs of another possible road south through Afghanistan's Wakhan into Pakistan.

In the Alai valley, the approach to the Muzkol diverts away from Peak Lenin towards Kyzyl Art Pass (4280m) and Karakul Lake (3900m), a barren high-altitude region not dissimilar to California's Mono Lake. Karakul, although smaller, is higher than South America's Lake Titicaca, which is considered the highest navigable lake in the world. It's a total stretch of 250 miles from Osh to Muzkol with several passes over 4000m.

A right-hand turn south of Karakul started us on a rough dirt-track edging south-west toward the Muzkol mountains. The only signs of human life along the way were mostly either Russian soldiers, of whom there are reportedly 25,000 in Tajikistan, posted at control and border checkpoints, or Kyrgyz nomads who have defied the Soviet century by maintaining most of their traditional ways. Ten thousand bounces later the truck eased to a stop on a grassy flat alongside the Zartoshkol river. As if on cue the steel bench in front of me collapsed with the weight of its two occupants slamming my right knee. After thoughts of two weeks in a tent, I realised that I had avoided serious injury. We began unloading the two trucks, then pitched tents in the lee of a low dirt ridge. To the west, three hours' brisk walk away, the Muzkol-Zartoshkol mountains rose abruptly with views of Panorama Peak (5925m), Fay's Peak (6115m) and unclimbed Points 5960m and 5500m dominating the horizon.

In 1997 Semiletkin and Wielochowski had led a group to the same area and had climbed several peaks in multiple teams, but the majority of peaks remained untouched, notably Zartosh (6106m), which rose at the head of an unexplored glacial valley several days' walk from base camp. Altogether, the Muzkol boasts more than eleven summits higher than 6000m and thirty between 5500m and 5999m.

The next two days at base camp were spent acclimatising and formulating a climbing plan. Most of the group hiked an adjacent hill, later called 'Crows' Nest', to take in a view of the range. From here a view of Zartosh opened up, as well as a neighbouring, undiscovered 6000m summit, Zartosh West, subsequently named the 'White Pyramid' (c6060m). Glancing to the west, shapely Peak Revolution (6974m) rose high above the Academy of Sciences range.



Walking back to camp, the most striking impression of our first day in the mountains was the absence of noise. The only sound came from the occasional Hoopoe bird (*Upupa epops*) and the afternoon wind raking the plateau that separated our camp from the mountains.

In 1840 an English naval officer, John Wood, battled through severe winter conditions to gain the Pamir from Afghanistan. Later he reflected on his experiences, writing that 'silence reigned around – silence so profound that it oppressed the heart.' More than 150 years later, many of us found the Pamir stillness to be a welcome antidote to modern life; high on the plateau, the long silence was filled only by what the imagination would add.

With the map and what we could see from the Crow's Nest, we sat down next day to churn out a plan. The group embraced a variety of professions including a forensic scientist, a business consultant, a student, a nuclear scientist and university teachers, but we all shared the common goal to be first atop a snowy summit. With this backdrop there was a little edginess to begin climbing.

The first goal remained Zartosh, and we agreed that someone should reconnoitre the Zartosh valley while others would climb Pt. 5500m and check the feasibility of Zartosh from the south. Most chose the climb of Pt. 5500m, with Semiletkin and Wielochowski opting for Zartosh. Both groups departed on 14 August. Following one night at Vanishing Lake Camp (4300m), so named for the body of water that had quickly evaporated the previous year, the main party hiked up glacial moraine to a rocky flat at the foot of Pt. 5500m. High up a side valley we established camp at 4900m as light snow began to fall and, in a few hours, the last daylight coloured the unclimbed spires and storm clouds that surrounded us.

Early next morning we clambered 30 minutes up loose moraine to the edge of a snowfield. Above and to the right was the rugged satellite Pt. 5200m. Trudging upward, the snow slope increased to 40°. After two hours the lead climbers cramponed onto the rocky ridge running west to Pt. 5500m and several kilometres east to two additional points before dead-ending in Peak Muzkolski (5895m). Views to the south took in several prominent unclimbed peaks and Peak Communism to the north-west which crested the Peter the Great range 100km distant.

We scrambled along the summit ridge over two false summits and topped out as the ridge fell away to the open space and vistas of the High Pamir. All of us reached the summit in the next hour or two including a few with nagging stomach ailments. We named the mountain 'Four Nations Peak' (5500m), after capitulating to the Welsh climbers who had lobbied hard for nation status. We built a cairn on top and left a small register. Under blue windless skies, I examined the ridge that we had just come up, and eyed the two additional points. They offered a good walk to the east. As I started over, John Cederholm joined me and we scrambled up copper-tinted rocks to the first point and twenty minutes later to the next. The second top





22. Unclimbed peaks over 6000m in the Muzkol Range. (David Keaton) (p127)

appeared slightly lower than 'Four Nations'. We named the two tops 'Point Theresa' (c5475m) and 'Point Marina' (c5500m) after our wives.

From 'Marina' much of the eastern and southern portions of the range came into view including Soviet Officers' Peak, Snow Leopard Peak (5875m) – climbed by an Executive Wilderness Programs group in 1996 – and an elegant unclimbed six-thousander which Wielochowski fondly described as the 'Matterhorn of the Muzkol'. Later in the day, British climbers John Clark and Antony Hollingshead and the American Chris Kinney completed the same walk.

We could disregard the southern aspect of Zartosh as there was little chance of overcoming the steep and crumbling rock guarding this approach. Viewing the Muzkol from the south there is hardly a scratch of snow on steep rotten rock while the northern slopes could be heavily glaciated. Only the very highest peaks tucked within the central zone of the range have any snow on their southern profiles. Vladimir Ratzek, a noted Soviet glaciologist and mountaineer, points to the extreme aridity, high altitude and dramatic temperature shifts to explain the shattered rock of the Pamir and cites as an example the afternoon of 9 July 1934 when the temperature plummeted from 33°C to -6.4°C in only three hours.

The next day we hiked down to base camp and met Sergei and Andrew who arrived on the same day. The news was promising with at least three more virgin peaks readily accessible, including the expedition's main objective, Zartosh. With visions of fresh mountains swimming in our heads, we passed the next day resting at base camp. By nightfall, we had made a sizable dent in the stock of Kyrgyz cognac, which most rated only a few notches above moonshine. That night, my tentmate Colin Sprange and I were visited by a guinea pig-like animal. He was heard but unseen until he was plucked neck deep from a food bag around 3am. We named him Fedchenko after the Russian explorer and the enormous, 45-mile-long Pamir glacier, before sending him off into the night.

On 19 August the entire climbing party departed camp with food, fuel and equipment for the Zartosh climb. We again tramped across the barren plateau following the Zartoshkol river to a north-east tributary running from the Zartosh valley. Along the riverbank we found snow leopard tracks, but couldn't agree when they were made. In 1950, members of a Soviet expedition reportedly spotted the footprints of these elusive creatures on the very summit of 7134m Peak Lenin.

Along with leopards, the East Pamir is home to the largest concentration of spiral-horned Marco Polo sheep (*Ovis ammon poli*). Although first identified by Polo, they were not seen again by Europeans until John Wood's expedition to reach the source of the Oxus river in the 1800s. Both leopard and Polo sheep are currently listed in the Russian 'Red Book' of rare plants and animals. Other creatures found here include ibex (*Capra ibex*), eagles, grouse, and the legendary alma which is the Tajik version of the yeti. They

are said to walk on two feet, weigh up to 500lbs., and reach a height of 6' 6". The Muzkol region has reportedly long been skirted by nomads due to an over-abundance of alma sightings.

With no almas in sight, we crossed a rocky gorge at the base of the valley, and navigated a boulder field. Up on the glacier, a well-placed ice bridge enabled a safe crossing of the turbulent river before we slogged up onto a rocky platform at 4500m where we camped. Overhead the snowy summits of Fay's, the unclimbed Panorama East and the first glimpse of Zartosh beckoned us higher.

Early next day we broke camp for a three-hour walk to our high 'Glacier Camp' (c5050m). After chopping steps on a tongue of icy glacier, we followed moraine to a crest where the valley opened to a magnificent cirque ringed by high snowy peaks. Across the cirque stood the impressive north wall of Zartosh, linked by a col to the 'White Pyramid'. At the centre of this snowy 'lake' was an elegant c5520-metre island summit surrounded by a crown of previously untouched and unseen peaks.

That night Chris Kinney tuned his radio to the BBC which reported a CRUISE missile strike on suspected Afghanistan-based terrorists. The US State Department advised US travellers to avoid 'hostile crowds'. For the three Americans this raised a few questions about our return journey and more than a fair amount of ribbing from our British counterparts.

After our coldest night in the mountains most of the group tackled the so-called island peak. Our Russian friends Sergei, Valeri and Igor stoically provided a resupply carry from our previous camp while British climber, Paul Hampson, attempted to reach Col 5300m at the eastern end of the cirque. According to our map this passage gained access to the Bozbaital valley and at least two virgin 5600m summits. The rest of the group crossed the Zartosh glacier for forty minutes before reaching the mountain's lower snowfield. We worked up this slope unroped then onto the classic arc of the north-east ridge which rose to 40°. The final rocky pitch involved some airy scrambling with nice exposure dropping away to an icefall far below.

The miserly highpoint accommodated one standing person and forced the rest of the group onto fifteen additional metres of knife-edge for a lunch space. It was worth it: to the south-east our next objectives loomed impressively. We took nearly forty minutes to examine Zartosh and the 'White Pyramid', calculating a line of ascent. We later named this aesthetic peak the 'Leopard's Tooth'. The following morning Hampson and Clark attempted Col 5300m again, but steep broken rock repulsed their efforts. At the same time Wielochowski and Hollinshead examined the 700m north face of Zartosh, identifying several ice routes. Climbers in the previous two years' expeditions had completed several Grade 5 ascents.

On 23 August, we set out at dawn for Zartosh. In a range charmed with mild continental weather, a 6am start is the Muzkol version of an alpine

start. Looping around the 'Leopard's Tooth' we crossed the Zartosh glacier to gain the mountains' lower slopes in one and a half hours. Our initial goal, the col separating the two 6000ers, stood above.

At the foot of the face, the self-selected lead group roped-up while the rest agreed to climb independently and rope if necessary. Ascending moderate snow, the Americans Cederholm and Kinney doggedly broke trail and forged a route up the right-hand side. In one hour or more this line ended in a cluster of rocks hanging over the abrupt west face. From the rocks we veered left toward the col, encountering a short pitch of steep ice which we traversed by front-pointing. The conditions soon reversed with unconsolidated snow rising to waist level. In one 50° stretch a stream of snow flowed continuously between the climbers' legs.

Near this point, one British climber had trouble in deep spindrift scooping a hollow with his arms and legs. During the wait John Clark and I began issuing directives which ended with my suggestion to 'give him a push to the fanny'. Clark whipped around saying: 'We don't do that sort of thing around here.' We both laughed.

As we climbed higher, clouds and light snow converged on the mountain. Out across the Pamir the sun broke dramatically through gaps in the storm clouds, creating a patchwork of light and shadows. 'Muztagh-ata!' Clark bellowed, pointing to a large white dome which had appeared in the east. More than likely this was the 7546m giant isolated at the western tail of the Kun Lun range. In the next hour, we jumped a few crevasses without incident and reached the col. Zartosh's mixed 55° terrain paced off to the left while the snowy mantle of the 'White Pyramid' eased over to the right. Wielochowski stomped over to the north face of Zartosh to scout routes while the rest of us followed the easy terrain to the virgin summit of the Pyramid.

The top was guarded by a partially obscured crevasse backed by a flimsy cornice of rotten snow. The actual summit was the size of a snooker table with the south and north-west faces yawning eagerly into space. Wielochowski joined us in time for a round of whisky courtesy of Hollingshead. The climb gave us a range of conditions from clear sunshine to wind-blown cloud, from hard ice to deep snow, but in the end little technical difficulty. In a 1980 reconnaissance of Mount Kongur, not far north of the Muzkol in China, Chris Bonington summed up the emotion of making the first ascent of a summit after climbing Peak Sarakyaguqi (6200m): 'Technical difficulty seemed of little importance compared to the joy of finding one's way up an unknown peak, of gazing around and knowing that almost everything in sight was unclimbed and unexplored.'

Back at the col, several climbers made a go at Zartosh's summit ridge but unstable snow, along with the deteriorating weather, forced a retreat. The following day we scuttled back to base camp. The climb of the north face of the 'White Pyramid' was rated 3B or AD+. The next few days were spent resting and exploring the southern end of the range near Soviet Officers' Peak. We were also visited by an amiable Pamiri hunter named Alexander

who rode into camp on horseback. The Pamiris, like the Tajiks, are of Iranian ancestry, but the highlanders also trace their lineage back to Alexander the Great's army, with a number favouring blue eyes and fair complexions. For a slab of meat we bartered candles, sugar, and boxes of matches. With a broad wave Alexander re-mounted his horse and charged off at full gallop. It was a good end to the trip.

With over one hundred 6000m peaks, the Pamir has tremendous climbing potential for Westerners. In the Peter the Great range there are yet unclimbed peaks of 6000m and virgin summits over 6100m in the Trans-Alai. East and south of Karakul, the Sarikol range also holds many options, but convincing the border guards to let you wander among these untrodden summits along the frontiers of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China could prove tougher than the climbing.

With continuing political uncertainty, approaching these peaks with Russians or Tajiks is becoming a virtual necessity. Access is more unreliable as Tajikistan is no longer permitting helicopter flights from Kyrgyzstan and few Westerners will risk hanging around the capital, Dushanbe, to catch a flight. This translates to longer approaches, more security checks and more red tape. The effect has been immediate with most reports counting no climbers on popular Peak Communism this summer.

Despite these obstacles, climbing in the Pamir can be very rewarding. Our three weeks in the Muzkol drifted by quickly. There are certain places that stick to your skin and this is one. The enduring silence of the Pamir plateau, the mystique of endangered creatures, and the lure of unknown valleys and untrodden summits are discoveries that will remain with us all.

**Summary:** An account of a four-nation expedition to the Muzkol Range of the south-east Pamir.

**The team** included: Igor Gavrilov, Valeri Rezhnik and Sergei Semiletkin from Russia; John Clark, Paul Hampson, Antony Hollinshead, Cerith Jones, Doug and Harvey Jones, Colin Sprange, Stephen Taylor, Kevin Turner, Andrew Wielochowski and Duncan Woods from the United Kingdom; John Cederholm, David Keaton and Chris Kinney from the United States.

**First ascents** included: Four Nations Peak (5500m), 16 August 1998 (team except Semiletkin and Wielochowski); Point Theresa (c5475m) & Point Marina (c5500m), 16 August 1998 (Cederholm, Clark, Hollinshead, Keaton and Kinney); Leopard's Tooth (5520m), 21 August 1998 (team except Hampson and the Russians); White Pyramid (c6060m), 23 August 1998 (team except Sprange).