

Sairam, North Face, 5B (RUS) (V. Sedelnikov, 1977)

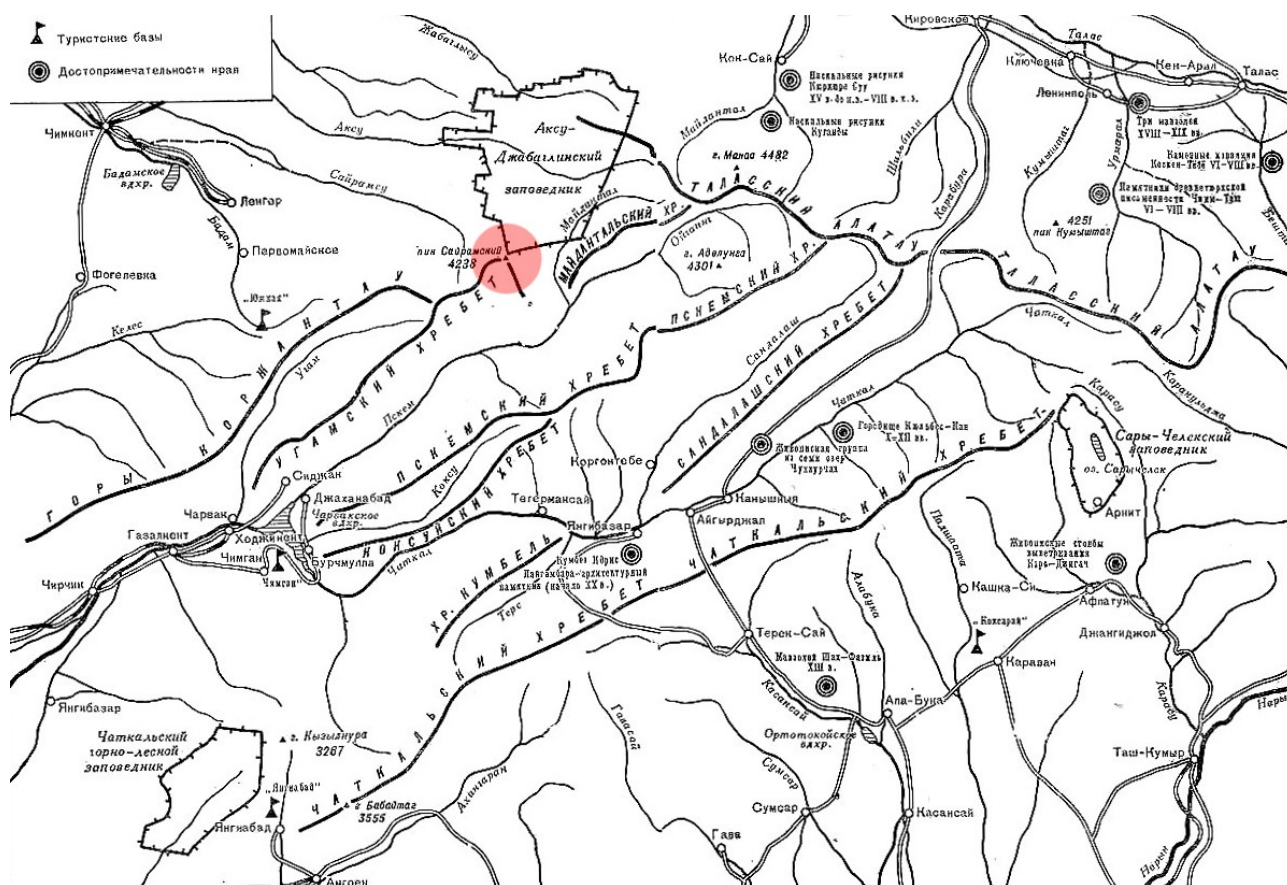


1. General Information

Class:	Technical alpinism
Region:	Tian Shan, Ugam mountain range, Kazakhstan
Name of the summit and route:	Sairam, North Face (Sedelnikov's route)
Height:	4238 m
Type:	Rock
Category of difficulty:	5B (RUS), TD+/ED (IFAS)
Route characteristics:	Height difference of the route: 830 m Length of sections with difficulty V-VI climbing: 500 m Mean angle of the route: 76°
Points of protection:	For protection: 101 - Beak pitons: 65 - Pitons: 10 - FrenDs: 14 - Nuts: 3 - Ice screws: 9 For aid climbing: 1
Beginning of the ascent:	14th of September, 2017
End of the ascent:	15th of September, 2017
Hours spent on the route:	25h 30min - Ascent: 20h 15min - Descent: 5h 15min
Number of bivouacs:	1
Time schedule:	Beginning of the ascent: 14th of September, 7:15 Summit: 15th of September, 18:00 End of the descent: 16th of September, 12:00 Back at base camp: 16th of September, 13:00
Weather conditions:	Clear, sunny, no precipitation
Group members:	Rees Juurmaa (Estonia, Tartu Alpine Club Firn) Juta Blaževiča (Latvia, Riga Alpine Club Traverss) Anatoli Rovnij (Latvia, Riga Alpine Club Traverss) – leader

Video including the ascent: <https://youtu.be/4NhjkkpLzP0>

2. Description of the Region



Sairam is the highest peak in the Ugam mountain range, situated in the Western Tian-Shan, Kazakhstan. To reach the mountain, it's optimal to travel to Shimkent and then organize car transportation to a village called Sairam, which is located near the river of Sairam-Su. From the point where driving by car is no longer possible, it takes approximately 6 hours to hike up to the base of the North Wall of Sairam.

This mountain region is outstanding for its unique and pristine nature. Compared to many other mountain regions, Sairam has stayed relatively untouched by human activity. The region wasn't popular among mountaineers before the second half of the 1970s. As of now, there are more than 80 routes on numerous mountains and in every category of difficulty. Four of these mountains – Sairam, Sofia, Kyzylbash and Druzhba – have many technical routes from difficulty 5A to 6A. Many of these routes have never been repeated. In addition to this, there's still a great amount of mountain faces with obvious and logical possibilities for first ascents.

For better understanding of nature of climbing in this region, it's necessary to note that the local climate in Sairam is rather dry, which means that the difficulty comes from strong rock climbing, not moving on ice or snow. That's why the routes in Sairam involve significantly more technical rock climbing, compared to combined routes in some other mountain regions like Bezengi in the Caucasus mountains, for example.

The best time for alpine ascents in Sairam is from May to October. Based on the experience of our group, the first half of September is a very good time, regarding weather conditions.

3. Technical Description of the Route



3.1. Approach

We set up our base camp on a moraine ridge at the base of the North Wall of Sairam, at the altitude of 3300 metres. It took 6 hours of hiking to get there, starting from the lower base camp situated at the river of Sairam-Su, which is accessible by car. The approach has almost no distinct footpaths, only those made by wild animals. First, it's necessary to cross the river, then taking a direction towards a prominent rock tower called „King-Kong” by the locals. Only narrow animal trails help to make way through the bushes and tall grass. Having reached the rock tower, we proceeded towards the beautiful „Solnechnyi” mountain pass, followed by a long traverse along moraine slopes, to finally reach the upper circus of Sairam.

To get from our base camp to the beginning of the route, it was necessary to hike another 45 minutes uphill, towards the glacier coming down from the left part of the North Wall of Sairam.

3.2. Short Description of the Route by Sections

- R1** Climb 150 metres of moderate ice (50-65°) up the glacier to reach the base of the rock wall.
- R2** Climb 55 metres up a wall (70-80° VI), leading to a dihedral with ledges in between.
- R3** Go left around an overhang by climbing 15 metres up the dihedral (70-80° VI) until a small ridge.
- R4** Climb 40 metres – first up a dihedral, then an overhanging wall (60-100° VI), leading to a chimney.
- R5** Climb 50 metres up a chimney (80-85° VI) until reaching a large block leaning out from the wall.
- R6** Climb through the space between the leaning block and the wall, followed by 35 metres (80-90° VI) of dihedral and wall climbing.
- R7** Climb 55 metres along a moderately difficult wall (75° IV+) until the next ledge.
- R8** Continue 60 metres up the wall and the following ridge (75° V) until a comfortable ledge.
- R9** Move 55 metres – first along the ridge and then straight up a wall with good holds (70° V).
- R10** Climb 60 metres up a wall with loose rocks (70-90° V) to reach a nice ledge. Place for bivouac.
- R11** Climb 60 metres up and left along a dihedral with some ledges (75-80° V+).
- R12** Continue 40 metres along a wall and a dihedral (60-80° III-V) to reach a comfortable ledge.
- R13** Crux pitch. Climb 60 metres up and left (80-100° VI+) – up a wall, followed by a chimney and then an overhang with little holds, finishing on a big ledge. That concludes the technical part of the route.
- R14** Towards the large snowy couloir, continue 70 metres up on ice covered rocks (65° III-IV).
- R15** Climb 100 metres along easier terrain with loose rocks (40-60° III) to reach a ridge.
- R16** Left from the ridge, along moderate rocks, traverse 100 metres (45-60° IV) until the summit ridge.
- R17** Move 100 metres along the easy summit ridge to reach the summit of Sairam.

3.3. Scheme of the Route in UIAA-symbols

Number of section	Length • Angle • Difficulty (UIAA)
17	100 m 15° I
16	100 m 45-60° IV
15	100 m 40-60° III
14	70 m 65° III-IV
13	60 m 80-100° VI+
12	40 m 60-80° III-V
11	60 m 75-80° V+
10	60 m 70-90° V
9	55 m 70° V
8	60 m 75° V
7	55 m 75° IV+
6	35 m 80-90° VI
5	50 m 80-85° VI
4	40 m 60-100° VI
3	15 m 70-80° VI
2	55 m 70-80° VI
1	150 m 50-65°

3.4. Bivouacs

- **September 13th:** Base camp at the base of the North Wall, on a moraine ridge at 3300 m. Water found at about a 15 minute walk away from the tent towards the glacier.
- **September 14th:** Bivouac at the end of the first climbing day (R10), 4000 m. The bivouac spot was very small and surrounded by a vertical drop in three directions. It was necessary to rearrange rocks and belay the tent with ropes. No water in close proximity.
- **September 15th:** Bivouac on the descent along the North-West ridge, 4000 m. The bivouac spot was very minimal and bumpy, needing strong rearranging and belaying the tent with ropes. Some ice nearby to boil water from.

3.5. Descent

Having reached the summit on September the 15th at 18:00, we started our descent at 18:15, choosing the route along the North-West ridge (2B category of difficulty). Having descended for a little more than one hour (19:30), the sun was already setting, making the route finding too uncertain. Thus we decided to find the first suitable place for a bivouac, which wasn't that easy to do! Nevertheless, we managed to find a minimal spot, rearranged it to fit our 2-person tent, which we then belayed with ropes. We spent the night there and early in the next morning we continued our descent in the daylight. The last section of the descent route took us along moderately steep slabs followed by a glacier, which were all covered with very loose moraine. Because of that we needed to be extremely careful, so not to drop rocks on one another.

Descent from the summit until the last bivouac spot: 15th of September, 18:15–19:30.

Descent along the North-West ridge (2B) down until the circus of Sairam: 16th of September, 8:00–12:00.

Back at base camp: 16th of September, 13:00.

3.6. Character of the Rock

As this route has only ever been climbed a couple of times (previously about 15 years ago), we were faced with quite loose rocks – especially at the crux of the route (R13). For that reason, every member of the group had to be very precise and safe in climbing and organizing belay stations. There were no pitons, bolts or other forms of equipment left by previous groups throughout the whole route.

The second important characteristic of the rock quality was the texture – although there were generally enough hand- and footholds, it was problematic to place secure points of protection. We couldn't rely on friends and nuts, because the only trustworthy cracks in the rock were very thin, mostly measured in millimetres. Because of that, to organize protection and belay stations we used mostly beak pitons, also regular pitons and only a little amount of friends and nuts. As the placement and removal of beak pitons inevitably takes more time, it dictated our tempo of movement on the route.

3.7. Tactics and Style

The main part of the route (sections with difficulty V...VI+) we climbed as usually, belaying each other from stations. On easier terrain we, as a rule, climbed simultaneously. Our tactics were based on three principles:

- 1) **Maximum safety**: every climber in the group had two ropes for protection at all times.
- 2) **Maximum speed**: two climbers out of three were climbing simultaneously at all times.
- 3) **Good style**: every climber in the group climbed every section by free climbing, no jumaring.

Technically it looked like this:

- 1) **First climber** (Juta) climbs up, with rock shoes and without a backpack – using two dynamic ropes for protection. In the belay station, she fixes one of the ropes as a fixed line, whereas the other rope is used for belaying the second climber.
- 2) **Second climber** (Anatoli) free climbs up with boots and a small backpack, belayed primarily by the dynamic rope controlled by the first climber, whereas the second dynamic rope is used as a fixed line, on which a rope clamp (Climbing Technology Roll N Lock) was sliding as a backup device. The second climber brings up a third, static rope.
- 3) As soon as the second climber has reached the station, he attaches the static rope as the new fixed line. Next, he simultaneously belays both the first climber and the third climber. While the first climber works her way up the next pitch with two dynamic ropes, the **third climber** (Rees) free climbs up with boots and the heaviest backpack, removing all the pitons from the previous pitch – belayed primarily by the lower end of one of the dynamic climbing ropes and secondarily by the static rope, on which a rope clamp is sliding as a backup device. Having removed all the pitons from the previous pitch, the third climber hands them over to the second climber who, in turn, gives them to the first climber at the next station.

These kind of tactics worked well and we managed to climb the route in our approximately planned schedule.

3.8. Equipment

Group (technical)		Personal (technical)		Group (other)	
Dynamic rope (60 m x 8.9 mm)	1	Helmet	+	Tent (2-person)	1
Dynamic rope (60 m x 9.0 mm)	1	Harness	+	Jetboil	1
Static rope (60 m x 10.0 mm)	1	Self-belay system	+	Gas	250 ml
Carabiners (HMS)	16	Cordelettes	+	Thermos (1L)	2
Carabiners (wire gate)	16	Belay device	+	Pot (2L)	1
Quickdraws	17	Crampons	+	Sleeping mats	2
Slings (120 cm)	5	Rock shoes	+	Sleeping bag	1
Slings (60 cm)	5	Head torch	+	Backpack (30L, 60L)	2
Cordelette	10 m			Food (for 3 days)	1500 gr
Frends	7				
Nuts	9				
Beak pitons	11				
Pitons	3				
Ice screws	4				
Nut key	1				
Rock hammer	2				
Ice tools	2				
Aiders (Krukonogi)	2				
Gear sling	1				
Rope clamp (CT Roll N Lock)	2				

3.9. Conclusion

The ascent to the summit of Sairam along the 5B line of Sedelnikov (1977) was a North Wall route with a height difference of 830 metres, whereas the length of V...VI+ category climbing was 500 metres. In addition to technical climbing, this rarely visited route demanded very careful and safe organizing of protection in order to avoid loose rocks.

Our three-person team climbed the route, following a prearranged tactical plan, which emphasized maximum safety, speed and good style. It took us 20h 15 min of climbing and one bivouac to finish the ascent. For comparison – the first ascent of the route took 66h and 5 bivouacs.

The team agreed that it was an exciting technical climb in a fantastically beautiful region.

4. Photos



Photo 1. Anatoli climbing on section R3



Photo 2. Anatoli climbing on section R4



Photo 3. Anatoli climbing on section R7



Photo 4. Juta climbing on section R9



Photo 5. Anatoli climbing on section R10



Photo 6. Rees in the morning at the bivouac after section R10



Photo 7. Jutta climbing on section R11



Photo 8. Anatoli climbing on section R11



Photo 9. Jutta and Rees at the summit of Sairam



Photo 10. Rees, Anatoli and Jutta at the summit of Sairam

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