

# Alam Kuh<sup>1</sup>

## The German Flank

September 7 and 8



Having it on the back of my mind for almost 30 years, I finally made it!

At my level of rock-climbing ability, it was like succeeding in “Mission Impossible”.

Very difficult. Very rewarding.

A German group of alpinists first climbed what later became known as **The German Flank or Ridge** in 1936.

At the time, it was considered a great mountaineering achievement in Europe. Now with all these super technical routes on the wall itself, anyone you ask will tell you:

*“It’s a picnic; the other day I took my grandmother up that route to the summit of **Alam Kuh** for breakfast!”*

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The ascent proper starts from **Alamchal**<sup>1</sup>. The altitude here is about 4200 meters. It is about a six hours hike from **Rudbarak**<sup>1</sup> via **Barir**<sup>1</sup>. About four hours to the **Sarchal**<sup>1</sup> shelter and then another two to **Alamchal** where one can set up one’s tent on the remains of the old shelter, which was washed away by the glacier.

I wonder who had the brilliant idea of building a refuge right on a moving glacier! In this respect pre-revolution and post-revolution Iran are at parity. This one was built after the revolution while another, also in ruins, a little higher in the same general area was built before!

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<sup>1</sup> See my reports on Alam Kuh. I suggest reading it before this one. Actually it is required because this is a continuation of that report

The whole expedition takes two days. The first day to **Alamchal** and the next one to the summit and return all the way back to **Rudbarak**. One can then drive to Tehran the same night.

However, Saturday being a holiday, in keeping with the mountaineering dictum<sup>2</sup> of “*never rush unless you have to*”, we chose to spend another night at Rassul’s<sup>1</sup> in **Rudabarak** and drive back to Tehran “relax” the following morning.

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I chose to go on this expedition during a long weekend coinciding with a full moon, which is always helpful when one has to venture out of the tent at night.

This late in the season, it is about the last chance before it starts getting cold. Snowstorms are common at **Alamchal** in September. On top of that, the Flank and the northern side of the mountain itself are prone to high winds, which often make the climb very difficult and unpleasant or even impossible.

“Goosh sheytoon kar”<sup>3</sup>, as usual, we were very lucky with the weather: much warmer than what is normal for the season, just perfect during the day; at night even though the temperature fell below freezing we didn’t feel cold in our tents.

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<sup>2</sup> Or maybe I just made that up

<sup>3</sup> A Persian expression meaning “may the devil not hear this so that this state of affairs can continue!”

On Thursday morning, we started from **Barir** where Rassul had asked Shirzad R, our mule driver, to meet us. He packed all our equipment on two mules and we started towards **Alamchal** via **Sarchal** shelter. We rested a couple of hours here before continuing to **Alamchal**, which is at the base of the glacier.

We reached **Alamchal** early in the afternoon and set up camp. Only one other tent was there. Earlier in the season, the place would have been packed with alpinists that come here from all over the world!

Here is the “base camp” for the mountaineering routes up **Alam Kuh**, the main ones are:

1. Via **Siah Sang**: This is the standard route
2. The many routes on the North Wall, ranging from very difficult to extremely difficult.
3. And of course the famous **German Flank**

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Although five of us (Hossein M, Nasser M, Mohammad B, Ali-Mohammad N and I) left from Amanieh together the evening before, our team was composed of three: Rassul Naghavi as leader, me as number two on the rope and Ali-Mohammad at the end of the rope giving me a helping hand, literally, whenever I was really “wedged!”

Our other three friends after having planned to just practice rock-climbing on the famous **Alam Kuh** North Wall, changed their mind and finally took the ridge. They went on their own. We only saw them briefly in the morning and then again, almost by coincidence, when we arrived back in **Barir** where we had left our car the day before.

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On Friday, Rassul, Ali-Mohammad and I started from **Alamchal** at about 6 am. Except for the first hour or so, the climb was very difficult for me with two extremely nasty passages requiring mountaineering ladders. Had Rassul not been there for technical and moral support, I am sure I could have not overcome these two hurdles.

The second one required catching a grip behind or at least at 90 degrees from the path with a plunge of 500 meters or more under your soles!

At this point, I was stuck with no helping hand!



After what seemed a very long time suspended between rock and sky, Rassul finally told me that I almost had to jump behind the boulder to catch the next hold! I shouted:

**“RASSUL..., YOU THINK I’M TOTALLY F\*G OUT OF MY MIND”?**

He replied coolly:

*“Of course, we all are, nobody in his right mind would be here in the first place”.*

The rest of the way was by no means a party either; thus we were tied to the rope and secured by Rassul most of the way.

Anyway,

We reached the summit<sup>4</sup> at about 2 pm where we stayed no longer than 15 minutes. We were back in **Tang Galoo**<sup>1</sup> at about 7 pm.

For the return, I had chosen the most efficient way. Instead of going back to **Alamchal** we went down on the opposite (southern) side of the mountain towards **Hesarchal**<sup>1</sup>. This took some organizing with Shirzad since he had to take our equipment back from **Alamchal**.

I strongly suggest this route because the way back to **Alamchal** via treacherous **Siah Sang**<sup>5</sup> is unpleasant, more difficult and takes much longer.

This is the ideal way down with a gentle slope all the way.

After a strenuous climb, there is no need for any extra, unwarranted effort.

We arrived, at **Tange Galoo** let’s say, fairly in shape instead of in ache and pain had we taken the other route.

Ninety percent of the people also climb from this side since it is also the easiest way up.

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Back at Rassul’s, after a good meal prepared by Mrs. Naghavi<sup>6</sup> and a well deserved resting night, the next morning, on the way back to Tehran we made a crochet to **Lake Valasht**.

Except for the women’s attire, the atmosphere reminded me of Italians picnicking around one of the lakes near Rome<sup>7</sup> in the 60’s.

The water was clean and the temperature pleasant but I gave up on the idea of a refreshing dive before the final leg of the trip because the shores were too crowded, littered and muddy.

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<sup>4</sup> For altitudes and other details, please refer to my previous Alam Kuh report

<sup>5</sup> Peak right before Alam Kuh on the “standard” route up vial Alamchal. Its rocks, contrary to Alamkuh, are friable

<sup>6</sup> Rassul’s wife, a mountaineer in her own right; a discreet but pleasant and efficient lady

<sup>7</sup> I lived there from 1964 to 1967 and have very fond memories of the city and its surroundings

Strangely, I was also a little embarrassed of being half naked in front of veiled women although that didn't seem to bother other men around who were swimming or just going about shamelessly in their bathing suits.

We stayed half an hour and then reluctantly left this beautiful area and Rassul with his family to still drive back early enough to avoid the dreaded traffic near Tehran...

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### **Photos**

*Page 1: At one of the "hurdles"*

*Page 2: Alam Kuh North Wall early in the morning, the glacier below, our route shown in red. Dotted lines indicate the two passages behind the visible face*

*Page 3: At the first hurdle, in the middle of the photo you can distinguish two people before the first ladder*

*Page 5: Lake Valasht. The photo is in B&W trying to evoke the mood of the 60's.*

### **Links**

See my previous report "Alam Kuh"

### **Thank you**

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J-M Houtcief