

This means that for the higher walks, local guides are more or less essential. No GPS readings are given for Svaneti, partly because a local guide is recommended for security. Svans are traditionally suspicious of strangers. A guide is the important link to the community. I have heard of no robberies since the start of 2004 in Svaneti, and sometimes do small walks alone – but always prefer to take a local.



Mt Ushba (4710 metres)

In the early 20th century the local Prince Dadesheliani once gave this mountain to a beautiful German secretary. She had arrived with a climbing team – and the smitten Prince presented the mountain in the hope of receiving her hand. On her safe arrival back in Germany she is said to have returned the mountain to the Svans.

Walk 36

The CHAIR LIFT

Start/end - Mestia

Type - Loop

Date - April to November

Time - 2 hours (max)

Upward climb - 200 metres

Max elevation - 1600 metres

Grade - Easy but a steepish descent

Mobile signal - Permanent

Summary

A short but satisfying walk for those with little time. It gives views of Ushba's summit (hidden in Mestia town), reaching up behind the Cross mountain; takes you past a splendid 75 metre sheer slate cliff above the roaring Mulkhura river, follows a jeep road most of the way up into the forest giving views over the town and valley, then drops you back down into Mestia under the guiding wires of a chair lift. Plenty of fine colours in the autumn.

Route

Head out of the main square on the Ushguli road. Cross both bridges, pass the large Museum and keep following the road. The houses soon end and the road climbs gently through the forest onto the mountainside above the wild Mulkhura river. After about fifteen minutes the dramatic slate cliff appears on the left, shortly after this the road divides. The lower heads towards Mulakhi and Ushguli, the upper toward Yeli and the TV station. Take the upper road. It climbs up through the forest, and soon you see the Ushba twin towers peeking down. Walk up about 25 minutes keeping your eyes peeled for chair lift cables crossing directly over the road. Once spotted, turn immediately right and follow them straight down the slope. You soon come to a cable tower - which dare-devils like to climb - then just follow the steep winding path down to a flatter area. Here you meet a path coming down from the right. You have a choice either to take this - which leads more pleasantly off to the left winding through the woods to the base station - or just to keep heading straight down under the cables to the cable car base. Once there you can continue straight on down into the village - but I advise bearing to the right along the jeep track to avoid the houses' guard dogs. The track soon arrives on the Ushguli road - so just turn left and walk back down into the town.

Walk 37

To the TV STATION

Start/end - Mestia

Type - One way return (also potential loop with a good guide)

Date - May to October

Time - 6 hours

Upward climb - 900 metres

Max elevation - 2400 metres

Grade - Medium

Mobile signal - Virtually permanent

Summary

Among the best views of the Mestia region are gained from the ridge at the top of this walk. You stroll for a good 1.5 kms at the top of the world – and on a good day see all of Svaneti's highest peaks. For the more determined walker – a great first day introduction to the region. Of all the walks this is best rewarded by good weather. The route described here is all along the jeep track – although there are more direct, steeper and quicker routes which can take you in a loop. For these you need a good guide. I would advise the jeep track for one of the directions, as it passes through clearings to give great views.

Route

Follow the **Walk 36** route up to the point where you turn off the jeep track down under the cable-wires – then just keep going up on the jeep track. When it hits a small ridge follow it down into a shallow valley then up the other side. (don't turn left along the ridge), note the yellow azaleas whose perfume can fill the whole valley and Ushba's twin peaks that start appearing like a pair of rabbit's ears emerging from a hat. Climb up again until the road hits another flatter ridge with small fenced pastures on the right (and a couple of huts) where a steep road leads up to the left – take it. Don't continue straight or you'll descend to Yeli. Climb this steeper jeep track all the way to another flatter plateau, where the trees thin and eventually open into small pastures. There, more or less at the highest point, another left hand fork offers a jeep track up along what soon turns into the ridge top –

here the great views begin. Follow it all the way to the TV mast. Spot the dwarf Rhododendron Caucasicum (white/yellow flowers in June/July) along the summit. If desired you can continue along to the summit of Mt Zuruldi – add another hour.

Down – retrace your steps

Walks 38/39

To the CHALATI GLACIER

Start/Finish - Mestia

Type - Single direction, return

Date - May to October

Time - 7 or 10 hours (but depends on what lifts you take)

Upward climb - 300 or 600 metres

Max elevation - 2000 or 2300 metres

Grade - Easy (Walk 38). Tricky (Walk 39)

Mobile signal - Poor. Only at start (in Mestia valley)

Summary

A long, very pleasant one day walk – with an adventurous add-on, if required. This easy route takes you along the beautiful Mestia River valley with views of Ushba peeking down, up to the tongue of the Chalati Glacier. Then if you wish you can climb up the moraine side, towards the dramatic ice cliffs (better stay off the glacier surface). This second section should only be attempted by those with good balance and the patience to step on the boulders **slowly** and carefully – many are loose. However no special equipment is needed. If the second section is attempted it's advisable to drive all the way to the suspension bridge, missing the first flat section of the walk, to give sufficient time to reach the most interesting part – the ice cliffs – then walk back to Mestia (four hours). We took a lift half the way to the bridge, but ended up walking the last 2 kms back in the dark – all-be-it along tarmac road.

Route

Follow main (metalled) road out of Mestia toward and past the airport. At the end of the tarmac continue along the jeep track all the way to the head of the narrow-

ing valley where the track ends (about 7kms). Just before the head you will catch glimpses of the Chalati glacier tumbling down from Chatin Tau Mountain to the left (where you're headed). To cross the river take the Soviet built suspension bridge just beyond the point where two rivers merge (don't worry I made it). On the other side follow the track left and up through the woods beside the Chalati glacier river all the way to the glacier tongue. The path is pretty obvious. Higher up the woods disappear and you can clearly see the glacier – so just follow the general direction. Note the significant glacier shrinkage markings painted on the boulders.

Walk 39. Facing the tongue of the glacier head up the steep boulder-cliff directly to the right. Stay off glacier surface. Once above the glacier, continue on along the right side, toward the ice cliffs about 2 kms up. Note the moraine boulders are often loose – so tread carefully and don't hurry. Coming down is more difficult – so leave more time.

Back - retrace your steps. It took us a full four hours back to Mestia from the ice cliffs – with no stops.

WARNING: Once at the glacier tongue, *do not* stand up close directly under the ice as large boulders periodically tumble down (especially on sunny afternoons) - as the ice mass melts - potentially fatal results.

Bridge to Chalati glacier



Walk 40

The ALPINE LODGE and PASTURES

Start/end - Mestia

Type - Partial loop

Date - May - November

Time - 3/4 hours

Upward climb - 300 metres

Max elevation - 1700 metres

Grade - Easy

Mobile signal - More or less permanent

Summary

An easy, aesthetic stroll up into the low alpine pastures. At the eastern, dog-leg end of the Mestia valley. A good introductory walk affording fine views in two directions; one some 20kms westward down valley toward Latale; the other some 12kms northward toward the Daligora massif and Chalati glacier. All this of course under the watchful eyes of Mts Ushba and Tetnuld, who gaze down much of the way. The walk is short and better extended by an hour or so, by following the jeep track on up toward the higher pastures – as far as desired, then back. This gives a good view onto the Chalati glacier northwards. Early deviations to the right, up to the rim of the dramatic Mulkhura chasm are strongly recommended.

Route

Head out of Mestia main square on the Ushguli road, but after the first bridge turn immediately left. Walk up the stony road, past the old Intourist Hotel (on right) choosing the right hand lane whenever the road divides. This becomes a pleasant amble beside small fenced/walled pastures. After some ten minutes bear in mind that just 50/100 metres to the right the great Mulkhura river chasm opens up with dramatic sheer slate cliff dropping away. Definitely worth a deviation and a peer-over at the great views up the river gully and of the 4974 metre pyramid of Tetnuld. Be careful not to walk up to the edge without checking the rim first – some is just wads of turf with nothing below...

After this the track begins a brief switch-back and the sharp-eyed will notice a smaller path leading away straight up the hill. This leads to the ridge top and apparently gives a good view down into the Mulakhi valley –

but is a major deviation and not taken here. On this walk just follow the jeep track. After some 30 minutes you spot the ruined Alpine Lodge just down below – a powerful symbol of the Soviet period when Svaneti had been developed for tourists. The Alpine Lodge used to house 250 guests in its three tiers of rooms. The semi-circular restaurant with views over the valley give it a distinctive look. Before it is an abandoned swimming pool in a pleasant grass pasture – now used by resort-class cows. Here you have a choice – to walk down to the lodge then head back toward Mestia along its long entrance drive (making this a two and a half hour walk in total) – or continue on up – towards the higher pastures. The latter is advisable as it extends the walk and provides good views of the Chalati glacier under Daligora Mountain to the north. Walk along another half an hour or so (the choice is yours) then turn back. This way you can adjust the length of the walk – bearing in mind the trek back to Mestia's central square from the Lodge takes just under an hour.



Fresco in Laghuni church, near Mestia

Walk 41

MASERI to MESTIA - the GULI PASS

Start - Maseri village

End - Mestia

Type - Single direction, one way

Date - June - September

Time - 11/12 hours

Upward climb - 1400 metres (in one relentless go)

Max elevation - 2950 metres

Grade - Gruelling

Mobile signal - Poor until on top, or down in Mestia valley

Summary

This is an enormous, shattering walk – but fabulous. It brings you close up to the rock massif of Ushba providing vivid impressions of the most spectacular mountain in the Caucasus. As you make the long, arduous climb up toward the pass, the South peak looms ever closer and bigger overhead. You can see the climber's routes – following one some of the way – and then suddenly at the top of the pass (2950 metres), the Mestia valley opens up with all the high peaks stretching away. The descent is steep but not frightening. We followed the valley all the way down to the Inguri valley, then took a delightful track through the woods (above the road) to Mestia – impossible to describe this last bit here (I had a local guide, which is completely necessary on this walk). It's easiest to follow the main tarmaced road back to Mestia. This is a massive walk, some people take two days and camp up in the mountains. Guli means heart in Georgian – and you need a good one. Better do it when there is plenty of daylight (i.e not October) unless super fit and a speed walker. The directions below are only general because you should definitely take a local guide. I had one of the best, Zura, but still we had to back-track because of new land-slides. The walk climbs fairly high so altitude is a factor. We ran into fresh snow on July 1st just below the pass – so check on snow conditions first, particularly if in June.

Route

Start just before Maseri (a 50 minute drive from Mestia, up the Becho valley). Take the first right after the metal cross standing beside the road. Cross the river and walk up the valley between the two rivers, following the jeep track all the way to the ruins of Guli village, then up past its small church. Keep climbing and gradually swing left towards the looming cliffs of Ushba South. Keep following the alpinists' trail up into the huge empty valley headed by a small glacier, tipping down from Ushba South, which now looks increasingly enormous. Just before the final shepherd's hut turn right and head straight up the mountain, switch-backing up and up. After an arduous hour and a half, nearing the top, you should gradually bear right to hit the rim of a ridge (if you go too soon you'll be stuck under a cliff and have to back-track). You will see the flat Guli pass above, but first you have to traverse the head of a shaley valley to the grass, peat of the final push for the top, partially covered in snow when I went in July. By now I was definitely travelling on reserve, but fortunately my guide kept saying 'nearly there,' which tricked me to the top. The view is magnificent, and you can see the path heading left on up to the spectacular Coruldi plateau (one of the best views on Ushba available to walkers – but requires a night in a tent). The rest is downhill. More or less straight. The valley directly ahead leads down to the Inguri valley and is pretty obvious. Head down the centre of the valley, don't take the paths that traverse the sides – unless you want to walk on (and up again) to the Cross peak – then down to Mestia (left hand traverse). By then I'd had my fill of 'up.' At the bottom you hit the Mestia road, where you turn left and walk the last few kilometres back home. The walk down is as big as the walk up (about 1500 metres) – so is hard on the knees. Do not attempt this walk unless you're hardy!

Mt Ushba route



Walk 42

The CROSS PEAK

Start/end - Mestia

Type - Loop of single-direction return

Date - May to October

Time - 4/5 hours

Upward climb - 900 metres

Max elevation - 2350 metres

Grade - Medium

Mobile signal - Permanent

Summary

A stiff but good introductory walk – offering superb views in all directions most of the way. The Cross stands directly above Mestia, you can see it from the central square, nearly 1 kilometre above. It stands proudly right in the crook of the valley dog-leg – so you can see virtually everything from the top. This is the start of another climbers' route toward Ushba, but the mountain is only clearly visible on arrival at the Cross. This is more than compensated by the magnificent panoramas of Banguriani, Daligora and Tetnuldi mountains for more or less the whole trip. Arrival at the Cross is a surprise as from the town it looks no more than a couple of metres high – in fact it's over four, giving a good indication of the altitude (and views) gained.

Route

As in all walks the start is important, but in this case fairly easily found. Head out of town on the wide, easternmost road from Mestia's main square – toward

Laghumi village. The road runs, dead straight about 300m, past the few shops then just before it bears slightly right and down toward the river bridge, another road branches up and to the left. Take it. This heads straight up into the old village, and is also the route toward the Tower and House Museum (well worth a visit). Walk straight up. There are choices, but 'directly up' is your guide. You should soon pass under an old stone arch connected to a tower, then on up out of the village. The last major right hand turn heads across to the Tower and House Museum – but don't take it. Keep going straight up the now increasingly steep open track, past a tiny chapel (to the left) up to the top of the stony water-escarpment where the path bears to the right. Here begins the best route to the Cross – and the climb loses some of its severity by taking a steady north-eastward route along the slope of the Cross hill, following the Mestia valley increasingly northward. The path is very clear (much used by cattle) and eventually joins the jeep road up to the Cross. Follow the road for a few minutes then, where it begins to bend away to the left, beside two gates to pastures (on opposite sides of the road) you have a choice. Either follow the jeep road all the way up to the Cross (simplest, but least rewarding) – or take the steep upward path leading away to the right. This climbs stiffly up but offers excellent views of Daligora and Banguriani mountains – all the way to the first huts of the summer village. Here the houses interconnect with paths, so follow one to the left and upwards. My favourite route from

here is to continue on up, past more of the houses to the top of the ridge (now near), then, when you see the Cross, slightly below and to the left, walk down to it. Ushba is now clearly visible all the way. You can also follow a path down, through some firs, to pick up the jeep road again, then on up to the Cross. Both options start from almost the same altitude as the cross – so don't require a great deal of extra exertion.

Down – there are several options. One is take the jeep road all the way – this is longer but follows a different route, landing you further north in the Mestia River valley. Then simply follow it back through Laghumi village to Mestia. You can also just descend the way you came – along the path (which I prefer since you see the same splendid views again but from the other direction)... *or*, you can descend by another completely new, *very steep* path straight down into Mestia. This is quickest and ends up west of the town centre. It can be found by walking up the ridge a few minutes from the Cross while looking keenly left. A little way up you should spot a path leading down, then turning left again into the woods. This route is also fairly clear, but is enclosed by trees much of the way (giving sudden spectacular views). The direction is pretty easy since you can see Mestia town most of the way – to keep bearings. At the bottom you hit another small valley made by a stream – which doubles as a path, Follow this straight down to the main road, then turn left into Mestia town.

Walk 43

The CORULDI RIDGE

Start/end - The Cross Peak above Mestia

Type - Single direction return with loop mid way.

Date - July - September

Time - 7 hours (or 9 if walking back down to Mestia)

Upward climb - 900 metres

Max elevation - 3300 metres

Grade - Difficult and strenuous

Mobile signal - Permanent

Summary

Possibly the most spectacular walk here, but also most difficult and at times hazardous. Never a climb (no equipment needed) but often a scramble along steep escarpments. Altitude is also a factor - (noticeable from around 2500 metres) so you need to be fit. However, once up on that ridge... all is forgotten. The view onto the ice fields is simply staggering. You look down on two huge glaciers - the Ushba Ice Fall and Chalati glacier. The tower of Chatin Tau (4368m) rises up directly ahead like a Mt Doom - and lordling above all is Ushba, now awesomely close. The place is so high - so absolutely not designed for humans - it catches your breath. Up there you are threatened by rock and ice on three sides; on the forth the vast empty space of Mestia valley opens up all the way to Tetnuldi. You also begin to acquire that mountaineers' acute sense of the weather. I was caught in a blizzard up on the ridge (see 'Story') which fortunately passed. But we didn't hang around too long as another approached. The quickest route up is clearly visible all the way, as the entire walk is above the tree line. However near the top the walk turns steep and difficult on loose shards of slate. Boulders flake away and can tumble down a 100 metres - so *never* walk directly beneath (or above) your companions. Before starting check on the snow conditions. Too much will stop you in your tracks - although a little is helpful for footing upward, near the top.

Route

Take a jeep up from Mestia to the Cross then on up to the highest of the summer pasture huts. This cuts out three hours of slog - giving you (or at least me) enough puff to take on this high altitude walk. Beyond the hut (beside a small tarn) the track degrades into a series of parallel paths. Standing at the bottom you can clearly see

your destination - a short flattish ridge one kilometre straight above. With binoculars it's possible to make out a small cross on the summit. The route is clear - following a ridge leading toward the Guli pass to the left, then climbing the final steep flanks to the Coruldi ridge. There is another route to add variety - and stunning views of Banguriani and Darigora; or if the ridge is too windy. After some twenty minutes up from the hut a smaller path branches off to the right, away from the more direct ridge route. Follow this and the climb becomes easier and calmer. Also, after about thirty more minutes, you encounter a small spring, which with a bit of digging allows bottles to be filled. Although accompanied by parallel cow paths the way is pretty logical - take the biggest going up. Eventually it winds round and up to the left to a series of small lakes. At the far end of the last lake the ridge is clearly visible - which you pick up for the final long push up to the Coruldi ridge. Here life becomes more tricky. The way steepens and the ground deteriorates into small shards of coloured, and endlessly slipping slate. But keep your bearings straight for the ridge just below and to the right of the cross - which should be visible now with the naked eye. Patches of snow make this climb easier (if colder). The feet slip back less on the compacting snow. A mixture of both is ideal - up on the snow, down on the slate. After some considerable climbing a small plateau opens out. Directly above is the Coruldi ridge - the Coruldi Plateau is slightly to the left, behind the peak with the cross. If you're making the walk after the first October snows, or before the final July melt - you will almost certainly now be facing a snow walk, intermixed with patches of crumbling slate (gloves, sunglasses and a windcheater with hood are advised). The final 100 metres up to the ridge is very steep with some scrambling. The rock is loose so be careful and make certain *nobody is directly above or below you*. However just when it all starts to feel too much, the top of the ridge suddenly arrives, with one of the finest walker's views in the Caucasus - described above. A great place for lunch.

Down. Quickest is the way you came avoiding the lakes, staying on the ridge all the way. Some may not still have the jeep - it's more expensive to have the driver stay up the whole day. If so, either just follow the jeep track back down, or choose one of the Walk 42 routes down.

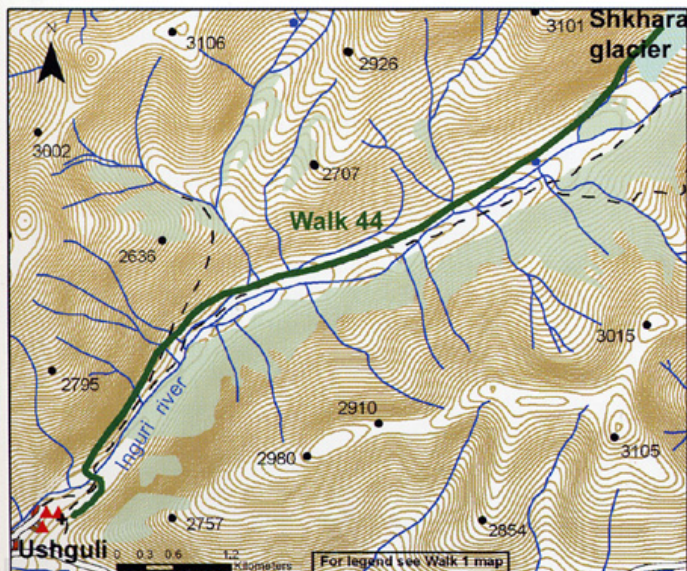
NOTE:

The super fit can do this walk all the way from Mestia in one day. IE combining Walks 42 and 43. Only attempt this in July or August when the days are longest. I've only met one person who made it (I tried once and failed).

USHGULI

INTRODUCTION/HISTORY

If Mestia is a fine example of how Georgia's culture survived through the centuries, then Ushguli is its secret heart for... how could anyone find it? Georgians claim Ushguli as the highest, permanently occupied village group in Europe at 2200 metres. It's also one of the oldest; the bases of some towers date to pre-Christian times. Historically a remarkable place, not to mention its fine 11th-12th century towers. In 1993 it was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO due to its antiquity and fantastically remote atmosphere. Some remoteness disappeared with the new mobile mast - placed in the most prominent position, near the main watch-tower. Composed of four villages (the main one is Chajhashi), Ushguli contains two small museums, one in a tower and one in a house. Opening is not reliable, or sometimes even possible. Walks however are - and numerous. Here I'm afraid is only one. Homestay accommodation is always available, and often lifts in local Niva jeeps.



LOCATOIN

The Ushguli villages are about two hours' jeep ride from Mestia - if you don't stop (too far to walk in one day). But the way up is very beautiful and interesting, with the villages of Ipari and Kvala with their famous 12th century churches (and fine frescos). The only way up is by jeep.

Ushguli



Walk 44

The SHKHARA GLACIER

Start/end - Ushguli

Type - Single direction, return

Date - June to September

Time - 6 hours

Upward climb - 300 metres

Max elevation - 2500 metres

Grade - Easy

Mobile signal - At start only

Summary

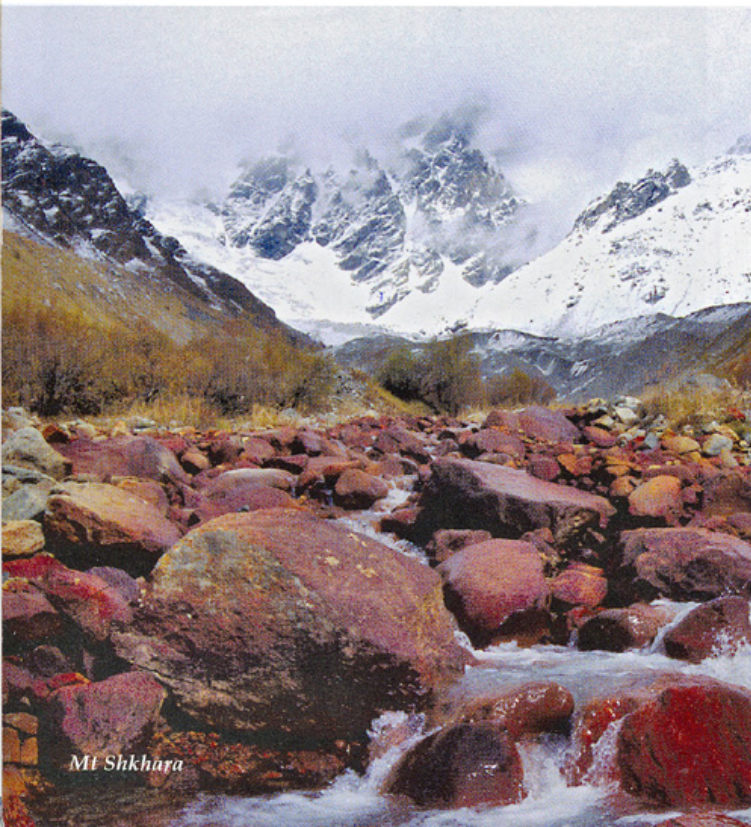
This fairly easy walk takes you to the base of Georgia's highest mountain, Shkhara (5068m) – giving splendid views of this giant much of the way. The walk itself is longish but for the most part flat, running along a wide, mostly treeless valley. On the final section you walk up beside a river running down from the glacier. The goal is the glacier tongue itself – not as spectacular as Chalati – but a simple glance upwards at the majestic cathedrals of

rock and snow lifting straight up into the sky, easily compensates. The walk can be shortened and intensified by jeeping up the valley – missing out the less interesting first hour and a half of valley (preferable).

Route

Walk up out of the last Ushguli village along the jeep track toward the Lamara Church and tower – the highest stone building in the valley. Beyond it the track dips down slightly – and picks up the river from the Shkhara glacier. This is your guide all the way. After about 20 minutes along the track you encounter the first and only significant obstacle on the walk – a ford of the river. Usually there is a narrow plank bridge up to the left. If the summer floods have washed it away – then nothing for it but take off the shoes, roll up the trouser legs and encounter some bracing glacial water. But it's a short distance and a good stick will help for balance. A quick wipe down and you're on the way – up the now wide, treeless valley. Follow the jeep track all the way. This is the least eventful part of the walk, but the looming snowy massif of Shkhara makes you forget the routine. An hour later the jeep track sort of peters out, or rather seems to merge with the river. At this point stay on the left hand side of the river, following it all the way up to the point where it divides (another river meets it from the right). Bear left up the valley towards the now visible Shkhara glacier. There is a rough path that meanders parallel to the river, on the left hand side. You can also climb along the river itself, leaping between the wonderfully red-oxidised boulders. When arriving at the glacier tongue – remember the warning from Walk 1 – do *not* stand directly under the tongue of the glacier (boulders can race down without warning).

Back. Simply retrace your steps – not forgetting to turn round frequently to catch the receding, but still splendid views of Shkhara in the changing light.



Mt Shkhara

