

Noshaq on skis

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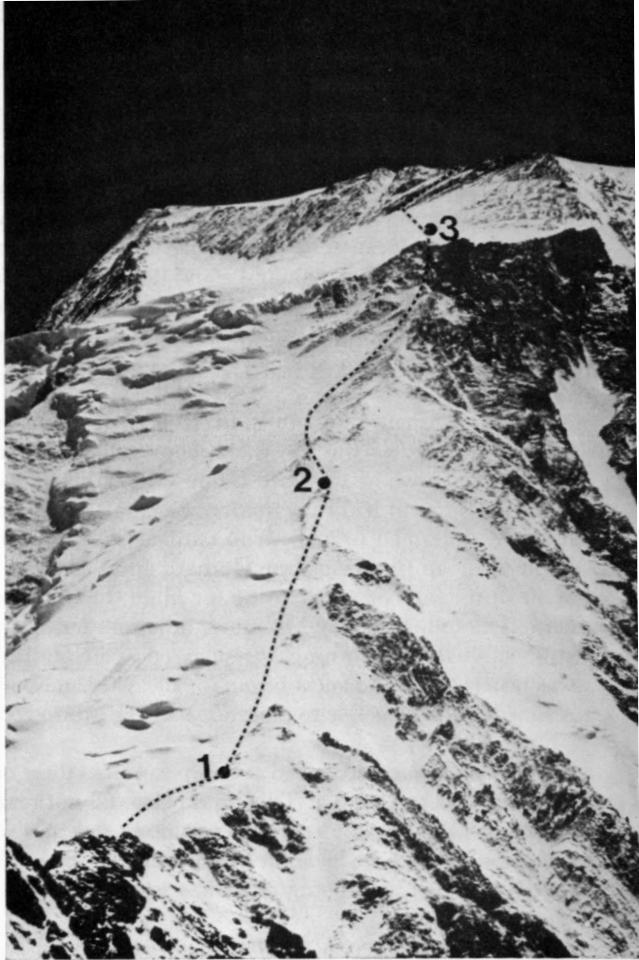
Could the ascent of a 7500 m mountain be accomplished on skis? This challenging question, posed during a club-meeting of the Academic Alpen-Club one evening in summer 1969, was the subject of an animated and lively discussion. There were two opposing camps formed immediately, those who said it could be done and others who were in doubt, advancing the reason that such an undertaking had never been attempted yet. However, what was foremost in our minds was: could such a feat be accomplished without oxygen? Should skins be used or would it be advantageous to walk and to carry the skis? Is the equipment used by skiers in the Alps today also suitable at such high altitudes? The conclusion of this discussion was that all agreed that to prove or to disprove this challenge could be decided only on the spot; furthermore the answer to this question and experiences gained through such an accomplishment would justify the sending of an expedition.

Therefore on 13 June, 1970 Karl Gabl, Gerd Gantner, Gerhard Markl, Hansjörg Moser, Dr Jörg Schmidl, Dr Roland Schulz and myself set out in two Volkswagen-buses for the Hindu Kush. We called ourselves 'Tiroler Hindu Kush-Ski-Expedition 1970 of the Academic Alpen-Club, Innsbruck' and our aim was the ascent on skis of Noshaq (7492 m), the second highest peak of the Hindu Kush. We chose Noshaq because of its topography, which after a careful study of literature and photographs was found to be an outstanding challenge to the skier.

After driving approximately 7200 km in eleven days through seven countries we arrived at Kabul. There we were held up for four days in order to procure the necessary authorisation to enter the border district. The road to Kundus built by the Russians, took us over the Salang Pass (3350 m) and we arrived finally at Qazi Deh, the last point of habitation, close to the Russian frontier on very bad roads, not worthy of the name.

The people of Qazi Deh of course do not understand a single word of German, they understood, however, the power-words in Tyrolean dialect of our language expert Gerhard Markl, especially if they were accompanied by expressive gesticulations. After colourful negotiations and the usual bargaining he was happy to have hired forty-one porters, who during the following three days transported all the equipment of the expedition to the Base Camp. This camp, situated at an altitude of 4510 m, consisted of three small sleeping tents and one large tent, where we could cook, eat and shelter during bad weather. Looking south-west there was Kharposhte Yakhi (5698 m), turning to the east-south-east we saw the outline of Asp-e-Safed (c. 6500 m) and turning to the south-east we gazed at Noshaq (7492 m), our target.

45 *The Route.* This and next photo: U. Schwabe



No sooner had we encamped than we set out to establish the mountain-camps, beginning with Camp 1 at 5364 m. This, however, had to be interrupted as our expedition doctor, Jörg Schmidl, left at Base Camp with headache and slight temperature was found on our return with high fever and symptoms of paralysis. Dr Schmidl was already unconscious and it took the whole group to transport him to Qazi Deh and from there on by the second doctor, Roland Schulz, to Kabul. We heard later that the diagnosis was inflammation of the brain and it was in a depressed mood that we returned to Base Camp after three days.

It is a well-known fact that climbing at high altitudes requires careful acclimatisation, for which we had reckoned fourteen days. Some days after our return to Base Camp we therefore made a trial run on Kharposhte Yakhi, making an ascent on skis from its western side. As we were not equipped with any large scale maps, we were very interested to make a survey of Noshag to establish positions for possible sites for the two mountain camps still to be established.

From the summit of Kharposhte Yakhi the north side of Noshag with its mighty glacier can be clearly observed. Above all our attention was fixed on the glacier section between Camp 1 and the ridge which leads to the summit.

We could observe a variably steep terrain, in general feasible for skis in spite of crevasses here and there, which only once, at about two thirds of its height, was interrupted by a break and a rock face on its right-hand side. Through the binoculars the break did not look inviting, but obviously it would be better to climb the rock face in spite of an exposed traverse, which was to be expected. We agreed that Camp 3 should stand just above the face, thus the group who would one morning start from this camp towards the summit, would have the most difficult part of the climb behind them. Camp 2 should stand about half-way between Camps 1 and 3.

The establishment of Camp 2 (6218 m) and Camp 3 (6888 m) took us nine days. The weather was not good, above all not steady and snow fell almost daily as far down as the Base Camp. Nevertheless we felt that an attempt to reach the summit had to be undertaken, particularly as we felt fit and in good form. We planned to make it in two stages, carried out by two groups. The night of 19–20 July Hansjörg, Gerhard and I slept for the first time in Camp 3 at an altitude of 6888 m. During the night the thermometer fell to 20°C below zero. The following day brought a deterioration in the weather, the summit, still visible in the morning, disappeared in a cloud. A sharp icy wind blew, it was bitterly cold and snow began to fall. After an hour's obstinate climbing we realized it was hopeless to continue and the group returned to base.

The second group had stayed at Camp 2, waited there one day for better weather then climbed to Camp 3. This group also did not reach the summit as during the night Gert became seriously mountain sick and with the assistance of the first group had to be brought to the valley at once. Thus the first assault had failed; however, the mountain camps stood!

Mountain sickness is a terrifying experience and it is shocking to see how quickly a strong young man, one moment in full possession of his physical and mental capacities, can lose all his vitality and literally collapse. This happened to Gert within less than six hours. Fortunately a man suffering from mountain sickness recovers quite quickly as soon as he is taken to a lower altitude. A predisposition for mountain sickness is a matter of individual constitution. A strong and sturdy physique alone is no guarantee at all that one will not suffer from it.

At Base Camp we waited during four days of heavy snowfall and storm for better weather. A second assault was discussed and carefully planned and again two stages were set. The first group, comprising Hansjörg, Roland and myself was to proceed to Camp 2 and then to Camp 3. The second group comprising Gerhard and Karl was to follow a day later and stay at Camp 2, their skis, however, would have been carried to Camp 3 by the first group. Gert unfortunately had to remain at Base Camp.

On 23 July weather and weather report are good. The first group starts. In spite of deep snow they proceed quite satisfactorily, but in the afternoon have to struggle against a sudden snow-storm. With the howling of the wind and the rattling of the tent-sheets they pass a bad night at Camp 2.

With the intention of reducing their stay in the thin air as much as possible they do not start for Camp 3 until the following afternoon, when the weather has improved. They traverse the glacier and climb the 500 ft high, rocky face with the difficult, though secured traverse just below Camp 3, which is reached at sunset. Meanwhile the second group has arrived at Camp 2; wireless communication confirms that all is satisfactory there.

At sunrise the first group starts from Camp 3, perceiving the second group already halfway towards Camp 3. The weather is fine and promising, but it is bitterly cold. Up to Camp 3 we had carried our skis. But now we put them on and with skins move slowly upwards over vast, steep slopes. Walking with skis is found to be a relief in spite of the increased weight on the feet, due to the evenness of the gliding motion. Very soon a definite rhythm is developed which continues without mental effort. The necessary balance between respiration, pulsation and physical effort is thus almost automatic. Nevertheless, the lack of oxygen is very tiring and not more than 500 ft an hour can be climbed. Having traversed the glacier in its upper part the first group reaches the ridge at 11.00am; they decide to wait here for the others.

This place offers an overpowering view. One looks across to Pakistan, where directly opposite the dominating massif of Tirich Mir (7708 m) towers in the sky. One recognises the 7000-ers of the Russian Pamir in the north. As far as one can see there are mountains, summits and mountains; a cloudless sky arches above them. Gratefully we look towards the sun, which gives us light, heat and enthusiasm. We take off our padded jackets and sit on the skis in the snow, dressed only in our pullovers. We feel completely recompensed for all effort and fatigue. At 12.00 the two groups unite.

Refreshed we take leave at 12.30pm from the place, called 'Eleven-o'clock-place', and go on. There are no difficulties on the ridge, therefore everybody goes as fast as suits his own condition. Hansjörg with the best height constitution is very soon far ahead. He will reach the summit first and will make preparations for our reception. He will hoist up the summit flags between his 180 cm long skis and will mount the film camera, which he will use to make record shots.

Meanwhile the summit has suddenly hidden itself in a cloud. Slowly penetrating the dense fog the surroundings become vague and unreal. As the world of mountains and valleys gradually vanishes we lose the feeling of our own altitude. The summit too, shrouded in mist and fog, seems now to be an illusion and not to be there. At the end of a monotonous climb we find Hansjörg standing on a place where all paths lead down. One after the other we arrive there, rather numbened and bewildered. We do not grasp that we are on the target of our hopes. Certainly there is an occasional break in the clouds, but all that can be glimpsed assumes only the significance of passing phantoms. We check the time: it is 2pm on 25 July. We remove the skins and have some tea from the thermos. Mechanically we take some pictures because there is a faint recollection that we planned to do so. Apparently the altitude, the lack of oxygen, the physical effort and above all the nebulous atmosphere have affected our state of mind.

The summit was still in fog, visibility bad. The ridge, where we came, borders on the right side the edge of the North face of Noshaq, which falls down about 3300 ft almost perpendicularly. On its other side a large declivity of rubble slopes rather steeply towards the southern valley. Between the edge and the declivity there were strips of some hard-pressed, wind-blown snow, about 30 ft wide and bound more or less. Moving carefully on these strips we came to the 'Eleven-o'clock-place'. The slope was gradual and visibility improved as we descended.

We had been anxious that the lack of oxygen at this altitude would make turning difficult; but to our surprise we were able to perform a sequence of about twenty turns at a restrained but fluent pace without any real difficulty.

Near the 'Eleven-o'clock-place' we left the ridge, which descends here to the glacier by a gradual rocky step. Only a little dip in the ridge gives access to an assembly of snowy passages, about 30 ft wide, which we followed to the glacier, skiing down without trouble. As on the ridge, we kept also here more or less to the ascent track.

On the free side of the moderately steep glacier there was good powder snow and skiing was a real pleasure. Everybody could make his own track. There was no fog on the glacier, the sky nearly cloudless and visibility excellent. After a delightful speedy run we reached Camp 3 at 3.40pm, forty minutes after our departure from the summit.

We wasted no time in breaking up camp. Considering the fact that the most difficult part of the descent had yet to be done, it was already late. However, feeling elated on account of the good weather and the favourable conditions we decided we could always spend the night at Camp 2 in case of necessity. In order to save time Roland and Karl set out immediately to get down the rocky step, whilst Hansjörg, Gerhard and I followed later with the fully packed rucksacks. The descent of the 500 ft rocky step was achieved without incident; a 150 foot rope was left on the face. At 6pm the five skiers stood at the beginning of the lower glacier.

Here the conditions were less favourable. On the steep slopes, which here and there had all the appearance for avalanches to come, there was wind-blown, heavy snow. We had to ski carefully in a single track along the rocks. However, we reached Camp 2 half an hour later, at 6.30pm.

At this hour the sun stood just above the horizon. Its oblique beams plunged the mighty mountains under the blue sky in waves of expiring fire. From the valley belts of fog crept up, its lifting foam gleaming in the sunlight. A cold wind blew, but we did not feel its harshness, the descent had warmed us.

We considered whether we should stay at Camp 2. Reasons for staying were the lateness of the hour and the 5600 ft still to be descended. But we did not reflect long. The descent thus far had been better than we had dared to hope and that was it. Resolutely we turned the ski tips towards the valley. Camp 2 would be



46 *'The fabulous last slope'*

collected the day after tomorrow. The twilight stood behind us like a ghost, the urge for haste, however, had to be restrained, as in this part of the glacier there were crevasses. Slow and careful skiing in single track was imperative. Conditions improved only when we reached Camp 1.

But now we let the skis run. The last steep slope was covered with the best powder snow. For the time being physical and mental fatigue left us. The prospect of finishing the descent successfully gave us an unexpected buoyancy. The rucksacks seemed suddenly to be as light as a feather. Meanwhile dusk had fallen; in its uncertain light, facing the approaching darkness the descent became a breath-taking dance. Turn by turn we sped down, without a halt towards the valley and the night. Some faint light shone still on the summits. All that we had experienced during this day, the anxiety for success, the stress of climbing, the satisfaction about the lucky ascent, the enjoyment of the descent found in this late Bacchanal its final expression.

Extremely happy we shook hands at the end of the glacier at 7.30pm congratulating ourselves on the ascent, which we believe to have been the highest one ever accomplished on skis. We had skied down about 9800 ft in one run.

Half an hour's walk brought us back to Base Camp and to Gert, who welcomed us, proud and sad at the same time.