# Mountains of the Thui Gol[1]

**Dave Broadhead**

The Hindu Raj range lies between the Chitral slopes of the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram, and the upper reaches of the Yarkun and the Indus rivers. Part of the Gilgit Agency, Tom Longstaff first appraised the mountaineering potential while stationed there in 1916–17. 'On the northern frontier of Yasin lie some of the finest mountains in the Hindu Kush. To the west are the Thui peaks and to the north the Darkot group; five peaks from over 20,000 to over 22,000 feet' (*This my Voyage* 1950 205). The area was subsequently visited by R. C. F. Schomberg, who introduced the name Hindu Raj (*AJ 251* 316). Translated as Hindu Rule, we found this incongruous name offended many Muslims. In Rawalpindi our expedition title, discreetly painted on the door of our van, was daubed over by an indignant Pakistani. In Gilgit and Yasin the area is known simply as Thui.

The Japanese began serious exploration in 1956, and developments to 1970 are described in detail by Dr. A. Diemberger, tireless collator and willing source of information on the area (*Himalayan Journal* XXXI 310). The main ridge of high peaks runs N, then takes a sharp turn E, providing the frontier line between Chitral and Kashmir. Access from the Yasin side via Gilgit has previously presented a problem in obtaining permission, with the Pakistan government favouring the longer approach to the northern glaciers via Chitral. Following an extensive reconnaisance in 1967, Dr Gerald Gruber published fine panoramas of the Thui peaks, taken from the N (*AJ 316* 55). He described Thui II (6525m), as 'the most beautiful and isolated summit in the Hindu Kush or Hindu Raj', warning that 'the ascent will require a strong team and a massive outlay of equipment'.

Attracted by such a challenge, in 1969 the British Hindu Raj Expedition led by Dick Isherwood approached Thui II from the N, by way of the Shetor Glacier (*AJ 319* 179). Attacking the SE ridge, the onset of bad weather robbed them of success close to the summit. With an easing of political pressures, in 1974 Ron Rutland and a party from the Charlotte Mason College of Education approached Thui II from the S via Yasin and the Thui Gol valley. They established a Base Camp at the foot of the Qualandar Gum Glacier, but poor snow conditions prevented any attempt on the summit. With such a fine objective, our plans were well under way when we learned of a rival English expedition with a prior claim.

Fortunately we did not have to look far for alternatives. To the S of Thui II, opposite the Qualandar Gum Glacier stands Thui Zom (6158m) In 1967, a 2-man Japanese expedition had camped on the W side of the Thui An pass, and gazed in awe at 'the desperate N side of Thui Zom with its enormous wall, approximately 2000m high, at an average angle of 70° with hanging ice blocks here and there'. Thus Dr Diemberger presented their photograph, noting that 'it is clear that these savage towers constitute a tremendous problem for the hardiest of climbers.' We were bitterly disappointed when our application to attempt Thui Zom from the unexplored

[1] Edinburgh University Hindu Raj Expedition 1975.
Members: Dave Broadhead, Geoff Cohen, Dave Page, George Gibson, Des Rubens.

Ghalsapar Glacier was turned down in favour of a large Swiss expedition based at the foot of the Qualandar Gum, below the N face.

Our remaining alternative, obvious from Dr Gruber's panorama, was Thui I (6662m), second highest peak in the area. In 1968 the mountain was attempted by the Japanese from a base on the Pechus Glacier. Two climbers attempting an unsupported Alpine style ascent were not seen again. In 1970, another Japanese attempt, from the Ponarillo Glacier, was defeated by bad weather. With permission granted for an attempt on Thui I, we were disappointed to learn from Dr. Diemberger that the peak had been climbed in 1974, by a Japanese party based on the Borum Bar Glacier, by the approach we planned. However, using all their time and resources establishing 3 high camps to conquer this elusive prize, they had not bothered with any of the surrounding peaks.

In 1974 it had been possible to drive a van all the way to Gilgit. The Karakoram Highway is a grandiose scheme to link China and Pakistan and Chinese engineers are currently building a 2-lane road across the Himalaya, through Hunza and Gilgit to Islamabad. While they are at work, the Hunza valley and the Gilgit road are forbidden to Westerners; when they finish, Gilgit will be robbed of its remoteness. However, in 1975 the area was completely cut off for much of the summer by storm damage to the old road, leaving communications in the hands of Pakistan International Airlines. At the mercy of the weather, irregular flights disrupted the plans of many of the flood of expeditions travelling to Gilgit and Skardu. We were lucky compared with others, and only delayed a total of 7 days. Crowded inside a C130 transport, we missed our glimpse of Nanga Parbat, visible only from the other side of the plane, supposedly a highlight of this famous flight.

From Gilgit a precarious jeep track follows the Gilgit River 90 miles NE to Yasin, the idyllic gateway to Thui and the administrative centre of the area. The hospitality we received gave us the same impression as Colonel Schomberg, over 40 years ago; 'a very smiling country and very decent folk' (*Between The Oxus and The Indus* 1935 60). A few miles further on, near Barendas, a crumbling gorge guards the entrance to the Thui Gol valley. The jeep road continues N to Darkot, awaiting completion of the suspension bridge over the Thui River, where at last we turned our backs on mechanical transport. Since the deposition of the Rajas in 1970, administration has been in the hands of government agents, known as Tahsildars. Eager to be of every assistance, the Tahsildar of Yasin arranged porters for our walk up the valley. He was enthusiastic about the economic benefits from foreign expeditions to such poor areas; we were surprised to find the standard rate for porters at 40 rupees (£2) per day, an increase of 150% on 1974. In Islamabad too, the Ministry of Tourism regards mountaineering as a source of foreign exchange. In 1975 they introduced peak royalties, charging us 600 dollars for Thui I. This proved to be the last straw for the team that had beaten us to Thui II, and they abandoned their plans, too late for us to change our objective officially.

Arriving a few days behind the mammoth Swiss Thui Expedition, we barely managed to recruit the 23 porters we needed for the 4-day approach. Passing through a string of small villages, the richly cultivated lower reaches of the Thui Gol gradually gave way to more rugged scenery, enclosed by rocky



*48 Borumbar glacier and Pt 6400 m (Photo: Edinburgh University Hindu Raj Expedition, 1975)*

walls leading up to peaks of 5800m and over. Near the head of the valley, the towering ridges of Thui Zom dominated with the higher Thui peaks to the N hidden, apart from a tantalizing glimpse of Thui II. The Thui An is still used as a pass over to Chitral, though the government apparently disapproves of the movement of people and flocks through the mountains. Above the shieling of Sholtoli, the path leads on to the Aghost Bar Glacier, while we turned N and climbed steeply up on to the Borum Bar Glacier, establishing base camp at about 4250m on the W lateral moraine.

Surrounded by a huge horseshoe of fine unclimbed snow and rock peaks, we could not have hoped for a finer position. Visible from Sholtoli, the

SE face of Peak 6175m dominated the coire, lined with rocky ribs and thin snow couloirs, indicating some hard climbing. The coire headwall, a curtain of steep rock pillars, linked this peak with the forepeak of Thui I (6400m), a long hopelessly pinnacled ridge. Crowned with a wedge of snow, the forepeak stood aloof with a majestic air. A long narrow hanging glacier beckoned as the obvious route to our objective, the higher summit (6662m) hidden from view. Coming S, a rim of crumbling ice-cliffs capped the ridge, rising to the rocky 'Twin Peaks' (6100m and 6200m) separated by a steep glacier tongue. Facing their W flanks, the N peak, (6100m) presented a huge black buttress, and the S peak (6200m) a long jagged curving red ridge. Peaks 5508m and 5600m had been obvious rock peaks on the walk in, but from Base Camp they were two pleasant looking snow-cones, separated by glacier cols to the N.

We began our climbing on 20 July after 2 days at Base Camp. Des, Dave and myself climbed Pt 5600m while Geoff and George climbed Pt 5508m, from bivouacs on the respective cols at about 4900m. They were straightforward snow plods, but climbing became a struggle with the effects of altitude, panting for breath and hearts pounding. Looking from these lower summits to our higher objectives, we realized that we still had a long way to go to get fit. The view alone made up for the effort. Immediately to the E, towering over the Kerun Bar Glacier, were 2 impressive unnamed snow-peaks, the higher just over 6000m, while beyond, the Baltoro group and Chinese Turkestan were spread out in a sea of shining white peaks. Three days later, George and Geoff began their campaign against Pt 6175m, tentatively named Thui 1.5, or Sholtoli Zom. Gaining the S ridge at about 5800m via an ice-couloir, they sat out the heat of the day contemplating the highly crenellated ridge. Faced with pinnacles resembling the Dames Anglaises of the Peuterey Ridge of Mont Blanc, they discreetly retreated.

In preparation for further attempts we established a high camp of 2 tunnel tents at the head of the Borum Bar Glacier, at about 4900m, and on 28 July Des joined George and Geoff for another attempt on Pt 6175m. A long thin snow-couloir offered the only obvious weakness in the imposing headwall, a straight-forward climb by torchlight despite a few rock pitches of grade IV. Above, a steep ridge of hard ice presented serious difficulties. With the summit still some distance away, a deterioration in the weather forced a retreat from a point just above 6000m, involving an epic bivouac on the steep ridge. Meanwhile, Dave and I had been sitting it out at our high camp, watching the clouds and idly acclimatizing. On 30 July, despite the clouds, we climbed the long steep glacier below the forepeak, intent on Thui I. On the rim of a huge snow-bowl, at about 6100m we looked in vain to the summit, covered in cloud. As if by prior arrangement, the wind suddenly changed from S to N, and the clouds cleared. With the setting sun casting a rosy tint on the sea of anonymous peaks stretching before us to Nanga Parbat on the far horizon, we settled down to an airy bivouac.

Setting off well before dawn, with just enough light from a waning moon we traversed below Pt 6400m. Aiming for a broad snow-saddle below an intermediate rocky crest hiding the summit, we were going strongly, the rising sun still hidden by Koyo Zom. Suddenly, with a sickening crack, the innocent looking snow-slope opened beneath us. Bewildered and battered by falling snow, Dave was swallowed up while I jumped clear, rolling down

the slope. In a few moments silence and stillness returned, as the sun at last rose above Koyo Zom. With the taut rope tied off to my ice-axe, I crawled anxiously to the edge of the crevasse. A faint voice from the depths informed me that he was hanging undamaged, about 40ft down, still holding his ice-axe. Two hours later he emerged, severely chilled, slightly frost-bitten and exhausted, after a desperate struggle to prusik up the rope, cut deep in the soft snow. Moving cautiously to the rocky crest, for once we were glad of the burning mid-day sun, as Dave gradually warmed up again. Gazing across to Thui II, and beyond to the mountains of Afghanistan and Russia, the summit of Thui I seemed so near. Not satisfied with a near miss, as we retraced our steps in the cool of the evening we made an attempt on Pt 6400m on the way. Climbing by torch light, we were repulsed a few hundred feet from the summit by exhaustion, and windslab snow on hard ice.

In the light of our reconnaissance, for a second attempt on Thui I Des, Geoff and George established a high camp at our bivouac site at 6100m, and duly climbed Pt 6400m on 5 August. Intending to climb the main summit after a rest day, they decided instead to attempt the 'Twin Peaks', rather than retracing their steps. A long traverse along the rim of the snow-bowl led to Pt 6100m and thence to Pt 6200m. On the latter summit, an impressive 60-foot rock pinnacle climbed by a pitch of grade IV, they were surprised to find a bird's footprint.

To the S, across the valley, we never lost sight of Thui Zom, a useful measuring stick for altitude. Contemplating its improbable N aspect as we sat out the heat of the day, when climbing was unbearable, we discussed possible lines, but it looked so desperate that we gave up thinking about sneaking over and having a crack. No longer envious of the Swiss, we were curious about their progress, so we paid them a visit. West of Pt 6158m a long ridge drops down to a low col, the only sign of weakness, guarded by a line of threatening seracs. Having tried to reach this 'Col of Despair' they produced an impressive collection of broken karabiners and bent pitons, grim souvenirs. Frightened off Thui Zom, they did however climb Pt 6175m by the straightforward SW flank above the Qalandar Gum Glacier, giving the peak yet another name, Thui III.

While the botanists looked at the rich flora of the Thui An, and our liaison officer enjoyed a change of scene down in Sholtoli, Geoff and Des planned a bold attempt on Thui II (Pt 6523m). Loaded down with a tunnel tent and food for 7 days, they crossed over to the Qalandar Gum Glacier (named after 7 holy men alleged to have been lost there while attempting to cross the Thui An). Following its W side through an ice-fall into an upper snow-bowl they spent their second night on a col above the Shetor Glacier, then continued over a subsidiary 6100m peak, to a camp at about 6030m, below the S ridge of Thui II and well placed for a summit bid. Once again, however, Thui II was guarded by the weather. After 14 fine days it suddenly changed, and a storm on 15 August marked the end of summer and the approach of winter, which we had been warned to expect about then. Feeling rather out on a limb, sitting out the snow-storm in their tunnel tent, there was no alternative but to retreat, even though the weather cleared up again for a short time. The climbing season was over.

On the walk out down the Thui Gol, Geoff and I walked up to the Ghalsapar

Glacier to examine the S defences of Thui Zom. A barren rocky bowl, hemmed in by steep walls, we felt glad that circumstances had thwarted our original plan to establish a Base Camp on that rubble-covered glacier. Partly covered in cloud, the S side of Thui Zom looked as impregnable as the N. However, the fine looking surrounding peaks stirred our imaginations, and to the S the Mushk Bar Glacier remains unexplored. The Thui Gol has much to offer strong determined parties seeking Alpine style climbing on a large scale. From our experiences the key lies in making full use of the summer months to ensure complete acclimatization.

# The Chartreuse

**Jean-Paul Zuanon**

Principally known for a very beautiful monastery which gave it its name, the Chartreuse group, near Chambéry and Grenoble, is a little pre-Alpine group which is worth investigation by the climber in the fore- or late-season, when the conditions or the short days forbid access to high mountains.

### A little geography

Chartreuse is a limestone group, 30km long and a maximum of 10km wide, which just exceeds an altitude of 2000m. However, it is a true natural fortress, delimited N and E by great cliffs which tower above the Chambéry plain and the Isère valley and which are the more interesting part for the climber. Elsewhere, the boundaries are less typical, even though well pronounced. On the W side, one must cross deep gorges by impressive roads. In the S, Chartreuse is separated from the urban area of Grenoble by the Col de Porte and the Col de la Charmette. There are no vast karstic stretches as in Vercors. In Chartreuse, forest is 'king'. It is one of the main activities of the inhabitants and it gives to the region an original character and even an austerity that are not to be found in other regions of the French Alps.

### Rock climbing

Chartreuse cannot pretend to compete with Oisans or with Vercors. However, its mountains are not without Alpine interest and they can offer some fine routes to the climber. They have characteristics similar to those of the Vercors, close at hand. The walls rarely exceed 300m, but the rock is fairly good, especially in the classical routes. Approaches are generally short and made easy by good paths or even forest-tracks. Descents sometimes require abseils. The climbs are to be recommended in spring and autumn; you must be an enthusiast for warmth if you come to climb these E cliffs during summer.

Chartreuse offers plenty of easy summits to the tourist: Dent de Crolles, Charmant Som, Grand Sure. From the early days of mountaineering in Dauphiné, they were the favourite objectives of the members of Société des Touristes Dauphinois (STD) and of the Section de l'Isère of the CAF, the first two