A summer in Gilgit (1975). Pt I

Rob Collister

Ever since we had shared a tent in Kulu in 1973, Dick Isherwood and I had been plotting a 2-man expedition to the Karakoram. I use the word 'plotting' advisedly, for we would be in no way official and of planning there was little, and that hindered by the peripatetic nature of Dick's job in the Far East. One of the last communications I received was a card scribbled in an aeroplane and posted in Japan. It read: 'How about Distaghil Sar? Buy a goat in Hispar and drive it up the glacier. Dick.' Distaghil Sar is 7885m high. Investigation revealed that despite several attempts it had only been climbed once, and then after a struggle involving ice-cliffs, avalanches and violent storms. However, the Hispar Glacier is 40 miles long and surrounded by peaks only slightly lower and considerably less dangerous, so I was quite content to head in that general direction.

With 7 pounds of potato powder and some meat bar to supplement the goat, I flew to Pakistan on 21 June. I was met by Dick with the news that Hunza, the northernmost province of Pakistan and the only feasible approach to the Hispar Glacier, had been closed to foreigners. After being a prohibited area for over 10 years, it had been re-opened in 1973. Now, suddenly, it had been closed again, ostensibly because of work on the so-called Karakoram Highway. Following an old Himalayan trade-route but built for political and military rather than commercial reasons, the 'K-K Highway' runs from Islamabad to Kashgar, in Chinese Turkestan, over the Kunjerab Pass (where according to Dick who had reached it clandestinely the previous year, there is nothing save a sign reading: 'CHINA, DRIVE ON THE RIGHT').

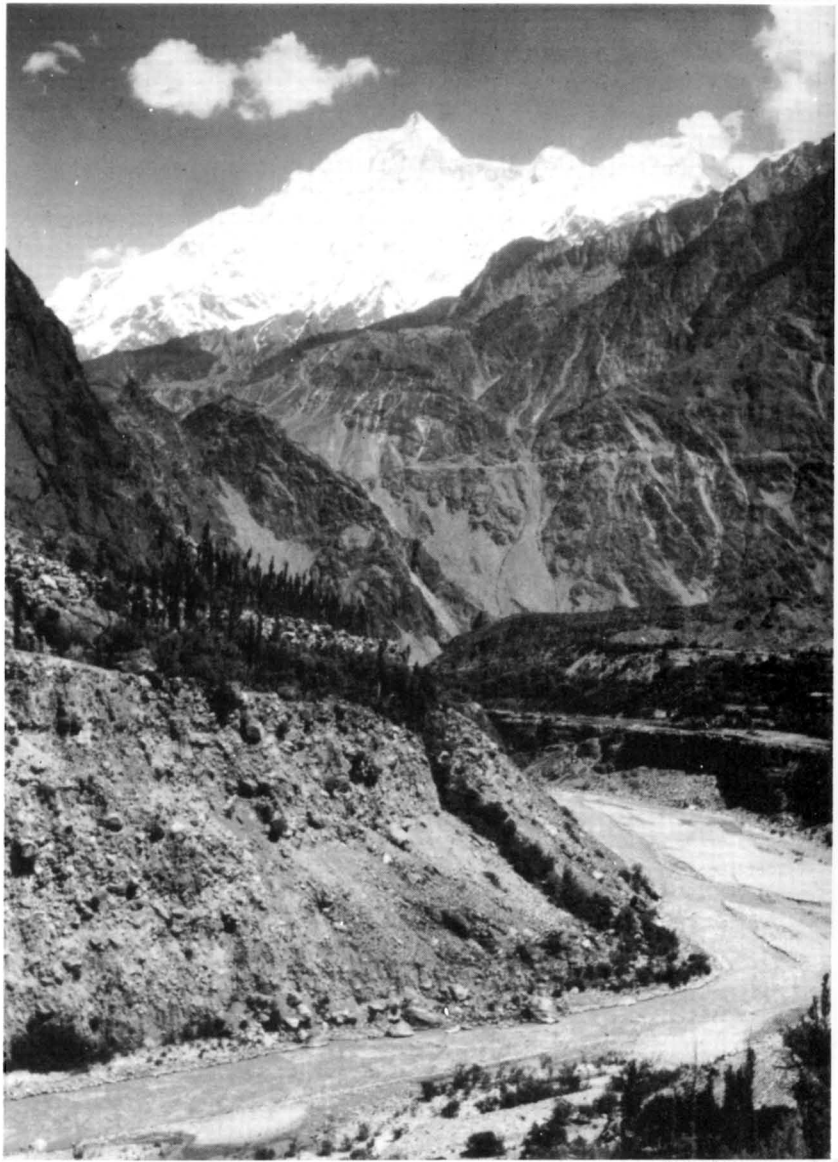
Work still goes on, however, widening, metalling, and endlessly repairing the road. The ban on foreign (though not on Pakistani) tourists seems to have been prompted mainly by the objection of several thousand Chinese engineers and labourers to being so much camera fodder. Another possible reason, strenuously denied by officialdom, was the disturbance caused the previous winter by the government's arbitrary assumption of power in Hunza, depriving the Mir of all authority. This move cannot have been entirely unexpected as the semi-autonomous kingdoms of Negar and Chitral had already suffered the same fate. Nevertheless, some, at least, of the Hunzakuts resented the imposition of policemen, magistrates and a Hilton Hotel, all of which they had managed without quite successfully for some centuries. Be that as it may, our plans to climb around the Hispar Glacier had to be shelved.

We had other strings to our bow, but the immediate problem was to reach Gilgit. This scruffy but strategically-placed little town, once the corner-stone of Imperial defence policy in the Great Game with Russia, is the unavoidable gateway to the W Karakoram. Unfortunately the road up from the plains was also infested with Chinese and out of bounds to foreigners. With the road closed, air flights were even more heavily subscribed than usual, with a booking list stretching into August. That in itself meant little, but Rawalpindi was suffering from the vagaries of its erratic monsoon and many of the daily flights had been cancelled. Rawalpindi was full of long-faced expeditioners of many nationalities, some of whom had been waiting a fortnight already. Neither

Dick nor I are good waiters and, besides, Dick only had 4 weeks' holiday. So, after one abortive visit to the airport, we decided to take the long way round through Swat and Chitral, small states to the S and W of Gilgit. The plan was to walk up the Ushu Valley and over the Kachikani An (4766m) to Sor Laspur in Chitral. From there, we would have to cross the Shandhur Pass (3700m) and travel down the long length of the Gilgit Valley, much of which can be done in a jeep. The journey would take at least a week, compared with an air flight of one hour, but the time would be infinitely better spent than stewing in Rawalpindi.

Two days' travel, mostly by minibus, saw us at Matiltan in Swat State, the

62 The N face of Rakaposhi from near Chalt (Photo: R. Collister)



end of the road. The village boasts an unusual flyover irrigation system of hollowed-out tree trunks on stilts. Set amid fields of maize, wheat and potatoes, its solid stone-built houses are shaded by huge walnut trees and enjoy a view of the twin Bateen peaks. But, to our surprise, its people were grasping and unfriendly. We had both been to Swat before and had the fondest recollections of the place. Dick, in 1964, had climbed Mankial, a fine peak conspicuous from the road as one drives N through Swat, while in 1968 I had been with a party which travelled up the neighbouring Gabral Gol and climbed peaks on the Swat-Chitral watershed. Things had changed considerably since then. We found that organized trekking, both by foreigners and Pakistanis, had become extremely popular and the route we had chosen threatens to rival the Pennine Way in the traffic it receives. Partly because of this trekking boom and partly because Pakistan, like everywhere else, is in the throes of inflation, wages had increased by a factor of 4 or 5 and porters were not inclined to haggle. In Matiltan, those who were found themselves set up by a vigorous Trade Union movement, the militancy of whose members seemed to be directly related to their affluence. It was only with difficulty that we found 2 men, or rather a man and a boy, sufficiently impecunious to defy the militants and accept our terms.



The Ushu Valley, though not without its arid sections, is a lovely place. Its stands of pine and deodar, its water meadows dotted with ponies and cattle, and the snowy peaks visible at either end, make it as picturesque as anything in the Alps. Springs of fresh water bubble up among banks of orchids. Beside the path bloom familiar flowers – cinquefoil, forget-me-not, comfrey, celandine, gentian, even the ubiquitous dandelion. And there are birds everywhere – beside the turbulent white glacier stream, dippers and white-capped and plumbeous redstarts; where the river has flooded, sandpipers and a striking black and yellow wagtail; on open rocky hillsides, kestrels and black redstarts; and among the trees, rose finches, and cuckoos calling insistently. Dick, ever on the watch with his Leitz glasses, was compiling a checklist which had soon exceeded 50 species.

The only discordant notes in this idyll were struck by our predecessors. Earlier the same month a party led by one Mr Langlands had travelled up the valley. We knew this because either Mr Langlands or one of his acolytes appears to suffer acutely from the 'Kilroy was here' syndrome. At least once in every day's march the legend 'Mr Langlands' and the date, artistically enclosed in Urdu script, would appear painted on a prominent rock. We were compelled to follow the progress of Mr Langlands all the way up the Ushu Gol, into Chitral and even some of the way down the Gilgit Valley. We wished that, like Kilroy, he could have confined his activities to lavatory walls.

Two days ahead of us from Matiltan was a commercially-organized trekking party of 15 Americans led by a Pakistani, with a huge number of coolies. Of their passage, too, we were left in no doubt, following a trail of Kodachrome boxes, sweet papers and fruit drink packets until, near the end of the second day's walk, we caught up with them, camped in a birchwood not far from the snow-line. They were so affable and welcoming, however, that I did not have the heart to give vent to my feelings.

The Kachikani An proved straightforward enough, though without a guide the correct route might not have been obvious and from the opposite direction would, I suspect, be even less so. We spent most of the day in the snow. The coolies were not strong and in their plastic shoes made heavy weather of the steep sections. I was no faster. A 'touch of the sun' the previous day had made me feel so poorly that I had eaten and, more important, drunk virtually nothing. As a result, I became badly dehydrated and found every upward step of the pass an effort.

Another day's walk through a very different, near-desert landscape brightened only by dog roses and purple vetch, brought us to Sor Laspur – a prosperous village sited, like most in these parts, on an alluvial fan and totally dependent on irrigation from the glacier river. Here we had to change porters, the villagers being jealous of their territorial rights.

Finally, in a 25 mile day, we crossed the long plateau of the Shandhur Pass to reach Teru. In December 1895, the Pass was the scene of an epic crossing by Colonel Kelly, on his way to the relief of a beleaguered garrison in Chitral, when unfortunate sepoys from the plains of the Punjab had to drag their cannon through 5 feet of snow. In summer, though, cattle graze upon it and there is even a polo ground laid out. In days gone by, the annual polo match between Chitral and Gilgit, held on top of the pass in August, was the social event of the year. Alas, the advent of the jeep has made the ownership of a horse a

luxury rather than a necessity, and the match has not been played since 1968.

The sight of a blue-throat, so rare in England, only a few feet away and quite undisturbed, enlivened a dull walk on the far side. But almost as memorable for their homely associations in that foreign setting, were house martins swooping over the broad white river and, in Teru, skylarks singing above the fields. Over the last few miles, however, I noticed little. In the glare of mid-afternoon, my feet swelled and swelled until, like the princess in the fairy tale, I seemed to feel even the tiniest pebble through the thick soles of my shoes. The 2 coolies from Laspur must have found it a long day also, for they arrived late in the evening driving their loads before them on a donkey.

A rough road runs right to the top of the Shandhur Pass but only occasionally do jeeps go even as far as Teru. We were in luck, for one arrived that night which took us 60-odd miles down the hospitable Gilgit valley the following day, more than once being flagged down to sample the first fruits of the apricot harvest. Rather than continue to Gilgit itself we had decided to branch off up the Ishkoman Valley to the Karumbar Glacier, from which we could attempt Kampire Dior (7143m). After various vicissitudes involving jeep-drivers and bouts of a mysterious fever, we eventually reached the roadhead at Imit, renowned locally for its opium poppies. On the way we had been given every assistance by the police but here we met a self-important gentleman from Military Intelligence who was quite emphatic that a permit was needed and that 'law is law'. Despondently, we walked 12 miles back to the next village where we found a jeep going to Gilgit.

Gilgit is an unprepossessing place full of jeeps and flies. Expedition accounts tend to confine themselves to the comforts of the Residency and the hospitality of the DC. However, appearances are everything in Pakistan and we did not receive the usual invitation to take afternoon tea. In fact, I seemed to have offended the orderly bureaucratic mind, for I was asked by more than one puzzled official 'Are you Tourist or are you Hippy'. At all events we lost no time finding another jeep and next day drove, on the opposite side of the river to the K-K Highway, along the spectacular mountain road to Chalt, 30 miles N of Gilgit in the Hunza gorge. In addition to the usual oft-described horrors of such rides we found ourselves perched high up on top of sacks of flour and lumps of rock salt, in imminent danger of decapitation by branches, telegraph wires and overhanging rock, though in good position to help ourselves to apricots.

Foiled twice now, we were making for 2 unclimbed peaks of 6872m and 6885m respectively, at the head of the Kukuay (pronounced Cook-ooo-a) Glacier. Again, the local police were friendly and helpful – 'You are our Guests' – and as there is no frontier in the vicinity, this time there was no sign of the army. Putting our belongings on a horse and marvelling, on the way, at the stupendous N Face of Rakaposhi, we reached Bar, the last village in the valley and started the lengthy process of finding porters.

In Gilgit we had pared our baggage down and, with only a fortnight of Dick's holiday left, we needed less food. The 2 loads weighed less than 70lb each and normally we would have had no hesitation in shouldering them ourselves. In fact, the following morning when negotiations broke down, we did so and were not bluffing. Nevertheless I, at least, was relieved when, after ½ a mile, the porters and their representatives caught us up and agreed to our

price. More than Dick, I was finding the searing heat and the dryness of the atmosphere very trying. (A German expedition to this region, in 1954, estimated the relative humidity to be often less than 10%.)

The coolies agreed to our rate of payment but insisted on lighter loads, and by the time we had taken our own climbing sacks they were left with very little more than 40lb apiece. With loads so light they might have been expected to travel relatively fast. Instead, the distance we covered that first day from Bar was so paltry that we would have paid them off there and then had I not been feeling, again, the effects of dehydration.

We spent that night outside a goatherds' shelter which had clearly been occupied by the goats as well as the herds, and I put in some determined drinking. As a result I went much better the next day. Initially, we tried to stay with the coolies, but they were impervious to hints and the combination of a rest every ¼ hour and a pace that would not have been out of keeping in a dead march, was too much for our patience. Anxious not to walk through the heat of the day unnecessarily, we went on ahead, vowing to pay the coolies off that night.

Having crossed the moraine-covered snout of the Baltar Glacier in a long detour enforced by an unfordable river, and returned to the stony wastes of the main valley we reached, about midday, the place called Toltar – or what we took to be Toltar. There was nothing there but a few charred sticks and some dry stone walling beneath a boulder. But the coolies had made it clear that Toltar was the day's objective, so we sat down to wait for them.

They never came. Every hour or so we carefully scanned the valley with binoculars but there was never a sign of them. Dick read Richard Burton on Sindh. Having rashly left my book behind in the interests of weight, I contemplated alternatively the sky and my navel. The hours passed and we began to feel hungry. Finally, as evening drew in, we unrolled our sleeping bags and tried unsuccessfully to stave off the pangs in sleep. Just before dark, Dick had a final look round but still there was nothing to be seen, not even the smoke of a fire.

Next morning our hunger was no less, but convinced that the porters must be nearby, we left our sacks and backtracked a mile or so, searching and shouting. We were certain that they could not have passed us. Not only were we keeping a look-out, but at that point there is so little room between the mountainside and the river that they could hardly help but see us. But there was neither sight nor sound of the 2 men. With nothing to eat, there was no alternative but to beat a retreat to Bar, by now a highly desirable land flowing with chapatties and salt tea.

At the insistence of the villagers who professed themselves certain that the porters would return any moment, we spent 2 days in Bar, lying in the shade of a walnut tree. An almost morbid fear of the police stemmed, we learned later, from a successful raid in search of stolen property only a fortnight before. So strong was this fear that it induced the local prophet to go into a convulsive trance, wherein he was bold enough to foretell the very hour of their arrival. Unfortunately, he was wrong. In the meantime, we lived on what the villagers chose to provide, mostly mulberries and chapatties of mature vintage, sometimes eggs and, on one memorable occasion, a packet of vermicelli, a tin of cheese and a large quantity of sugar boiled up together into an edible glue.

However, 2 days seems a very long time when one is a public spectacle throughout the hours of daylight and has nothing to do but debate the likelihood of villainy or disaster. Eventually, when requests that we should stay showed signs of hardening into a refusal to let us leave, we flitted on a dark moonless night to Chalt – our noiseless departure marred only by Dick describing a somersault from one terraced field to the next, wrenching a knee in the process. In Chalt we made a statement to the Inspector of Police and, after a day of over-indulging in apricots and sweet biscuits, returned to Gilgit full of gloom.

With a damaged knee and his holiday almost over, Dick cut short the fiasco of our 'expedition' by taking the first available flight back to Rawalpindi. Within minutes of his departure I met a policeman from Chalt in the bazaar and learned that our baggage had been recovered. Back in Chalt, I was told that the coolies had brought it in themselves, claiming to have carried it all the way to the Kukuay glacier and back and demanding 9 days' wages for their pains. Unfortunately the Inspector believed them. Apparently one of them had made the pilgrimage back to Mecca and 'They are very gentle men'. Secretly, I wondered if a man who had been to Mecca might not be all the more anxious to con an infidel. Aloud, I voiced the suspicion that they might have spent most of those days reclining in the shade of a birch grove beside the Baltar Glacier with some goatherds. But there was no convincing the Inspector and it is no easier to argue with the Law in Pakistan than anywhere else. Reluctantly I handed over the money.

Before I could depart with the baggage, however, there was a formality to be observed. 'Please check that everything is here', said the Inspector. He had already done so himself, using the list attached to our statement, but now it had to be done again. I was rather embarrassed as 2 fascinated constables, like children with a Christmas stocking, drew forth ropes, ice-axes, hammers, pitons, karabiners, crampons and high altitude boots in quick succession. But the Inspector seemed unperturbed. Despite our insistence that we only wanted to 'visit the glaciers', he was no fool and must have known better. The important thing, as far as he was concerned, was that we were not an Expedition. The ruling of the Pakistan government is that Expeditions to climb mountains must apply to Islamabad for permission, whereupon (maybe a year later) they are charged a royalty of $1000 US, given a liaison officer whom they must fully equip and, more often than not, informed that they may climb a totally different peak to the one requested. But, as the Inspector knew from personal experience, Expeditions have at least 8 members and require an army of porters. As patently we were not an Expedition, he could see no reason why we should not climb mountains if we wanted to: though *why* we should want to was beyond his comprehension.

Dick had gone home without setting foot on a mountain. I was more fortunate, having plenty of time and having already arranged to meet 2 other friends, Rob Ferguson and Dave Wilkinson, to climb in the same area. There was hope yet. I returned to Gilgit to spend 10 hot, sticky, interminable days waiting for them.

(To be continued)