

Wakhan 1977

Lindsay Griffin

'£600 to hire a jeep! You could buy it for that price.' Fortunately the final demand was lower but after 4 days of hassling for an extension visa and a sudden realization of the effects of rabid inflation, we were beginning to wonder whether we now had the finance to make the trip possible. Would It Be Worth It?

Gone are the romantic days of Kurt Diemberger jumping into his VW bus and driving lightheartedly into the high Hindu Kush, an area noted until recently for its relative cheapness and ease of access. Now the mass bureaucracy with its associated permission papers, intensive haggling and compulsory liaison officers at 20 US dollars a day provide the backcloth for an entry into the Wakhan. Unavoidable and understandable when one considers how close one operates to the Pakistan, Russian and Chinese borders. Almost overnight transport into the mountains has become more expensive than anywhere in the Himalaya. The change reflects the economics of the time-money syndrome.

Traditionally, if the correct price for the services of a porter was around 200 afghanis then he would start his bid at 1000. You would immediately retaliate with an offer of 50 and after one or two days of haggling an agreement of 200 afghanis would be reached and both parties would depart happy. It is easy to see that a large and well financed expedition will, with the time pressing, immediately pay the initial demand of 1000 and so ruin the pitch completely for the small party on a tight budget.

The local populace cannot differentiate between one expedition and the next. All western folk must have enormous riches to have travelled such great distances from their country—an incontestable point! As the money would appear to go to the commune and not to the individual, any incentive to pounce upon what must be highly paid labour is minimized. Consequently our lengthy, one day approach march (all we could afford!) cost £10 per porter!

The Wakhan has undoubtedly been the preserve of large Polish expeditions, an almost annual event since the early sixties. Their impact has been well felt, from the prodigious conquests throughout the area to the disgraceful state of the traditional Noshaq Base Camp, festooned with piles of litter and rusty tins. With this year's inflation, however, come rumours of their plan to hold a voluntary boycott over the next few years in an attempt to lower prices to a reasonable level. As for the present.... The N face of Rakhe-Kuchek seemed an obvious introductory choice. A reasonably angled, almost innocuous-looking ice-slope of 500m. So while we the 'B' team were establishing Base, the 'A' team set off to do battle, only to return 3 days later with tales of great unpleasantness. Iron-hard water-ice, slopes creaking and cracking, lungs creaking and cracking and hideously loose rock descents. Ice, they said, was quite definitely not playing the game. September it appears is too cold to allow any semblance of névé covering and during our stay we only experienced gruesomely hard ice or deep 'dehydrated' powder snow.

However, to quote Jerzy Wala: '...The scenery of the great cirque of the Syarpalas glacier surrounded by what seemed to be entirely inaccessible summits and sectioned by sharp rugged lateral ridges can be considered as being one of the finest in the Hindu Kush....'



14 From Kohe Sakht towards Nushaq (Photo: L. Griffin)

And Wolfgang Axt, reflecting on his expedition to Nushaq: '... A special task would be towards the N extending to the Sad Ishtagh group which in the main part consists of red-brown Mont Blanc like granite and promises wonderful rock climbing....'

Finally Wala again: '... A problem of great interest would be an ascent of Kohe Sakht (KZ57)—from the Wakhangol.'

The SE ridge of Kohe Sakht was climbed in 2 days, 1000m of magnificent granite—this was quality of which we in our wildest optimism had not dreamed. Another 2 days were needed to descend the NE ridge—a veritable Charmoiz-Grépon traverse complete with Route aux bicyclettes—and over the Zebak needles (KZ56) for a 5 day round trip from Base.

An original objective—one of the most obvious in the area was the perfect clean-cut line of the NE spur of Jachi. In appearance irresistible—but was the rock? The gneiss that appears in vast shattered lumps in the Qaz-i-Deh basin proved to be fairly sound and compact on the crest of the ridge and median pillar gave a surprising variety of steep rock climbing followed by tricky delicate mixed work leading to the ubiquitous 'concrete' ice-slopes and perforated summit penitentes. A 3 day round trip in splendid isolation left one limping slowly back to Base to hear the others recount their ascent of the yellow granite pyramid of Kohe Zard from the beautiful Darrahe Aftab—Valley of Sunshine.

Domination of the range by Nushaq prompts the attempt of a rapid Alpine-style ascent via the Austrian Spur. Starting from our Base at 4100m, a second bivouac site is established just below the rock band. Obviously more acclimatization and less powder snow are needed for an ascent such as this, and the next day the party grinds to a halt at under 7000m. A rest and a second attempt would probably prove more fruitful but unfortunately time is running out.

So What Does Tomorrow Bring?

The Qaz-i-Deh, Noshag, Mandaras regions are now well explored and few worthwhile lines remain. The short but very steep N faces of Daros would provide fine safe ice routes in good conditions, and, some of the peaks from Aspe Safed IV to Pt 5980m—an Argentière wall—still remain untrodden.

The answer lies in the Kohe-Zebak, a range eminently suitable for technical Alpine-style ascents. The Qalat Basin has now been thoroughly explored by the N of England and Manchester expeditions of 1975 and 1977 respectively, but to the E the scope is limitless. One could mention the magnificent NE face of Sad Ishtragh and the numerous possibilities on the N side of the Kalan wall above Syarpalas. The NW pillar of Kohe-Sakht was sieged in the summer of 1977 by a French team, but the true N face is an awesome sight: 1200m of near-vertical rock and ice-runnels—a real technical challenge.

The W faces of KZ46 and 50 and the N face of KZ20 offer aspects similar to the S face pillars of Mont Blanc, and the S side of the Kalan Wall, classic pillar and face climbs similar to the Envers side of the Chamonix Aiguilles. The latter is approached via the Wakhan Gol and to establish Base at the head of Gol would probably require a 3 day march from Qaz-i-Deh and thus great expense on porters, but would also allow attempts on the unclimbed summits and attractive ice-walls running along the Pakistan border from Jachi to Sad Ishtragh.

Approaching the Kohe Zebak from the N is a different matter as the terrain is easier and suitable for mules which can be hired relatively cheaply for the 2 day approach march from Eshkashim. The W part of the range is lower, less glaciated, still totally unexplored and perhaps best approached from Zebak.

September/October is later than the normal climbing season providing a passably warm day but a cold night; the rewards lie in the 30 consecutive days of perfect weather and the knowledge that one has the whole range to oneself.

Walking and climbing in Botswana

Tony Mills

Whilst no-one could pretend that Botswana is southern Africa's answer to Chamonix, it is not without a good number of fair-sized cliffs, more than enough to satisfy connoisseurs of the bizarre, latter-day Livingstones, politically liberated climbers who like their freedom in the hills to be absolute, stranded Alpinists and adjacent S African climbers in search of something different and new.

Botswana consists of a largely flat plain at an altitude of approximately 1000m, with some higher ground in the S and E parts of the country, reaching the dizzy heights of Otse Mountain 1489m high, 20km N of Lobatse. It has the virtue of being cool in the dry season and wet for a very short hot summer season. Botswana is a country the size of France of which perhaps 60% is the Kgalagadi Desert, a generally flat depression covered with delicate grasslands, not so delicate thorn trees and many naked salt pans around which animals may still be counted in their thousands. The people, however, are much less numerous, numbering little more than 500,000.