

The opening of the Karakoram Highway and the KKH-to-Skardu road to tourists appears to ease the way in to the major areas of the Karakoram, and the streamlining of the Ministry of Tourism's procedures is an aid to rapid transit through Islamabad. Nevertheless, at least four days should be allowed for activities in the capital, and on occasion formalities may still take longer. For small parties the helicopter bond of \$4000 remains something of a problem, although the authorities do appear to cooperate by fairly prompt repayment once an expedition is over without incident.

West of the Baltoro A Personal Appraisal

Steve Venables

Early one fine morning in the summer of 1979, my brother and I reached the summit of a 5200m peak above Hunza. We had discovered the peak by chance after walking up the Silkiang valley, opposite the Hunza capital, Baltit. We unofficially named it 'Peak Dawson', in honour of a friend who had injured himself on a typically unstable Karakoram moraine a few days earlier, and so been unable to come on the climb.

They say that the view is always most spectacular from the lesser summits, and this was certainly true of Peak Dawson. A few km to our West, Rakaposhi's N face was splendidly profiled, the E ridge plunging towards us in great curves, before rising again to the summit of Diran, immediately to our South. The 7000m ridge continued East, on to the brilliant snow flutings of Puparish and the remote summit of Malubiting, which was only climbed on the 7th attempt, in 1971. To the NE, the massive trio of Momhil Sar, Trivor and Kunyang Kish stood guard over the Hispar Glacier, a deep gash, lined with unclimbed peaks. The savage towers of the Ogre dominated the blue haze at the head of the glacier and the unmistakable pyramid of K2 projected far behind, 160km from where we stood. The Hunza valley lay 3000m below us; on the far side rose Ultar, at 7388m one of the highest unclimbed mountains in the world. Further W a maze of lesser peaks, dominated by Kampire Dior, merged into the Hindu Raj and Hindu Kush.

From our summit we saw the full extent of the West Karakoram, an area almost as spectacular but less well known than the Biafo and Baltoro regions, further E. There are no 8000m peaks, but seven thousands abound. Several of them have only been climbed during the last 10 years, few have had second ascents and a handful remain virgin.

One of the first peaks to be climbed was Rakaposhi. In 1958 the

British Army team climbed the route from the West, reconnoitred by Tilman and others; but the tremendous N face, which dominates the Hunza valley, is the most obviously appealing objective. Herrligkoffer had a look in the early 70s; the Japanese succeeded on the obvious central spur, with a large team and fixed ropes in 1979. An Alpine-style ascent would be a fine challenge. Rakaposhi's slightly lower neighbour, Diran (or Minapin) was attempted in 1958, but 2 men were killed and the mountain remained unclimbed until an Austrian party made an unofficial ascent in 1974. That was, as far as I know, the only illegal ascent that has been made of a 7000m peak. Most parties have been prepared to go through the official channels and suffer the red tape for which Pakistan is renowned.

Trivor was climbed by Wilfrid Noyce's expedition in 1960. The mountain has still not had a second ascent, despite at least 2 recent attempts (Japanese and Spanish). Noyce's party climbed the NW ridge; the SE face plunges 2400m to the vast basin of the Khiang Glacier, a tributary of the Hispar. It was from this basin that another British Expedition attempted Distaghil Sar's avalanche-raked S face. In 1960, a 4 man team, led by Austrian Wolfgang Stefan, succeeded on a route further left. This side of the mountain is extremely dangerous and far less attractive than the third main peak in the basin, Kunyang Kish. However it is Kunyang Kish which has had the reputation of the 'killer mountain'.

Having devoted 2 summers (1981 and '82) to attempts on Kunyang Kish I might be accused of bias in saying that it is *the* outstanding peak in the area. However the 3000m NW face is spectacular, by any standards; it will probably be climbed one day, but only a fast Alpine-style ascent will stand any chance of dodging the frequent sérac avalanches on the lower part of the face. We climbed the NW spur, an elegant, logical line, flanking the face and leading to the N ridge—a Himalayan 'Biancograt' which starts at 6800m. In 1980 Phil Bartlett, Dave Wilkinson and I twice reached a high point at the start of this ridge, only to be turned back by thigh-deep new snow, after sitting out 5-day storms. Our 3-man, semi-alpine-style attempt had come close to success, but when faced with a long descent over slopes heavily laden with new snow, we began to realise how far out on a limb we were. However, it is doubtful whether a large team, with fixed ropes and well stocked camps, would have been appreciably safer. The first 3 attempts on the mountain had been full-scale sieges. The British came first in 1962 and 2 men were killed. The Japanese attempted the same desperately extended route on the S ridge and a climber was killed. In 1971 the Poles took a short cut onto the ridge, via the SE face, which was fix-roped all the way. They were then faced with over 3km of difficult, high altitude terrain. Jan Franczuk was killed in a crevasse near Camp 4. After much deliberation, the climb was continued and 4 men made a bold dash for the top, bivouacking just below the 7582m summit, which they reached

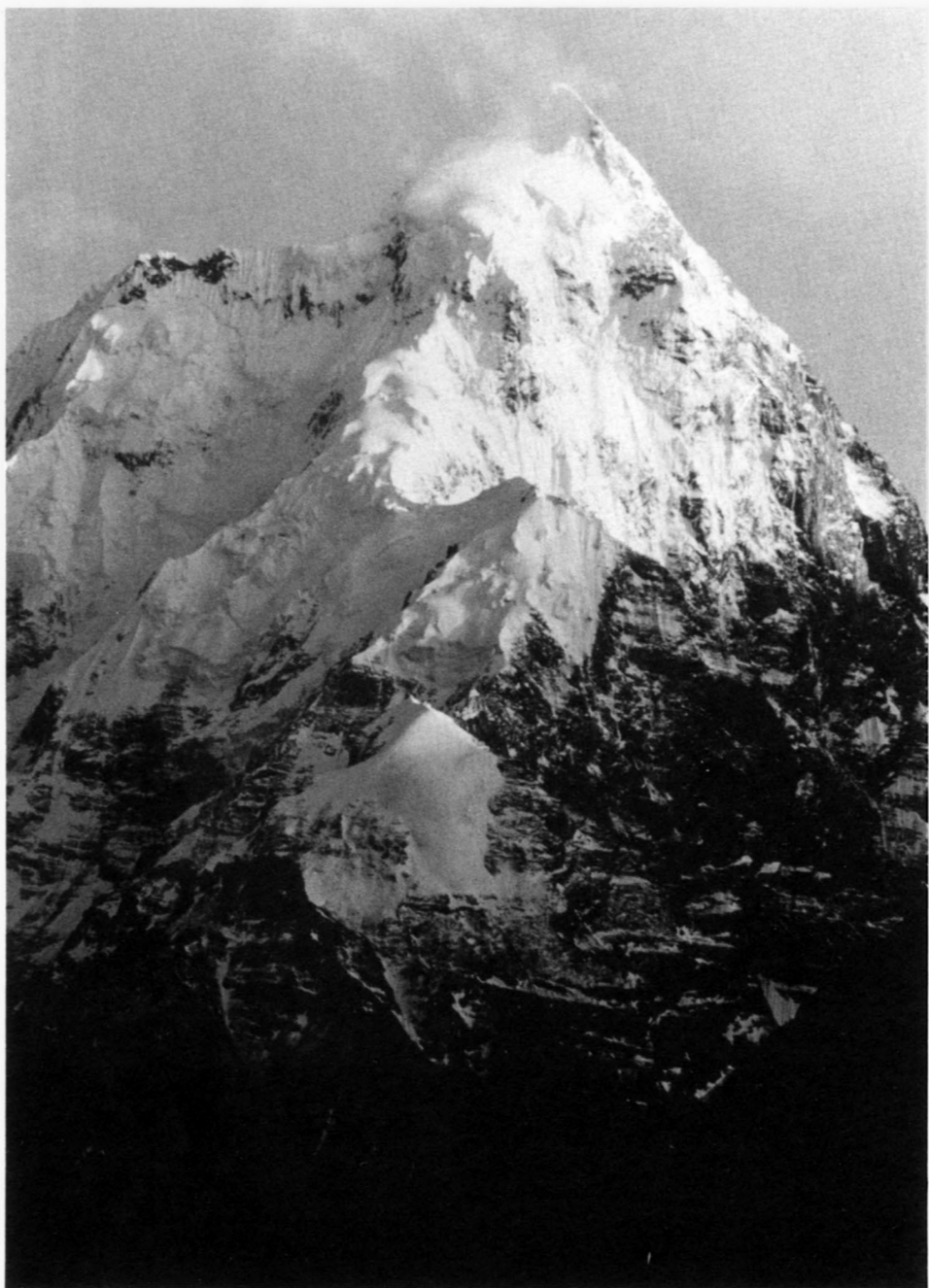


Photo: Steve Venables

- 64 *Makrong Kish seen from the north. Relatively small but technically difficult, it is typical of the peaks on the south side of the Hispar Glacier. It was attempted in 1981 but remains unclimbed*

the next morning. This was a 'big expedition'—13 members—and fixed ropes were used on the lower part of the mountain; but the final success depended on an extended climb far beyond the end of the ropes. The leader, Andrež Zawada has since shown the same flair in his pioneering of Himalayan winter climbing.

There is only one pass leading out of the upper Khiang basin. It is high on the ridge between Distaghil Sar and Kunyang Kish North (first ascent by the Japanese in 1979) and was used to approach the remote and spectacular peak of Yuksin Garden in 1981. The Pakistani/Japanese expedition came close to success but were beaten by the first of a prolonged series of August storms. The mountain remains unclimbed. The logical approach would appear to be up the Yazghil Glacier, from Shimsal; but Alois Furtner's 1974 expedition found the Yazghil icefall impassable and failed to reach the upper basin—Furtner's and the 1980 Karakoram project expeditions are the only ones to have been allowed into Shimsal in recent years. For most climbers, north of the watershed remains forbidden territory. This includes the Batura Glacier, explored by Matthias's expedition in 1954 and hardly visited since. Probably these areas will eventually be opened to climbers and the possibilities will be exciting; however, in the Shimsal area, the approaches will be long and porter costs prohibitive.

The same applies for the numerous pinnacles and pyramids which line the S side of the Hispar—virgin plums ripe for the picking, if you can afford to get there. All expeditions to the Hispar have to pass through Nagar. The men of Nagar have a complete monopoly on portering into the area and will not allow the amenable Hunzakuts from across the valley into their territory; they also have little respect for government regulations. In 1981 their tesseldar had little control over them and we were forced into paying over the government rate. Daily rates of march have halved since the 60s and our 50km approach took 6 days. With porters costing about £7 a day, the bill was staggering—26 porters up and 7 down cost us £1400. One can see why no-one has recently attempted any of the virgin peaks further up the Hispar.

The men of Nagar have been notorious for their extortionate ways since the last century. Things came to a head in 1981 and, after complaints from nearly every expedition, Mr Awan in Islamabad has promised to exert his authority. Government intervention cured the anarchic chaos in Dasso and Askole, so perhaps the same will happen in Nagar.

One answer is to dispense with porters. In 1980 we met a Polish team descending, unaided and carrying gargantuan rucksacks, from the Khiang valley. On the way up they had drastically reduced their intended supplies and employed only a handful of porters, much to the disappointment of 60 belligerent Nagaris hoping for work. They were a strong team and the 5 of them made first ascents of Yazghil Dome (7440m) and Distaghil Sar E (7700m), within 20 days of arriving at their

base camp. (The previous year they, with leading Hunza climber Sher Khan, had made the second ascent of Rakaposhi, by a new route on the NW ridge.) Their lightweight raid in 1980 was in marked contrast to a Japanese expedition attempting Bularung Sar (the virgin peak on the ridge between Distaghil Sar and Trivor). They had a lavishly equipped base camp (complete with vegetable garden!), 2 doctors and a large team of climbers methodically pushing a line of camps up the mountain. Success seemed to be measured in number of camps established and occupied. However, like us, they were defeated by the unreliable August weather.

So far the West Karakoram has mercifully been spared the most vulgar excesses in the Baltoro region and no-one has seen fit to mount an expedition requiring 1300 porters. Most expeditions, dating back to some of the early successes like the first ascent of Momhil Sar, have been fairly modest affairs. Huge lavishly equipped expeditions are no guarantee of success and are hardly justifiable on 7000m peaks. As for the lower peaks, the recent change in Pakistani regulations has opened the door for comparatively cheap, lightweight expeditions. (Peaks below 6000m no longer require a fee, but the liaison officer, with his attendant cook, extra supplies and extra expense, is still obligatory).

The area will probably never be as popular as the eastern part of the range. There is nothing that quite matches up to the grandeur of Concordia or the fierceness of the Latok peaks. Having said that, the Batura, Hispar and Chomolungma glaciers are all virtually as big as the Baltoro, the Hispar gorge is probably as dangerous as the notorious Braldu, peaks like Rakaposhi and Kunyang Kish are amongst the highest and most impressive in the world and are approached from that legendary land of abundance—Hunza. Yuksin Garden and Ultar (whose summit is only 6km from the main road) are perhaps the most tempting objectives but are reserved for joint Pakistani/foreign expeditions. Immediately to the West of Ultar, Shispare and the Batura peaks have been climbed, but there are several unclimbed summits on the subsidiary ridges descending towards Hunza. (See J. Nixon's article, 'British W. Karakoram Expedition', *AJ* 87). Further west still is an extensive area of lower peaks, bounded by the Hunza, Gilgit and Karambar (or Ishkuman) rivers. Most of the peaks are between 5000 and 6000m and are almost Alpine in scale; but the glaciers are typical of the Karakoram—large, complex and strewn with hideous debris. In 1975 Rob Collister's 3 man team spent 3 very successful weeks in the area (*AJ* 82, *AJ* 83). Their long bouts of load carrying, supported by meagre rations, perhaps verged on the masochistic; but the rewards—2 summits and the first crossing of a pass—were obviously well worth the effort. For those with more time and more money, there are numerous unexplored glaciers and unclimbed peaks along the main Chomolungma/Hispar divide. The best source of photographs seems to be the books published by the Bullock-Workmans in the last century.

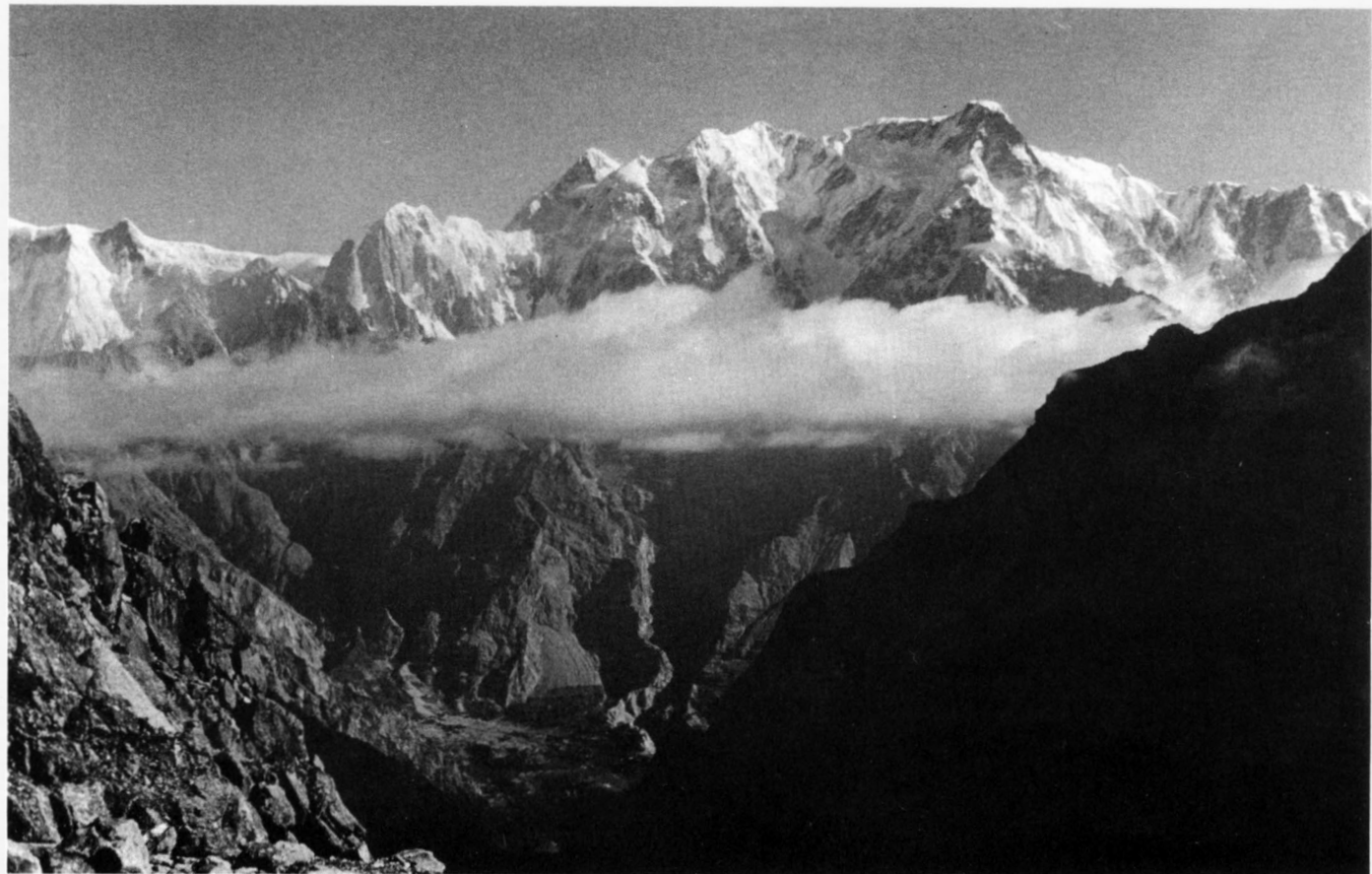


Photo: Steve Venables

- 65 *Ulta Peak from the south. Ulta towers directly above the Hunza valley in the western Karakoram and is one of the highest unclimbed peaks remaining. Access is exceptionally easy but technical difficulties could be considerable*

Tradition has it that there is no Monsoon in the Karakoram. However, during 1980 and 1981 the weather in August was appalling. The success rate in the Hispar and Hunza areas was just as low as further east. There seems to be a slightly better chance of reasonable weather early in the summer, before the arrival, further south, of the Monsoon; but there is no hard and fast rule. By September temperatures are considerably lower, heavy snowfalls take longer to consolidate and avalanche risk is greater. On the highest peaks success is elusive and costly: our 3 man attempt on Kunyang Kish, in 1980, cost £3600. The only way to reduce the cost would have been to make an illegal attempt. In 1981, due to various circumstances, there were 5 of us, but the cost per head was hardly any lower (total £5300). We returned to the mountain full of optimism. Five days of glorious weather at the beginning of August were spent acclimatising on the lower part of the mountain; after that we made little progress in the face of almost continuous precipitation and it was a very dispirited team that returned to Nagar at the beginning of September. However, in spite of 2 successive failures and in spite of having to put up with the most expensive and bloody-minded porters in the Himalaya, I look forward to returning to an area full of tempting possibilities.