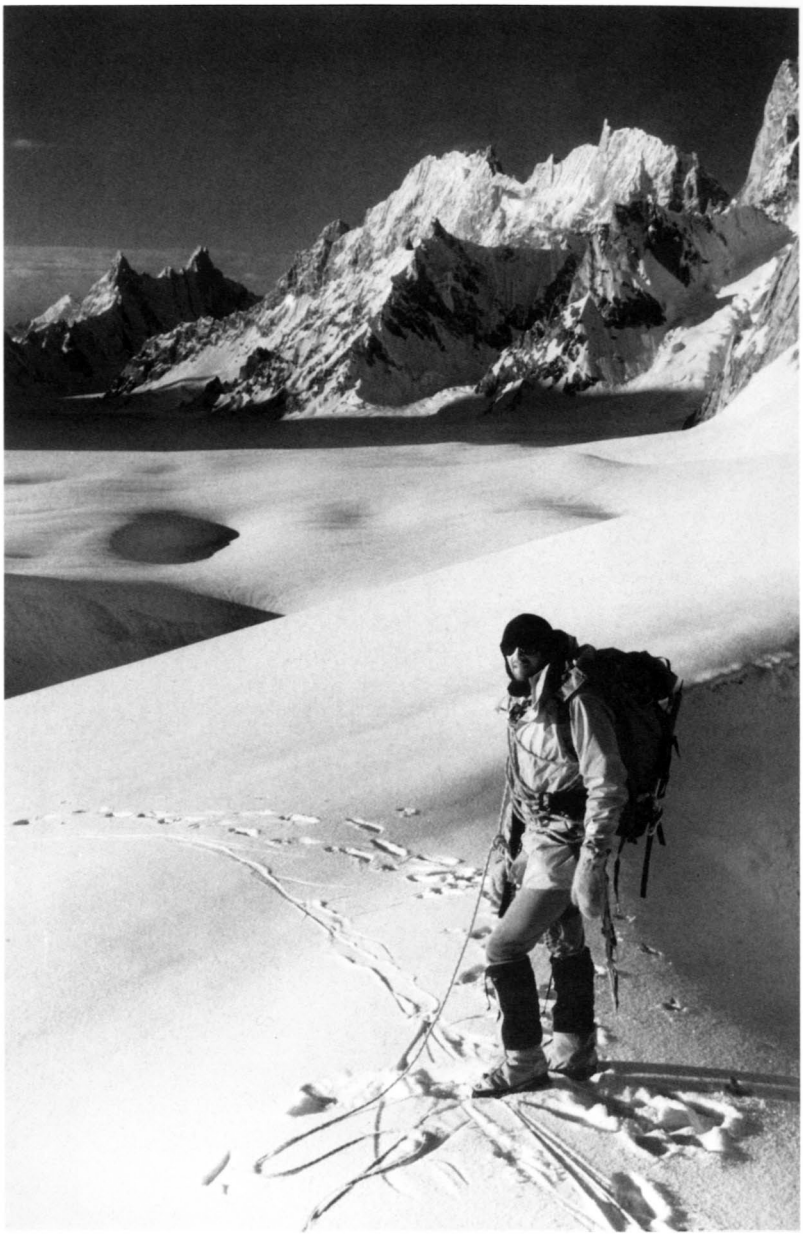
Crossing the Kurdopin

PHILIP BARTLETT

In the nature of these things, the rather grandly named 'Karakoram Traverse Expedition 1987' underwent a number of metamorphoses even before leaving England. Jerry Gore was keen to reconnoitre the N ridge of Latok I; Duncan Tunstall wished to do the same with the N face of the Ogre. At this stage a circumnavigation of the Latok group seemed a possibility – not exactly a traverse at all. However, Stephen Venables had a trick or two up his sleeve, as usual. He wanted to trek up the Biafo, make the first crossing of the Kurdopin Col above Snow Lake and trek out to Shimshal; or possibly do the same via the Virjerab glacier. This appealed to me, as it would certainly not be easy but would be very different from our attempts on Kunyang Chish in 1980 and 1981. Stephen again: could we ascend the Choktoi as being rather more exciting than the better-known Biafo and thus approach Snow Lake that way, sizing up Latok and the Ogre on the way? Or even the Nobande Sobande? But closer research revealed that, with the exception of the Latoks, the peaks bordering the Choktoi are remarkably uninspiring. Furthermore, Dave Potts had on a previous expedition experienced great difficulties trying to cross from the Choktoi to the Sim Gang glacier, experiencing soft snow overlaying bad crevasses, and had been forced to retreat. I argued that the Kurdopin would prove quite challenging enough without the added problems of the Choktoi or Nobande Sobande. At this point Stephen pulled his master stroke: he had heard that somewhere in the endless wastes of the Nobande Sobande there was an ancient undiscovered fort . . . but no, the boring old Biafo it was to be. The final team also emerged: Duncan, Stephen and myself.

Boring is a relative word. The Biafo may be easy but it has a great deal of virgin climbing potential. In an article in *Mountain 49* Malcolm Howells pointed out some of the possibilities and presented some tantalizing photographs. (I'm afraid you don't get issues of *Mountain* like that any more.) Some of these possibilities, notably the Ogre and its satellites, have since received a lot of attention, but the peaks of the West Biafo wall still seem to be little known. The most notable, Sosbun Brakk, was climbed from the south by the Japanese in 1981 (see Griffin's article on the Sosbun glacier region, *AJ91*, 49–52, 1986). But there is a fantastic N face which would be technically very hard and could be reached by crossing the Sokha La (Tilman's Col) or by ascending the Sokha (Cornice) glacier. The Sokha La is a straightforward snow-slope on both sides, though there is slight serac danger. It is also possible that Sosbun Brakk could be climbed from a point slightly lower down the Biafo, by entering a cwm which drains its SE side, but this cwm appears extremely hazardous to enter.

North and west of the Sokha La a range of ice-smeared rock-spires, only slightly less impressive than Sosbun itself, extends towards the Hispar pass. There is some excellent mixed climbing here. Whilst I relaxed at Base Camp, set



1. Karakoram. Duncan Tunstall on the upper Biafo glacier. Tilman's 'Sokha La' is the furthest right gap in the ridge.

up on the moraine at the Biafo/Sim Gang junction, Stephen and Duncan climbed the subsidiary summit of one of these peaks, tentatively named Solu Tower, and found good Scottish Grade 5 terrain. (Later in the summer Stephen also climbed the main summit.)

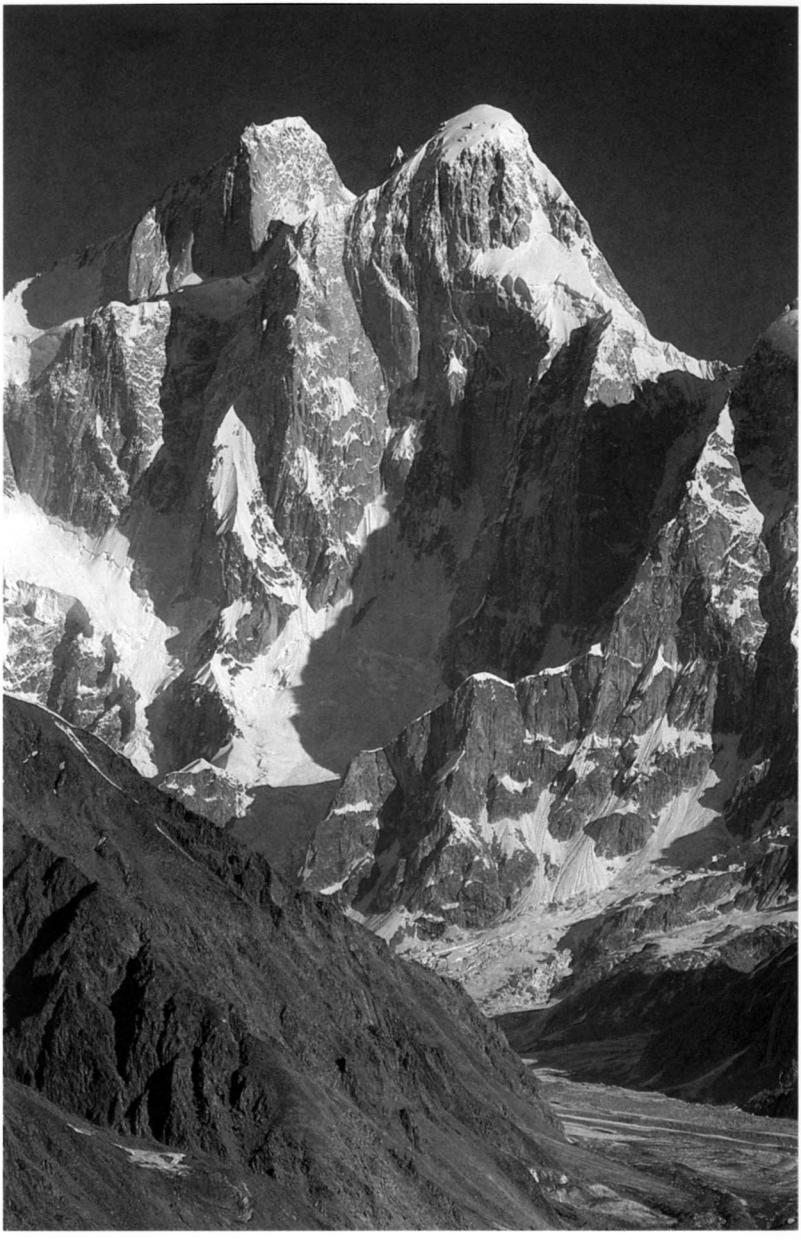
To the south-east the Biafo wall takes on a different character. It is composed of snow and ice-peaks which look to be of modest technical difficulty, but are nevertheless most attractive. The most desirable prize, magnificent in the evening light, is Gama Sokha Lumbu which filled the view from the open tent door. Altogether I felt quite happy to be doing nothing for a few days.

The Hispar, Snow Lake and Biafo glacier-systems were first explored by Sir Martin Conway in 1892. The Workmans followed. Tilman/Shipton parties explored extensively in 1937 and 1939, covering an enormous amount of ground and clearing up some of the Workmans' more dubious claims. Most of the work in 1937 was based well to the north-east, on the Sarpo Laggo glacier, but at the conclusion of the trip Tilman and two Sherpas reached the Snow Lake/Biafo junction and then crossed the West Biafo wall by the Sokha La. We were able to reach this col ourselves in four hours from Base Camp. In 1939 Shipton and Peter Mott, with their Indian surveyors Fazel Ellahi and Inayat Khan, produced a superb map of the Hispar and Biafo basins, subsequently published in the *Geographical Journal*, July–September 1950. This map extends as far as the N rim of Snow Lake, i.e. as far as the Kurdopin Col, which Shipton, Scott Russell and two Sherpas reached from the south as the finale to the 1939 expedition. But for the outbreak of war they would doubtless have explored its N side and descended the Kurdopin glacier.

The Greenalds' visit in 1959 (*AJ64*, 175–182, 1959) was a significant one, their primary objective being the first ascent of Lukpe Lawo Brakk or Snow Lake Peak (6593m), the dominating mountain which rises immediately west of the Kurdopin Col. However, they found it a bigger undertaking than expected and had to be content with the first ascent of Cornice Peak (5880m). Their sketch map (printed in *AJ64*) is useful but not wholly accurate. The glacier shown as extending between the N Simgang wall and Cornice Peak does not in fact exist – we couldn't see it, anyway! There is a snow-basin certainly, but the topography seems to be more complex than indicated by Greenald. The well-known Polish map (Jerzy Wala, 1973) is more accurate.

More recently, the Snow Lake area has been the scene of at least two tragedies. In 1985 Mike Harber and Mike Morris were lost, it is believed whilst attempting Snow Lake Peak. This mountain is a very fine one, though, considering its relatively modest height, it does seem to attract a surprising amount of bad weather. Weather apart, the problem seems to be that the most convenient means of attack, up the E ridge from the col, looks very hard, whilst the more feasible southern route, that taken by both the 1959 and the 1985 parties, has a long and quite serious approach. Altogether, the mountain is both avalanche-prone and remote, but from a general mountaineering if not from a technical climbing point of view it is outstandingly attractive – and still unclimbed.

Ian Haig was lost in the vicinity of the Kurdopin Col in 1986, attempting



13. Pillars of Pumari Kish.

a crossing in the reverse direction to ourselves. From what we learnt when we arrived in Shimshal it appeared that he passed through on 7 August, with two experienced men from Passu. In Shimshal he had hired two additional men to carry supplies as far as 'Kurdopin Base Camp', the last hunter's camp in the ablation valley before the Kurdopin ice-fall, and some five or six porter days from Shimshal. This is also the highest point in the Kurdopin basin which trekkers could hope to reach, and then only with competent guides.

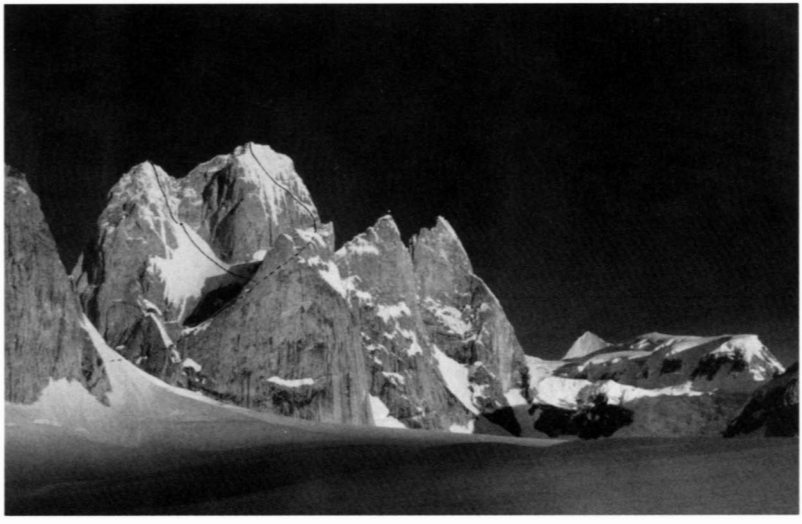
Our own crossing of the Kurdopin began on Tuesday, 28 July, after sitting out a three-day storm at Base Camp. By this time we had already carried some 10 kilos of food and equipment, one day's walk across Snow Lake. Our plan now was to make a single continuous push, picking up the cache of gear on the way and reaching Shimshal within 10 days. We abandoned some small articles of clothing, a good deal of rice, dahl and flour, and some Pakistani corned beef about which the less said the better. That left us about 27 kilos each. Weather made a big difference; the tent flysheet, only 1½ kilos when dry, weighed in at 3½ some mornings. Snow-shoes – or lightweight skis – were essential. Mine, 10 years old and plastic, gradually fell apart and only just lasted the course. Duncan's, also plastic but newer, worked well. Stephen, true to character, had a near antique wood-and-twine pair, one of which Lindsay Griffin had discovered on the summit of the Fou. They were, nevertheless, the strongest of the lot.

The first two days, to a camp below the col, were probably the most exhausting physically. The weather was warmish, and Snow Lake seemed endless. The Workmans estimated it at 300 sq miles, reduced by Tilman to a more modest 30, but that's still sizeable. Trudging across and feeling more like porters than porters' employers, we had a look at the Ogre through the clouds. The N face looked easier than I expected, but then I had expected it to be 89 degrees. Snow Lake itself has a quite un-Himalayan feel to it. There are no massive peaks here, and the general impression is more like the Arctic. Crevasse peak with its meringue cornices, and the more striking peak to its immediate east which may still be unclimbed, could have been straight out of the Andes.

At the end of the first day we found our dump of food, but it had been rifled by the ravens. Not only the biscuits had gone, but so had the full stock of tea-bags. Disaster! The following day we continued our adventure with a stand-up argument about whether we were in a position to explore possible routes on to the Virjerab glacier. In the end it was decided that there wasn't time. This was a pity; it did appear that at the NE corner of Snow Lake there was a saddle leading to the Virjerab which might well be possible. It did not look easy, but there is no reason to believe that there is any easy route on to the upper Virjerab. It would certainly be worth someone investigating. The ascent to the top of the Kurdopin was made on the third day with half the gear, thus committing us to a second carry on day four, more or less irrespective of the weather. Meanwhile we were separated from virtually all the food for 12 hours, a situation which both Stephen and I find quite against our natures. Sure enough, a storm blew up and the second carry was made in a white-out. But we were probably incapable of carrying all the stores to the top in one go. The col itself is at just under 5800m, and the climb to it is 450m of 50-degree snow and



14. Duncan Tunstall descending the right bank of the Kurdopin ice-fall. The ridge behind leads leftwards to Snow Lake Peak.



15. P 5979m on the upper Biafo glacier. First ascent: S (left-hand) summit – D. Tunstall and S. Venables, 23–25 July 1987. Main summit – S. Venables, 24 August 1987.

ice, with some avalanche danger. Once there we retired thankfully into the tent, but late in the day the storm started to clear, and on Day 5 we were able to descend into the high snow-bowl to the north of the col. The mediocre weather had been blowing from the south for weeks and we expected to find windslab. We were not disappointed. There were some nasty shudders and a smallish avalanche set off not far to the left. I was glad to have the rope on and to know that the two behind me were considerably heavier than myself. If anything happened I would hold my trusty bamboo-pole aloft and wait to be rescued.

This upper bowl has some attractive alpine-scale snow peaks, but they are a long way from nowhere. A well-acclimatized party with plenty of spare food and finding well-consolidated snow (which cannot be common) could hope to climb several worthwhile virgin summits quickly. But under heavy snow they would all be very hazardous. To judge by an impressive granite pillar the rock, what little there is of it, is good.

Below the snow-bowl is a superbly positioned snow-plateau at the confluence with a side glacier, dubbed by Duncan 'the cricket pitch'. There were some tantalizing glimpses of Kanjat Sar from here, which we were not to see again for the rest of the trip. My snow-shoes were suffering from terminal plastic fatigue by this time, as a result of which I had been able to secure myself at the back of the rope, following the track so thoughtfully beaten out by Stephen and Duncan. So I could enjoy the magnificence of the view to the full and wonder what was coming next.

Falling from the cricket pitch was the Kurdopin ice-fall – big, tottery, and altogether impressive. It took us the best part of two days to descend it and reach the beginning of the ablation valleys and the camping ground referred to earlier as 'Kurdopin Base Camp'. It was dangerous but extremely satisfying to negotiate it successfully. One section stands out in the memory: a loose and exposed rock-step which Stephen somehow got down without taking his sack off. To me that was a moment of truth: to try and do the same – it was only a few feet – or to take that unwieldy weight off the back and lower it on a rope? I'm glad I did the latter. Stephen, after all, is dangerously good at that sort of thing. It can cloud a chap's judgement.

The sign of tracks in the ablation valley was a welcome surprise – it showed that the rest of the route was at least possible. On the other hand it led us to believe that it would be easy, which was a mistake. In fact it took another three days to reach Shimshal, with an apparently endless series of 'stings in the tail' maintaining interest. To ice-climbing, rock-climbing and glacier work we were able to add abseiling down conglomerate, mud-cliff climbing, river-wading, a tyrolean traverse and some typical Karakoram scree-slopes. Route finding kept up the interest.

At one point we were tempted off the glacier into an ablation valley by signs of sheep pens and a track – not to speak of sheer logic. It *should* have been right. We sauntered confidently down, only to be confronted after a couple of miles by the end of our valley and a steep drop of several hundred feet to a glacier river below. Beyond, the river churned away at the bottom of some very nasty looking screes. At the time it was a baffling impasse, but in retrospect it is clear that the river must have altered its course, perhaps quite recently, cutting

into the moraine and destroying the ablation valley. After some thought we retreated and abseiled down the moraine, only to be confronted by the screes. These were quite up to Hispar Gorge standards with stones coming down constantly, but it was either that or the river, so we advanced resolutely to the attack. Stephen got furthest, before a mass retreat was called. I viewed the river with gloom, not being able to swim, but Duncan surged in with Stephen holding the rope. He eventually struggled to the bank and Stephen and I crossed more easily. At the far side was a shore of silt and black mud into which one sank. It was now dusk, and it had been a long day. Standing there frozen, wet and stuck, Duncan holding the rope only six feet away, it crossed my mind – was this really mountaineering? I decided after the shortest of pauses that the answer was gloriously and unequivocally 'yes'. We sauntered past the scree-slopes grinning, and next day crossed back over on a steel hawser.

Duncan, on his first Himalayan expedition, had enjoyed(?) most elements of the 'Karakoram experience' and it didn't seem right that he should be allowed to escape the scree-slopes. However, there turned out to be some exciting ones on the walk-out from Shimshal, where we were both treated to the sight of Stephen squatting at the river's edge holding his sack over his head for several minutes before, with admirable control, peering upwards and then running like hell out of the line of fire. He then watched us doing precisely the same. Luckily we were all as fit as butcher's dogs by then.

We arrived at Shimshal and its newly opened rest-house on 5 August. Here we discovered that the Kurdopin had in fact been successfully traversed – twice – in 1986. Two Canadian geologists, Barry Roberts and Cameron Wake, who were undertaking snow and ice hydrology work in the Snow Lake area, had walked into Shimshal from Hunza and hired two of the best men, Shambi Khan and Rajab Shah. All four had then walked back to Hunza and travelled to Skardu. From there they had traversed the Kurdopin in the same direction as ourselves and arrived in Shimshal in the second week of July. After a few days' rest they had retraced their steps back over the pass to Skardu, and the Shimshali men had travelled back to Hunza by road. We consoled ourselves with the thought that ours was the first crossing made without porters/guides.

When we reached the Karakoram Highway at Passu two days later, it became clear that there was considerable interest in the Kurdopin amongst trekking businesses. We were descended on by people wanting to know the route. One of these had produced a trekking guide to Hunza and he showed us a copy. It seemed to consist of a series of identical sketches with different captions. In the middle of each page was a glacier, surrounded by spikey mountains; with marvellous optimism, a dotted line representing the trekking route went up one side of the glacier, across the top and down the other side. Only the name of the glacier varied. Certainly, some ambitious outings were included: the Malangutti glacier, for example, caused raised eyebrows from Stephen. He had not thought it a stroll when he had been there is 1984. (See 'Autumn in Shimshal and Naltar', *AJ* 90, 64–70, 1985.) Seeing it when walking out from Shimshal to Passu, Duncan and I agreed. And the Kurdopin itself: there was the dotted line, going up the true right bank of the glacier to Kurdopin Base Camp, crossing over and descending the left bank. On our own descent of



42. Duncan Tunstall using local transport to cross the Shimshal river.



43. The climbing team – Xixabangma 1987. Nyanang Ri (unclimbed) in the background.

the Kurdopin the left bank had appeared to be one of the nastiest and most difficult glacier banks any of us had seen. There are good business incentives for finding new trekking routes in the Karakoram, particularly super-trekking routes which are still little frequented and which allow a continuous traverse across a watershed. No one likes to come back the way he went up if he can avoid it. But it can lead to some optimistic judgements. For example, the rest-house book in Shimshal recorded the visit of two Germans at the end of June who had set off for the Kurdopin. They seem to have been adventurous trekkers rather than expert mountaineers and had gathered that the Kurdopin was 'easy'. They were surprised to reach Kurdopin Base Camp and find a huge ice-fall blocking their path. They retreated. But they would have done well to note the experiences of the Dutch explorers Dr and Mrs Visser who explored the lower Kurdopin in 1925.

The obvious alternative, which is no doubt feasible, is to hire a number of high-altitude porters and a guide. Perhaps this is what will happen in the future, if the demand is there. For us, sitting in the Passu Inn being quizzed, it was all rather depressing. Unless one has scientific motives, the whole point of such a trip lies in having a small party, completely reliant on its own devices, with no advance knowledge of the route and no guarantee that it will even be possible. The satisfaction lies largely in the decision-making, or so it seems to me. Without that it would deteriorate into little more than a spectacular route-march. My own final thought was thankfulness that I had been able to get in on the act at this relatively early stage. All modern exploration is artificial, I suppose; NASA must have detailed photographs of everything, and you could always take a helicopter. But it felt like the real thing.