Where Poets and Paupers Go

A visit to the West Karakoram

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Much searching of *Alpine Journals* revealed that little had been climbed or written about in the Batura glacier region. Situated in the west of the Karakoram, it seemed a suitable area to visit in July/August 1989. We were a small party on the usual low budget, looking for sub-6000m first ascents. Having obtained a copy of the wonderful 1:50,000 Chinese map of the glacier, we could see that the area abounds in such peaks. A standard search followed for cheap gear and reasonable flights, culminating in the sweaty haul from Karachi to 'Pindi. Esajee's shop in Sadaar Bazaar must be world-famous in providing almost any food that an expedition might require, with absolute honesty thrown in free.

The village we made for was Passu, going via Gilgit for the last few items required before entering the mountains. Up in Passu we met Qama Jan, a friend of Doug Scott from the 1978 K2 expedition, who seemed to run things and was an absolute gem in arranging the necessary transportation to Base Camp. The weather up to this point had been quite poor, and when we reached Gilgit we doubted whether we could get up the Karakoram Highway to Passu. However, our worries were ill-founded and we were ready to leave the road-end on a blistering hot day on 25 July.

It is a three-day walk to a Base Camp in a reasonable position for the mountains. Thus we moved into our 'Batura house' in the small summer village of Guchisam at 3740m. Although rather low, set on the lateral moraine of the main glacier, it is well situated for the lower peaks on the northern side of the area. The major drawback to this rather comfortable situation was the use of the village for the pasturing of goats. As a friend's tent had been partially eaten the previous year, we were loath to leave anything outside the house when we were not in residence. The goats also had the nasty habit of breaking out of their rock-walled corral in the middle of the night, creating havoc and of course waking us up.

Our first foray into the hills started with bumbling ineptitude. Warton nala is a side valley some 20 minutes from Guchisam, extending north from the Batura glacier. The path we could see going up a steep scree-slope on the true right bank seemed partially avalanched away, so we proceeded up the opposite bank, climbing steep mud and grass with 25kg sacs, only to watch as a local man skipped easily down the path in question accompanied by his yaks. So much for mountain experience.

We made our first camp on a high meadow at 3920m at the confluence of Warton nala and the Shelin Maidan glacier, sitting out several days of bad weather. An exploratory walk up the terminal moraine of the glacier revealed an array of beautiful peaks, all unclimbed, several of which would give respectable rock and ice routes. The highest of these, at 5973m, looked likely to give the best chance of success, given that my partner Kay Brunger had not been on a glacier before.

From our camp we moved up to make a bivouac at *c*4900m on the south side of this peak. As a result of too late a start and lack of acclimatization, we failed in our attempt on the peak. Although technically straightforward, this side of the mountain was very avalanche-prone, so we prudently descended from a high point of 5600m.

Meanwhile the other three in our party had gone further up Warton nala and reported that the north side of this peak, while steep, looked relatively safe. They were later to climb a fine trekking peak of 5800m in the western end of this nala. Back in Base Camp we waited out several days, Kay's face needing a repair job after her neglecting to coat it with block on our first attempt. It was the pattern throughout our month in the hills for the clouds to be cloaking the mountains while we had brilliant sunshine in Guchisam. Our guilt feelings were dissipated by stomachs full of chapatis and plenty of chai.

Two further camps at 4420m and 4850m in the eastern end of Warton nala finally brought us under the face on 17 August. After a rest day we set about climbing this finding, as on alpine routes, the best snow during the night. The face of 800m was 45-55% snow, climbing through old avalanche runnels, the only problem being chest-deep powder at the top. This led to a col at 5650m and a mixed rock and ice pitch, followed by a fine alpine ridge. The summit block was a 20m rock monolith surrounded by soft, mushroom-like cornices, not attempted in the light of the danger. A descent of the route gave us 12 hours tent to tent and much satisfaction at having been the first on this mountain.

On our walk back to Base Camp we ran into two British lads looking for something to climb. Although we had met several trekking groups, these two were the only other people, in our time in the Batura, who were there specifically to climb. To my knowledge, having talked with many locals, it seems that we were the only expedition on the glacier this year. With many unclimbed peaks under and over the 6000m mark, there appears to be ample opportunity for making numerous first ascents, especially if a longer time than we had can be spent in the area. The distance between valleys and the need to carry loads are the major drawbacks. But what better way of losing that British pallor and midriff?

Area Information

The best time to visit the West Karakoram seems to be from mid-July to September, avoiding excessive heat and, later, the possibility of heavy snow. Lindsay Griffin has climbed here in November, finding the snow in good condition but experiencing cold days.

The best map of the Batura glacier is undoubtedly the Chinese one in the Sheffield University Geography Library.

In Passu, Qama Jan or the manager of the Passu Inn will arrange porters. They charge 1050 rupees for the trip to Guchisam, non-negotiable. They are the best, most friendly porters any of us had used.

The article by Steve Venables entitled 'West of the Baltoro' (*AJ88*, 194–198, 1983) is a useful reference.