
Expeditions

KURT DIEMBERGER

Beyond Broad Peak: A Journey of Discovery

The International Catalan Expeditions 1991-92

Translated from the German by Ernst Sondheimer

(Plates 13, 14, 37-39)

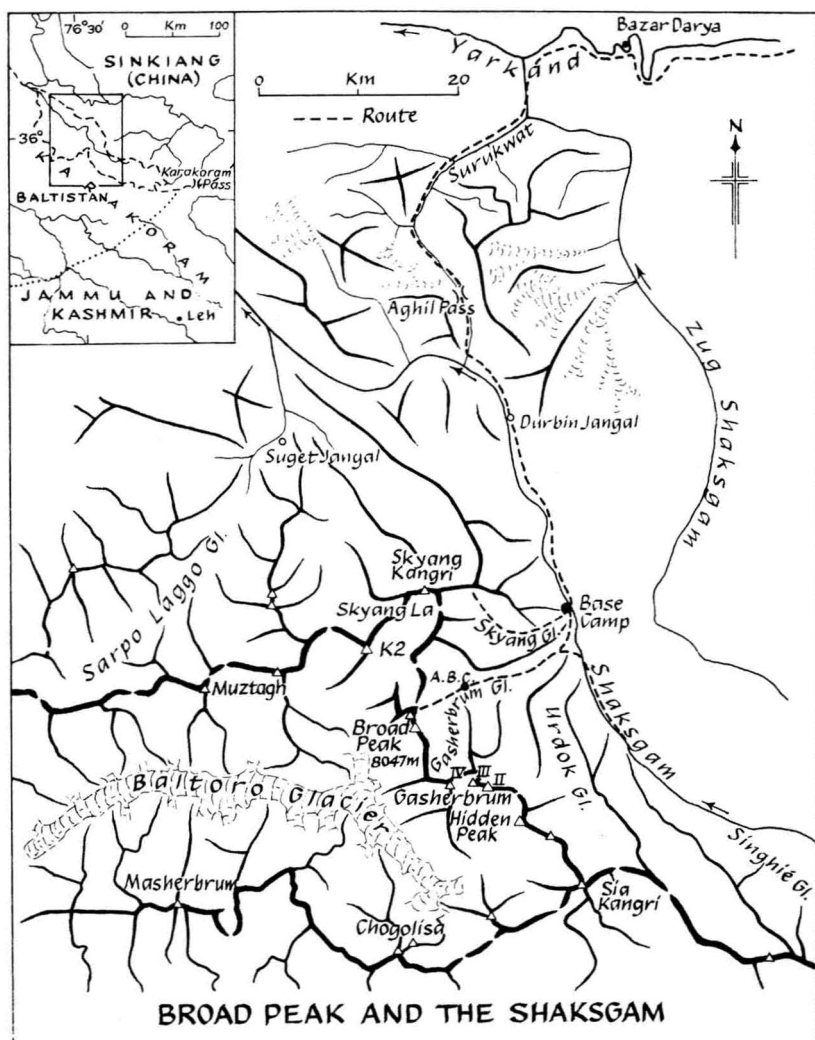
What is a mountain? And how can we really get to know it? Gaston Rébuffat once described the incomparable sweep of the Matterhorn as 'a magnificent heap of stones'. Rising majestically above Zermatt, its strong and simple outline is impressive from every angle. But whilst we toil along a ridge or up a face towards the summit, how can we comprehend its noble form and make it really our own?

It is only when we look at a peak from further away that we can begin to appreciate its varied structure: its corners, ridges, subsidiary summits and rock towers. Perhaps we later return and renew our acquaintance by approaching the mountain from another side. But just as we believe that we are at last penetrating its secrets, once more it eludes our grasp . . . 'I have already done over a hundred routes in this massif - I have been climbing here for years - but I am still very far from knowing the mountain.' This was said to me at the foot of Mont Blanc, many years ago, by a famous French mountaineer: it was Lionel Terray.

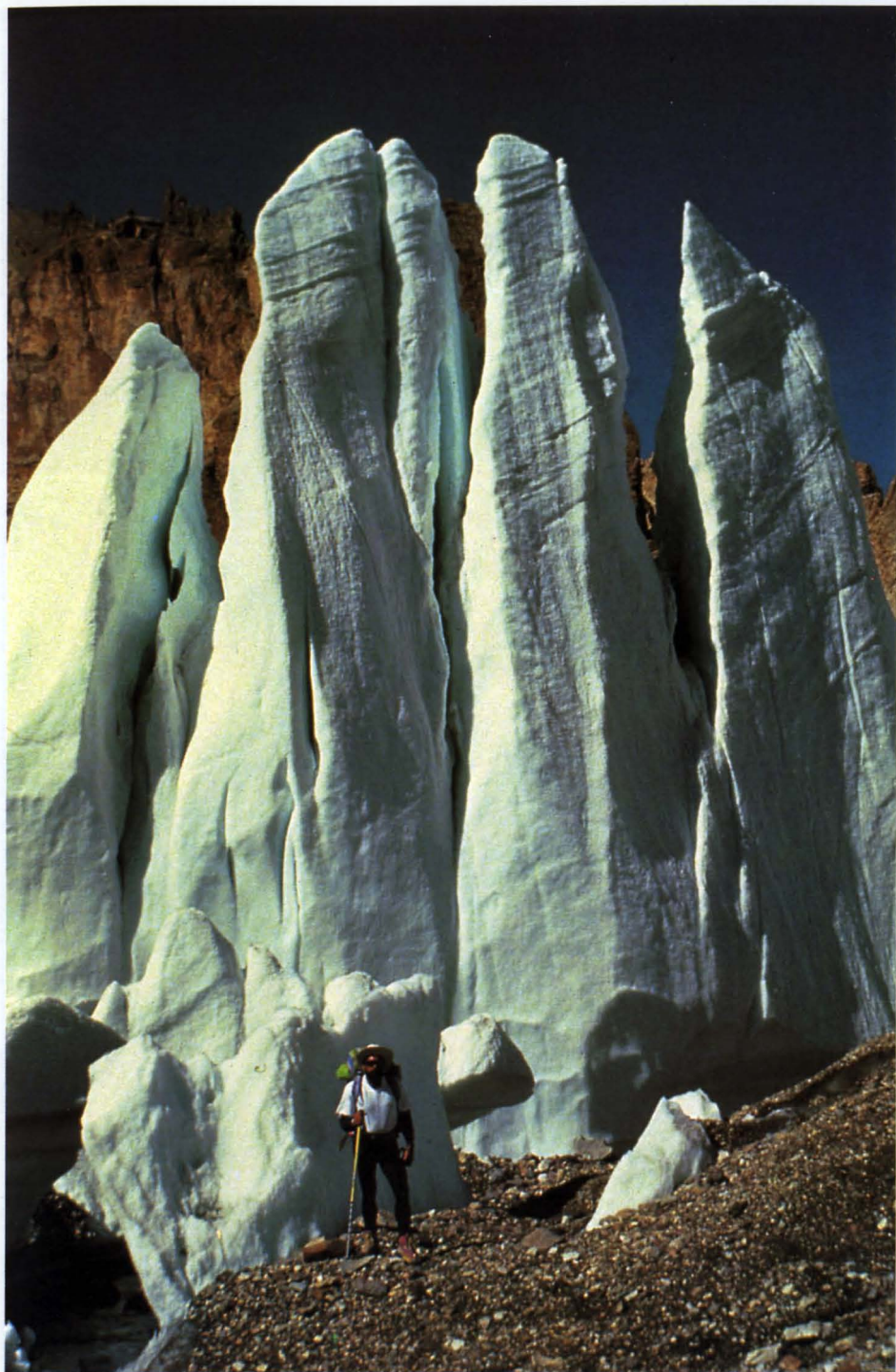
One thing is certain: those who have simply 'done' the summit may not yet have got to know the mountain. Yes, they will have stood on the top, but really they have only passed by.

Like a moving milestone, Broad Peak has reappeared more than once along the tortuous path of my life - and always in a fresh manifestation. In 1957 it was the realised dream of a 25-year-old: my first Himalayan summit; at the same time it was a gift from the gods: the experience, with Hermann Buhl, of sunset at 8000 metres. The four of us had captured this 'citadel' of rock and ice (or so it appeared from the Baltoro glacier) without help from high-altitude porters or oxygen: the first eight-thousander climbed in 'alpine style'. This ascent in *Westalpenstil*¹ (as Hermann Buhl used to call it) was also a milestone in mountaineering history, for 9 June 1957 marked a turning point. Subsequently, countless numbers of alpinists followed our example.

Twenty-seven years later, on the summit of Broad Peak, past and present combined to form a personal joint high point for Julie Tullis and myself. Just the two of us made the ascent, to the third scale of the 'dragon's back' (that was how it appeared from K2!), carrying rations for a week and a bivouac



tent. A year earlier we had already glimpsed the Chinese side of Broad Peak together, between the ice pinnacles of the Gasherbrum glacier, and I had recounted to Julie some tales from the mountain's history. But we could only see the three rib-faced summits soaring above the mighty ridge which obscured the lower portion of the mountain, concealing the glacier at its foot. On 18 July 1984 we reached the top, supremely happy, amidst swirling clouds from which thousands of sunlit crystals rained down upon us – a magical moment.



13. International Catalan Expeditions 1991 and 1992: Jordi Magriña (leader) below ice pinnacles on the Gasherbrum glacier. (Kurt Diemberger) (p88)

'Let's climb up to the edge of the cornice and look down into China – first you, then me – and well belayed with the rope!' . . . The view into the abyss was breathtaking: the marvellous swinging line of the Gasherbrum glacier, the single cleft of the Shaksgam valley in a barren, jagged mountain desert, the endless ocean of the summits of Sinkiang. Only a year ago we had been down there – 3000 metres below the snow at our feet.

'I can recognise the spot reached by the camels,' Julie said. 'Out there, by the dolomitic walls above the Shaksgam river. And the big curve of the glacier, which we couldn't get through because of all the ice pinnacles – it's just below us. How different it looks from how we had imagined it! The glacier extends far behind the summits that we called "the camels"!'.

Julie, standing above me at the edge of the cornice, pointed into the deep, her eyes shining with joy. It was a land without name and without people, and our dreams belonged to it. Our yearning for the Shaksgam and for a close-up view of the hidden east face of the mountain was intense beyond measure.

But then we turned towards K2 – it was like a promise. Two years later, in 1986, we reached the summit – but Julie did not return. A day lost during the ascent had, on the way back, made us captives of the terrible high-altitude storm which claimed five victims on K2 at the beginning of August – amongst them my companion. I myself, after seemingly endless days and nights in my icy tent prison, managed with my last reserves of energy to come down from 8000 metres.

Ever since those days my longing for the Shaksgam valley – the mountain desert beyond K2 and Broad Peak – has remained with me. And this wish to explore the hidden glacier valley at the foot of our mountain and to comprehend, at close quarters, the secrets of the east face . . . it was like a promise to the past. Eight years elapsed before my dream could come true. I did revisit the Shaksgam in 1988 when I was working with Italian scientists and had to make a film about an enterprise inspired by Professor Desio and launched by the research consortium CNR. On that occasion I had no companions for whom a push into the remote hidden valley beyond Broad Peak would have had much meaning. With two Hunza porters I did in fact reach the Singhié glacier which, with its thousands of gigantic ice pinnacles, bars onward passage upstream through the Shaksgam.

At home again, I searched assiduously for photographs which might provide a clearer picture of the mass of serrated precipices on the E side of Broad Peak, with their continuously changing hanging glaciers, plateaux, ridges and pillars. I had indeed already seen this view – from the summit of Gasherbrum II in 1979 – but it was long ago, under a gloomy sky, and on that occasion my attention was totally absorbed by the enormous Shaksgam valley, flooded with light, and by the sea of summits stretching away to the east and north into Sinkiang. Later, when Julie and I looked down from the Broad Peak cornice, its steepness prevented us from seeing much of the face itself – only ice-clad alcoves and pulpits! But in 1983, when we, as part of an Italian expedition, explored the northern Gasherbrum glacier, both of us had already guessed that there might be a route along a huge ramp leading to a high plateau above the 7000m line attached, like a salver, to the wall of the central



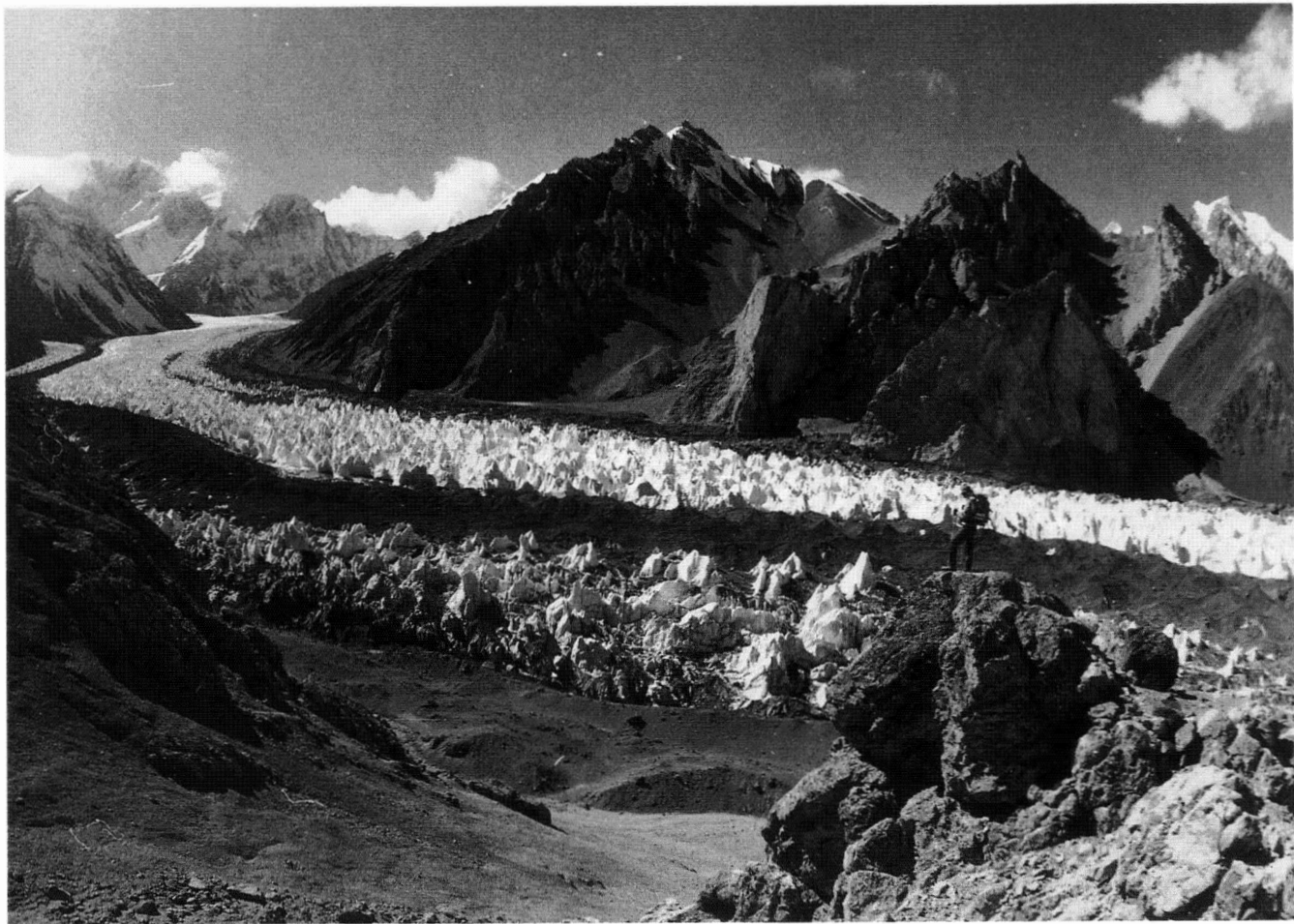
14. Broad Peak East Face: trying to find a route to the ramp through the complex icefall. (Kurt Diemberger) (p88)

summit. Whether and how one could reach this ramp was still unknown and could only be determined by entering the hidden glacier valley itself. However, some Chinese mountaineers who had lately explored the glaciers in the vicinity told me that 'no one has ever reached that place – it is too difficult and the way is endlessly long'.

If I had refused an invitation, in early spring of 1991, to attend the onion feast in Valls near Barcelona, then I would probably, even now, have failed to reach my goal. But I have always loved eating onions; moreover, Jordi Magriña assured me that the 'Calsots', one handbreath in length, are the best onions in the world. With the help of plenty of red wine I managed to consume 35 of them – a respectable total even for a native of Valls. Anyway, I seized this opportunity to talk about Broad Peak and the wild onions which grow on its moraines. Jordi was immediately interested in the mountain and mentioned it to the mayor of Tarragona who was keen to give his town a higher profile – including a satellite radio station which could send reports back home. FEM TARRAGONA ('Let's make Tarragona great!'), as our expedition was called, was born during the onion feast. Four Catalans, one Italian, one Austrian and three Sherpas made up the party. The pesetas from the town hall arrived rather late (the Spanish *mañana* applies also in Catalonia!) but they *did* arrive – and the Chinese readily gave permission for the radio station. The expedition, originally planned for the summer of 1991, was postponed until the autumn, with decreased chances of summit success, but the important thing was: we were going! I was very happy when, at long last, I could be sure of this.

A nasty surprise – does the Gasherbrum glacier 'gallop'?

For the last hour I have felt uneasy: the lofty ice pinnacles stand like close-packed sentinels above the moraine wall. No one shall pass here! That's what they seem to say as we slowly approach with our caravan of 24 camels. All day long we have been moving across scree, over the hundred thousand stones of the kilometre-wide river bed. Today, 24 August 1991, it was only thanks to our strong beasts that we managed to cross the turbulent waters of the Shaksgam to reach the opposite bank. We were dealing with enormous loops, reaching from one side of the valley to the other. Now, after a 40km trek from the last oasis, Durbin Jangal, we are not far from our proposed Base Camp at 4000m. But something seems to have gone wrong with the glacier! I remember it as being entirely different: gentle moraine hills, a dark wall of dolomitic rock on the other side of the valley. That was the picture in 1983 when I made my first reconnaissance here, and in 1982 and 1988 we were still able to pass this spot quite easily. But now the gleaming watchmen seem to be in upheaval, their aspect is wild and threatening, and they have grown higher as if they wanted to leave the edge of the glacier, to climb over it, pushed forward by hundreds more behind them! There is no doubt: the glacier has moved forward – right up to the valley wall on the other side. Soon we know the worst: there is no way forward here! Between the pinnacled glacier and the



37. The enormous flow of the Gasherbrum glacier. Broad Peak is visible in the far left-hand corner. The route from Base Camp to the real base of the mountain (about 20km) runs along the opposite rim of the glacier to that where Joan Gelabert, radio operator, is standing.

(Photos: Kurt Diemberger) (p88)

smooth rock wall there remains only a narrow defile, through which roar the waters of the Shaksgam river. While we try in vain to find a way through the barrier of ice pinnacles two of our best camel drivers attempt, without success, to force a passage through the defile with their strongest animals. Checkmate! We cannot reach our proposed Base Camp site but must stay somewhere around here where Broad Peak is still far away and hidden by massive mountain walls. We are on the 'wrong' bank of the river of ice – on the difficult side where no man has ever forced a way through; the opposite side of the glacier, where the going is relatively easy, is out of reach. It seems, at first sight, as if my 1983 reconnaissance was a total waste of time.

We were all very worried, but Joan Gelabert, the radio operator and technician of our satellite radio station, is the first to regain his composure: 'Perhaps we can still find a way through to Broad Peak and I can manage transmissions from the very top of the moraine!', he suggests. We drag six camels, carrying the 500kg of the radio station, up over a steep scree-slope, while Oscar Cadiach and Alberto Soncini set out for a quick reconnaissance of our 'new' glacier bank. (... Is there a walkie-talkie connection 'round the bend', which can penetrate behind the blocking mountain barrier?) Jordi Magriña, Lluís Rafols and I attend to Base Camp – it should be sited as close to the mountain as possible and this is our last day with the camels at our disposal, to bring everything up to the chosen spot! We manage to extort another 40 minutes' worth of footslog from our Chinese-Uigur companions (one liaison officer, one interpreter and several camel drivers) – after that, the terrain becomes too difficult for the animals. But our three Sherpas, Dakipa, Pasang and Pemba Maila, are full of gratitude: this last effort by the camels, which has shifted more than a thousand kilos, will make quite a difference!

Up till now we have managed everything in an incredibly short time: only 12 days from Europe to this spot, via Islamabad, where we met the Sherpas who had flown in from Nepal, and a journey by bus over the Kunjerab Pass towards Kashgar. Joan Gelabert will have to repeat the 40-minute walk at 4200m between radio station and Base Camp many times during the next one and a half months – covering a distance equivalent to a crossing of his entire native Catalonia! And the rest of us? Before we can start climbing the mountain, we have to cover a distance of roughly 20km up the glacier or along its flanks – how many times remains to be seen.

One thing I already know: the Gasherbrum glacier is like a living creature – it moves, it changes, it speaks ... and now, after all these years, it seems to have started to 'gallop'. Will this continue? If so, what hope is there for future expeditions if they want to establish a Base Camp further upriver? It seems as if the mountain wilderness, all on its own, is barring the way.

For three more days our radio operator looks glum: he can't get through to home! That is worse than merely annoying, since our sponsor, the Mayor of Tarragona, will be eagerly waiting for news. Joan is desperately trying to reconstruct from polystyrene a part of the transmitter which broke when a camel shed its load. At last he succeeds, and as the first sounds from Tarragona emerge from the apparatus, we all breathe deep sighs of relief.

The hidden valley

Ice pinnacles, and yet more ice pinnacles! There must be fifty thousand of them – I try to make an estimate; magical shapes, with blue-green glacier lakes in between them, disappearing in gleaming processions into the distance. Gigantic pillars of rock rear up along the edge of the glacier – my Spanish friends call one of them *Naranjo*, after the orange-coloured rock formation in Picos de Europa. The whole of the southern horizon is filled with the Gasherbrum wall – from Hidden Peak, the eight-thousander, to Gasherbrum III. We shall be gazing at this scene for many days now! Hours of toil up the loose moraine rubble; we are glad to have the Sherpas, but the rest of us, of course, are also carrying heavy loads. At last, whilst we are establishing an intermediate camp, Broad Peak makes its appearance in the glacier's most distant and remote recess! The ramp gleams white, surmounted by the plateau; the mighty ridge appears with its blue shadows – and then the three great summits. Seracs threaten – no, it hasn't become any easier up there since the last time, eight years ago, when I thought I could see a way through at that spot – rather the opposite. Where can we find a passage? 'We won't be able to decide that until we reach it: then all will become clear,' says calm prudent Oscar, a mountaineer with much experience of the Himalaya; usually Jordi is his partner – they have climbed Nanga Parbat together.

The stony track between the long rows of ice pinnacles gradually narrows, until we finally end up in a cul-de-sac; here we manage to find a place, across the glacier stream, where we can squeeze through to the lateral moraine. We scramble up and follow a narrow valley (full of wild onions!) between the moraine and the mountainside; but we constantly have to traverse laboriously across steep, loose scree-slopes. Suddenly, far below, we catch sight of a little duck paddling happily in a glacier lake! It must have lost its way when all the other birds were migrating . . .

On 28 August, at 4850m, we erect the first tents of an Advanced Base Camp (a task which was not completed until 1 September when we brought up the big dome tent). We still cannot look 'round the corner' into the hidden valley, but we can see wild cascades of ice, the summits of the nearby 'camels' towering into the sky, and avalanches whirling down in enormous clouds of spray.

I think of the moment for which Julie and I yearned so much and which is now so near – when the hidden valley under Broad Peak will yield up its secrets. Shall we come again? We shall come again! We were only one day's march away when we had to turn back, but we resolved to return. Now I am here; I have come again – for the two of us.

On a brilliant morning we set out and stumble through a labyrinth of humps, broad pinnacles of rock, white ribs, glacier valleys, trying somehow to find a way between frozen tarns and streamlets . . . but gradually the going improves and we steer towards a dense web of narrow transverse crevasses covering the rising vault of the glacier which rolls down from the valley at the foot of Broad Peak. High above us, gleaming in the morning sun, are its



The International Catalan Expeditions 1991-92:

Facing page

37. The enormous flow of the Gasherbrum glacier. Broad Peak is visible in the far left-hand corner. The route from Base Camp to the real base of the mountain (about 20km) runs along the opposite rim of the glacier to that where Joan Gelabert, radio operator, is standing.

Above

38. Broad Peak East Face: main summit (centre), 8047m. The central summit (R), 8016m, was reached via the giant ramp (R).

(Photos: Kurt Diemberger) (p88)

alcoves, bastions and delicately ribbed walls – the mountain looks more beautiful from here than from anywhere else!

Now Gasherbrum IV reveals itself, with its distinctive shape: a trapezium. From this high seven-thousander a diagonal ramp runs down to the end of the valley. Perhaps some complicated passageway to the Baltoro glacier might even be found there – but that does not interest us at present for, while searching for a way up between the pattern of crevasses, we can now also see the regular pyramid of Gasherbrum II (8035m) and, immediately next to it, Gasherbrum III at 7952m. We rest and gaze. Full of emotion we stand in this lonely valley which has remained hidden for so long. We look at the ice cascades of Broad Peak reaching down to the floor of the glacier (not an encouraging sight, but we'll find a way through somewhere!). We walk on, gaze and gaze, and feel that strange tension which grips you when you know that where you are standing no human being has ever set foot before – no one, from the beginning of time – and that you are looking, for the very first time, at one of the most secret corners of the world. Of course it had already been seen from space and from high summits – but to be here yourself is something different. It is a wonderful, indescribable feeling. It is the bliss of discovery.

Kafka's Castle – The eastern precipices of Broad Peak

A shield of rock, probably extending upwards to about 6500m, rises, like the Grandes Jorasses, above a chaos of stacked-up ice blocks, large as houses, with enormous crevasses in between them. The 'small Khumbu icefall' below heaves itself from an invisible plateau at 5500m down to where we are standing, at 5200m, in the bottom of the 'hidden valley'; we are considering where to go next. We have to bend our heads back when we look up at the wide-ribbed face of Broad Peak: dark, verglassed rock, steep and difficult – in fact almost everywhere impossible. The upper edge of this face is at 8000m; the Grandes Jorasses would be a mere alcove in this gigantic structure. Above us, a curved white edge leads up towards a snow summit – surely also a six-thousander; behind it must be the ramp leading to the high plateau beneath the central summit of Broad Peak (also called: Broad Peak Middle, c8000m).

It is confusing terrain and its exploration takes up many days. Three attempts up the icefall lead, each time, to impassable giant crevasses, barring access to the glacier floor above. Quite soon, we consider a completely different possibility: to attack the long SE ridge of Broad Peak, in a wide curve starting from the valley's end under Gasherbrum IV. But the distance is great, the glacier floor is seamed with crevasses, and the ridge, studded with névé towers and cornices, is immensely long. With our three Sherpas and our limited amount of rope we can see no chance of success this autumn; so we turn again towards the central summit.

The steep rock wall at the edge of the icefall is interspersed with icefields. We secure it with rope and thus reach the curved edge which leads up to the nameless six-thousander. An ascent to the col behind it appears possible, indeed tempting, via a vast white bowl . . . but then, on 10 September, one of

the biggest ice avalanches I have ever seen thunders down from one of the battlements of Broad Peak, engulfing the bowl and the whole glacier floor right down into the 'hidden valley'. Air masses tear at the flapping tent of Camp 1 on the névé edge, 5600m high, and within seconds, as I cling to the fixed rope, I am transformed into a snowman (for days afterwards I have the tiresome sound of water gurgling in my ears). As a result, we all decide that we would rather traverse the nameless six-thousander than venture into this bowl.

But the route over the six-thousander also becomes complicated: '*Un Castello di Kafka, qui al Broad Peak*,' laments Alberto, after our first push towards the summit.' Whilst skirting an ice mushroom, tall as a house, he and Oscar get stuck in a renewed chaos of seracs. Only on 13 September do they reach the double summit of the mountain, 6300m high, which, to recall Tarragona, is baptised 'Tárraco Kangri'. On 16 September Camp 2 is established behind the mountain, at 6200m, and a high-level traverse is found which avoids the up-and-down of the crossing of the two summits.

I myself am no longer a member of the party: I am at Camp 1 waiting for my ankle to improve – I had sprained it in a crevasse during the first summit attempt on the six-thousander. But this takes time. Eventually I descend to Base Camp and, whilst the ankle slowly recovers, I explore the vicinity: I manage to find a passageway between the ice pinnacles to the other side of the glacier; and, once again, I stand on 'Left Ear Peak', a pointed limestone mountain ascended in 1983 by Julie and myself as a film team. Later, carrying a light tent, I advance from Base Camp along the edge of the eastern Skyang glacier to a spot exactly opposite Windy Gap (Skyang La) where it might be possible, with difficulty, to cross to K2. At the same time I discover a nameless col which might well provide a passage to Suget Jangal – a lengthy and certainly not an easy enterprise but one which could provide a link between two Base Camps when the Shaksgam valley is flooded – and without the need to cross the river!

Meanwhile, on Broad Peak, a sudden break in the weather, with enormous falls of new snow, has created a dangerous situation for our lead team – but fortunately they succeed in fighting their way down through the ocean of snow from Camp 2 which had become a trap (in places they managed only 100m per hour!). A brief interval of good weather renews our hope of making a lightning push over the dangerous crux (a huge serac-step) and thus reaching the high plateau under the central summit. But whilst Oscar and Lluís are establishing Camp 3 at 6500m, nearly at the end of the ramp, the weather turns bad again.

And so, in these first days of October, storms and increasing cold draw a line under our enterprise – no summit successes, but a marvellous exploration of the 'no man's land' on the dark side of Broad Peak.

I often recall a small episode: when the approach of winter is in the air, many birds set out on their migration. Some lose their way and perish in the mountains, whilst others fight through to their destination. There was a hoopoe which one day marched in through the door of our Base Camp tent in the most matter-of-fact way. He did not honour us with a single glance, but



39. Broad Peak East Face: the central summit, 8016m, was reached on 4 August 1992 by the International Catalan Expedition.
(Kurt Diemberger) (p88)

settled down in a corner and went to sleep. When I tried to capture him next day, in close-up, with my telephoto lens, the fellow flew up and sat on my head – and then transferred to Joan's head, which supports a big mop of hair in which the bird at once began to poke about with its long beak, searching for insects! I remember Joan's look of astonishment and the disbelief on his face when the bird, after a few words of encouragement, returned to my own head: he must have thought that I was a kind of 'St Francis of Assisi'. Our hoopoe stayed for two days; then it flew on.

The Second International Catalan Expedition (1992)

After our first expedition we made every effort to return to Broad Peak as soon as possible. The effort succeeded: the mayor of Tarragona showed understanding, and at the beginning of June 1992 the same basic team set out from Barcelona: Jordi Magriña, Oscar Cadiach, Lluís Rafols, Kurt Diemberger, Alberto Soncini and the radio technician Joan Gelabert. We were joined by two further mountaineers from Catalonia: Enric Dalmau and Jesus Elena. Three high-altitude porters, Tenzing, Nawang and Mingma, completed our new expedition team.

We were greatly helped by the knowledge we had gained on the autumn 1991 expedition – the glacier was quickly mastered and the lower part of the ascent. But during July we had a gruelling battle against unstable weather. Three summit pushes failed because of this, but Camp 3 was finally established at 7350m on the edge of the huge high-level plateau. Below this, the icefall had been conquered and, where necessary, equipped with fixed ropes. Between Camp 1 (5600m) and Camp 2 (6300m) the expedition followed a glacier valley which had been avoided on the 1991 reconnaissance because of the danger of ice avalanches. The decision to use this route was not unanimous even though it was considerably shorter than our previous passage over Tárraco Kangri. Kurt Diemberger did ascend to Camp 2 on a single occasion, but he then devoted himself to his own programme of exploration in the region of the Gasherbrum glacier. In spite of the time-saving short cut mentioned above, it seemed, right up until the last moment, as if the weather gods did not wish to grant the summit to our expedition!

On 4 August the summit of Broad Peak was finally reached by Oscar Cadiach, Alberto Soncini, Lluís Rafols and Enric Dalmau. The camels for the return march through the Shaksgam valley were already approaching when these four seized the only chance offered by the weather before the arrival of the next weather front. Snow was already falling above 7000m during the descent! After two expeditions, this was a hard-won success which was made still harder by a forced bivouac at 8000m not far from the summit. Fortunately, only Enric Dalmau suffered slight frostbite to his toes; but he thought this a small price to pay for his first eight-thousander: the central summit of Broad Peak (8016m).

This ascent of the E (and partially NE) face was the first major new climb for 10 years (since the ascent of K2 from the north by the Japanese in 1982) to have succeeded in the region between Hidden Peak and K2, on the Chinese side.

Summary: In autumn 1991 the International Catalan Expedition 'FEM Taragona', led by Jordi Magriña, explored and made the first attempt on the E face of Broad Peak, reaching 6500m; also, they made the first exploration of the glacier basin below Broad Peak, reaching the base of Gasherbrum IV. Kurt Diemberger explored the eastern Skyang glacier as far as a nameless saddle, opposite Windy Gap (Skyang La), where it might be possible, with difficulty, to cross to K2. In summer 1992 Kurt Diemberger returned to the Shaks gam with the Catalans, four of whom reached the central summit of Broad Peak (8016m) via the E face by the route explored in autumn 1991. The summit was reached on 4 August by Oscar Cadiach, Alberto Soncini, Lluís Rafols and Enric Dalmau.

REFERENCE

- 1 'Westalpenstil was a new way of climbing an 8000-metre peak without the help of high-altitude porters and without using oxygen apparatus, which Hermann Buhl devised in 1957. Fixed camps and a limited number of fixed ropes were permissible. Broad Peak became the first 8000-metre peak to be climbed in this 'alpine style', which was a true pioneering achievement. Today what climbers call alpine style implies also a refusal to use fixed camps and ropes. In fact, Buhl and Diemberger climbed Chogolisa in modern alpine style, and Wintersteller and Schmuck climbed Skil Brum that way immediately after the first ascent of Broad Peak in 1957 without inventing a separate label for a method which they saw as simply a lightweight version of *Westalpenstil*.'
A quotation from *Summits & Secrets* by Kurt Diemberger; new edition, Hodder & Stoughton, 1991.