High Asia



1. John Innerdale, *Garula Kang, Bhutan*, chromacolour, 47 x 36cm, 1993.

PAT DEAVOLL

The Troubled Road to Karim Sar

In March 2009 I was in the midst of planning my third expedition to Pakistan in as many years when the Taliban invaded the Swat valley, causing a huge wave of refugees to stream south to camps in and around Peshawar, Rawalpindi and the capital Islamabad.

'What do you think?' said my expedition partners. 'Will we be able to get into the country? Out of the country? Are the media blowing things out of proportion?'



2. Police checkpoint on Karakoram Highway *(Pat Deavoll)*.

I consulted a couple of experts: Doug Chabot, who said he was cancelling his expedition, and Bruce Normand, who said he was glad to be leaving Pakistan via China. 'Islamabad airport could be under threat,' he said. 'If you do go, make other plans for leaving the country.'

At home in New Zealand, the computer screen reflected the team's puzzled faces as we trawled the internet for news of the conflict. We were bound for the south face of Kampire Dior, near the Taliban hinterland.

What if Islamabad is overrun by insurgents? What if the airport is captured

while we are in the mountains? Will we be able to escape north to China? Should we get a Chinese visa just in case? What if the Taliban kidnap and behead us? What if we're caught up in a suicide bombing? What if...what if…what if?



3. Fleeing the fighting, refugees heading away from the Swat valley *(Pat Deavoll)*.

By May, two million civilians had fled Swat and the Taliban and the army were fighting house to house in the provincial capital of Mingora. The Taliban were posting assassinations of army personal on YouTube and rumours were spreading that the country's nuclear capacity might fall into their hands.

By the time we'd flown into Islamabad at the beginning of June, our team of four had dwindled to a team of two: Paul Hersey and myself. We'd switched to a new objective, Karim Sar, an unclimbed peak near the relative serenity of the Hunza valley. Ivo Ferrari, Yuri Parimbell and Fabio Valeschini attempted the mountain in 2007, but turned back because of bad weather.

I'd first seen Karim Sar a few years earlier from the top of a small peak by the Baltar glacier. Its ice-capped summit had shimmered in the rarefied distance, the midday light reflecting a grandeur surpassing its moderate size. Rock turrets reached to the sky; snow slopes curved down into the void. *Steep, elegant… and unclimbed.* At the time I was enchanted. But Paul and I would still have to travel north through a portion of Swat province to reach it.



4. Walking in to base camp (*Pat Deavoll*).

As we settled into our guesthouse in the capital, I recalled the previous year. A *whoomph* had sounded as my British climbing partner Malcolm Bass was sitting in his hotel room. The ground jumped and the windows rattled; a bomb had gone off just minutes down the road. When I arrived several hours later from New Zealand to join him, he was still wide-eyed.

This year, soldiers and police with AK-47s lined the Islamabad streets. They wore black flak jackets and used mirrors with long sticks to search passing cars for bombs. They worked in pairs; one searching, face wooden with tension, while the other stood, rifle against chest, finger on trigger, gaze darting among the crowd. Barbed wire cordoned off the Marriott Hotel, once the cool retreat of air conditioning and post-expedition feasts of lobster and extravagant puddings. Five months earlier, a suicide bomber had driven his truck full of dynamite into the main entrance, killing 65. I wondered which of the smiling waiters I'd got to know by sight were now dead.



5. Base camp – local shepherds come calling. *(Pat Deavoll)*

Baig, my friend and minder from previous journeys, hastened us through now empty streets. The Faisal Mosque, with room for 10,000 worshippers, was deserted – except for one small figure on the far side, sweeping the endless floor. Paul and I wandered gingerly barefoot over the scorching marble terraces before Baig hurried us on to the bazaar to do our pre-climb shopping. 'We must keep moving. There's no guarantee you will be safe. Don't go outside without me.'

He sounded uncharacteristically serious, but kept further thoughts to himself. Paul fiddled with the beginnings of his moustache. 'Better do what Baig says.' He went off to his room to call his wife. I went up on the roof to smoke a cigarette. It was 45 degrees up there and the air hissed with heat. Distant blue hills wavered in and out of focus. The traffic sounded in the distance but the only person in sight was a road sweeper. He sat in the dust under a tree in his ragged clothes, flapping flies one-handed, his twig broom abandoned at his side.

Twenty-four hours later, Baig had hustled us out of the city. In an edgy voice, he'd said he wished we were flying north, but flights were cancelled. We drove north up the Karakoram Highway against a tide of refugees heading south from Swat. Families crammed into the backs of jeeps and onto the roofs of trucks and buses, while others struggled on foot, piggy-backing children and the elderly, and bundles of possessions. *Two million people displaced— that's half the population of New Zealand.*

A middle-aged man hung on the running-board of a truck. Beneath the brown Pashtun turban his sun-rugged features looked proud, but weary.



6. Karim Sar from the Baltar glacier: 'a grandeur surpassing its moderate size'. (*Pat Deavoll).*



7. The intricate south face of Karim Sar (6180m) (*Pat Deavoll*).

Where will he end up? In a refugee camp? What will happen to his home, his farm? How will he support his family? What if I had to leave my home and livelihood, not knowing when I'd return? For a split second we locked eyes and in that moment I realised we were irrevocably, eternally foreign to each other.

Guilt filled me, and I turned away. Near Chatta Plain, a kilometre-long traffic jam brought us to a halt. People clambered from their vehicles, greeting each other, laughing and gossiping in the heat and dust. Then news rippled down the line: *the Taliban have bombed the bridge.* A furore of shouting, blaring horns and diesel fumes erupted as the traffic tried to negotiate the rocky riverbed. I looked back. *Such a small bridge.* A large, jagged hole disfigured the far side. *I'm here to climb a mountain. This is their life. What would they think if they knew?* I didn't dare answer.

As we passed the eastern Swat town of Besham, bearded men stooped and stared through the windows, dark gazes of disapproval. I held my headscarf tight around my face and kept my eyes ahead. After several hundred kilometres and many security roadblocks, Baig sighed and finally let us stop for the night at a guesthouse. The next day, we reached Gilgit, the small northern city wedged between the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush, and Baig began to smile. We paused several times so he could hail friends. '*Assalam-o-Alekum*.'

The city was barricaded like a fortress, but on an impulse I rushed Paul to the bazaar to outfit him in the traditional *shalwa kameez* and the Hunza hat. He listened closely to the shopkeepers' words, and soon we had a small crowd of locals giving us advice. 'Sir you need a larger size! Oh you look very fine now. Sir, you must not pull the hat so low.' Paul looked good in an earthy smock that grazed his knees, a woollen hat jaunty across his forehead. Almost Pakistani.

Two days later, shepherds from the village of Budelas loaded our equipment onto tiny braying donkeys with large fluffy ears. Baig stood on a rock, laughing, conducting the donkey orchestra with a stick. The porters yelled affably as we meandered up the steep valley to our base camp beside the Shilinbar glacier, under the massive south face of Karim Sar. After a rowdy, impromptu game of cricket, they wished us much cheery good luck, '*Inshallah, Inshallah,* God willing…' and disappeared down the valley in a jovial, shambling, laughing mob. Our journey to the mountain was over. A different journey was about to begin.

The sun set behind the ridge and all was quiet except for the hum of the kerosene burner in the cook tent and the occasional phat-phat of rockfall. The air seemed to hang, waiting. At last, the south face reared 2600 metres above us; the intricate facets of rock, the labyrinth of snow gullies and traverses, the towering ice-cliffs lit by the last subtle rays of light. The twilight faded into night, into a timeless, unfathomable peace. There was no conflict here. The mountain was quiet, without emotions or judgment.

Finally, finally, we would go climbing.

As we acclimatised over the next week in snowy, unsettled weather, Paul struggled with the altitude. Summer was late to arrive and there was



8. Paul Hersey works his way up the steepening gully to high camp at 5100m. (*Pat Deavoll*).

vastly more snow than during the previous two years; we learned later that the Karakoram hadn't seen as much winter snow in 30 years. At base camp Paul came down with an undiagnosed illness, recovered, and then decided he didn't want to go onto the mountain. I felt a mix of despair, anger, and anxiety; the expedition was heavily sponsored and, for me, giving up without an attempt wasn't an option. I decided to try the mountain alone and succumbed to some angst-ridden, sleepless nights.

The morning of my departure for the summit, Paul announced he would come back up the glacier to advance base camp (4200m). I felt a flood of gratitude – even if Paul were thousands of feet below me it would be a huge relief to know he was there. Moving up through a dangerous section of the icefall, he climbed with new speed and confidence and next morning agreed to come a few hundred metres up the face to belay me through a rock band. But when we got beneath the short granite pitch, I realised that ice-cliffs, 1500m above, ringed the terrain. I decided to follow a gully system to the left that was overhung by a massive, but seemingly stable ice-cliff. It seemed the better of two evils.

To my surprise, Paul decided to continue, even though he had no overnight gear. At about 3pm I arrived on a small saddle at 5100m, dug a tent platform, and watched Paul slowly work his way up the steepening

slope. The location was breathtaking: Rakaposhi and Diran to the south, Sangamarmar only a couple of kilometres east, and way in the distance the massive Hispar glacier.

We both spent a sleepless night; Paul because he was lying in a large plastic pack liner, and me because I was so damn nervous. At 4am I brewed up, handed my sleeping bag to Paul, and headed up a steep snow slope to the first obstacle, a small band of granite covered in loose snow. I bridged up a gully for a few metres, had an '*I can't do this'* moment, and climbed back down. Thwarted only half an hour from the tent! Taking a deep breath, I tried again and this time climbed the 20m to the top.

Another steep snow slope led to a 100m-high granite cliff. I headed right to circumvent it, then discovered I would have to traverse across a steep rock gully with a large drop beneath, and so scurried back left. Above me were two ice-cliffs and between them a steep, narrow gully of snow. I front-pointed 100m up the gully and found myself in a wide cwm rimmed by huge ice-cliffs 300m above. The cliffs seemed quiet, but it was early, and I decided to climb onto a broad ice rib on the right of the cwm to avoid any action. I tried to hurry, but with snow almost up to my knees progress was glacial. Conditions were better up on the rib and I sped up dramatically.

After climbing several hundred metres, passing some sizeable crevasses, I came to a large rock band that formed the base of the summit pyramid. From base camp it had looked as if this could be navigated on the left, but now I realised this would require a long traverse over steep ice with a 1500m drop to the Bar glacier below. Far too scary! I accepted glumly that I'd have to drop 100m, traverse right under the rock band, and try to summit from the east side. The exposure was frightening, and with every step loose, wet snow swished down alarmingly, gathering speed until it shot over the ice-cliffs. After what seemed like an eternity, the traverse ended and I was able to start climbing toward the ridgeline. By this time I was in the full sun and feeling tired.

At midday I hit the summit ridge above the east face. I could see the top and the only obstacle seemed to be a 60°-70° ice slope. 'I can rappel that,' I thought, and whizzed up the ice with renewed vigour. A five-minute wander along the final ridge put me on top. 'Yippee! Now I can go down,' was my reaction.

Two raps off V-threads got me nearly down the ice slope and another three off rock bollards saw me back to the start of the traverse. The snow had deteriorated further and by the time I reached the broad rib at the far end I was almost in tears. But progress down the rib was rapid and I soon cheered up. Back in the cwm, I sat behind a large block of ice, ate a bit and started to feel pleased with myself. I set off again with a big grin.

Reversing the steep, narrow gully between the ice-cliffs required concentration, followed by a nasty traverse back to the slope above camp. I spent 40 minutes cold-welding a stopper into a rotten crack for an anchor and 30m later repeated the procedure to rappel the final rock band. I could see the tent and soon Paul stuck his head out the door and waved.

I felt such an enormous sense of relief when Paul hugged me. He had water and food ready and vacated the tent so I could lie down. After 40 minutes he left to descend 1000m to advance base camp – another night in a plastic bag was beyond the call of duty. I fell sound asleep. At dusk I woke, made another brew, and then passed out till 7am. Descending the gully next day, my legs were like jelly. Paul was waiting at ABC and we packed up and made our way slowly back to base camp.

Back in Islamabad, I was happy to spend the time before my flight watching Wimbledon on cable in my hotel room. While we'd been in the mountains there had been further bombings in nearby Peshawar and Rawalpindi. Baig was ever adamant we keep a low profile. 'Only go out on the streets very early,' he said, 'and take me with you.' But when we did venture into the bazaar in the quiet of the morning, as vendors loaded their



9. Summit day: Pat Deavoll on the ice rib high on Karim Sar's south face (*Pat Deavoll*).

stalls and the first of the day's shoppers drifted by, we were approached by Pakistanis who thanked us for visiting their country. 'Thank you for coming in troubled times,' they said. 'It's not always like this. Really, we just want peace.'

Summary: An account of the first ascent of Karim Sar (6180m), Hunza region, northern Pakistan, in June 2009 by Pat Deavoll, accompanied to 5100m by Paul Hersey.

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SANDY ALLAN

To Get Closer

Tenth July 2009. We're at 8125m, the summit of Nanga Parbat. I have semi-frozen hands, the weather is awful and Rick and I think we are a tad late to be in such a high place. It's 3pm and our top camp is long way down at around 7000m.



10. Nanga Parbat's Diamir Face, from base camp. *(Sandy Allan coll)*

Rick rushed his photos but I insisted on taking some better ones. While we had both already climbed several 8000m peaks, most of my photos are really poor. As it turned out my Nanga Parbat images are not much better, but there are at least some without thumbs or the inside of down mittens in the frame; one of Rick in fact is rather good and I know he likes it. That's how I partly froze my hands. The old ego trap was yawning again, a trap that for mountaineers can lead to poor decision-making with potentially grave consequences. I was putting my wellbeing at risk for the sake of a photo. Everyone, including me, seems to want a photo, a memento or