

LINDSAY GRIFFIN

Afghanistan 2012



The famous Aga Khan bridge over the Oxus, connecting Afghanistan and Tajikistan. This border crossing is the one used in recent years by foreign expeditions visiting the Wakhan Corridor. (Franck Mazas)

Climbers visiting the Wakhan Corridor in 2012 were affected by hostilities, though not from within Afghanistan. Fighting erupted in Khorog, the last main town in Tajikistan before reaching the Afghan border at Ishkashim, after central government forces confronted local commanders. Many people were killed in some of Tajikistan's worst violence since the end of the civil war in 1997. The Tajik government closed the border to stop insurgents escaping, trapping several expeditions in Afghanistan. They were able to effect an escape either through the intervention of ambassadors in Kabul, or by the good old-fashioned means of bribery.

An innovative trip was an attempt to make the first winter ascent of **Mir Samir** (5809m), a mountain located in the remote upper section of the Panjshir Valley and made famous by Eric Newby in his best seller *A Short Walk in The Hindu Kush*. From the date of the first ascent (1959) to 1978 Mir Samir was climbed frequently (but at no time since), and amassed nine or 10 different routes. James and Edward Bingham, Quentin Brooksbank and Mark Wynne (UK) suffered the 'disappearance' of a crucial kit bag at the roadhead, and then found the approach valley to be steep-sided and deep with snow, above knee-deep even using snow shoes, making it

purgatory for pulling sleds. At 3480m on 20 January, after five days' hard travel, they had made relatively little distance and were now far behind their planned schedule. With more heavy snow forecast, they reluctantly decided to turn back.

American Mike Libeck returned to the **Koh-e-Baba** mountains and Bamyan region during February-March to investigate the skiing and ice climbing potential. The timing proved a little late for safe ice climbing or good skiing, though both were achieved, including kite skiing at the Band-i-Amir lakes. If the political situation remains safe, he plans to return in a future January.

In the **Wakhan**, Alexandre Darrioulat, Franck Mazas, and Arnaud Pasquer (France) hoped to climb **Noshaq** but due to the unrest in Tajikistan were not allowed into the Qaz-e-Deh valley, as it leads to the border with Pakistan. There has always been a somewhat irrational fear of the (Pakistan) Taliban crossing the high (and glaciated) pass at its head into Afghanistan. Instead, they were given a permit to enter the Keshi Khan valley, two valleys east of Qaz-e-Deh, which has no such border. Here, they first climbed the north top of **Koh-e-Qalat** (5505m, altimeter), most likely first climbed in 1970. They then ascended a small, unnamed summit of c5200m, well to the west of **Koh-e-Token** (5200m). Although steep and impressive from the north, it had easy snow slopes on the south flank, which they followed to the summit at F. They finally reached the high Koh-e-Keshni Khan – Koh-e-Wark ridge, and climbed a fine snowy pyramid one kilometre east of Koh-e-Wark. It is not clear whether this **White Pyramid** (5612m GPS, PD) has been climbed previously. This team had to escape the country with a military escort via Kunduz and the border post at Sher Khan Bandar.

Pat Deavoll was back in Afghanistan, this time with Mary-Rose Fowlie. The pair originally planned to attempt **Rahazon Zom** (6535m) from the upper Qala Panja glacier but decided first on an acclimatisation ascent of a smaller peak to the west, **Koh-e-Rank** (5930m). They made an ascent of the east ridge, the route followed on the one and only previous ascent, in 1968 by Henri and Isobel Agresti. After this, and wondering whether their two-woman team would be strong enough for a five – seven day round trip ascent of Rahazon Zom, they returned to Koh-e-Rank and made the third ascent, but first traverse, via the north-west ridge, and descent of the east ridge.

Further up the Corridor, in the **Koh-e-Ak Su** range of the Pamir, Sarah Sheridan (Australia), Malgorzata Skowronska (Poland), Mariusz Hoffmann, Chris Nettekoven and Andreas Schnall (all from Germany) made the first ascent of **Koh-e-Elgha Eli IV** (c5725m) in the Elgha Eli valley south-east of Lake Chaqmaqin. They climbed the north-west face and south-west ridge (PD+) to the summit, only to find they were not at the highest point: three more summits lay to the north-east but they did not continue to them. They were subsequently caught up with the problems of border closure, but found the Wakhan Corridor to be safe, with welcoming, hospitable people.



On the ascent of Koh-e-Rank, with the Tajik Pamir in the distance. (Pat Deavoll)

In the big Pamir, Americans Ben Mitchell, Cecelia Mortenson, Dylan Taylor and Danny Uhlmann attempted ascents and ski descents during May. Their venue was the **Koh-e-Wakhan**, where they accessed the mountains in a two-day walk up the Issik valley above the village of Ptukh. They were turned back 100m below the summit of **Koh-e-Seh Aspe Safed East** (6040m) in white-out and heavy snow, and after climbing a striking 1000m couloir towards the left side of the south-west face of **Koh-e-Pamir** (6320m/6288m), searched in vain for a safe line up the north-east ridge to the summit. Their final attempt was on an aesthetic-looking un-named 5538m peak on the ridge east of **Koh-e-Zemestan** (6092m), but once again rotten snow stopped them, this time only 50m below the top of the north-east face. There are several fine unclimbed 6000m peaks in this region, including the main summits of Seh Aspe Safed and Zemestan. Koh-e-Pamir was first climbed in 1971 by guidebook author Carlo Pinelli.

DICK ISHERWOOD

Pakistan 2012

Dick completed these notes shortly before his death in February 2013. His obituary appears on pages 392-396.

Perhaps the most significant event in Pakistan in 2012 was the first complete ascent of the Mazeno Ridge on **Nanga Parbat** by the British climbers Sandy Allan and Rick Allen, supported by Cathy O'Dowd and Sherpas Lhakpa Nuru, Lhakpa Rangdu and Lhakpa Zarok. This ridge, nine kilometres long with eight subsidiary summits, arguably the longest ridge on any 8000m peak, had been the subject of many attempts over the years, including three by Doug Scott.

They left basecamp on 2 July and spent 11 nights on the mountain, traversing the complete Mazeno Ridge to a bivvi at 7160m above the Mazeno Gap. From there on the 11 July all the team began a summit attempt, with Lhakpa Nuru and O'Dowd turning back at round 7am and returning to the bivvi camp at 7160m. The other four pushed on but were unable to reach the summit by their chosen line and reached around 7650m before giving up and returning to the bivvi camp by darkness. On 13 July, the Sherpas and O'Dowd, all debilitated, descended via a line based roughly on the Schell route and arrived at the foot of the mountain on the evening of 15 July. Sandy and Rick rested one day at the 7160m bivvi on 13 July and began another summit attempt on the morning of the 14th, where they overnighted in a snow cave at 7720m. They reached the summit of Nanga Parbat on 15 July at 6.12pm and returned to their snow cave by darkness. Over the next three days they descended the Diamir face, which had been unclimbed for two years, and arrived safely at the Diamir basecamp on the morning of 18 July. The pair rated the route IV/4 and Alpine ED – it clearly justified the latter.

Adam Bielecki and Janusz Golab of Poland made the first winter ascent of **Gasherbrum I** (8068m) on 9 March, by the Japanese Couloir, above the Gasherbrum La. Three other climbers, Austrian, Swiss and Pakistani, disappeared in high winds only 250m below the summit on the same day. They were seen by Bielecki and Golab on their descent, but an extensive search by other climbers and two military helicopters failed to find them.

A Russian attempt to make the first winter ascent of **K2** was abandoned in early February when Vitaly Gorelik died, apparently of heart failure, at basecamp. Gorelik and partners Valery Shamalo and Nicholas Totmyanin had made it to a highpoint of 7200m on the SSE spur (the Abruzzi Ridge). Gorelik was a well-known high altitude climber who had reached the summit of K2 in 2007 with the large Russian expedition that made the first ascent of the west face.