

The giant sun halo we'd be climbing under all day was spectacular but a sure sign the weather was changing; our window was gone, the next storm front slowing moving in in the distance, black and ominous.

Yet standing on the 6,938m west summit, we were not disappointed; the dreamlike vista was breathtaking, unforgettable, worthy of all the pain and hard work of the last five days. We were satisfied and happy; we'd done what we could, gambled as much as we were willing on this adventure. It was too dangerous to descend during the day so we put the tent up right next to the summit, another wild place to spend the night with amazing views over the Karakoram giants: K2, Broad Peak, Masherbrum, and the Gasherbrums to the north-west and a bird's eye view down into the closed off Kondus valley to our east.

Jon's fever had returned during the afternoon, inevitably I suppose. I worried again, the situation even more serious than before if he continued to deteriorate. The snow that had started briefly during the night was even more worrying. Link Sar was not a mountain to be descending in bad weather; it would quickly become a torrent of avalanches, a fight for survival as the steep slopes struggled to hold the snow. We were both scared now.

By 3.30am the snow stopped and Jon was feeling better. The descent, down a large gully on the south side, went quickly, Jon keen to do his bit again, leading the way. I post-holed down the unfrozen glacier, every step a tentative one, expecting to fall through into some unseen crevasse as the powerful sun weakened the snow bridges. The icefall we had naively thought to be okay took hours to navigate, turned back by one dead end after another.

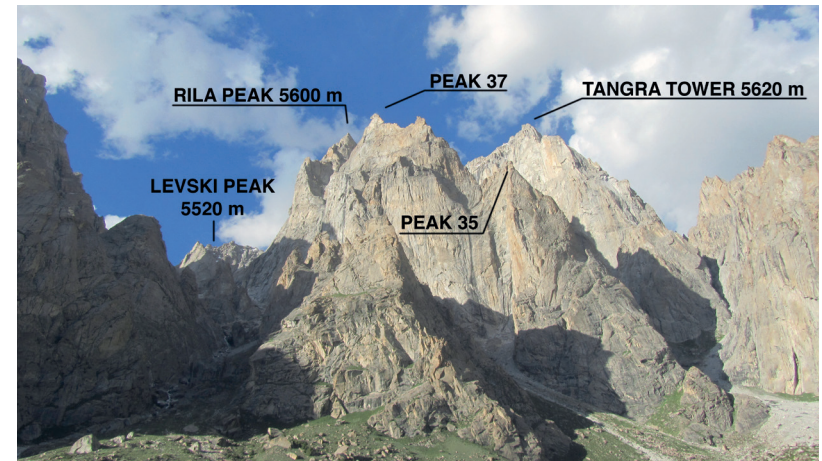
At one point I was crawling on my stomach to spread the weight as I crossed over yet another weak bridge, holding my breath expecting it to break. We stopped at one point, not entirely sure we'd find a way out this maze of towering ice blocks and crevasses. How one of us didn't take a ride into one of the many dark bottomless holes we crossed I really don't know. Maybe, at last, after pushing us to the limit for the last seven days since leaving base camp, the mountain was showing us a bit of respect. Finally sitting down in the relative safety of the dry Charakusa glacier, I hoped we had earned it.

Summary

First ascent of the west summit of Link Sar (6938m) via the north-west face. Starting in mid July, Griffith and Houseman made their first bivouac on the face at 6,100m and waited a day to allow snow to clear. After 17 hours, the pair reached the top of the face at around 6,800m, having climbed consistently steep ground and several mixed pitches up to M4. That night Griffith came down with a fever and the two decided to stay put the following day. On 17 July, with Griffith improved, they set off up the remaining ridge and by midday reached the west top. They bivouacked close to the top, and next morning made a committing and blind descent of a couloir on the south-west face, which led to an unnamed glacier and through a time-consuming icefall to reach the main Charakusa the same day. They named their route *Fever Pitch*.

WALTER POLIDORI

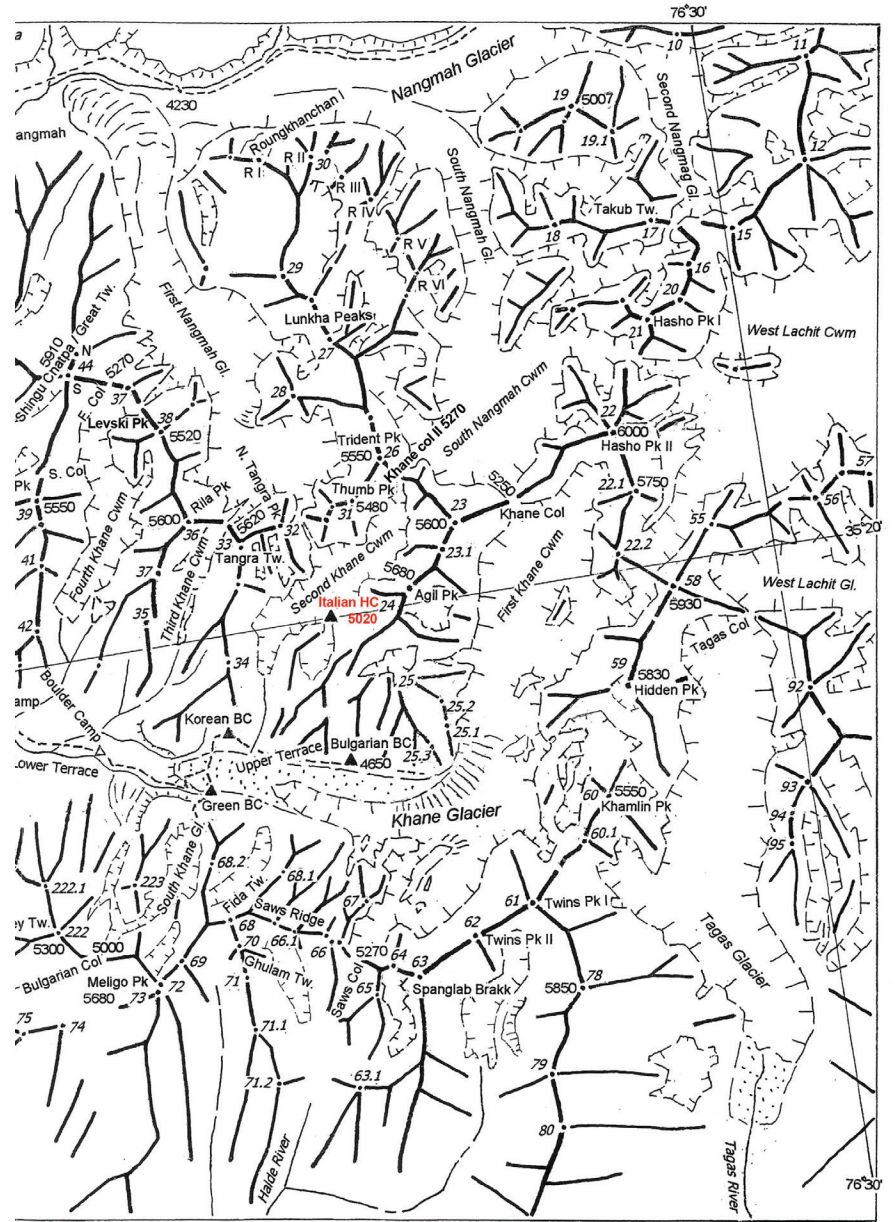
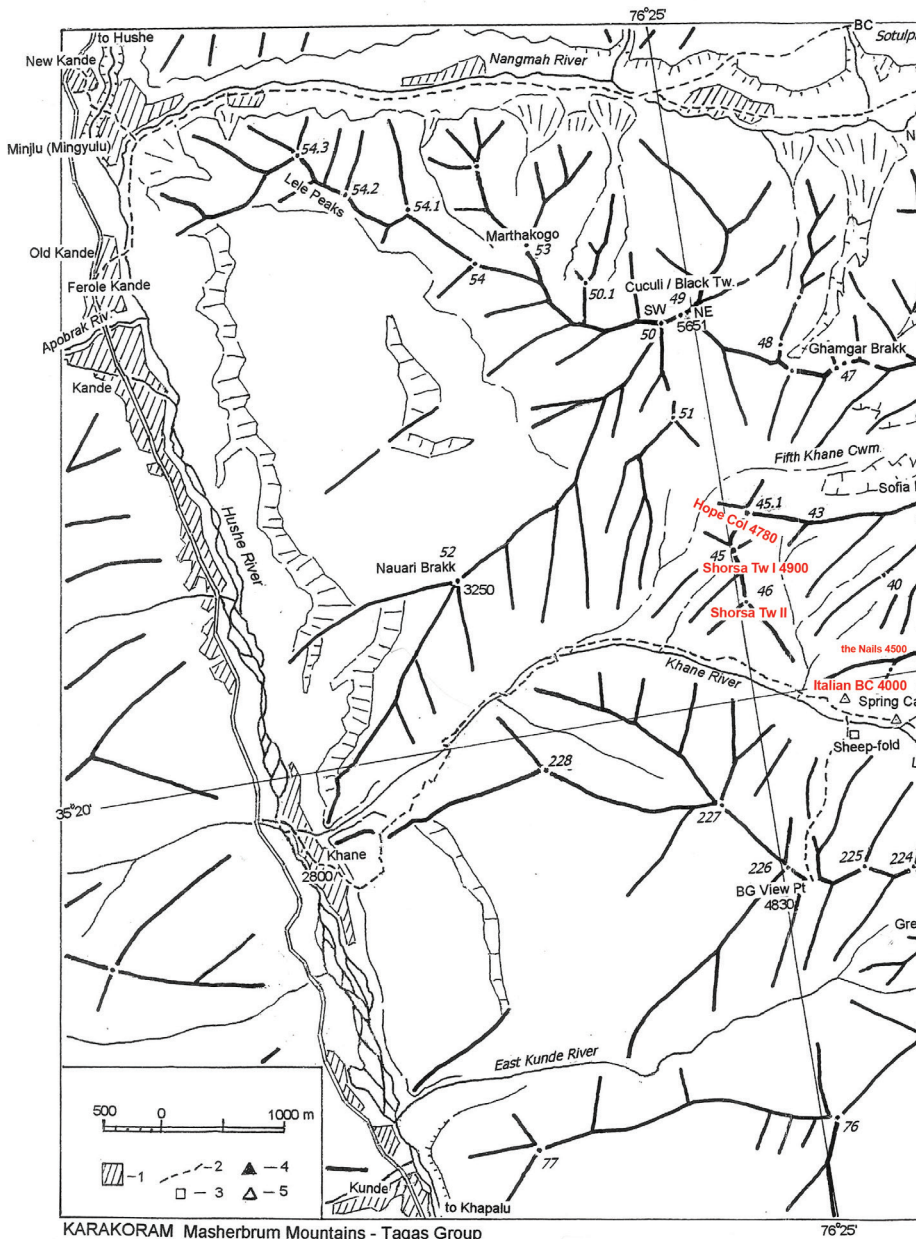
Khane Valley, Karakoram



Peaks on the north side of the Khane valley in the Karakoram.
(All images courtesy of Walter Polidori)

Our expedition in August 2015 was to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the mountaineering and ski mountaineering school Guido Della Torre of the Italian Alpine Club (CAI). Five different sections of CAI support the school: Busto Arsizio, Castellanza, Legnano, Parabiago and Saronno. All are located in Lombardy, northern Italy. In line with the school's tradition and ethical spirit, the aim of the expedition was mountaineering's original feature: exploration, with, obviously, full awareness of its risks and dangers. These requirements seemed to be met in the rather unexplored Khane valley, where only three summits have been climbed so far.

The relatively limited descriptions of this valley were collected from three recent expeditions: two from Bulgaria between 2011 and 2012, the first purely exploratory followed by a more mountaineering-oriented second one, and a climbing expedition from the USA in 2012. Other information included Jerzy Wala's 2012 map 'Karakorum Masherbrum Mountains: Tagas Group – The Khane valley' (Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research, 1990). The map has no contour lines but is nevertheless useful for a broad understanding of the features of the valley.



LEGEND: 1 – woods, small villages or settlement; 2 – foot paths; 3 – herders huts; 4 – base camp; 5 – places of the camp.
 Tw – tower; Gl. – glacier; Pk – peak; BC – base camp.

This map and its surroundings was created on the basis of the LANDSAT satellite image, N.W. Frontier Pakistan Satellite Image Map, scale 1:500 000; Topographical map Nangmah Valley 1:50 000 - Jerzy Wala Kraków 1st Edition 2010; Orographical Sketch Map Tagas Group, scale 1:100 000, 1st Edition 2004; Google Earth Image - Bulgarian Expedition 2011.

Jerzy Wala's 2012 edition of his map of the Khane valley with the Italians' notations in red.

KARAKORAM Masherbrum Mountains - Tagas Group

The Khane Valley

Prepared by Jerzy Wala Kraków 1st Edition 2012

This orographical sketch map presenting the Khane Valley and its surroundings was created on the basis of the LANDSAT satellite image, N.W. Frontier Pakistan Satellite Image Map, scale 1:500 000; Topographical map Nangmah Valley 1:50 000 - Jerzy Wala Kraków 1st Edition 2010; Orographical Sketch Map Tagas Group, scale 1:100 000, 1st Edition 2004; Google Earth Image - Bulgarian Expedition 2011.

Mountaineering History of Khane Valley

The Khane valley remained unexplored until a few years ago for the simple reason that the valleys close to it, such as Nangma and Charakusa, were more famous. The large majority of peaks in the Khane remain unclimbed and unnamed. Only a small number of them, visible from villages along the Hushe river, from the Nangma valley or from high pastures along the Khane river, were given a name by local people. According to locals from Khane village, the first foreigners to visit the valley were Koreans in 2001 and in the two subsequent years. They probably attempted, unsuccessfully, to climb the west face of Agil. During their second expedition they successfully climbed a 250m rock route on a satellite of a ridge close to their base camp, located at 4,450m. After them, an American visited the valley to trek after taking part in an expedition to The Ogre. She reached the base of the Great Tower, passing through a lateral valley located between the Rila Peak on the east side and Sofia Peak on the west.

In 2009 two locals, Ali Mehmed and his son Ruhali Ali climbed a graceful tower located above Khane village, calling it Nauri Brakk (c3250m). Other ascents were attempted before 2011 from the Nangma valley: Black Tower (or Sarigo) and Singu Chapta, also named Singu Charpa as well as Great Tower. As already mentioned, a Bulgarian expedition visited the valley for the purposes of exploration in September 2011. The Khane valley first came to the attention of Doychin Boyanov and Nicolay Petkov in 2005 and 2006 when they crossed the valley from north to south descending from the Gondogoro pass and then, in 2009, when they returned to the valley after an expedition to Gasherbrum I. In August 2012 Tervel Kerelov and Michail Michailov joined them for the Bulgarian Khane expedition. Together they made first ascents of Levski Peak (5733m) and Grey Tower (5435m). In September 2012 Anna Pfaff and Camilo Lopez attempted Peak 25 via the west face to within 200m of the summit but were forced to retreat because of the poor quality of the rock.

Italian Expedition 2015

While our main goal was unclimbed summits, the expedition's other aim was to explore the valley and produce a detailed description of the area through photo and video documentation. Our team included Walter Polidori, national instructor and expedition leader; Emanuele Nugara, regional instructor; Luca Monfrini and Matteo Filippini, sectional instructors, all of them part of the school. Finally, Tommaso Lamantia, alpine rescue member, took part in the expedition.

The Khane valley is located in north-east Pakistan, in the Tagas group of the Baltistan-Karakoram region. Perpendicular to the Hushe valley, which gives access to Masherbrum, and parallel, towards the south, to the more popular Nangma valley, the Khane valley spreads east. Still further north of the Nangma valley, the small Khridas valley and the much more popular Charakusa valley, thanks to K6 and K7, are located. The Halde valley is south of the Khane valley, while a mountain ridge divides



The Grey Tower (5435m) at the south-west corner of the Khane valley.

Khane from the Tagas valley. Khane village, set at 2,800m, is the last place reachable by vehicle.

The main entrance to the valley is from Skardu, connected to Islamabad by a short flight when weather conditions allow or by a two-day drive on the Kakakoram Highway. From Skardu it is possible to get to Khaplu thanks to a gravel road alongside the Shyok river; from there, a bridge on the true right bank gives access to Hushe valley. After driving through Machulo, a small bridge standing at the entrance of the village of Khane is reached in five hours. Due to the frequency of landslides, the road is often closed to the traffic; we experienced some troubles approaching this area due to flooding at the end of July.

A path runs up the true left bank of the valley above a gorge characteristic of the region; the Khane river here is pretty wild. The start of the path is marked with cairns to reach slopes on the left bank, a gorgeous path alongside which runs walls holding a water channel. Unfortunately numerous landslides have damaged this as well as the path, which crosses steep screes in many places. The path eventually disappears and we crossed the river on a temporary bridge made of a tree trunk. Then we climbed along a poorly marked path on the true right side of the river. The path angled back approaching the ruins of a few stone shelters; finally we reached a large flat area at 4,000m three or four hours from Khane where we put base camp. We called this the First Terrace. Pastures here explain the paths, and we frequently encountered flocks of goats and sheep, as well as yak and cattle herds guarded by a local shepherd, named Ismail.

Khane valley is oriented from west to east. After the First Terrace, heading east, the Khane river goes over a cliff to form a pretty waterfall. The path crosses this step to the Second Terrace (c4500m). From here, above a moraine,



The Italian high camp in the Second Khane cwm on the north side of the valley. The climbers reported unusually high temperatures resulting in serious rock fall, which limited their activities.

the dry glacier appears at the head of the valley. A little before it, there's a good spot for an ABC, a useful starting point for climbs in the upper section of the valley. The Bulgarians had their base camp here. From this point the valley changes its orientation, running south to north, and after a steep icefall (c4900m) reaches a col at 5,250m giving access to the Nangma valley.

Khane Valley Peaks

The most significant peaks are in the main valley, starting from base camp towards Khane col on the true right bank. Peak 46, named Shorsa Tower II by our expedition because of a name used by locals, is characterised by its graceful and long rocky south-east ridge. Peak 41 is located south of the massive Sofia Peak and is characterised, on its east side, by huge hanging slabs. Peak 42 is a wide and stocky mountain; Peak 35 is attractive, part of a ridge leading to Peak 37. Peak 34 is probably the first mountain climbed in the valley, thanks to a Korean team; it is located close to the waterfall. Peak 25 was attempted by the American team; they climbed most of it, but were unable to reach the summit due to poor rock quality. Agil is an impressive mountain with its west wall facing the North Khane glacier in the second Khane cwm (see map) and its east wall facing the main valley above the icefall; its upper slopes are snow-covered. Peak 23 can be reached from a second Khane col above the North Khane glacier but is difficult to find. Mixed ground and snow characterise this mountain.

On the true left bank are Peaks 226 and 225, small but attractive mountains at the end of debris channels. Peak 224 is a difficult shoulder of the Grey Tower; the Grey Tower itself was first climbed by the Bulgarians



The final pitch on Shorsa Tower I (4900m), at the north-west end of the Khane valley.

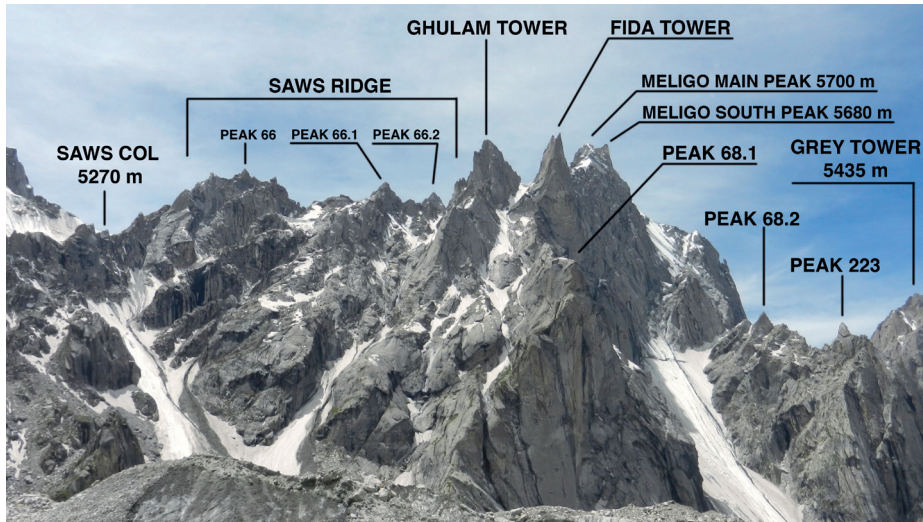
in 2012. Peak 223 divides the snow gully below Bulgarian col. There are two towers, Peak 68.2 and 68.1, under the north face of Meligo, an impressive and complex mountain, visible from the Hushe valley. A huge serac connects the main summit to the south peak. Meligo Ridge runs through Fida Tower, Ghulam Tower and then the different summits of Saws Ridge up to Saws col. Spanglab Brakk is particularly pretty viewed from the Hushe valley, with a sharp pyramidal shape. The Twins is a remarkable mountain, with a severe mixed wall overlooking the Khane valley. Khamlin is also an impressive mountain while Hidden Peak is characterised by huge seracs. Peaks 22.2 and 22.1 are mainly

rocky and mixed on the Khane valley side but snowy on the opposite one. Hasho Peak II is a huge mountain reaching 6,000m adjacent to the Nangma valley with a snowy side probably reachable from the Tagas valley side; the Khane col is located between Hasho Peak and Peak 23.

Side Valleys

Starting from the west on the true right or northern side of the Khane valley, there is a debris channel that starts on the right side of Shorsa Tower II; from this it is possible to reach a col at 4,780m that we named 'Hope col', wanting an easy climb of Sofia Peak. The col offers a view of a secondary valley (fifth Khane cwm) that starts at a much lower altitude in the Khane valley to reach the base of Sofia and Great Tower. Beyond the col, on the left side, it is possible to reach a small terrace at 4,800m from where we could see a chaotic ridge reaching rocky towers. Sofia is located beyond these towers. Shorsa Tower II is located on the right side of the channel at its entrance and is connected to the higher Shorsa Tower I (c4900m) by a grassy rock ridge. A little below Hope col, the east ridge reaches the summit of Shorsa Tower I, which we climbed for the first ascent.

Next, a lateral valley rises toward the Great Tower and Levski Peak in the fourth Khane cwm, located shortly before the waterfall up to East col (5270m). On the true left side of the valley, starting from the bottom, Peak 35, Peak 37 and Rila Peak form a stunning ridge leading, eventually, to Levski Peak, a snowy rock summit climbed by the Bulgarians in 2012. On the true right or western side, the wide face of Peak 42 is followed by Peak 41, Sofia, with its impressive and complex shape, and the Great Tower, already climbed from the Nangma valley side.

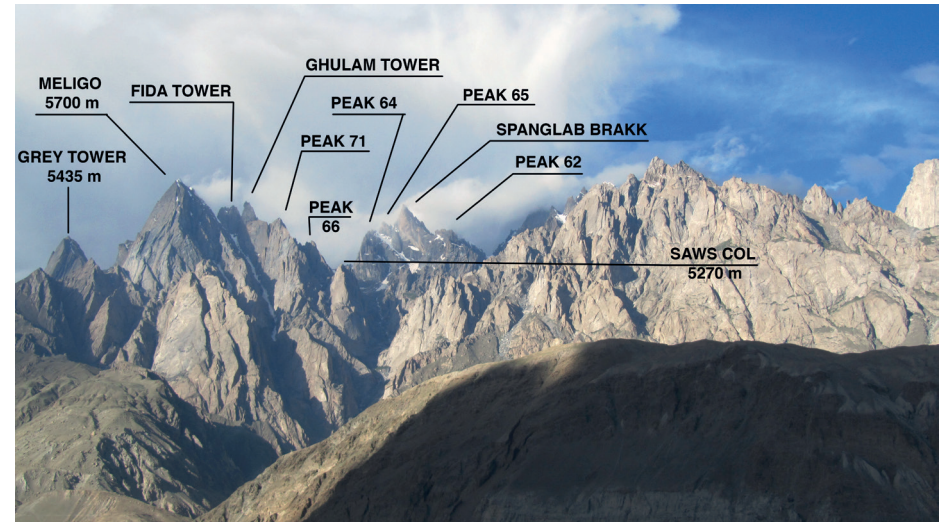


The Meligo group from the north, across the Khane valley.

The third valley, leading to the third Khane cwm, is located between Rila Peak and Tangra Tower. This is a narrow gorge, close to the waterfall, between the east face of Peak 37 and west face of the Tangra Tower. In its upper part it becomes snowy forming a couloir. Right at its start, a route along the true left or east side most likely allows you to reach a small rocky col from which the east ridge of the Tangra Tower begins; this is an impressive ridge with evidence of a recent landslide in its lower part.

A final valley on the northern, true right side of the Khane valley leads to the North Khane glacier in the second Khane cwm. This is the first side valley after the waterfall and is truly gorgeous. It rises up to a col (Khane col II) giving access to the Nangma valley. The peaks from the bottom up on the west side are Peak 34, Tangra Tower, an amazing granite tower with a beautiful south-east face, North Tangra Peak, South Tower, a rocky mountain presenting a smooth buttress, Central Tower and Thumb Tower. These last three mountains, close to each other, together form a stunning sight. Between Trident and Peak 23 lies Khane col II. On the east side, Peak 25 is followed by Agil and Peak 23.

On the southern, true left side of the Khane valley, there are gullies before the Grey Tower leading to Peaks 225 and 226, which are fairly unattractive due to poor rock. The first gully on the right of Grey Tower is the likely route to Peak 224. There is a snow gully reaching the col between Meligo and Grey Tower (Bulgarian col, c5000m). This was used by the Bulgarians to climb Grey Tower. A gully and ramp between The Twins and Meligo leads to Saws col, dividing Peak 64 from Peak 66 at an altitude of 5,270m. We couldn't find a col or route that easily crossed the mountain chain from the west side to get to the Tagas valley; from this valley an easy



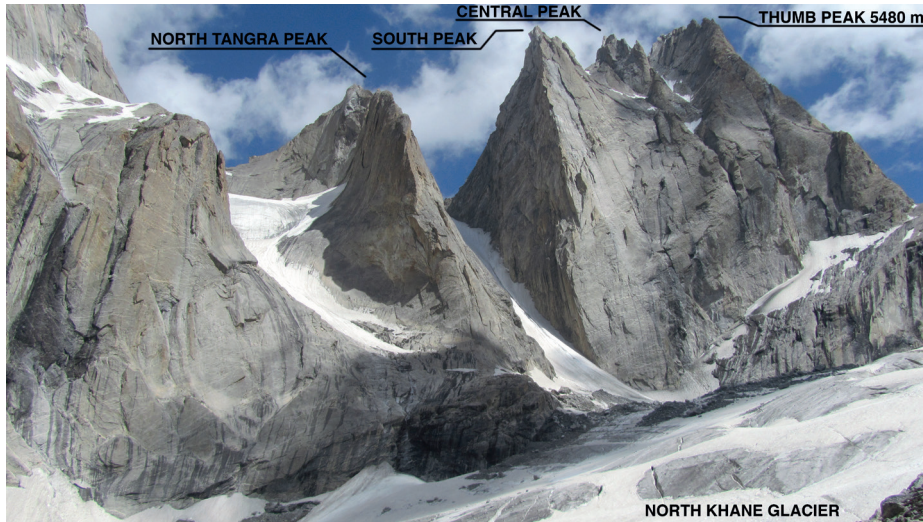
The Meligo group from the south, in the Hushe valley.

ascent to some summits dividing it from the Khane valley might be possible up snowy slopes.

Italian Exploration and Climbing

Using GPS for heights and tracking, as well as photographs, we explored and surveyed the main Khane valley and the Khane glacier up to the icefall at 4,900m. Unfortunately, the icefall was not practicable due to very poor ice conditions caused by high temperatures resulting in frequent ice and stone falls from its slopes. We explored the second Khane cwm, where the Tangra Tower is located, up to the moraine and the beginning of the upper glacier cirque at 5,020m. We climbed up the valley leading to Levski Peak, the fourth Khane cwm, almost to East col that connects with the Nangma valley at 5,270m. We also climbed up the gullies beside Peaks 45 and 46, up to the col we named Hope (4780m), to figure out whether an attempt on Sofia was possible, and the gully behind Peak 42 and two other minor satellites we named The Nails.

As far as climbing went, we climbed Peak 45 via its east ridge (VI+, 300m). We used this mountain's local name Shorsa Tower I (c4900m). Descent was by abseil, first down the route and then the south face with independent stances. Although of good quality, the rock was blocky, except for the last pitches where it appeared much more compact. We attempted the south face of Peak 42. The rock seemed attractive with many cracks; however, the presence of dirt, grass and strange concretions in the cracks made climbing unappealing. Only the first pitch, 35m long, was climbed with difficulties of VI/A2; poor quality of rock persuaded us to abandon the attempt. The exploration of the lower portions of the other towers led to the same conclusion.



The Tangra peaks above the Second Khane cwm.

An attempt on the col between Twins and Meligo (Saws col, 5270m) from an ABC at 4,780m near the head of the glacier was abandoned at roughly 5,000m due to frequent stone falls from the west face of the Twins. We attempted Peak 23 from the North Cirque glacier from an advanced camp, named Italian high camp (5020m) in the upper glacial cirque. The climbing was glacial and mixed terrain through the unvisited Khane col II. Again, we gave up due to poor ice conditions. Stones fell continuously from the overhanging face of Agil throughout the night; furthermore, a snow and rock fall missed our camp by only 80 metres the night before our attempt. Finally, we attempted a satellite peak near base camp close to Peak 42. Unfortunately, poor rock quality prevented us from reaching its summit by only 30m; the climbed section was roughly 300m with difficulties up to III+. The peak was named The Nail I (c4500m).

Conclusions

Weather conditions were favourable throughout the expedition. However, high temperatures all over the region made it dangerous, even impossible to climb on snow and mixed terrain and to approach some of the walls. Even attempts to climb peaks above 8,000m in the area were abandoned due to exceptionally high temperatures. Despite its appearance, the quality of rock in the Khane valley turned out to be very poor. We experienced frequent rock and snow falls even on mountains with snowy summits or partially covered by snow. Due to such poor conditions, the majority of the team chose to abandon our mountaineering attempts after the exploration phase.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the expedition, I would like to thank instructors at the Guido della Torre mountaineering school and the presidents of the CAI sections of Busto Arsizio, Castellanza, Legnano, Parabiago and Saronno for their support. My gratitude goes to the city of Castellanza, Legnano and the Banca Popolare di Milano Bank for funding. Particular thanks go to Maurizio Pincirolì, the school president, who enthusiastically helped us, and to Susanna Martinelli, a school instructor and friend, who continuously pushed us towards our objective. On behalf of Tommaso, thanks go to Salomon and Suunto for their technical support. Finally, I would like to thank my family members for their patience in all these months of work.

Translation from Italian by Vittorio Bedogni, director of the Guido della Torre school.