
TIMOTHY ELSON

Pakistan 2018



Adam Bielecki after left traverse on the upper part of the west face of Gasherbrum II (8035m), reaching the final summit ridge. (*Felix Berg*)

The biggest news from the Pakistan Karakoram in 2018 was undoubtedly the first ascent of Latok I (7145m) from the north side by the Slovenian-British team of Aleš Česen, Luka Stražar, and Tom Livingstone in August. However the dramatic helicopter rescue of the Russian alpinist Alexander Gukov from 6,200m on the mountain's north ridge prior to this dominated the international news media: Gukov and Sergey Glazunov reached the junction at the top of the north ridge over 11 days but did not summit. Glazunov disappeared on the descent leaving Gukov alone on the mountain for six days before a dramatic static-line rescue by the Pakistani military saved him. In fact rescues and recoveries were a big part of the story of the Karakoram in 2018, with rescues on Nanga Parbat in winter, Latok I, Ultar Sar, and Broad Peak; the pilots who carried out many of the rescues cannot be praised enough. Other major ascents were a new route on the west face of Gasherbrum II (8035m) by the Pole Adam Bielecki and Felix Berg from Germany in alpine style and a new route solo by the well-known Austrian Hansjörg Auer on the west face of Lupghar Sar West (7157m). Finally, K2 got its first ski descent from Andrzej Bargiel, who skied from summit to base camp in eight hours, a remarkable achievement.



Latok I with the north ridge right of centre of the picture. *(Tom Livingstone)*

Latok I

The major ascent of the season in the Karakoram was the first ascent of Latok I (7145m) from the north side by the Slovenian-British team of Aleš Česen, Luka Stražar and Tom Livingstone over seven days in August 2018. It was initially and erroneously reported that they had climbed the north ridge direct, but in fact they climbed three-quarters of the ridge before taking a traverse line rightwards to the col between Latok I and II, then completed their ascent up the south side. This was the second ascent of Latok I, the first ascent being from the south by a Japanese team in 1979. Česen, Stražar and Livingstone climbed the most logical line on the face, starting out up snow gullies on the right-hand side of the ridge in order to miss out the difficult lower rock section. They climbed this at night and in the early morning before stopping at safe places to bivvy. They then linked snow features until a traverse hard right at three-quarters height on the north ridge led them to the col (c6700m) between Latok I and II. Overnight on their fourth night on the face the weather deteriorated, and on 9 August they left their bivvy late at 11am, summited that day and descended back to their high camp. It took them two days to descend, which they mostly did down their ascent route except for the base where they descended the rock rib rather than the exposed snow gullies. The vertical height of the route was 2,400m and the team gave it an alpine rating of ED+.

The north ridge of Latok I has seen attempts by a veritable who's who of the climbing world over the last 40 years. In 1978 a US team comprising George Lowe, Jeff Lowe, Michael Kennedy and Jim Donini reached c7,000m on the north ridge in capsule style, spending 26 days on the route and only retreating when Jeff Lowe became critically ill. Over the ensuing



Tom Livingstone soloing on the first part of the face.

40 years over 20 teams have attempted the ridge with none getting as high as the US team's first attempt. In 2017 the Russian team of Anton Kashevnik, Valery Shamalo and Alexander Gukov reached 6,700m in an epic 14-day round-trip: see *AJ* 2018. Kashevnik and Shamalo suffered serious frostbite and both lost fingers and toes. Last summer Alexander Gukov returned with Sergey Glazunov and launched on 12 July, slowly making their way up the north ridge. On 23 July they made a summit push and Glazunov reached a point that he thought was the summit: Gukov was a rope length below and did not go up. They then started their descent but sadly on 25 July Glazunov disappeared while rigging an abseil.

Gukov sent an SOS signal but was unable to move and so sat out bad weather with no food or water for six days before being rescued by a long line. This almost ended in disaster: Gukov was not unclipped from his belay and only his anchor ripping allowed a happy outcome. Gukov, once recovered, reported he thought they had reached the top of the north ridge but not the summit of Latok I and the consensus seems to be that this is the case.

This was the second rescue from Latok in 2018. On 21 July an avalanche hit a Korean team led by Eun Soo Koo on the north face; two of the team sustained serious injuries before they were rescued by helicopter on 22 July. Thomas Huber led a German-French team to the north face of Latok I in August and September but after reconnoitring the face thought it unjustifiably dangerous. There was also a second Russian team on the mountain in July who attempted the north ridge and north face. Latok I was a popular destination in 2018.

Rescues

These were not the only dramatic rescues and searches in 2018 and into the 2019 winter season in Pakistan. There were 44 expeditions registered with the Pakistan Alpine Club and it has been reported that 17 called for helicopter rescue or evacuation in the 2018 season: that is 38%. In Pakistan, helicopter rescues are commissioned through a company called Askari Aviation and performed by the 5th Pakistan Army Aviation Squadron. Any climbers wishing to be rescued must have paid a rescue bond, currently \$10,000, with Askari. (Two helicopters are required under Pakistani military aviation regulations to fly over glaciated terrain.) There is also a plan offered through the Pakistan Association of Tour Operators (PATO) promising an expedition organised or facilitated through one of their members need not pay the rescue bond with Askari but will cover it for them.

There has been universal praise for the skill of Pakistani military pilots who have carried out these high-altitude rescues; this has been acknowledged with the Alpine Club's Spirit of Mountaineering Commendation as well as medals from the Russian ambassador for the rescue of Alexander Gukov from Latok I. In last year's *Alpine Journal* the rescue of Elisabeth Revol from high on Nanga Parbat was described. Since then it has been reported in the French media that Revol has unfairly criticised the rescues for not trying to rescue her climbing partner who was stranded at 7,200m in winter on an 8,000m peak. It is not often possible for a helicopter to rescue someone from that altitude, and her rescue in itself was pretty miraculous, combining the expertise of the Polish K2 winter expedition and the Pakistani military pilots.

In the summer there was a helicopter recovery of the body of Austrian climber Christian Huber from Ultar Sar (7388m). A team comprising Huber and British alpinists Tim Miller and Bruce Normand were attempting the south-east pillar when, on 29 June, while sitting out a storm at 5,900m on the route, their tent was hit by an avalanche. Miller managed to dig Normand out but by the time they had uncovered Huber he had perished. On Sunday 1 July two helicopters came to recover Huber's body from a very small landing platform prepared by Miller and Normand. Huber's body was recovered, and Miller and Normand were rescued. Key to this rescue was the close contact maintained between the climbers and the rescuers via an In Reach device. The climbers were able to tell the helicopters not to come when the weather was not suitable for landing and so forth.

The most highly publicised rescue of the summer was that of Alexander Gukov from Latok I, already described. This faced some criticism, as it hadn't been confirmed whether the team had paid the rescue bond, with the Russian government putting pressure on the Pakistani government to rescue its national. This highlights another issue: who pays for these rescues. In Gukov's case, the helicopters were out for six days in poor weather attempting to rescue him and it has been reported that Askari has not yet been reimbursed. On the other hand, Bruce Normand is reported to have paid outright for the recovery of Huber's body when he returned to Islamabad.



Left: Hansjörg Auer on the summit of Lupghar Sar West. *(Hansjörg Auer)*

Right: Hansjörg Auer with Lupghar Sar West in the background. Auer, widely regarded as among the very best all-round climbers of his generation, died aged 35 in the Canadian Rockies on 16 April 2019 in an avalanche that also killed his fellow Austrian David Lama and the American Jess Roskelley. *(Hansjörg Auer)*

We can only hope the Pakistani military continues to offer helicopter rescue but payment for rescues must be forthcoming.

A further remarkable rescue in the summer was of the well-known British climber Rick Allen on Broad Peak (8047m). Allen went missing on 9 July while descending from a solo summit attempt. On 10 July a drone piloted by Polish brothers Andrzej and Bartek Bargiel (see K2 ski descent) was used to find Allen. After identifying where he was, fellow climbers were then able to help him down to base camp; he had reportedly fallen around 400m and had frost-nip and only minor injuries. He was then airlifted out from the Baltoro glacier.

Sadly in the winter season of 2018-19 there were the widely reported deaths of Tom Ballard from the UK and the Italian Daniele Nardi on the Mummery Rib of Nanga Parbat (8126m). They were reported missing on 24 February 2019 and on 28 February Pakistani climbers, including Muhammad Ali Sadpara, Imtiaz Hussain and Dilawar Hussain, were helicoptered to Nanga Parbat's base camp to initiate a search for them. On 4 March more climbers were dropped at base camp, this time members of the K2 winter expeditions including Alex Txikon of Spain. They ascended to camp two on the rib and had a near miss with an avalanche before searching higher on the mountain with a drone and discovering the bodies of the climbers on 9 March. The search for the climbers was played out in public with daily updates in a way that a few years ago would have been unimaginable.

Lupghar Sar West

On 7 July Austrian climber Hansjörg Auer soloed the first ascent of the west face of Lupghar Sar West (7157m). The mountain had its first and only other ascent by a German team via the south-west ridge in 1979. Auer approached Lupghar Sar West from the Baltbar glacier, acclimatising in the



Lupghar Sar West (7157m), west face first ascent route. (*Hansjörg Auer*)

area for several weeks before setting out from base camp on 6 July for his attempt. He bivvied at the base of the face, c6,200m, and set off early in the morning up the left-hand side of the west face, joining the north-west ridge at 6,900m. Here he left his rope and bivy kit and continued to the summit. At one point on the ridge he very much regretted leaving the rope as the hardest climbing was on this section. Auer summited at 11.30am and then returned via his ascent route, which he reports was more difficult than the ascent, reaching his bivy at 8pm that evening. The difficulties were in the 55°/M4 range and he reported that soloing made dealing with the altitude easier as he was more focused and had fewer emotions.

K2

On 22 July Polish alpinist Andrzej Bargiel made the coveted first ski descent of K2 (8611m). He skied from the summit down the Bottleneck, onto the Česen spur and then out onto the lower section of the south face. Bargiel climbed the Česen spur over three days, summiting at 11.30am, before making his ski descent. This involved one abseil above the Bottleneck, the prominent narrowing gully high on K2 below the high serac band, and a forced wait for clouds to clear at camp four (7700m) before he was able to continue with the rest of his descent. He arrived at base camp at 7.30pm, giving a height loss of around 3,600m in only eight hours. This was Bargiel's second attempt at skiing K2, the first being in 2016, and there had been several prior attempts including two fatal accidents. Hans Kammerlander abandoned his attempt to help rescue another climber in 2001. Bargiel's brother Bartłomiej has made a film of the descent available online, including dramatic drone footage. Bartłomiej and his drone were also instrumental in the rescue of Rick Allen on Broad Peak: see above.

Gasherbrum II

Adam Bielecki (Poland) and Felix Berg (Germany) climbed a new route on the west face of Gasherbrum II (8035m) on 16 July. Their line goes between the 1975 Polish route on the face and the 1995 Mexican route. Bielecki and Berg, along with Jacek Czech and Borys Dedeszko, set off from their high camp at c6,900m and climbed to the summit and back in a day. Czech and Dedeszko turned around at around 7000m.

Pakistan's 8,000ers

The 8,000ers in Pakistan had a short weather window in the summer of 2018 with almost all ascents occurring in a 10-day period towards the end of July. On K2 (8611m) there were a record 60 people who reached the summit, all by the Abruzzi ridge or Česen spur, the majority of these ascents were by commercial expeditions using large amounts of fixed ropes, oxygen, high-altitude porters and guides. As noted above the highlight on K2 was its first ski descent by Andrzej Bargiel. On the other 8,000m peaks, Nanga Parbat (8125m), Gasherbrum I (8080m), Gasherbrum II (8035m) and Broad Peak (8051m), there was less commercial activity and more

smaller independent teams. Each of the peaks had ascents in the summer, including a new route on Gasherbrum II (see above) and a spirited attempt on the Rupal flank of Nanga Parbat, the biggest face anywhere in the world, by Czech duo Marek Holeček and Tomas Petrecek, who reached 300m from the summit but turned around in high winds. They spent 10 days up and down the wall in what sounds like an epic attempt. There was also an attempt to traverse Gasherbrum I and II by Masha Gordon, Helias Milleiroux and Yannick Graziani, although bad weather curtailed their attempt. The feat of linking two 8,000ers in a single push was done for the first time by Reinhold Messner and Hans Kammerlander in 1984 and repeated in 2008 by the Polish-Slovak team of Piotr Morawski and Peter Hamor. The winter attempts on K2 and Nanga Parbat in 2018 were covered in last year's journal. In the winter of 2018-19 there were winter attempts on these peaks once again. There were two teams attempting the first winter ascent of K2, the last 8,000m peak without a winter ascent: a Spanish team led by Alex Txikon and a Kazakh team led by Vassiliy Pivtsov. Neither of these teams reached high on the mountain and both supported the search for Ballard and Nardi when they went missing on Nanga Parbat, effectively ending their attempts.

Baltoro

There were three teams attempting Gasherbrum IV (7932m) in 2018. David Göttler (Germany) and Hervé Barmasse (Italy) attempted the south-west face but were driven back by heavy snow. A Spanish team comprising Oriol Baró, Roger Cararach, Iker Madoz and Marc Toralle attempted the first ascent of the south pillar but retreated from 6,200m because of the same bad weather and heavy snowfall. The third expedition trying Gasherbrum IV was an Italian military expedition attempting to repeat the original route on the mountain 60 years after its first ascent. Tragically Maurizio Giordano died in a serac avalanche while descending from camp three at c7,000m, which led to the expedition being abandoned.

On 11 May Laila Peak (6096m) had its first ski descent down the north-west face by the French team of Carole Chambaret, Boris Langenstein and Tiphaine Duperier. On 25 May the Swiss-Italian team of Cala Cimenti, Julian Danzer and Matthias Koenig made the second ski descent.

In August Andres Marin (Columbia), Anna Pfaff and David Allfrey (both US) climbed in the Great Trango Tower group repeating the American route on Great Trango Tower (6286m) and then climbing *Eternal Flame* (5.13a) on Nameless Tower (6239m), first climbed in 1989 by Kurt Albert, Wolfgang Güllich, Milan Sykora and Christoph Stiegler, and free climbed by the Huber brothers in 2009. Following this Marin made what is most likely the first solo ascent of Great Trango Tower in a 12-hour push on 22 August.

Biafo and Choktoi

The Swiss duo of Damian Göldi and Marcel Jaun attempted the unclimbed Baintha Brakk West I (6660m), aka Ogre IV, via the south face, a route one rib further west than the original route on Baintha Brakk (7236m), or

The Ogre. They reached 5,800m on the route before Jaun became ill, then sat out a day of bad weather before descending to base camp. On the other side of this mountain range a Kazakh team comprising Kirill Belotserkovskiy and Max Ten attempted the north-east buttress of Baintha Brakk West II (6540m). They set off on 4 August and reached 5,800m after two days of very difficult climbing. However, at this point they decided they were insufficiently acclimatised and moving too slowly to make the summit. They descended next day and had a close call falling into the bergschrund when their anchor failed. The German-Italian-French team of Thomas Huber, Simon Gietl, Rainer Treppte and Yannick Boissenot, mentioned in the Latok section, having investigated the north face of Latok I and decided it looked too dangerous, switched plans to the south pillar of Latok III (6946m). They set up camp at the base of the pillar but bad weather came in curtailing further attempts. Earlier in the summer Alex Huber and Fabian Buhl made the first ascent of a stunning ridge on Choktoi Ri (6166m), which they called the *Big Easy* (2200m, 5.10+, A1).

Kondus Valley

In July and August, Jess Roskelley, Kurt Ross (both US) and Nelson Neirincx (Belgium) made the first ascent of two 6,000m peaks in the Kondus valley. The first peak climbed was Chhota Bhai (6321m) in a three-day round-trip from base camp: *Naps & Noms* (A14). Following this they made the first ascent of Changi Tower II (6250m) in a four-day round-trip, calling their route *Hard Tellin' Not Knowin'* (M6, A14). On descent their ropes were chopped by rock fall but they made it down safely.

Thagas Valley

Nicolas Favresse, Mathieu Maynadier, Carlitos Molina and Jean-Louis Wertz made the first ascent of two 6,000m peaks in the Thagas valley before Maynadier was injured from rock fall, evacuated from the mountain by the team and then airlifted to safety. The first climb was the first ascent of Pathan Peak (c6000m) via *The Pathan Pillar* (900m, 6b, A1). The team fixed the lower section over three days and then made the summit push over two. While setting up the last abseil to their portaledge, the ledge Molina was standing on collapsed onto Maynadier knocking him out. He recovered consciousness and the others got him to camp and next day descended off the wall before a helicopter evacuated Maynadier from base camp. Molina and Favresse then made the first ascent of Pathani Peak (c6000m) via a route they called *Pathani* (600m, 6a, M6) in a 17-hour round-trip.

Ghoro Valley

In July an Italian expedition led by Maurizio Giordani made the first ascent of the west-south-west face of Kris Peak (5428m). This was mostly a big-wall climb, which they called *Water World* due to the melt water that came down the route during the day. They spent two days fixing the route then three days on their summit push, grading the line VIII, A2.

Shimshal

Pete Thompson and Philip de-Beger (UK) visited the East Shuwert valley situated close to the Shimshal pass in September and made the first ascent of 6040m on 22 September. North of the Shimshal, a Slovenian team of Tomaž Goslar, Mojca Švajger and Irena Mrak visited the Koksil valley where they made the first ascent of various 5,000m peaks and noted a lot of potential for further exploration. They had originally intended to climb in the Hindu Kush but were denied permits due to security issues; it seems as if no expeditions visited the Hindu Kush in 2018.

Hispar

In the Hispar region, other than Hansjörg Auer's ascent of Lupghar Sar West, there was an expedition by Canadian Raphael Slawinski and Alik Berg to the unclimbed Pumari Chhish East (6850m). After acclimatising they attempted the south face of Pumari Chhish East but returned due to dangerous conditions. After that they investigated the east face but this was threatened by seracs. They then switched their attention to Gus Zrakun Sar (5980m). Climbing over Emily Peak (5936m), they bivvied, then next day made a 16-hour return trip to the summit of Gus Zrakun Sar. This was the first ascent of this peak.

Hindu Raj

In June a Dutch expedition made up of Ruud Rotte, Danny Schoch, Menno Schokker and Bas Visscher visited the Thui and Ghamobar groups in the Hindu Raj. After acclimatising they attempted the north-east ridge of Kachqiant (5990m) but retreated from 5,450m after heavy snow. Schokker and Rotte then attempted the south-east ridge of Ghaintar Chhish (6273m) but retreated from 5,800m after experiencing avalanches and very poor rock. Schoch and Visscher then made a second attempt on the north-east ridge of Kachqiant and summited on 1 July, climbing the route in three very long days from base camp.

Thanks to Tom Livingstone and Hansjörg Auer.