
VICTOR SAUNDERS

The Murkhun Valley



Pregar on the right, situated in the Murkhun valley in the Karun Koh region of the Karakoram. The peak on the left is c6,000m. (*Victor Saunders*)

A team of three comprising Frenchman Bruno Dupety, Italian Giovanni Rossi and myself left Chamonix to visit the Hunza valley in July 2021. The target was the Murkhun valley, west of Karun Koh. This region was chosen for several reasons. In Pakistan permits and liaison officers are not required below 6,500m if not too close to the frontier. None of the team had been to this valley, so it would be new territory for all and there seemed to be a number of unclimbed 6,000m peaks in the region. There were also reports of previous expeditions to the area from 1984 to 2016, so there was good background information to support the exploration. Logistically it appeared to be fairly simple with easy access to the road head on the Karakoram Highway followed by a two-day trek to a base camp at 4,000m, which was important given that we had a relatively short window of three weeks; it was necessary to have sufficient time to acclimatise and select an objective and explore approaches to it.

It was notably simple to travel from France to Pakistan. We booked flights with Etihad through Abu Dhabi and the team flew from Paris to Islamabad.



On the two-day approach to base camp from the village of Murkhun. (*Victor Saunders*)

Covid-19 inevitably made things difficult. We needed to take PCR tests 72 hours before passing through security at the airport. We also required double vaccinations. Masks were mandatory on the flight and on arrival in Islamabad we had swab tests. The local population in Hunza were very Covid aware and masks were worn in all public spaces. Our two base-camp staff members were vaccinated. The porters on the trek kept their distance from us. Our sojourn in base saw very few visitors and Covid was not an issue during the climbing period. The level level of Covid compliance in rural Pakistan was broadly impressive.

In Islamabad, our excellent agent Ishaq Ali of North Pakistan Adventure met us. Having missed the next flight to Gilgit we took the Karakoram Highway to Gilgit in 13 hours, continuing on to Karimabad the next day in three hours. If I can offer advice for future expeditions to Hunza: it is preferable to spend a night in Islamabad and fly to Gilgit. The government seem to be losing the battle to stop the road reverting to mountainside. We spent a delightful day in Karimabad collecting supplies, including two chickens, for base camp, then made a two-hour jeep drive to Murkhun where we collected our cook and local porters for the trek to base camp. From Murkhun there is a spectacular gorge leading to Boibar, less a settlement than a remote group of shielings. The gorge continues to the herder hamlet of Prariar. There's a beautiful turf camp 300m higher at 4,000m with a spring-fed stream at the entrance to a side valley leading to the north side of Zartgarbin (5850m). This was our chosen base. There are further campsites a day's trek up the Karun Koh valley between 4,500m and 4,600m but they are not as well appointed as the Zartgarbin site.



The site of base camp at 4,000m on the north side of Zartgarbin. (*Victor Saunders*)

Base camp was established on 5 July and dismantled on 20 July, giving a 15-day period at or above base. Three of the possible objectives, Jurjur Kona Sar, Zartgarbin and Pregar II (marked as Pt 6200m on the Jerzy Wala 1992 map) were discounted for different reasons. The obvious and highly attractive route on Pregar II turned out to be an avalanche trap in the conditions we had in early July.

After several exploratory sorties it was decided to attempt Pregar (c6185m) from the west. Advance base was established at 4,900m under Pregar on the right bank of the Murkhun glacier. We left ABC at 4am on 17 July to attempt the climb. This involved five rope lengths in an atmospheric canyon-sided couloir to reach a long glacial shelf, a serac barrier (turned on the orographic left bank on the south side) and finally 10 rope lengths up an ice field to the summit block. The final pitches sported insecure snow undercut by cornices and were poorly protected with horizontal snow stakes buried deeply. It is not easy to give an alpine grade to the climb, given the length of the route and conditions we found but AD would seem about right.

The top of the mountain had a double summit, the slightly higher one, in good mountaineering fashion, being hidden till the last moment. The summit was reached at approximately 1.30pm. Doug Scott used to say it was respectful of the sacred nature of mountains to stop just below the top at a point where the climber can see over the highest point. That is what our team did. The descent was prolonged by quickly deteriorating snow conditions. After 10 rappels, the formerly crisp surfaces of the glacial shelf and serac barrier had become thigh deep porridge in the late afternoon, producing conditions that were in places simultaneously tiring and hazardous.



Giovanni Rossi at the summit.
(Victor Saunders)

Dupety and Rossi high on the route. The flat-topped peak on the right is Pregar II, currently unclimbed. Across the glacier on the left are peaks of the Tupopdan group.
(Victor Saunders)

The access couloir was rappelled in deteriorating conditions down small streams of water where in the early morning there had been ice. The descent took as long as the ascent with the team back at their tents by 11pm.

Our return home was somewhat complicated by the UAE banning travel from Pakistan and Etihad cancelling our flights not once but twice, forcing us to purchase new flights with Qatar. Again PCR tests (administered in Islamabad) were required to board the flight and double vaccination for avoiding quarantine in France.

Our route was possibly a first ascent of the mountain and a new route. In 1984, an Austrian expedition made the first ascent of Karun Koh (c6977m), shortly after an attempt by Chris Bonington and Alan Rouse. They reported making an ascent of a peak west of Karun Koh. Peter Thompson, who came close to the summit of Pregar in 2016, speculated the Austrians may have climbed Pregar, which was not a name used on maps in the 1980s. However, the *American Alpine Journal* reports that the Austrian leader, Harry Grün, confirmed they climbed two peaks of more than 6,000m, but that these were small, snowy tops on the long ridge connecting Pregar and Karun Koh, easily accessible from the upper Murkhun glacier and likely marked 6,040m and c6,000m on the Jerzy Wala map.



Two views of the route up Pregar's south face. (*Victor Saunders*)

