

TOURING THE MOUNTAIN GOD'S PALACE

A ski traverse of the Great Karakoram Range, Pakistan, 2004.

by Grant Dixon



Pakistan's high mountains are generally devoid of visitors during early spring. But this was the best period for our venture, an attempt to undertake one of the longest ski journeys ever undertaken in the high mountains the Great Karakoram Range, threading a route amongst peaks such as K2, the Ogre, Masherbrum, the Gasherbrums, and countless others.

At first impression arriving in Skardu, in the sandy Indus valley, the barren mountains (Karakoram is said to mean "black earth") don't appear a particularly sensible locale for a ski trip. Much of the region is a semi-desert, but precipitation increases dramatically with altitude such that the mountains are actually the most extensively glaciated outside high latitudes. The interlinked glaciers, and the fact the Karakoram contains the greatest concentration of high peaks on earth, means there is potential for lengthy, high-altitude ski journeys in a spectacular landscape. However, surprisingly few have endeavoured to do so. The only previous long ski traverse in the area was a four-man American effort in 1980. Their six-week trip linked the upper Siachen Glacier with familiar trekking routes on the Baltoro, Biafo and Hispar Glaciers.

Our party of six left the remote village of Shimshal in Upper Hunza in early-April and reached Hushe in Baltistan in mid-May. The main Karakoram watershed was followed as much as possible, utilising glaciers close to the Pakistan-China frontier. Our 37 day journey covered some 260 kilometres, virtually

entirely above 4000 metres, with almost two weeks spent above 5000 metres, and crossed six passes up to 5700 metres.

The Shimshal fields would be verdant in a month or two, but in early spring the tones of the grey river flats and surrounding scree slopes merged with barren fields and stone walls and houses. Arriving in fading light and a dust storm, it appeared a bleak place. But there was nothing bleak about the friendliness and hospitality of the Shimshalis.



We spent five days in the company of men from Shimshal, engaged as porters for our trek to the Braldu Glacier. The route followed an amazing trail up a narrow barren gorge, clinging to cliffs and steep unstable scree slopes of scree high above the river, winding across snow-filled gullies, and descending to cross a rickety bridge only to climb equally precipitously beyond.

During the trek, I flushed Snow cocks on a couple of occasions. The mournful cries of these plump fowls were virtually the only evidence of wildlife noted during the subsequent weeks. Droppings observed on several occasions were attributed to Snow leopards by the porters; unfortunately we saw no other evidence of these beautiful and secretive carnivores.

Beyond Shimshal Pass, the braided channels of the Braldu River were frozen, facilitating rapid travel. The bitter weather

also provided no enticement to linger and we reached the moraine-covered ice mounds marking the terminus of the Braldu Glacier in good time.

Blue sky next morning was the first since leaving Shimshal. Beyond the snow-covered moraine mounds an avenue of jagged rocky peaks lined the glacier. After farewelling the last of our porters, we were finally alone with our pile of food, equipment and skis, at an altitude of 4300 metres with no skiable terrain yet in sight.

Until we could assemble and load our sleds, we had too much gear to transport in single loads. Consequently each of us separated our share into two and set off intending to carry as far as possible and dump a load before returning to camp. It was another fine day and soon warmed up, snow turning

to slush and frozen sandy flats becoming quicksand. Staggering under heavy packs adorned with 1.5 metre plastic sleds we tried to pick the easiest line amongst the loose moraine ridges. A valley marginal to a ridge of ice towers provided easy going, yet necessitated shuffling across the glazed surface of



frozen pools. Returning a few hours later this ice was wet and thawing, and our shuffles were a little more nervous. Portaging our second loads next day we finally reached skiable snow, more than 12 kilometres from the glacier terminus.

Our first day pulling sleds was not a great one. The rocky peaks were hidden in cloud and an inviting crystal-walled corridor soon led to rougher terrain amongst ice towers and moraine bands. Next day was fine once more, and the ice towers and moraine finally gave way to open well-packed snow. A good day's travel increased our confidence, but the next pass, 5600 metre Lupke La, remained hidden amongst the icy peaks ahead.

It was to be two further days before we reached the pass. Poor weather returned, confining us to the tents just below the pass, and, climbing above 5000 metres, we encountered deep soft snow. Such snow conditions were to plague most of the higher sections of our journey. Progress was slow and particularly demanding for whoever was breaking trail, ploughing a trench and frequently stopping to gasp lungfuls of the thin air.

The descent from Lupke La was our first on skis and eagerly anticipated, but the slope was not steep enough to actually ski, given the soft snow. We plodded downward, winding nervously between large snow-filled crevasses. When mist obscured the view, we navigated using the occasional ghostly glimpse of rock spurs.

Despite a virtual white out, we headed on next day, hoping to get close to the base of Skam La to facilitate a crossing when the weather cleared. After three hard kilometres following a compass bearing in deep snow, unsure of the proximity of crevasses or the avalanche-prone slopes we knew were up there somewhere, we called it a day. A clearing revealed the 5650 metre pass and from our foreshortened perspective it appeared extremely steep. After much debate we selected the easiest looking line, but a bergschrund towards the top appeared unavoidable.

It was a fantastic clear day, but being able to see the pass just emphasised how slow we were moving. Swapping leads, we struggled to break a trail in the deep, crusty snow. When the slope got too steep

for skin traction we removed skis and tried to drag the sleds up the compacted snow of an avalanche fan, but even this soon got too steep. Grovelling in the soft snow and rigging a pulley system to haul the sleds to the pass, using the 350 metres of rope we had carried for this purpose, now amused us for the rest of the day. Breaking trail on the final section I found a shovel the most useful tool, literally digging myself a trench to the top.



We camped in a basin just below the pass, exhausted from the day's efforts but inspired by the view in both directions. To the southeast the distinctive pyramid of K2 could be seen rising above a mass of peaks; it was to be more than two weeks before we saw it at close range.

The initial steep ski descent from Skam La was something of a farce as we outflanked a large berchschrund and each took various routes down. Dave gave an impressive telemark display however, for most of us, style considerations were far from our minds as we struggled with the sleds and concentrated on staying upright. Ahead, the Nobande Sobande Glacier curved out of sight around a distant corner, above rose an icy fang and, beyond, the precipitous mass of the Ogre loomed against the dark blue sky. Once on the glacier's smooth surface we skied almost effortlessly, gliding at times, down to camp more than 20 kilometres from Skam La. This was the greatest one-day distance we managed during the entire trip and was an appropriate reward for the efforts on Skam La. We were to reflect on it repeatedly while struggling up the Chiring Glacier during the subsequent week.



Twelve days after leaving the Braldu Glacier terminus we reached the cache of food and fuel for the second stage of our journey, established by porters from Askole, four days distant. The restocked sleds were now laden with up to three week's food and were the heaviest they would be at any stage during the trip, up to 50 kilograms. It was therefore unfortunate that, soon after setting off again, we ran out of snow and the heavy sleds were dragged or carried over moraine until we could don skis again. Route

finding amongst the ice mounds and increasingly large and open crevasses became progressively more difficult. Opposite a steep tributary icefall the glacier ahead became a mass of seracs and crevasses. A reconnaissance eventually found a somewhat strenuous route off onto lateral moraine to outflank the serac area. We spent next morning undertaking two portages each along this route, the orange sleds strapped like carapaces to our packs and the aluminium traces waving above like the antennae of some giant insect.

Recalling now our ascent of the Chiring Glacier, the days seem to merge. Visibility was almost always poor and white, with terrain changes impossible to discern. The glacier surface comprised a series of large ice mounds and ridges. Snow-covered lateral moraine, to which we retreated at times, was often just as rugged. On several occasions we plunged over an invisible step, or stuck our ski tips into a wall we hadn't seen right in front of us. It took six days to travel the 16 kilometres and ascend to 5700 metre West Muztagh Pass, the highest point of our journey.

The final day to the pass saw us winding up the mounded glacier surface, ringed by snowy peaks revealed by clear weather. With softening snow I found myself counting steps between stops to catch breath as I forced a route directly upwards. The weather deteriorated again and, after battling driving snow for a period, we stopped to dig in and camp.

The squall cleared at dusk. Clear nights during the trip were rather frigid and it was sometimes below -20°C inside the frost-lined tent. Dealing with the daytime heat, even on cloudy days, was the greater challenge. The air temperature may be low but radiant heat on a glacier can be significant. Such days often involved a search for the perfect compromise between sufficient cover to prevent sunburn and ventilation to prevent over-heating.

Another aspect of glacier life was lack of water, despite being surrounded by the solid version. Occasionally a meltwater trickle could be found during the afternoons, but all water usually had to be generated by melting snow, a tedious affair occupying several hours each day. Lack of water meant no scope for washing and the fetid smell of unwashed



bodies and sweat-dampened wool soon pervaded the tents. By popular acclaim (even her own) Annette's socks were awarded the smell prize and consigned to her sleeping bag as much as possible.

The view from West Muztagh Pass extended from the spire of the Ogre to K2's pyramid, although increasing cloud was obscuring summits as we watched. Soft snow made the descent of the Sarpo

Largo Glacier somewhat tedious and, when the glacier became virtually flat, the afternoon's travel was something of a slog, particularly after the weather closed in again.

On his approach to the 5400 metre East Muztagh Pass in 1887, British explorer Francis Younghusband commented on the giant scale of the place and how it seemed to take so long to reach somewhere that appeared near. We felt the same way, especially with the surrounding peaks ghost-like until the sun burnt off the mist.

Beyond the level snowfield comprising the pass loomed a great trench, the Muztagh valley, with the ice-sheathed mound of Biale beyond. Younghusband was appalled at the "sheer precipice" on the far side of the pass and we were hardly less impressed, the drop to the Muztagh Glacier comprising an icefall. On their descent Younghusband's party supplemented their minimal rope by tying together all the porters' turbans and waist cloths and lowering themselves down this. We hoped our descent would be somewhat less of an epic; but it still proved the greatest technical challenge of the trip and required the deployment of all of our rope.



We commenced abseiling down a steep gully beside the icefall, laden sleds hanging below and tugging at our harnesses. The first abseil was straightforward and saw us huddled in the cold shelter of a shaded ice cliff, the route below out of sight. On the next section David abseiled first, without sled, to check the route, shouting back that it was rather steep. When the rope went slack I set off over the lip and soon saw what he meant - the slope steepened to scoured ice and a rock step beneath an overhanging ice cliff. Part way down the steepest section my sled jammed, the skis strapped on top having dug into a patch of snow. Dangling on the rope, no amount jiggling served to free the sled, and the others out of sight above were a bit unsettled by my cursing and apparent lack of progress. I eventually freed the sled and completed the abseil. I collapsed in the snow to rest but, after surveying the ice cliffs above and avalanche debris all around, decided I'd

prefer to await the others further down on the glacier.

The Muztagh Glacier provided the best ski descent of the trip, a ten kilometre, 950 metre descent on hard snow or ice with the sleds following obediently behind. Granite walls and spires now towered above and Masherbrum's 7821 metre summit rose ahead. We managed to ski right to the confluence

with the Baltoro Glacier in this fashion but the last section was marginal, threading a route on rough ice between rocky areas with the sleds bouncing behind.

At 4100 metres we had expected that snow cover would be sparse, but the expanse of moraine covering the huge Baltoro Glacier was a particularly depressing outlook. Hoping there may be snow leads on the south side, we spent a warm afternoon crossing the three kilometre-wide glacier unladen, clambering over numerous moraine-covered ridges. Green pools rimmed by ice cliffs provided scenic relief on the glacier, and the serried ranks of the Baltoro's famous peaks - Lobsang and Cathedral Spires, the Trango Group, Uli Biaho Tower and Paiyu Peak - a spectacular backdrop.

We did discover a band of hummocky ice and snow on the far side of the Baltoro Glacier, although its extent could not be discerned, and next day shuttled our gear across the Baltoro moraine. Ominous cirrus clouds filled the sky as they disappeared from sight beyond an icy rib.

Fresh snow overnight and low cloud marked the end of our fine spell. Unfortunately our snow lead was far from continuous and the fresh snow did little improve things. We were soon dragging the sleds over ice mounds and rock-strewn flats, and meandering amongst meltwater channels. It had been a while since any of us had washed but, despite this, David did not appreciate an impromptu swim when he broke through ice on a partially-frozen lake, nor the experience of stripping off his sodden clothes amidst snow flurries on the glacier.



We hoped the open snowy expanse of the tributary Yermanendi Glacier was a sign of things to come. But nearing the far side moraine-covered ice mounds closed in on the left, steep rocky ridges on the right, and then we abruptly reached the edge of an ice cliff. Beyond was a large depression where the glacier had retreated from the valley side and created a one-time lake, its drained floor now strewn with ice slabs and former icebergs.

The only way onward was across the depression. We lowered the sleds down the ice cliff and abseiled after them. After strenuous manhandling over a jumble of boulders, we faced a steep soft snow slope. Breaking trail and dragging my sled up this was incredibly hard work, the difficulties increased by trying to maintain purchase and not slip backwards; a plummet would have wiped out Annette and David directly below. Expectations of donning skis after the strenuous double portage out the far side of the

depression were short lived. After a few hundred metres of snow we were again portaging over moraine.

The following day was a stunning turnaround - a corridor of continuous firm ice and snow, clear blue sky and more than ten kilometres of progress to camp at Concordia, the famous confluence of three large glaciers below K2. Throughout the day we skied beneath sweeping granite faces and spires, the symmetrical form of Gasherbrum 4 directly ahead, until the massive, 8611 metre pyramid of K2 finally appeared up the Godwin Austen Glacier.



Turning our back on K2, we headed up the level Vigne Glacier, another ten kilometre day to camp beneath Ghondokhoro La. Knowing the route to this 5600 metre pass ascended beneath seracs and ice cliffs and was avalanche-prone, a fact emphasised by the debris littering the lower part of the climb, we arose

early next morning but, by the time we set off, cloud had settled on the pass. By the time we reached the base of the slope, it was snowing and visibility was poor.

Tackling the first 200 metres of the climb on skis, we zig-zagged amongst avalanche debris. When it became too steep for skis, we stopped to reorganise our gear. Ice cliffs loomed in the mist above. Our packs were still more than 30 kilograms, and awkward with sled and skis strapped to them, but we hoped to manage with a single load each. The soft snow was thigh-deep. For much of the climb it was necessary to flounder upward and create a trench, the leader then returning for his load while the others followed. Even then we sometimes wallowed treadmill-like making little progress. Near the top the slope steepened further and was clearly unstable. David dumped his load and grovelled up with a rope which, once fixed, the rest of us then I climbed. I prussicked up the rope, dragged backwards by my load but trying to equalise weight on my snowy footholds. Nearing the top the snow below me collapsed, the jerk pulling my ice axe from the snow above, striking me on the head. I hung on the rope, dazed, before making a final grunt effort to grovel over the lip. It had taken eight hours to ascend the 500 metres to the pass.

The view was non-existent and we were soon engulfed in a wild snow squall. Battling with this, we erected the tent and dived in. The squall later cleared to reveal the Ghondokhoro Glacier below our perch, with the familiar spire of Laila Peak down valley.



It was cold in the shade as we decamped next morning. A short plod back up to the pass provided some warming sun and a farewell view of K2 and the Karakoram's cluster of 8000 metre peaks. The 700 metre descent from the pass was steep and, following an avalanche runnel with a fresh debris fan at its base, we didn't linger.

On the glacier we loaded the sleds for the last time and skied off down the gentle slope. Weeks previously we had arranged to meet a few porters for the final walk down to Hushe village; as we were now overdue we wondered whether they would be there. After two hours and nine kilometres of easy skiing, approaching the point where the snow ran out, figures appeared on the moraine ahead. Wearing face-wide smiles, they raced up to embrace us, almost as if they hadn't expect to see us.

The final day seemed a blur. The porters took our loads and we all walked speedily down the dusty lateral moraine. We descended over 2000 metres from Ghondokhoro La, to the juniper and willow woods of the Hushe valley, the first greenery we had seen for more than a month. A warm welcome in the village, with numerous tea invitations and plenty of feasting ensuring we retired with bloated stomachs that night.

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