

THE 1965 SCOTTISH HINDU KUSH EXPEDITION

By JOHN WEDDERBURN

IN the last few years several expeditions, mainly German, have visited the Central Hindu Kush.¹ Strangely, they have always approached the range from the arid north and never by way of the beautiful and fertile Southern Nuristan valleys. Thus it came about that four members of the Corriemulzie Mountaineering Club were the first climbers to visit the Bashgal valley. They were Will Fraser, chartered surveyor; Gavin Johnstone, zoologist; Philip Tranter, civil servant; John Wedderburn, doctor.

The first European visitor to the Bashgal was possibly W. W. McNair, an officer of the Indian Survey, who reached it in 1883, despite strict orders not to travel beyond the Indian frontier. He was followed two years later by two other officers of the Indian Survey, but the first major exploration was undertaken by Sir George Robertson, the British Political Agent in Gilgit.² He spent several months in the valley in 1890-91 and traced the valley to its head and crossed into the northern province of Badakshan. Since then the only expedition to reach the valley was a German scientific expedition in 1935 which traversed the south of Nuristan from west to east.³ It entered the Bashgal valley at Kamdesh and crossed over to the Lutkoh valley in Chitral by the Semenek Pass.

The Scottish Hindu Kush Expedition⁴ left Edinburgh by Land Rover on July 4, 1965, and reached Barikot at the confluence of the Bashgal with the Kunar (Chitral) on July 28. Here they discovered that the road, which normally continues forty-three miles up the Bashgal as far as Bragamatal, had been blocked by rock-fall. However, with the aid of eight donkeys the Expedition was established in six days at its Base

¹ A. Diemberger, 'Bergsteiger erschliessen den Hindukusch', *Jahrbuch des Ö.A.V.*, 1965, pp. 164-85.

² Sir George Robertson, *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush*, Laurence and Bullen, London, 1896.

³ A. Scheibe, *Deutsche im Hindukusch*, Berlin, 1937.

⁴ The 'General Report' made to the M.E.F. of the Scottish Hindu Kush Expedition gives a full account of the expedition's mountaineering and scientific achievements.

Camp at the head of the Bashgal (2,850 m.) seventy miles from Barikot. Here the helpers were sent back and the Expedition was left to fend and carry for itself.

The only information available about the mountains was from one or two sketches made by the German expeditions from the north. These sketches were vague and showed nothing whatever on the Bashgal side of the Hindu Kush watershed but indicated four 6,000 m. peaks on the main watershed, three of which had been climbed—Koh-i-Chrebek in 1961 by J. Ruf and party⁵; and Koh-i-Marchech and Shakh-i-Kabud by the 1961 Traunsteiner Expedition.⁶ Between Chrebek and Marchech was another 6,000-er which was neither named nor climbed. The Scottish Expedition's avowed object was to make a second ascent of Koh-i-Chrebek, which is the highest peak of the chain, and to climb the unclimbed 6,000 m. peak. It should be noted here that Koh-i-Chrebek gives pride of place as the tallest summit of the Central Hindu Kush to Koh-i-Bandakâ⁷ which lies to the north of the main chain.

The topography of the tributary valleys at the head of the Bashgal is extremely complicated and the identification of the big peaks was a major task which took some time.

However, after extensive reconnoitring, a grand four-week round tour was planned—up the Shoshgal (Šošgal), over a high pass, and down the Suigal back to Base Camp.

From Camp II (on the Shosh glacier at 4,650 m.) a four-day diversion was made up the South Chrebek glacier to climb some 5,000 m. peaks and make the second ascent (by a new route) of Koh-i-Chrebek (6,290 m.). The summit of Chrebek afforded a grand view of the whole range. The unclimbed 6,000 m. peak was studied for possible routes and named Koh-i-Sheasgaich (Šisgeikh). Koh-i-Marchech was seen from this angle to have two peaks of which the North (lower) peak was virgin. Further it was seen that Koh-i-Marchech threw off a huge branch ridge to the east, situated on which was a spectacular group of mountains culminating in a beautiful square-topped peak which was certainly 6,000 m. high. This group for various reasons became known to the Expedition as the Rum Mountains and the square-topped peak was named Koh-i-Askival.

When the Expedition had crossed over the Ankabut Da (Spider Gap-5,220 m.) from Camp II to Camp III (on the North Sui glacier at 4,950 m.) it divided into two parties. Two men climbed Koh-i-Šisgeikh

⁵ J. Ruf, 'Eine Kundfahrt zum Hindukusch im Sommer 1961', *Die Alpen*, 1962, pp. 168-79.

⁶ O. Huber, 'Traunsteiner Hindukusch-Kundfahrt 1961', *Jahrbuch des D.A.V.*, 1962, pp. 167-74.

⁷ H. Winkler, 'Berliner Hindukusch-Kundfahrt 1960', *Jahrbuch des D.A.V.*, 1961, pp. 150-57.

(6,180 m.) while the other two climbed the North Summit of Koh-i-Marchech.⁸ After five days of epic mountaineering the parties reunited at Camp IV (5,100 m.) to explore the Rum Mountains. Finally, the last summit, Koh-i-Askival (6,000 m.) was climbed from Camp V (4,850 m.) on September 5.

⁸ Note on the heights: the heights given for Koh-i-Chrebek and Koh-i-Sisgeikh are those that appear on the soon to be published official maps based on aerial photographs. These are probably accurate but the height given for Koh-i-Marchech—6,435 m.—is clearly wrong. This mountain is probably about 6,200 m. All other heights given here are based on aneroid readings and are probably underestimated.

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1961, pp. 150-55.

D.A.N., 1961, pp. 107-74.

* O. Jäger, 'Trennung der Hindukusch-Kundlhar 1961', *Jahrbuch der D.A.N.*, 1961, pp. 168-70.

* J. Rul, 'Eine Kueste zum Hindukusch im Sommer 1961', *Die Alpen*, 1961, pp. 168-70.

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