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# Summer and Winter in the North-West Karakoram

LINDSAY GRIFFIN

(Plates 39, 40)

It was with some trepidation and not a little discomfort that I arrived in Rawalpindi towards the middle of June 1988. Illness and injury had dogged the previous two months and had left a certain feeling of disappointment. Also it was hot. Temperatures were at a maximum since Partition, and Lahore had been subjected to almost 50°C. There, a night sitting under the cold-water tap in a fourth-class station hotel made more practical sense than attempting sleep in a supersaturated atmosphere.

Phil Bartlett, fresh from an unseasonably fine British climate, arrived at 1am. Baggy cotton trousers, acquired nearly 10 years ago in Delhi, were beginning to look a trifle threadbare but this was offset, not uncharacteristically, by a huge floppy hat over-patterned with garish green daisies. His organizational strategy was simple but effective. Trailing in his wake I could only offer money and a little enthusiasm, but at 5am the following morning we were on the road north to our destination of Moorkhun on the Karakoram Highway.

This neck of the woods lies north of the Shimshal valley, enticingly close to forbidden Chinese territory, and access to it had not been freely available to the modern traveller until 1986 when foreign tourists, previously allowed no further on the KKH than the delightfully situated oasis of Passu, were granted permission to cross the Kunjerab Pass as a means of entering the Chinese province of Xinjiang.

Prior to the construction of the new track into the austere confines of the lower Shimshal gorge, upper villages were traditionally reached via an ascent of the Moorkhun valley and a crossing of the 4873m Karun Pir Pass. This is an arduous and largely waterless journey at the best of times, and it was no surprise to find that Shimshal village had originally been created as a convict colony for misdemeanants from the Hunza mirdoms. This journey was reversed by Shipton in 1937 at the termination of his explorations of the Shaksgam, and had possibly seen no British traffic since those times.

Tucked away at the head of the valley, hidden from view on westerly approaches, lies the fine snowy pyramid of Karun Koh (7350m). Reserved for the Pakistan Alpine Club and thus open only to joint expeditions, it was first attempted in 1983 by a small Austrian team led by Robert Schauer. Although little height was gained, the way was now paved for first British (Bonington and Rouse) and second Austrian (led by Harry Grun) teams in June 1984. Very bad

weather and lack of time led to an early retreat by the British pair but the Austrians, persevering for another month, reached the summit on 31 July. Later, Bonington was to remark on the wealth of particularly attractive 6000m peaks further down the valley: '... we had a superb view of them from our Base Camp and they were a perpetual temptation to divert our energies from the main objective.'

In 1987 a Sheffield team made the first ascent of Tupopdan (6125m), the highest of the southern group, via the NNE ridge. This proved an easy climb, hampered by very poor snow conditions — a phenomenon, alas, all too common at these altitudes during the early summer months. The summit was reached on 4 July by Cave and Stevenson. Grun returned in September; for three years the vision of Tupopdan had obviously featured prominently in his mind's eye and despite the disappointment of being pipped at the post, his Austrian team made the second ascent.

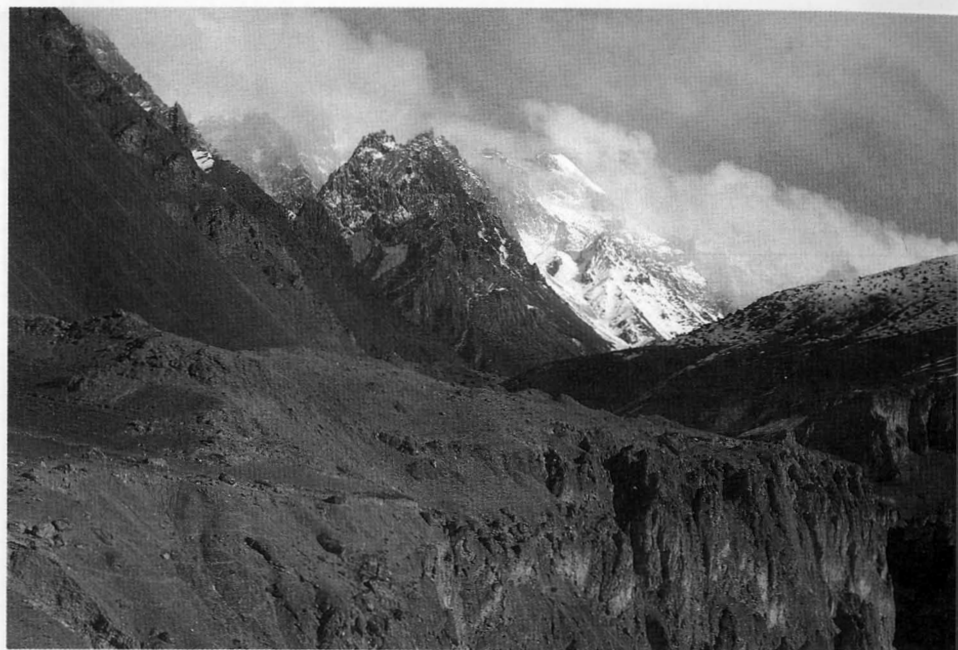
It was in February 1988 that Phil pushed a photograph of the neighbouring JurJur Khona Sar under my nose. 'What d'you think of that?' he asked, pointing at the fine sweeping arêtes leading up to a spire of acute sharpness.

The village of Moorkhun lies several miles south of Sost, the last checkpoint on the KKH beyond which, officialdom would have us believe, one can only travel with a Chinese visa. Inhabitants here have their origins inside the Wakhan corridor and until the construction of the road these Ismailis, whose spiritual leader is the Aga Khan, lived in isolated mirdoms. A journey to Gilgit, now four harrowing, precarious hours above the turbulent Hunza river, took seven days. In the last year, their stone and mud huts have received the blessing of hydro-electricity; yet these simple folk are as hospitable, honest and generous as any mountain dweller that I have met. But for how long, in their ever-increasing exposure to tourism, remains an unanswerable question.

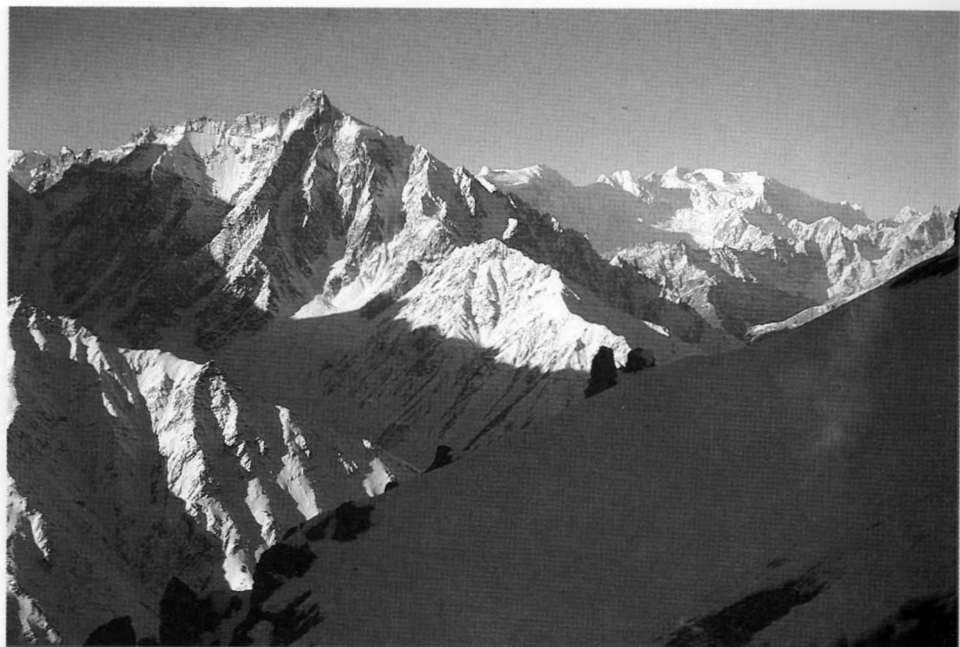
Recent parties, however, have not failed to mention a certain lack of motivation amongst the porters, and this was borne out by our three-day march to Base Camp. They were 'splendid chaps' and excellent company throughout the journey, but daily stages were indeed short. When later we packed up our base prematurely and crawled out with loads that weighed a crippling 40kg, we still managed to reach the KKH in seven hours despite movement that, on my part at least, was almost imperceptible.

Base Camp was, characteristically, up the wrong valley, though we convinced ourselves that we could be excused for not realizing it at the time. Perhaps more significant was the temperature. Clear skies prevailed, but at 4250m we were finding it a trifle uncomfortable getting inside our sleeping-bags at night.

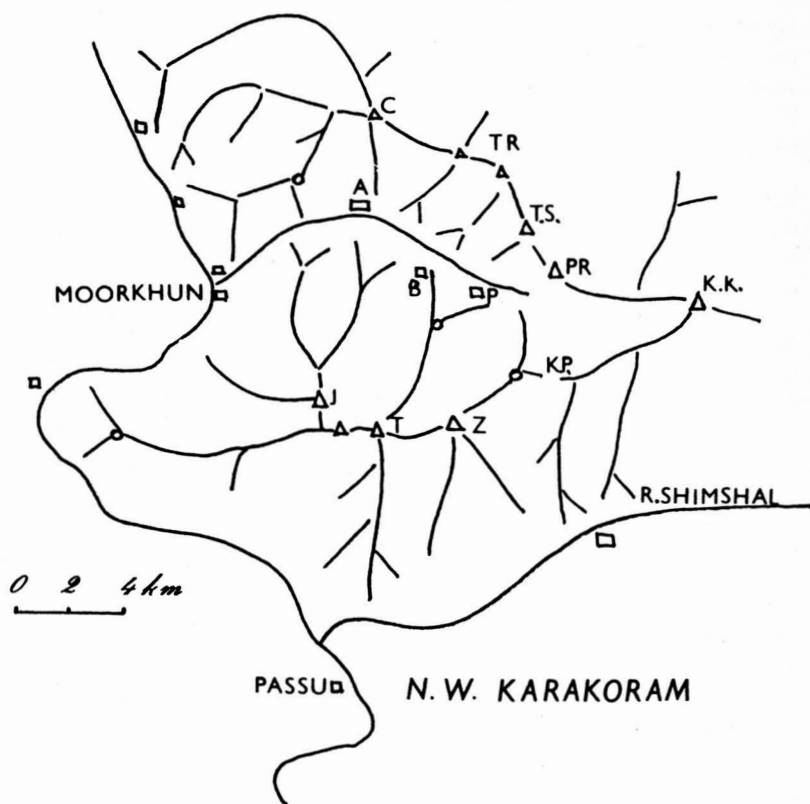
A number of attempts were made on the N face of JurJur. We could see that attaining its attractive 6000m summit would be lengthy and far from straightforward. An approach couloir, flanked by rotten rocky walls, led to a shoulder at 4900m; Bartlett stormed up this carrying the usual embarrassingly monstrous rucksack. Most mortals find this performance impossible to match, and the knowledge acquired from 15 years of climbing together allowed me to congratulate myself that, by just keeping in visual contact, I could conclude that



39. *The S face of Tapadan Sar from the gloomy depths of the Moorkhun Gorge.*  
(Lindsay Griffin) (p 69)



40. *JurJur Khona Sar from the S face of Tapadan Sar. Above Camp 1.* (Lindsay Griffin) (p 69)



## N.W. KARAKORAM

- A ABGARCH
- B BOEBAR
- C CHIT (5474m)
- J JURJUR KHONA SAR (c6000m)
- K.K. KARUN KOH (c7350m)
- K.P. KARUN PIR PASS (4873m)
- P PARIER
- PR. PREGAR (c6200m)
- T. TUPOPDAN (6125m)
- TR. TRICH GACH (c5700m)
- T.S. TAPADAN SAR (c6000m)
- Z. ZARTGARBIN (c5850m)

my health and fitness must at last be returning to an acceptable level! On occasion, and for a pathetically short period of time around dawn, the surface would crisp a little, allowing enjoyable frontpointing up 55° névé. For the rest of the time the same movement was applied, unsuccessfully, to thigh-deep snow overlying ice. Then there were the stones!

Once we spent three days on the hill, climbing for no more than three hours each day and sitting out the rest at a site free from stonefall. As if to mock, the sun beat down remorselessly from an unbroken azure. The logical conclusion was clear, but we agreed to spend more time at base in anticipation of a change.

Phil cracked first; I still had possession of 120 unread pages and a Walkman. It was ironic to withdraw in what transpired to be the only period of good weather throughout the summer, but we were forced to swallow the bitter pill – there was nothing else to climb.

Tilman once said, 'time spent in reconnaissance is never wasted', and over the last few years I had become increasingly interested in a Himalayan winter visit. With permission from India still unforthcoming, I spent much time during the next week quizzing locals on the state of the art during this season. Lying further north and west of the main chain, the Shimshal/Batura region tends to experience better weather and, overall, less precipitation than other parts of the Karakoram. Clandestine ibex hunters in Passu, who use the Batura to this effect, talked of a snowline no lower than Guchisham (3500m). Shimshalis living on the shady side of their valley at 3600m were at variance, some opting for a foot of snow and others for none at all. Everyone was in agreement, however, that the first heavy snowfall occurred in late December, with one or two more towards February/March. This reduced snowfall, it was felt, would be offset by much lower temperatures than in areas further south and east (it was suggested that climbing at 6000m would probably be equivalent to more than 7000m in a Nepalese winter).

Nazir Sabir, Pakistan's top mountaineer and a local Hunza man, voiced the opinion that, while expeditions traditionally left the Karakoram by the beginning of September when heavy snows would often fall at alarmingly low altitudes, by mid-October this snow would have largely disappeared. October, he enthused, was generally a month of unparalleled splendour. He had been liaison officer to Hasagawa during an October attempt on the Rupal face of Nanga Parbat, where snow conditions had proved better than at any other time of year. Defeat in November had been solely due to strong winds.

Choice of venue would be crucial to success in the short time available to us, and realistically dictated prior knowledge. Ease of access and escape was of prime importance – the thought of being stuck in some remote corner until the April thaw had little appeal! A big open S face would do nicely, but there was still the lure of JurJur which, if nothing else, would be safe from stonefall.

Mike Woolridge was an obvious choice of companion. He had covered much of the approach on the K2 expedition in trainers during early December, before the soul-destroying experience of being promptly helicoptered from Base Camp with acute appendicitis after a surprisingly short exposure to the Polish diet. We enlisted Pete Cox, a larger-than-life (in every sense of the word)

character and ex crime-squad officer in the Metropolitan Police. Four years ago he simultaneously took up climbing and dieting and, from being 6' 3" and 20 stone, he now has a pulse rate of 38, runs London marathons and climbs Scottish 5. Though short on big mountain experience, the physique was mighty powerful and made more plausible a number of anecdotes in which his figurative assailant 'failed to survive the arrest'. Phil was unable to join us as was Nazir, though we appreciated the latter's loan of Base Camp equipment – baggage allowance being a trifle inadequate for the extra gear required in winter. Well attired in the latest collection of Karrimor clothing, so generously donated by Mike Parsons, we flew from Heathrow in November.

I have now travelled the KKH eight times, and each journey seems worse than the one before. Transport now motors much faster, careers closer to the edge, overtakes with alarming frequency on blind bends and stops far more regularly to show you the upturned wreckage of yet another vehicle hundreds of feet down in the Indus gorge. In contrast, it was a joy to snuggle into a down sleeping-bag in Gilgit, where normally one would be sweating naked under the raucous whirring of fan blades.

Our arrival at Moorkhun in the early afternoon was bathed in sunshine. Hemmed between steep flanks of neighbouring peaks, overshadowed by giant scree slopes, I had expected little or no sun. We had underestimated its zenith at this latitude and now realized, with some optimism, that a carefully selected base in the bed of the Moorkhun valley would receive three to four hours sunshine a day.

In effect the choice was made for us. Heavy and unseasonably early winter snow in late October lay down to 3500m, and beyond this our porters would not go. Neither, apparently, had their motivation improved for, while ferrying loads down the valley on our way home, we walked back up the second day's stage, admittedly unladen, in 35 minutes! A group of shepherds' huts at Boebar became our spacious Base Camp and, with dead wood in abundance, our stay would not be uncomfortable. Night-time temperatures only fell to  $-6^{\circ}\text{C}$ , though they barely struggled to  $0^{\circ}\text{C}$  during the sunny daylight hours.

Inevitably, reaching the southern group became out of the question. Even below 4000m we were up to the waist in a substance that would have delighted the Colorado 'Powder-Hogs' but provoked mutiny amongst our team. Approach couloirs, if they could indeed be reached, would be impossibly avalanche-prone and it was estimated that our summer Base Camp lay under two to three metres of unconsolidated soap-flakes. However, since the first day all eyes had been constantly drawn to an elegant 6000m snow crest to the west of Karun Koh, referred to by our porters as Tapadan Sar. A vast snowy face composed of ribs, shelves and gullies rose for nearly 2000m above the northern scree slopes. I had always considered this route a possibility since my first sighting in the summer, and under its newly found winter garb it appeared doubly attractive. Closer inspection confirmed this.

Four days after our arrival at Boebar, and after a subsequent battle with a colony of hungry mice rudely awoken from peaceful hibernation, we set off well laden and reached the summit after five days of climbing. Our route took a blunt rib, interspersed with rocky outcrops and towers, towards the left side of the

face. This led to a snow-field at two-thirds height that we dubbed the 'Great Shelf'. Access to this involved crossing a complicated section of crenellations which Pete, having recently consumed a large diet of modern Himalayan accounts, christened 'The Pinnacles'. The weather was crystal clear and in the sun movement was far from unpleasant provided the E flank, where some consolidation had taken place, was followed. Camp 2, atop the first pinnacle at 5100m, afforded some gorgeous views across the Shimshal to the stupendous N faces of Lupghar and Distaghil Sar. The night was reasonably calm, with a temperature of  $-17^{\circ}\text{C}$ ; this was fortunate, as sleep had proved difficult at Camp 1 where strong winds had completely destroyed the flysheet.

Next morning we were away early carrying light sacks, despite the lengthy struggle to cocoon the feet with, first, polypropylene socks, followed by vapour barrier socks, woolly socks (two pairs in my case), aveolite inners, plastic outers and finally cumbersome neoprene overboots. By midday we were approaching the top of the 'Great Shelf', which in reality had become a  $40^{\circ}$  snow-slope and a purgatory indeed. Round to the right a gully system – the only means of reaching the summit slopes – broke through the large rock barrier above our heads. So far we had climbed largely unroped, apart from several sections on the flanks of the pinnacles, but now I was delighted to be able to lead the four pitches in the 'Bottleneck' (Pete again!) on good ice, with an exit up a steep mixed corner which in retrospect was no harder than Scottish 2.

The summit looked a long way off, and twilight was but a few hours away. Above a steeper section of poor snow overlying ice, which seemed a bit dubious at the time, the going improved and at 4.20pm we were there. I say 'there', but in fact the highest point, a cornice projecting a good 10m towards China, was left untouched. The anticipated panorama northwards was thus concealed, save for an unexpectedly huge pyramid that appeared mysteriously higher than anything designated on the map.

Up till now one-piece thermal underwear, shirt, fibre-pile jacket, salopettes with windproof covering, and a pair of insulated overgloves had been quite adequate. As the night-time temperatures dropped to  $-24^{\circ}\text{C}$  on the upper slopes, we donned down suits, adding balaclava helmets and more gloves. A stiff breeze accompanied our descent and nipped hands and feet as we carefully reversed the 'Bottleneck', trying to get the weight on to the heels at stances to restore circulation to the toes. Pete's fingertips remained tender for several weeks. 21 hours after leaving its comfort, I was ensconced in the tent, vainly trying to make a brew while fighting off the sleep that had overcome the others.

Despite my protestations, born out of laziness, Woolridge whipped us into action after only a few hours and we descended, albeit slowly in my case, to reach base later that night.

It had been a great experience. We had made it to the top and, perhaps of more importance, wit and rapport had been at a premium. We had worked well together, enjoyed each others' company and looked after one another consistently on the hill. Summits are important, but so are personal relationships. As we turned for home we were already talking about next year.