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ALAN HINKES

## The North Side of K2

(Plates 27–32)

The north (Chinese) side of K2 is one of the most remote places on our planet. Sir Francis Younghusband, allegedly the first European to see the north side of K2 in 1887, was impressed. In *Wonders of the Himalaya* he described his first sight of the mountain: 'There before me was a peak of almost perfect proportion, clothed in a glittering mantle of pure white snow and ice for thousands of feet, and standing up head and shoulders above all the mountains round ... The sight of that tremendous mountain, so massive, so firm and strong, so lofty, and so spotlessly and dazzlingly pure and white, necessarily left an impression which has lasted through life.' At that time Younghusband was a lieutenant making a remarkable epic journey from China to the Indian Subcontinent. Fifty years later, Shipton and Tilman made a similar journey which Shipton described in his book *Blank on the Map*.

Even today, just getting to this part of the Karakoram is an adventure in itself, and when I was invited to join the Reebok K2 expedition I had a good idea of the rigours I would be letting myself in for. Expeditions to K2 normally start in Pakistan; those aiming for the north side of the mountain travel up the Karakoram Highway and over the Kunjerab Pass to Kashgar in the Xinjiang Province of China.

We had a different plan. Our team of six climbers – Adrian Burgess, Alan Burgess, Brad Johnson, Paul Moores, Mark Wilford and myself – met in Kathmandu. Here we arranged for five Sherpa friends to take our expedition equipment overland through Tibet to the road head, a PLA outpost called Maza, in the wilds of Xinjiang. This would take the Sherpas about two weeks. Meanwhile, we six climbers flew anti-clockwise through China. This was not as simple, safe, easy or pleasant as it sounds. The flights were Kathmandu–Lhasa–Chengdu–Urumchi–Kashgar. Flying in China is an experience to be missed; our Sherpas definitely had the safest deal. We were glad to get onto the dusty roads and tracks which cross the edge of the Takla Makan desert, as we headed for the rendezvous with our Sherpas.

I had left Britain in late April, but it was early May before I arrived alongside the Yarkand river with 47 camels, 5 donkeys, 3 sheep, 4 goats, a few chickens and the rest of the team, heading to Base Camp. I felt as if I had been transported back in time for, apart from our bright modern trekking



27. The North Ridge of K2: séracs above the bergschrund. (*Alan Hinkes*) (p71)



28. Digging out a shelf for Camp 1 at 6000m. The tent was later flattened by an avalanche. (*Alan Hinkes*) (p71)

clothes and blue barrels on some of the camels, the scene looked as if it had not changed since Younghusband's day. For the first two days, we wandered down a track the Chinese had built in the 1960s. Soon we were heading deep into the high-altitude desert of the Karakoram. After crossing the Aghil Pass, we dropped down to the notorious Shaksgam river. At this time of the year it is a meandering stream in a vast, flat pebble-filled valley, flanked with 200ft vertical mudcliff walls. Getting down to the river is only possible in certain places. We found a narrow gully – probably the one Younghusband used in 1887 – and nicknamed it the 'Younghusband Slot'. It was only wide enough for us and the donkeys – the camels had to make a wide detour. We knew that the Shaksgam had a fearsome reputation for flooding in the summer, the whole valley floor becoming covered by the roaring river. On our return journey in August the experience of crossing this raging torrent was terrifying. Seemingly at the mercy of the camels and the torrents, crossing and re-crossing the swollen icy waters of the Shaksgam on camels is not fun, but fear.

After seven days walking in with the camel-train, we unloaded our equipment near the K2 river issuing from the snout of the K2 glacier, close to the spot that Younghusband called Suget Jangal in 1887. This site is around 3850m and we now had three weeks' hard graft carrying loads up the K2 glacier to establish an Advanced Base Camp below the mountain at 5000m on the moraine-covered ice.

It was 31 May before we could establish this high Base Camp but it was still bitterly cold. The ice on K2 was the winter variety, green, iron-hard and brittle as glass. Our initial aim was to set up and stock a Camp 2 at around 6800m. Working mostly in three pairs, we fixed rope up to Camp 1 at around 6000m, using the camp as a springboard for fixing rope to Camp 2.

This season the weather was generally good – at times too good, the heat causing a risk of serious stonefall. Early on we had a 10-day spell of bad weather and were trapped at Base Camp in Arctic-like blizzards. There is not much to do on a strip of moraine at 5000m waiting for the weather to improve. As well as reading, sleeping, writing and eating, we made some home-brew. When the weather finally cleared we watched several huge avalanches coming off K2. One particularly large one engulfed Base Camp. Luckily, most of its energy was already expended and the experience was only like being in a blizzard for 15 minutes.

I had a close shave one evening at Camp 1, when I was lying on top of my sleeping-bag in my underwear. I heard the characteristic rumble and roar of an avalanche. At first I ignored it ... just another avalanche, I thought. Almost immediately it got louder, and as I knew it was a big one I made a move for my camera. At that same instant I realised that this avalanche had my name on it. I dived out of the tent and clung desperately to the vertical ice wall and fixed rope at the back of the ledge. But the force of the avalanche was sucking me off the ledge and I was drowning under the wet





29. At 6800m – the view from Camp 2 towards China, the K2 glacier below.  
*(Alan Hinkes) (p71)*



30. At 8100m – looking back towards Camp 4 and a 3000m drop below the tent  
to the K2 glacier. *(Alan Hinkes) (p71)*

mass. The tent was flattened under 6ft of snow and ice blocks; I was lucky to be alive, though unable to move, buried thigh deep in the snow which had set like concrete. This was serious, as I was clad only in my underwear and all my equipment was buried in the tent, which luckily had not actually been swept away. Fortunately Aid and Al had escaped the avalanche and were able to dig me out and retrieve my boots and clothes from the tent before I developed frostbite or hypothermia. I was lucky, for if the avalanche had struck ten minutes later, I would probably have been in my sleeping-bag and unable to dive out of the tent quickly enough to escape being fatally buried under blocks of snow and ice.

After that experience, I never used Camp 1 again and always went directly from Base Camp at 5000m to Camp 2 at around 6800m. This nearly 2000m trip took around six to ten hours depending on conditions. The tent at Camp 2 was perched on a tiny snow ledge with a 2000m drop to the K2 glacier straight out of the door. The way ahead to Camp 3 at 7500m was over mixed ground, with some rocky sections of about Scottish II/III.

Paul, Alan and Mark now decided to leave. It is not easy to split an expedition in totalitarian China, with its strict regulations, but they got out. Aid and Brad decided to climb a peak (P 5540) above Base Camp instead of going back on K2. But there were now enough tents, food, sleeping-bags and rope at Camp 2 for six people and it seemed a shame to let that all go to waste; so, being a 'waste not, want not' Yorkshireman, I decided to go up alone to Camp 2 and try for the top.

At about the same time a Spanish expedition arrived and I shared a tent with some of them for three nights. I spent another eleven nights, mostly alone, above Camp 2 at 6800m trying for the top. I didn't want to go back down to Base Camp, which would involve the long haul back up and across what we called the 'Second Icefield' just below Camp 2. This was racked with stonefall, particularly in the afternoons, and was quite a dangerous place. I sat out bad weather spells cramped into what was now a broken tent at Camp 2. At least there was plenty of gas and food and even a book which I read very slowly. Although I was now well acclimatised, I realised it was only a question of time before I would start deteriorating through staying too high for too long.

After ten days above 6800m, I reached the site of Camp 4, with only just enough room for a tent, on a rock eyrie overlooking the final hanging glacier and a 'snowplod' to the top. The climbing between Camps 3 and 4 was steep rock, in places perhaps V Diff or Severe, but it is hard to judge at 8000m. Here at Camp 4 (8000m-8100m), two of the Spaniards squashed into my two-man tent. The weather seemed set fair and early the next morning all three of us set off, unroped, up the hanging snowfield. There was quite a tricky loose rock traverse to begin with and then a steepish section of plodding through some séracs. The weather remained good and clear, with a 'China wind' blowing. No doubt conditions on the Pakistan





31. K2, the North Ridge. (*Alan Hinkes*) (p71)



32. Crossing the raging Shaksgam on the trek out. (*Alan Hinkes*) (p71)

side were perfect. But even though the weather was good, I became increasingly concerned about the avalanche risk. Strong winds had built up dangerous and unstable conditions and I was scared that the slope would slip. Large patches of windslab snow were breaking away around our footsteps.

I had been away from Britain about three months now and had reached around c8250-8300m, perhaps only six hours from the summit – but I decided to turn back. The two Spaniards went on a little further; then they too turned back after wasting time and energy getting themselves out of a crevasse.

As I started descending, I realised that I was burned out and that I had to go back to Base Camp for a rest before I could try again. At Camp 2 food was getting low anyway. But I needed to spend another night there on my way down. It was one of the worst nights of my life, as I constantly needed to dig out the tent to prevent it being engulfed by spindrift which was rapidly setting like concrete.

When I finally reached Base Camp, I was quite debilitated and in dire need of a rest. I had not totally ruled out another go on the hill, but Aid had brought the leaving date forward by three weeks and the camels were waiting at low Base Camp. I had no choice but to go down the K2 glacier and trek out with the camels.

'*C'est la vie*,' I thought! Still, I can go back; the mountain will always be there. Four of the Spaniards summited as I trekked out. Sadly, one died on the descent and one suffered serious frostbite resulting in amputations.

**Summary:** The 1994 Anglo-American Reebok K2 Expedition spent four months, from May to August, attempting K2 from the North (Chinese) side. The members of the expedition were Alan Hinkes and Paul Moores (UK), Alan Burgess (Canada), Adrian Burgess, Brad Johnson and Mark Wilford (US). After three members of the expedition had left, Aid Burgess and Brad Johnson climbed a peak (P 5540) above Base Camp, while Alan Hinkes, climbing alone, reached a high point of c8250-8300m. However, he decided to retreat owing to dangerous windslab conditions, shortage of food and exhaustion.