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# Pakistan

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*Everest from Rongbuk Glacier, Tibet.*

Rob Fairley, 1987. (Watercolour. 36cm x 55cm. Private collection.)

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SIMONE MORO

## The First Winter Ascent of Nanga Parbat



The Diamir face of Nanga Parbat. Moro switched from the Messner route to the Kinshofer due to unusually risky conditions on his favoured line.  
*(All photos courtesy of Simone Moro)*

It was a cold dream, one almost 30 years in the making, on an epic mountain, the biggest in the world even if it isn't the highest. In the course of those three decades I spent a whole year either under or on the slopes of Nanga Parbat before finally realising my ambition of climbing to the summit in winter, and with a unique group of people. To realise big dreams you have to accept long waits and numerous defeats; rework strategies, teams and tactics. In a nutshell, you have to be willing to be mentally very strong as well as physically.

A winter expedition to an 8,000er is not the cold version of a spring or summer expedition. It's another world, a way of doing alpinism that's completely different; one that has to be learned, understood and experienced. Cold is certainly one of the elements with which you have to cope, but there is also the constant wind, freezing and damn loud, a wind that can force



Jumaring a fixed line on the summit bid.

you to stay in your tent at base camp even if the sky is clear and the sun is shining. Good weather windows are very rare and brief so acclimatisation phases are often irregular and incomplete; staying on the mountain for gradually increasing periods is incredibly difficult. Days are also very short and so the potential period for active climbing is reduced.

The times you leave and reach camps or for a summit bid are very different from those in summer. You can't be out in the dark, out of your tent and sleeping bag. Gas cans used to melt snow and provide water often freeze and must be kept warm. You never leave high camps up; tents are taken down and packed every time you leave them to return to the valley. There are so

many technical details and protocols that must be respected when climbing an 8,000er in winter. Our climb of Nanga Parbat this winter was all this, but with a human drama and a sequence of events spread over nearly three months, which eventually focused on six days and five nights spent on the mountain in late February, days that were unforgettable and ultimately historic.

There were so many of us this year dreaming of the first ascent of the penultimate winter summit of an 8,000er. These dreamers formed six expeditions, four on the Diamir side, totalling nine climbers, and two on the Rupal side, with 10. Routes chosen were the *Messner-Eisendle-Tomaseth* and *Kinshofer* for the Diamir side and the *Schell* for the Rupal. These were the three lines along which our dreams ran last winter; all had been attempted before in the years since the first winter attempt in 1988-89, when a Polish team led by that brilliant expedition leader Andrzej Zawada made the first winter attempt on Nanga Parbat, on that occasion via the *Kinshofer*.

But there was something different this year to all my previous winter expeditions. I felt something in my soul, in my heart and mind. I've never wanted a mountain like

I did this year and this desire was sweet: it was love. I didn't think about defeating the mountain, I never thought like that; I wanted instead to have a good relationship with her, I wanted to court her, to take things gently. I was already prepared to accept a third failure in winter following those of 2012 and 2014, but this time I was sure, really strongly confident that Nanga Parbat would be granted me after so many years.

I had learned a bit about the Himalayan giants; I had the experience of 15 winter expeditions. Although I had already climbed three 8,000ers in winter, both in the Himalaya and the Karakoram and always with several companions, I realised that for a special dream like Nanga we wanted a special team and a special atmosphere. For this reason I chose Tamara Lunger:

we had shared some mountaineering projects since 2009, but only recently, in the last year, had we become climbing partners, following my long association with Denis Urubko. In 2015 Tamara and I attempted Manaslu together in winter, and although we didn't make the summit, we climbed two smaller peaks via two new routes alpine style, and I realised that Tamara was the right one, even for an adventure in winter. She is strong at altitude [Editor's note: Lunger was the second Italian woman to climb K2 without oxygen and is a highly regarded ski mountaineer], stronger than most I've met in my 25-year career, she is always in a good mood, and most of all she was also in love with Nanga Parbat and high altitude.

As a team of two people of different sexes, taking a different approach from usual made sense; we decided not to communicate with the outside world for the whole of the expedition. We weren't in a hurry, we had more than three and a half months, all of the winter season, and we knew we wouldn't be back home until 21 March. We chose not to report anything, not to update websites or have a dedicated blog; that was the second surprise, and I knew this decision was at odds with others on the mountain.

It was 6 December when we flew from Milan to Islamabad and as always happens on any expedition, especially winter, things did not go as expected. We wanted to acclimatise on the 7,000m peak Spantik, before going to Nanga Parbat, but our local agent did not respect our agreement, and tried to quadruple our fee; we knew there would probably be further increases when we got back from base camp, and that we had no other option but to accept. So we cancelled the first part of the expedition and headed to Nanga Parbat base camp, which we reached on 27 December.

Two months passed, intense, beautiful and fascinating months, before the day arrived when all our waiting and efforts paid off. Before that, however, Tamara and I tried for a month to climb the *Messner* route, more dangerous this year than usual. That month was spent going backwards and forwards up the Diama glacier, always briskly, and then going as high as possible on Ganalo Peak while still getting down during the day to the base of our route. It was nearly 15km to base camp from that quiet and wild place. The Pole Tomek Mackiewicz and his expedition partner Elisabeth Revol had the same goal but with different methods and strategies from our own, although with the same belief in the beauty and appeal of the *Messner* route.

In the course of a month Tamara and I weren't able to get beyond 6,000m and spent just two nights at 5,800m. That was too little gain in altitude for any valuable acclimatisation and any realistic hope of success in winter on that route. Constant serac collapses and a dangerous maze to work through the initial part of the route made us realise we had to change. Tomek added weight to our decision; his last desperate attempt ended at 7,400m. He and Elisabeth decided to return home.

It was a similar story with the Poles Adam Bielicki and Jacek Czech, who returned home, the first after a fall and the other for health problems. Time was moving on; the large Polish expedition attempting the Rupal Face stopped hoping and fighting and went home, as well as the Brazilian-



At camp 2 the four climbers discovered that two of their sleeping mats had blown away. They were forced to share for the next five nights.

born American Cleo Weidlich and her team of Sherpas. Of the original expeditions, there remained just me and Tamara and the team of Alex Txicon from Spain, who had invited us to join him and his group on the *Kinshofer* at the start of the expedition.

After we gave up on the *Messner*, we accepted his offer and were both happy and excited; I was always convinced that this was the year. I kept repeating to Tamara and later also to Alex and his climbing partner, the Pakistani Muhammad Ali Sadpara: this year we would go to the top. However, Alex's invitation caused a strange reaction from his expedition partner Daniele Nardi. For complex reasons and personal relationships, we split them apart, and Daniele took the decision to abandon base camp.

So it was a case of those who were left, those who were stranded on Nanga Parbat to carry on to the summit in the teeth of the winter cold. Despite this, we were for sure the most resilient and optimistic team I'd ever experienced, able to move every day over the course of two months, even in cold weather, keeping fit and active. True, we were also the least acclimatised we had ever been; although Tamara and I were very fast, we hadn't once slept high in almost three months of the climb. Finally, having switched to the *Kinshofer*, we had an opportunity to spend a night at camp two. With Alex and Ali, we tested our engines, going in less than 10 hours from base camp, around 4,300m on Nanga Parbat, to camp two at 6,100m; we passed a good night and worked beautifully with our two new fellow adventurers.

We had made the most of a single sunny day to make that flying visit to altitude and now prepared to wait for the right window, a period of good weather sufficiently long and stable to allow us a try. There was a little less

than a month to go before the end of winter but I kept repeating like a mantra that this was the year I would get to the top, we will go to the top, the top... It was not an obsession, but a clear conviction. I felt it. I knew it.

It was a cold and frosty morning when Tamara, Alex, Ali and I set off on 22 February 2016 on snowshoes to the base of the *Kinshofer* route. The window of good weather had arrived, and with it the clear intention of attempting the summit even though I knew that on paper both Tamara and I had insufficient acclimatisation for a big jump of more than 4,000m in altitude.

We reached camp two in about nine hours, fast, smiling, happy, despite the bitter cold and the shady steep gully we climbed. But when we arrived we had a nasty surprise that would cost us for the next five nights. Two sleeping mats had been blown away by the wind in the preceding few days; the four of us would have to share the remaining mats in the incredible cold of winter nights high on Nanga Parbat. We spent two nights in the tent at camp two because of strong winds that arrived next day. Four sleeping on two mattresses wasn't very comfortable, but at least we found a solution to this setback that would see us through the attempt.

The weather remained stable, albeit with wind and cold, and we climbed first to camp three at 6,750m and then camp four at 7,150m, striking and packing the tent each morning with all the other gear. The last camp we deliberately located lower than usual, 1,000m below the summit. We could feel our obvious failure to acclimatise and so had to come up with a new strategy as well as being determined. Tamara and I were already 1,000m higher than the maximum altitude we had reached in the previous three months, and now we had to climb another 1,000m.

We had divided the work with Alex and Ali, but now we needed to decide how best to deal with the summit day. We left the tent at different times, to allow everyone to get ready comfortably and not all four of us at the same time. I wasn't using battery-heated insoles like the others, so I left the tent last. First were Ali and Alex, at 6am on 26 February; half an hour later it was Tamara's turn to leave the haven of the tent. I got myself ready, warming my feet over the stove and then left at 7.45am. I kept up a strong and steady pace, with regular breaks, and reached first Tamara and then my companions. It was cold, very cold, minus 34°C with a strong wind of 45km/h, so it felt more like minus 58°C.

It was only at around 10.30am that we saw the first rays of the sun transform the mountain's harsh appearance and lift our mood, even though the unceasing wind seemed now to spread everywhere as we gained altitude and became more exposed to its exhausting effects. Our hypoxia was becoming more pronounced; I could manage only around five steps, sometimes ten. It was past 2pm when we passed the 8,000m mark, spread out but in visual contact. Ali, in that last stretch, climbed a little to the right of the usual line of ascent, while Alex, Tamara and I stuck to the regular route, becoming increasingly fatigued as we strove towards a summit that seemed never to arrive.



Moro had to persuade his two fellow summit climbers Alex Txicon and Muhammad Ali Sadpara to pose for a photograph in the face of intense cold.

In the morning, just after she left the tent, Tamara had been sick, vomiting the little breakfast she had managed to eat. She continued to vomit every time I offered her liquid or food. It was also the start of her menstrual cycle, adding to her fatigue. Clear-headed and rational, she took the decision to abandon the summit at around 8,040m, only 80m or so in altitude from the top. The decision probably saved her life. The three of us, a little ahead, took the last few steps to the summit at 8,126m. It had taken 27 years since the first attempt in winter, generations of alpinists passing on the baton to keep alive a project that seemed almost impossible.

We hugged on top, exhausted, incredulous but sharing an ecstatic joy. It was already 3.30pm. Now in the last hours of daylight and coping with the obvious exhaustion, we hurried to start our descent. Not seeing Tamara, we realised that something had happened and she was already on her way down. Ali had seen her from the summit and waved a few minutes before. I insisted that we stop to take a photograph on the top; Ali and Alex weren't fussed because of the cold, but I managed to capture this historic moment not only for us.

I wanted to look once again to the Rupal side. I imagined it was almost 50 years ago, and those two lads from the South Tyrol, Reinhold and Günther Messner, were climbing up towards me. As a child they had made



The four climbers back at base camp: left to right Alex Txicon, Tamara Lunger, Simone Moro and Muhammad Ali Sadpara. Ali became the first Pakistani to climb an 8,000er in winter. Only one woman has reached the summit of an 8,000er in winter, the Swiss Marianne Chapuisat on Shishapangma in 1993, despite Lunger's best efforts.

me dream. Reading about them, realising that their strength was in the co-operation and understanding they shared, I developed the ambition to one day become a man capable of climbing mountains, to try to do it my way, finding my own path with a close companion as they did. With Tamara I found that connection again, and with Ali and Alex we established a unique and almost unrepeatable bond. If the dedication of my fourth first winter ascent was to Günther Messner, I must also acknowledge the team with whom I lived for five nights and six days on Nanga Parbat, as well as all those who for 30 years kept the flame of this dream alight.

### Summary

On 26 February Simone Moro, Alex Txicon and Ali Sadpara reached the summit of Nanga Parbat via the *Kinshofer* route to make the first winter ascent. Nanga Parbat was first attempted in winter in 1988-89 by a Polish team and more than 30 expeditions have tried since. Moro has now climbed four 8,000-metre peaks in the winter: Shishapangma in 2005, Makalu in 2009, Gasherbrum II in 2011, and Nanga Parbat in 2016. Only K2 remains to be climbed in winter.

ANDY HOUSEMAN

## Fever Pitch

The First Ascent of Link Sar's West Summit



Misty conditions on the lower part of the north-west face of Link Sar, located between K6 and K7 in the Karakoram's Charakusa valley. (All images Jonathan Griffith Photography)

**W**e approached the face in wet sleet and knee-deep sodden snow. Ignoring the enormous faces and the gaping crevasses, it was like walking into Stob Coire nan Lochan in typical Scottish weather: nothing is frozen, you get soaked and you really start to wonder why you are there.

Yet we were far from Scotland. Jon Griffith and I had travelled to the Charakusa valley in the Karakoram to attempt the unclimbed Link Sar (7041m). The Charakusa is one of the more developed valleys in Pakistan. Dominated by the towering golden granite spires of the K7 massif and the huge complex north faces of the three K6 peaks, it's like Chamonix on steroids. Link Sar sits in the back corner, almost forgotten.