
High Asia



Lt H O S Gibson (1885-1917), 11th Battalion London Regiment, a school-friend of George Mallory's, blown to pieces during fighting at Gaza, Palestine.

BRUCE NORMAND

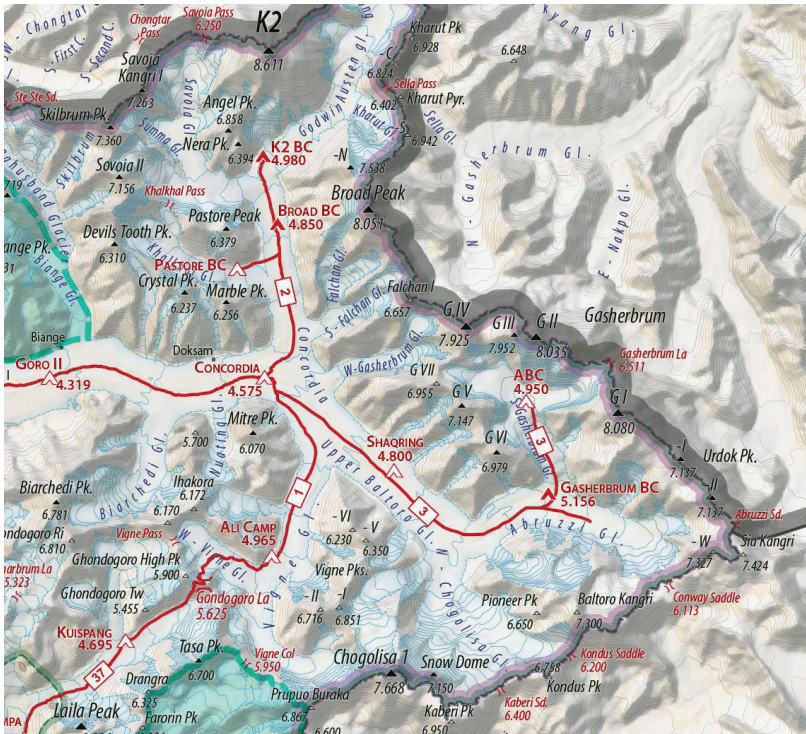
Gasherbrum IV



The south and east faces of Gasherbrum IV, both unclimbed. (Bruce Normand)

The Gasherbrum sub-range forms the very core of the Karakoram, the massif from which the Baltoro drains west, the Siachen south-east and the Shaksgam the north-east sides. Not for nothing is its highest point (Gasherbrum I, 8080m), tucked away at the end of 50km of ice and ringed by lesser summits, known as Hidden Peak. Although Gasherbrum I and Gasherbrum II both pass the magic 8,000m mark, and Gasherbrum II ranks as an 'easy 8,000er', their limelight is stolen quite definitively by Gasherbrum IV (7925m). The west face, known for good reason as the Shining Wall, rising unbroken for 2,500m directly to the summit, dominates the trekking nexus of the Pakistani Karakoram, Concordia. It is visible for days to all who set foot on the upper Baltoro.

The aesthetic fame of Gasherbrum IV among trekkers is more than equalled by its notoriety among mountaineers. While 'only' the 18th-highest peak on the planet, Gasherbrum IV is nevertheless the *ne plus ultra* of inaccessible mountain giants. It has indubitably the most execrable rock of any high peak where the climbing cannot stick to snow and ice: alternately badly fractured marble and impenetrably compact marble. Too high for freeze-thaw cycles to produce ice most of the surface area of Gasherbrum IV essentially takes no gear at all. Thus the mountain has no easy routes,



A map of the upper Baltoro glacier illustrating just how remote the Gasherbrum massif is. Camp one is marked as ABC and the correct height is 5,950m. (Central Karakoram National Park)

has never been climbed in anything other than an epic, and has seen fewer pairs of feet (10) on its true summit than has walked on the moon (12). The footing on the moon is also a good deal less tenuous. Despite annual expeditions in the 1980s and 1990s, and sporadic efforts in this millennium, there remain no routes on the south, east or north faces of Gasherbrum IV and only two through the Shining Wall (*Kurtyka-Schauer* and *Central Rib*). The only route ever to have been repeated is the north-west ridge, which means that the route of first ascent, the north-east ridge, has not been repeated in the 60 years since it yielded to Bonatti and Mauri. The stories of the first ascent and the *Central Rib* are of bloody-minded persistence. The story of the *Kurtyka-Schauer* suggests a death wish is a handy thing to bring along.

In 2009, my eye for new and overlooked mountains led me to try Gasherbrum III. Not being nearly as brave as Geoff Cohen and Des Rubens, who made a very spirited attempt on the south-south-west ridge in 1985, we tried to get to the north-east ridge from the north, but were unable to get out of the cwm between Gasherbrum III and Gasherbrum IV. Taking a good look at the dark side of Gasherbrum IV from the cwm, the American Billy Pierson and I saw that one line on the centre left of the east face looked



Billy Pierson and Marcos Costa. (Bruce Normand)



Normand on the exit beside the final ice cliff. (Billy Pierson)

to be something of a straight shot up snowy gullies, with perhaps some short rock steps, depending on snow cover. This face offers the shortest possible technical route on the mountain, being 900m at 50°-55° from bergschrund to summit. The snow gully route would also lead directly to the main summit, rather than requiring the awkward traverse of the upper west face, which all existing routes must make. While the aim of the 2017 expedition was to put this fine theory to the test, we were not the first to have this idea: the east face was attempted in 1980 by Americans Craig McKibben and Steve Swenson, in 1993 by Yasushi Yamanoi of Japan, and in 1996 by a Korean team including the irrepressible Kim Chang-Ho. While Yamanoi did not get above the floor of the cwm, both the Americans and the Koreans were repelled low in the central gullies by spindrift and compact rock.

For our attempt on this project, Billy and I roped in the Brazilian Marcos Costa, as well as two other members who cancelled before the rubber hit



Costa leading the lower ice pitches from camp two to three. *(Billy Pierson)*

the road. Our team arrived in Pakistan in late May, flew immediately to Skardu and required only one day of formalities before setting out for Askole. All the new and onerous post-Nanga Parbat conditions, which we encountered in 2015, appear to have been rescinded or forgotten. Rising living standards in Askole can be measured from the many more porters smoking; several now own enough horses to do the majority of the heavy lifting. They also wanted to dispense with the usual rest day and evening party in Paiju, so we made the trek to Gasherbrum base camp (GBC) in six days. The Pakistani military has moved its own GBC a kilometre down-glacier since 2009, but in that time has succeeded in creating the most monumental eyesore, in the middle of the Central Karakoram National Park, with blackened rubbish of all conceivable sorts strewn over a 200m radius around the central huts.

Although the east face may be short, the approach is anything but. Our first task was to establish the seasonal trade route through the south Gasherbrum icefall to camp one (5900m) for the Gasherbrums I, II and IV. With a little foreknowledge and a few days of decent weather, we had found the route, shuttled two loads and occupied camp one by our fourth day beyond GBC, compared to 10 in 2009. We then continued north up depressingly flat glacier, ending with an even more depressingly soft slope, to camp two (6300m), beneath but sheltered from the icefall which breaks out of the cwm. Our problems started here. The 'straightforward' snow slopes on the



The business end of Gasherbrum IV's east face: technical climbing that the team did not reach. (*Bruce Normand*)



Costa setting out for the dead-end slab. (*Bruce Normand*)

right of the cwm icefall, which we had climbed un-roped in 2009, seemed to be in a permanent state of windblown crust and were essentially unusable. The left side turned out to require seven pitches of 50° ice, which we had to simul-climb for safety, followed by a long, deep traverse which turned out to be more stable than it looked, with the exception of its rotten and bottomless final 100m. On our second weeklong stint above GBC, we managed to make two and a half trips up this route and to deposit most of our east face equipment in camp three (6900m), dug in at the base of a walk-in crevasse at the centre of the lower cwm.

By this time the somewhat stable weather periods we had enjoyed up to 20 June had started to lapse into generally unstable conditions which defeated any of our forecasts. Our first stay at camp three was shortened by a day due to incoming weather and the first week of July turned out to be very poor, although an alternative forecast did cause us a fruitless trip to camp two. Every foray we made beyond camp one required breaking a new trail. With our forecasts agreeing on an excellent weather window from 9 to 11 or 12 July, we set off on 6 July to camp one, 7 July to camp two, but were forced to declare 8 July a rest day while the copious snow of the day before stabilised. On 9 July we were back in our crevasse, digging out camp three while the afternoon weather deteriorated around us. On 10 July we pushed up snow slopes to 7,300m on the east face to deposit our rack and ropes



Two views of a dead-end. The blue line indicates the team's ascent, the red dot their high point. This second photograph was taken from camp two (6550m) on Gasherbrum II. (Bruce Normand/Guillaume Vallot)

and monitor the conditions: 50° snow over slabs of fractured marble with few useful surface features. The weather turned again to clouds and blowing snow which persisted for much of the night.

Our appointed summit day, 11 July, was clear and windy well before dawn. The first thing to go wrong was that our entire approach and climbing track from the previous day had been eliminated. Below the bergschrund was hard work and above it was very poorly consolidated. Back at our gear dump and thawing in the sunrise, we racked up with Costa leading, Pierson belaying in a snow hole and me casting around for any kind of protection. The best I could do was a centimetre of knife-blade in the only crack where the piton wasn't about to break the rock apart. At 25m out, Costa found a previously invisible compact white marble slab, only five metres long but entirely featureless. His efforts to find protection, or an alternative route, took some 40 minutes: across and right, up and left, lots of sweeping ... but there was nothing. The slab was at minimum tenuous M8 and thus, in the absence of any form of gear or belay, the route was simply too dangerous to attempt. We cleaned the line and retreated to camp three before the lower face could become even more dangerous in the heat.

The afternoon brought clouds and wind again, which did little to temper the bitter disappointment. The completely un-forecast bad afternoon weather was doing nothing for the atrocious underfoot conditions in the cwm. We decided to use the last day of nominally good weather for a bid on 'G2.5', a 7,706m subsidiary peak at the edge of the long plateau between Gasherbrum II and Gasherbrum III. The hike up the cwm was a frigid post-holing nightmare, which caused Costa to retreat with frozen feet. Pierson and I reached the 45° snow gullies at the north-east end of the cwm, but were shut down yet again by bad weather: high winds and incoming clouds even before 11am. We almost had to re-break the track just to get back to camp three, and there was no doubt that it was time to descend before real weather arrived. We decided not to leave anything at camp three; the dangers of returning just to rescue some gear outweighed the chances we would be back for a lightweight bid on anything. Our descent beside the cwm icefall was made in spindrift so heavy it would have been comical had it not been so dangerous.

At base camp we needed a long rest. The weather was poor over the peaks



but not really on the glacier. Costa joined the neighbouring French team to summit Gasherbrum II. Pierson and I considered a bid on the 1958 route, but this was ruled out by Pierson falling ill, and in retrospect would not have worked due to inclement weather persisting through the window forecast to be good. While cleaning camps one and two, we made a final brief attempt on 'G4.5', a 6,950m peak on the ridge joining Gasherbrums IV and V, but had to stop at 6,700m due to dangerous snow conditions. We had to begin our walkout on 22 July and were in Askole on the day that the first stable weather period in five weeks arrived in the mountains.

With regard to the feasibility of the east face as a route on Gasherbrum IV, it is possible that, in a year with more winter snow or better winds, one might simply climb over some or all of its marble bands on unprotected snow. Our 2009 photos appeared to show only one serious rock obstacle, in a zone of fractured marble. As things stand, we suspect that the Americans in 1980 and the Koreans in 1996 were stopped by exactly the same compact slab as we were, and that more specificity in their reports could have assisted our decision-making. We observed that our compact slab might be avoided by following snowy streaks 50m to its right, although this may entail 100m-200m of climbing on rather thinly covered terrain. In 2017, we did not see much point in launching a bid on that variation in the extant conditions.

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