
NICHOLAS HURNDALL SMITH
Yawash Sar I



Nigel Bassam in new snow underneath Yawash Sar I at the end of the team's three attempts on the peak. *(All images courtesy of Nicholas Hurndall Smith)*

More than 1,400 people had died in Pakistan and millions forced from their homes due to terrible monsoon flooding: three times the usual rainfall. Under local advisement, it we decided our expedition to unclimbed peaks in the Ghujerab mountains could still go ahead. The post-monsoon season proved an excellent time to visit; in the main we had cloudless skies with little wind. Karim Hayat, our guide, had been before in September 2013 and also had good weather. The monsoon itself doesn't seem to affect this area much.

From Shimshal, we walked north for several days towards the Chinese border. Once past the 5,000m Boisum pass, we headed down (and occasionally up) through persistent snow and, after endless plodding, reached a shepherds'



The Yawash Sar I team, from left to right: Ross Bell, Nicholas Hurdall Smith, Nigel Bassam, Paul Winder, Karim Hayat and Waseem Shah.

hut where we stopped to regroup. Our differing pace had led to gaps in the procession and we felt a little out of touch in the clag. Squeezing inside the tiny hut with the porters, we ate hot food and talked to Jalal and Bulbul whilst they heated water for chai. Wakhi is their language, also spoken in Tajikistan and Afghanistan and Kashgar in Xinjiang.

'Chiz hol he? How are you?'

It was nerve-racking to see one's bags carried for three days over mountain pass, river and snow. I saw my donkey refuse a number of times. On its back were all my diabetic supplies, bar my insulin, which I was carrying. The donkeys carry 40kg, which I'm told is a reasonable weight. Karim told me privately that he much preferred human porters as kit can so easily be damaged. But the porters prefer donkeys as they are paid for two loads. In fact we only had one real porter who carried 20kg.

Karim, now an AC member, had been a porter for Victor Saunders and Mick Fowler in 1992. He was also in the team that supported Tom Ballard in 2019 but, with forebodings about the conditions, he descended before Tom was tragically killed. He was later flown out to Turkey to take part in the film about Tom and his mother Alison Hargreaves. In June 2013 he had been at camp two on Nanga Parbat when terrorists gunned down 11 climbers. As he descended to base camp in the afternoon, the army were flying in and out. Later that year on a trip to the Ghujerab he soloed a 5,836m peak, which he named Umeed Sar. Umeed means 'hope': his response to the Nanga Parbat tragedy, which proved difficult for him personally. It was from there he took his photo of our current objective, Yawash Sar I, which sowed the seeds of this expedition.



A foreshortened close-up of the south face of Yawash Sar I showing the team's high point.

Bulbul, our sirdar, had climbed K2 earlier in 2022. He had also been there in 2021 with Rick Allen and Jerry Gore, when Rick died. He had helped to bury Rick's body with Jerry. The mountaineering community is a small one.

Base camp was located near a cool clear river running down from the West Ghidims glacier. Our five climbers' tents quickly formed a clump amongst a series of side streams, closer to the centre of the valley. Speeches were made, tips paid and our trusty porters retreated. I spent the next few hours trying to put my tent into some semblance of organised chaos. We took turns to enjoy the 'shower'. Karim set up the toilet, complete with booby trap: a large rock intended to offer the chance to stand or crouch. A fortnight later this collapsed into the (now less deep) pit with me on it. Luckily I was switched on, and performed a dyno to safety.

Tom Bell, paramedic and AC member, went on for days about putting all our mountain food in a barrel to deter the mountain mice. I was sceptical. There was little wildlife up there besides yaks and a solitary eagle, alpine choughs, wagtails and the odd spider. Yet Tom was right. Soon there was evidence and then sightings of a 'mountain rat', as Karim called it, mostly in the mess tent. I spotted the culprit making its entrance and spontaneously grabbed it with no clue what to do with it. As I threw it outside, the scoundrel sank its teeth into my finger, drawing blood.

Some of us recovered sufficiently to do some exploratory climbing. And what a mountain we had above us! Our first task, once the weather and snow conditions improved, was to explore access to Yawash Sar I from the south.



Descending to advance base below the icefall.

We reced and then with heavy bags set up a camp at 5,200m. No one, as far as we knew, had ever stepped into this valley. Our high camp was on a moraine below and to one side of an icefall, which we then climbed in three easy pitches. Above was a huge bowl of pristine firm snow whose lower section was heavily crevassed. Our eyes were drawn by a snow gully on the left that led to a long and involved ridge. Karim was keen on attacking the south face front-on but the start looked steep. We returned to camp at dusk, happy to have got to a high point of 5,400m.

It was cold during the night. With the door open to avoid condensation, the temperature in the tent was about -6°C . Feeling parched, we drank as much hot water as possible and at 4.20am headed back up the icefall with the moon and stars ablaze. A steady pace kept the cold at bay and soon the sun rose, though we remained in shadow. Approaching the face and the steep ice leading to it, the route started to look more amenable. It was 8.30am when the sun hit us, just as I was about to lead the steep lower section of the south face.

The belay at the top of the ice slope that led to the first rock section was not pleasant or safe. When the first rays of the sun hit the face high above, rock and ice started to come loose and occasionally a real 'whizzer' went past, uncomfortably close. In my mind there was no sensible reason to continue. We called a halt at about 5,550m, feeling disappointed. Nigel Bassam, who had been the least keen on this route, now seemed the most frustrated. Having been hit in the face and chest by smaller missiles, I was glad to be out of the line of fire. We were back at our tents by 11.30am and Karim headed down to base camp, complaining of a bad headache.



The steep approach slope to the south-east ridge.

Sleep helped to raise morale. Everything in this valley was unclimbed apart from Karim's Umeed Sar and we hoped that with more climbers at the high camp, we could change that. Nigel and I left at 4.20am next morning for another summit bid. We took the same route to the upper glacier but this time turned right to climb over a bergschrund and up a steep snow and ice slope, hoping to get on to the south spur of the south-east ridge. It felt like classic north face climbing up several hundred metres, something neither of us were really in practice for. But we made steady progress moving together, huffing and puffing, with the altitude weighing heavily on us. As the angle eased, ice and névé turned to softer snow and I made a bucket seat to belay Nigel up to join me at the col just after 9am. After a short break, we crossed another bergschrund and finally reached rock.

From here I had planned to tackle the ridge direct, steeply at first, in the hope we would reach some easy ground. The ridge certainly looked flatter higher up. We had also hoped that stepping onto rock would be a pleasure. It was not. We had expected loose rock but this was dangerously so. Climbing the south ridge of the Strahlhorn three weeks earlier had been great training for this. We slowly and gingerly gained height to 6,000m, tiptoeing through the choss and my heart was in my mouth committing to steeper moves. Every hold was suspect. Where possible I tossed bread bin sized rocks far down onto the glacier to help clear the route for Nigel.

We soon had more problems. Light snow was falling and we had lost our good rhythm moving slowly up with 15m of rope between us. There was still no wind. I started to contemplate a night out; there was still so far to go.



The approach slope to the left of the photo and the south-east ridge with the team's highpoint marked.

I also looked down the other (eastern) side of the col and wondered if that might offer a good line of descent. As 1pm approached, we decided the dangers were too great, the ground we needed to cover too involved and our progress too slow. The best option was to back off and go down the way we had come, a much harder prospect than climbing it.

Nigel climbed down first, placing gear where possible, with me following. Solid gear placements were few and far between. We managed to set up two abseils lower down, the first from a block that looked large enough to stay glued to the mountain. It was a huge relief to get back to the steep snow. Even after this the descent was not plain sailing. After lowering Nigel from the top bucket seat, we made seven 60m abseils from abalakovs. It felt endlessly long and tense, as tiredness and dehydration set in.

Plodding slowly down, weaving our way through the snow-covered crevasse field, I was grateful for the tracks we had made there. We felt deflated yet happy to be on easier ground. Luckily it was cool again and the snow bridges felt solid. We reached camp just before dark at 5.40pm, welcomed by mugs of tea and cheery faces. It had been an intense and exhausting 14 hours.

On the first attempt, it was me who had made the decision to turn round, with Nigel wanting to continue. On the second, the opposite was the case. Both were the right decision. With two attempts behind us we were starting to appreciate the scale of the mountain. It was bitterly cold that night: -20°C outside the tent. The stars were shining and we had one more good day forecast before snow was due. I finally got warm wearing all the clothes I had inside my sleeping bag with my insulin stashed safely in my pocket.



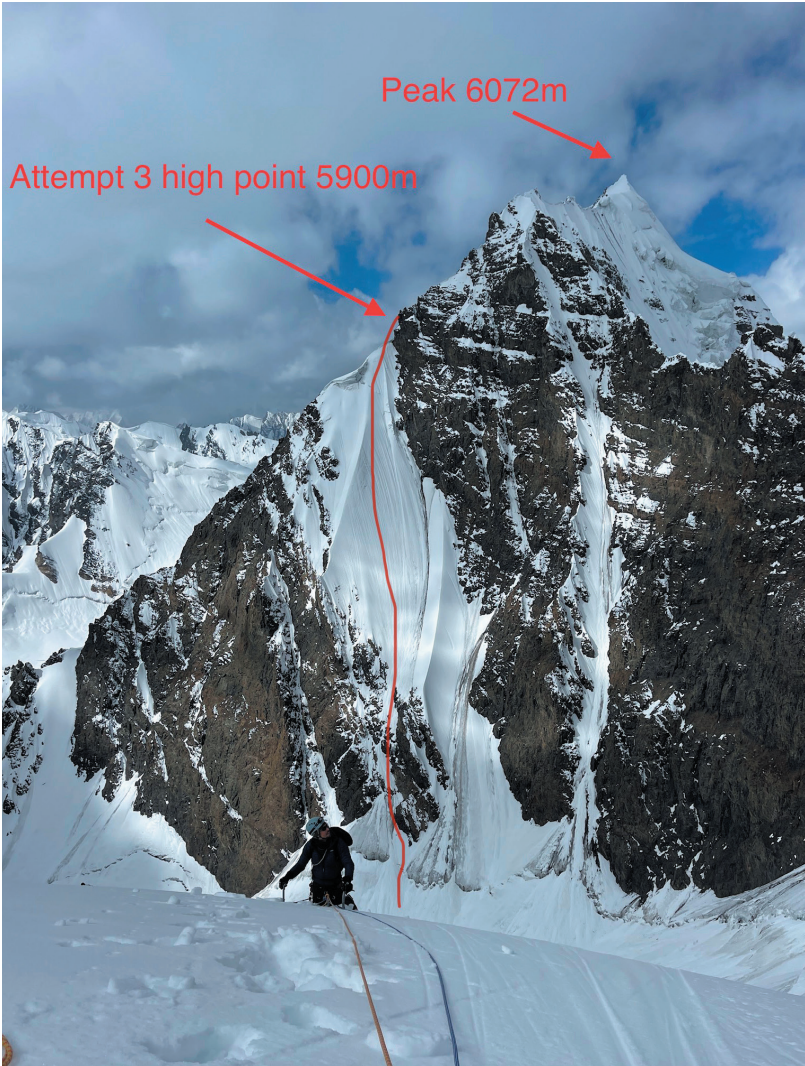
Nigel Bassam at the team's highpoint.

A Nalgene hot water bottle by the toes was a game changer.

The weather held and sunshine hit our tent soon after 7am. I was suffering from mountaineer's foot, which Tilman describes as the inability at times to put one foot in front of another. We agreed to go down to base camp to rest and ponder our next move, arriving back in time for the most lavish lunch prepared by our outstanding cooks Abbas and Waseem: mutton korai cooked in milk cream and fresh tomatoes with chillies and spices, pasta, apples and coffee.

Snow did indeed come and the weather set in properly. The slopes were clagged in and snow flurries swept across camp. Paul Winder described it as 'a grim Tibetan wind'. I tried to keep us off the topic of what to do next for a day, so that all could have a proper breather. I knew I needed one.

We had time and a weather window ahead for one more attempt on Yawash Sar I. As we approached high camp once again we spotted Karim and Wasim descending after the first ascent of Peak 5742m, which they named Uncle and Nephew Peak. Karim and Wasim were over the moon. This was the first success for the team and I was delighted for them. Nigel and I puffed our way back up the icefall to drop some kit and make a plan. Hope and doubt seemed in balance. The weather was due to turn again soon so we had to make the most of the window. Back at high camp, we set the alarm for 1am and were in bed by 6pm.



Peak 6072m viewed from the south-east ridge with the team's highpoint marked.

The temperature inside the tent was -10°C when we woke and much colder out. These felt like conditions for frostbite. Putting on crampons that we'd left at the bottom of the icefall wasn't easy with cold hands. Once underway again we gradually felt better and began to move well. In fact, we moved so well we were in a position by 4am to start the steep ascent to the point where we'd turned back the previous week. Except we couldn't see the face and made the mistake of going too far left. I followed what I thought were our tracks, now rendered less clear by the previous day's sun, but they turned out to be the imprints of a falling boulder.



On the south-west ridge.

Sensing our position wasn't right, we hollowed out a seat with our axes to await the imminent dawn. I reached for my blood glucose sensor, switched it on, fumbled and dropped it. Down it went, its light visible in the darkness as it slid down over 100m onto the glacier below.

The first glimmers of dawn revealed the error of our ways: we had gone too far left and were at the foot of an inviting gully leading to the south-west ridge. We'd spied this as a potential option beforehand and now it seemed too arduous to traverse right over steep ice and snow to our original line. Next my insulin pump began its tell-tale squeal, indicating it had failed. This would continue for the next five hours until we reached easier ground, allowing me to intervene. I would have to rely on injections today, thanks to the back up insulin pen safely stowed in my inner pocket.

Up we went, moving well together over crisp névé and a lovely section of mixed ice and rock. When we were able to stop, we turned to admire the beautiful dawn colours, accompanied by the scream of my failed pump. As we gained height, conditions underfoot gradually worsened, definitely worse than the slope opposite that we'd climbed five days before. We also realised our line was threatened by a large cornice, so we opted for an even steeper line to the right. Névé gradually turned to powder and we found ourselves swimming and digging for placements. Our pace slackened and our calves burned. Then the sun hit our backs. That took the chill off but made the snow even worse.

I felt ready to give up but Nigel's encouragement kept me going. We finally reached the ridge at 8.30am and sat exhausted to warm ourselves on the sunny rocks at the bottom of a vertical but amenable looking wall. The view



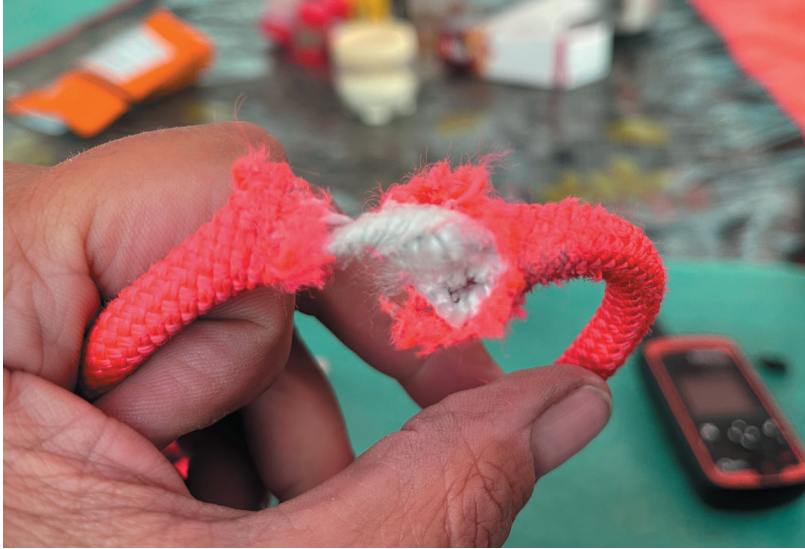
Looking down the route of descent from the highpoint on Peak 6072m.

to the south-west was beautiful, with every peak for miles visible, so many unclimbed. And I now finally had the chance to remove my squealing insulin pump and silence it with my knife.

The continuation of the ridge was a series of rock towers many of which we hoped to bypass on snow and included a significant descent before the final steepening to the summit. We were close to 5,900m and even more aware of the vertical distance down to the glaciers either side of the ridge. Gearing up, I launched myself at the first steep pitch. The rock was sturdier and more inclined to stick to the mountain. I placed some good gear and arrived at a shelf of precariously balanced frisbee-sized rocks. Knees before crampons, in the hope of not braining Nigel, I made a belay to the side and Nigel followed.

We knew this was only a taste of what was to come and our fatigue suddenly felt all the greater. Hope was replaced with doubt and, after a short discussion, resignation. We had managed just one pitch on rock and given the hours it had taken us to get to this point, we both agreed it was game over. We cut some tat and abseiled from a solid block back to our pleasant rock perch above the cornice.

The descent became a trial. The ice was too rotten for abalakovs and the snow too loose for bollards. So I returned the ridge and descended further to find better ice. It soon became clear we would have to abseil down the rock to the left of the ridge below us. This became an adventure in itself. The ropes kept catching on loose rock so we looked for the steepest line of descent to make things easier. By the fifth abseil we'd reached steeper ground but one of the ropes got caught and as I tried to free it, the rope prised a



Critical rope damage.

block the size of a car wheel off. The air was filled with the reek of cordite and the rope was damaged, requiring some nimble but time-consuming rope work to tie it off and continue. I warned Nigel, while he was still in earshot that he would have to abseil past a knot.

Another three abseils with the same issues of falling rock and snagging ropes got us to the glacier and we returned to our small gear stash. Nigel, for whom nothing is too much trouble, ignored his fatigue in a vain search for the reader I had dropped earlier. I sat slumped on a solitary rock. Then we began the steady plod down to our high camp after a punishing 16-hour day.

I studied photos taken from the slopes opposite and realised how far we still had to go when we turned around. We were way too far left and had been better placed to attempt Peak 6027m (which I'm sure is higher). A harsher critic might have said we were on the wrong mountain. I was even more convinced that the best route up Yawash Sar I was up its south face, preferably with a higher camp below it and the ability to locate the start of the route in the dark. And perhaps a double helmet.

I woke at 6am to find light snow falling. Karim popped a cheerful face through the door to ask what our plans were. We decided to leave our camp in place, descend to base for a rest and return to explore and bag a new but easier peak. As for Yawash Sar I, the joke was over for this year. The mood in base camp was subdued with lots of chat about going home. We spent the morning chewing the fat, practising knots, and teaching each other different ways of tying them.

Nigel, Wasim, Karim and I dragged ourselves away from 2.15pm next day for high camp and were in bed by 7pm. With the alarm went off at 2am neither of us felt like getting up but an hour later we were marching up the

KNN Sar 5798m PD+ Karim, Nick & Nigel 30 Sep 2022



A consolation first ascent of Peak 5798m.

Ghidims glacier and towards the col marked at 5,644m on Jerzy Wala's map. Nigel and I both felt super-tired. The weather was glorious but incredibly cold and all of us had cold feet. I was tempted to turn back as mine simply would not warm up.

Once at the col we turned left and taking care to stay away from cornices to the east we headed to the summit in shade, swimming through deep snow. Our feet got even colder but we pressed on and reached the summit at about 8am, too tired and cold to feel elated even though the moment felt significant. Karim suggested we name our peak KNN Sar. Views were spectacular, of Yawash Sar II peeping over Peak 6072m and numerous others. There was no question of continuing along the corniced ridge to the next peak. We were simply too cold and energy was lacking.

Back at camp soon after 9.30am, Nigel and I retreated inside the tent, now like a greenhouse, to thaw out and snooze the day away, still exhausted from our earlier attempts. It snowed in the night and we woke at 5am, having been horizontal for nearly 20 hours. We delayed a decision about what to do but then the heavens opened and snow really started coming down. We did all we could to pack from within as the snow built up and a big avalanche rumbled. Then we emerged to cram everything into our sacks and by the time we were read to go the weather had started to brighten.

The weather began to brighten and we were ready to go by 8am. Our descent was beautiful, even warm, and gave us a chance to bid farewell to our home, on and off, for the past week or so. The sun did its best to burn through the clag and with the fresh snow gave us some atmospheric views. We got a final glimpse of Yawash Sar I. Maybe we will be back.

Winter had come to base camp, bringing blustery snow flurries and biting cold. It was the first time snow had settled there. The forecast suggested it would not be radically better in the morning so it made sense to start our return a day early. Thankfully we woke to blue skies to start the journey home. It was no less stunning in reverse: the scale of the landscape was immense and at the Boisum pass we met a herd of yaks we'd seen before from the valley.

On the way we stopped at the base camp of an Austrian couple and their team. Karim knew the guides and were given a warm welcome with tea and biscuits. They were at the beginning of their trip, hoping to climb some established routes nearby but were struggling with altitude. Then we continued. Light snow was falling on our last day but the weather improved and the sun came out. We met a friendly shepherd who made us tea. He was on his way to the shieling at Mandikshlakh (4129m) to tend his 50 sheep. He told us how he had seen a snow leopard here the previous year and also a pack of five wolves. Eagles, he said, were a threat to the sheep.

Almost three weeks after leaving we were back in Shimshal. The village was more autumnal, colours that contrasted beautifully with the snowy peaks above. Back in Hunza, we discovered that disaster had struck the Austrian team close to the Boisum pass; an avalanche had left one dead and another injured. We had been the last to see them and it was hard to process the news. The route they were climbing involved a narrow valley with snow on both sides, which must have been loaded by the recent falls. After dinner Karim produced some Hunza water, made from apricots and mulberries, which we drank with two of his close friends. We raised a glass to our Austrian friends.