

KARAKORUM MOUNTAINS

July 2018

It was quite obvious why Skardu is designated a fair weather airport and only experienced, specially trained pilots are allowed to fly there. The mountain tops towered above the plane's wing tips as the flight path curved around Nanga Parbat, one of the world's 8,000 metre mountains, before snaking up the Indus valley and descending onto the airstrip.



The Mazeno Ridge was clear to see out of the right window, stretching for ten kilometres all the way to the summit of Nanga Parbat and I was on my way to meet up with Sandy Allan who only a few years earlier was the first person to climb the ridge. At the time this was considered one of the last Himalayan challenges and lauded throughout the mountaineering world.

It had long been an ambition of mine to visit the Karakorum mountains of Pakistan but despite previous efforts I thought the opportunity had passed me by. This trip was going to be far more demanding and hopefully more rewarding than any trip I'd planned there before. I'd agreed to support Sandy in his attempt at a new route on Broad Peak and the opportunity to join him, at some point, was far too good to miss.



The Drive In

I spent two days in and around Skardu waiting for my passport to be returned along with my travel permit that allowed me to venture up the Baltoro Glacier and on to Broad Peak Base Camp in sight of K2. The first part of my mini expedition involved a drive in an Off Road 4x4 vehicle up a mountain track perched on a cliff edge best suited to goats.

At the end of the road, at 3,000 metres altitude, is Askole. It's from here that the trek up the Baltoro Glacier starts.

The perilous narrow track that clung to the hillside before descending into ravines and back up the other side would never have featured in "The World's Most Dangerous Roads" programme, it was far too treacherous to allow celebrities to drive along it.

Read more overleaf...



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KARAKORUM MOUNTAINS (cont.)

I was the only member of my expedition but I had a total of sixteen people in support that consisted of a local guide, a cook, cook assistant, Sirdar (Foreman) and twelve porters.

The first two days walking meandered up the side of a wide sandy river valley before eventually climbing on to the snout of the glacier. I was fortunate that the sky was overcast as this section has a reputation for being desperately hot.

Once on the glacier the heat of the sun cracked ice and stones tumbled down the slopes of the glacier into pools and caverns below. The Baltoro is not a white pristine glacier but one covered in stones and boulders that have been pushed up to the surface and out onto the valley walls over thousands of years. It was through this moraine and ice fields that we slowly made progress up the glacier until the full enormity of the Karakorum mountains revealed themselves.

After leaving the valley floor the hillsides on the edge of the glacier provided campsites until it became necessary to camp on the glacier itself, all the while flanked by gigantic rock towers. A climber's paradise.

The dangers of Acute Mountain Sickness were never far away and we were sharply reminded of it when news of someone dying a few days earlier drifted into camp.



Day One Of The Trek



Concordia and Gasherbrum

By day nine Concordia revealed itself. A wide open expanse where the Baltoro starts and the Upper Baltoro and Godwin Austin glaciers join it. In front Gasherbrum, to the left Broad Peak and beyond K2. To the right Masherbrum and many, many other magnificent mountains.

I've seen mountain ranges on every continent, including Everest from both sides, I've even climbed a few but for me this was one of the most beautiful places on earth. Some people enjoy looking at art and others listening to music but mountains are my passion. You couldn't help but be moved by the majesty of it all.

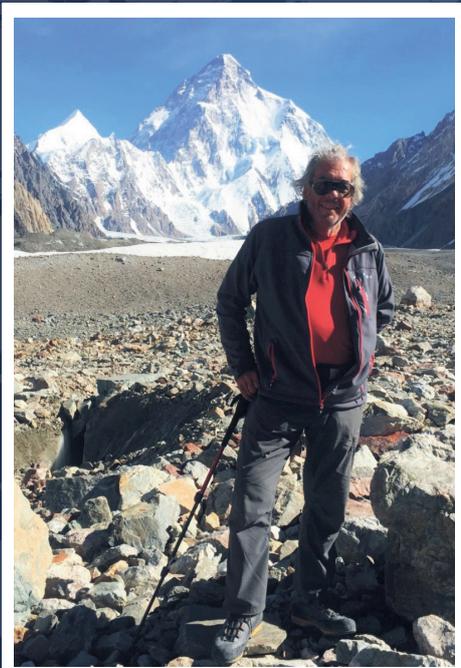
From Concordia there was just the matter of a four hour walk up the Godwin Austin glacier to Broad Peak Base Camp at 5,000 metres. All the while K2, the second highest mountain in the world, towered above us at the end of the valley.

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K2

KARAKORUM MOUNTAINS (cont.)

Sandy was in residence when I arrived at Base Camp and in a very sombre mood. He began to tell me how he and Rick, a life long climbing partner and their two young companions, Stan and Kacper had climbed to Top Camp on the Ordinary Route as part of their acclimatisation and training. Sandy watched a group ahead who were labouring and making slow progress in heavy conditions. At this point three different decisions were made.

Sandy advised that it was too soon after heavy snow to make a summit attempt and went down. Stan and Kacper decided to stay put and wait for Sandy's return but Rick set off at 10.00pm for the summit, alone.

Stan and Kacper waited two days at Top Camp before radioing Sandy and advising that Rick had failed to return and feared the worse. Sandy was now trying to organise a rescue mission using the resources of the Pakistani Army and other Expeditions.

On the third day a camp cook saw someone through his binoculars, in the middle of a hanging snow field, completely off route but moving slowly. By luck an Expedition on K2 had a camera drone which was sent up to confirm that it was Rick. Sandy was initially considering being dropped by helicopter to rescue Rick but Dan Mazur, a well known American mountaineer, was heading for Top Camp. He and his fellow climbers traversed across and brought Rick down to safety.

I was in the Mess tent when Rick arrived and listened while he relayed his ordeal to the Army Major. He explained that he thinks he summited at 2.00pm the following day but left it too late to put his head torch on and got hopelessly lost on his descent. Lowering himself down on one axe he discovered that there was nothing below to place his crampons in. That's when he fell. He must have fallen at least 1,000 feet, if not 1,500 before lying unconscious for some time. Miraculously he still had the use of his limbs but was generally battered. After some time, he started to make his way slowly across to the normal route down.

Rick was in no fit state to continue and his frost bitten toes and fingers meant that he needed to be helicoptered out. Sandy accompanied him. Their Expedition was over and as Sandy said before departing "we weren't here to do the Ordinary Route but to do something special".

I enlisted some extra porters, that were returning without loads from K2, to bring Sandy and Rick's gear back to Skardu. Stan and Kacper decided to stay on for another two weeks.

Given that we only stayed at Base Camp for two nights we had time on our hands, so our walk out mirrored our walk in but with one less rest day. A good decision as the route out seemed even harder. Despite the return seemingly being a descent, it was just as demanding, if not more so and there was no perception of it being downhill.

Read more overleaf...



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KARAKORUM MOUNTAINS (cont.)

The glacial torrent that we'd waded through on the way up was so fast and furious that we had to detour and find a way across the glacier to a point where the torrent disappeared under the ice, enabling us to cross.

Ice glistened menacingly below the thin veneer of gravel as we navigated up and down pyramids of ice and rock before finally reaching the point where the glacier meets the valley wall. We teetered along the steep slope conscious of the trickle of stones from above and the plaque to four porters killed recently in a rock fall. We took it in turns to move swiftly across, all the while hoping that nothing bigger than the trickle of stones would fall from above.

The snout of the glacier seemed to go on for ever but finally we reached the valley bottom and a rest day. There were now four nights of camping and two days walking left before the dramatic drive back to Skardu. There was a clear feeling that I'd experienced two adventures in one. The hair-raising drive in and out in the 4x4, along a track that clung perilously close to a cliff edge and the demanding trek up the Baltoro Glacier to Broad Peak.



On The Way Up



The Drive Out



Trying to look like a local

Sadly, I didn't get any higher than Base Camp but the chance to stand amongst the world's highest mountains was rewarding enough. Unlike Nepal and Tibet there are no defined paths or tea houses and rest stops. The Karakorum is truly a very remote and amazing part of the world.

The adventure was not quite over though, as I managed to borrow a motorcycle and claim country number 70 by bike.



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