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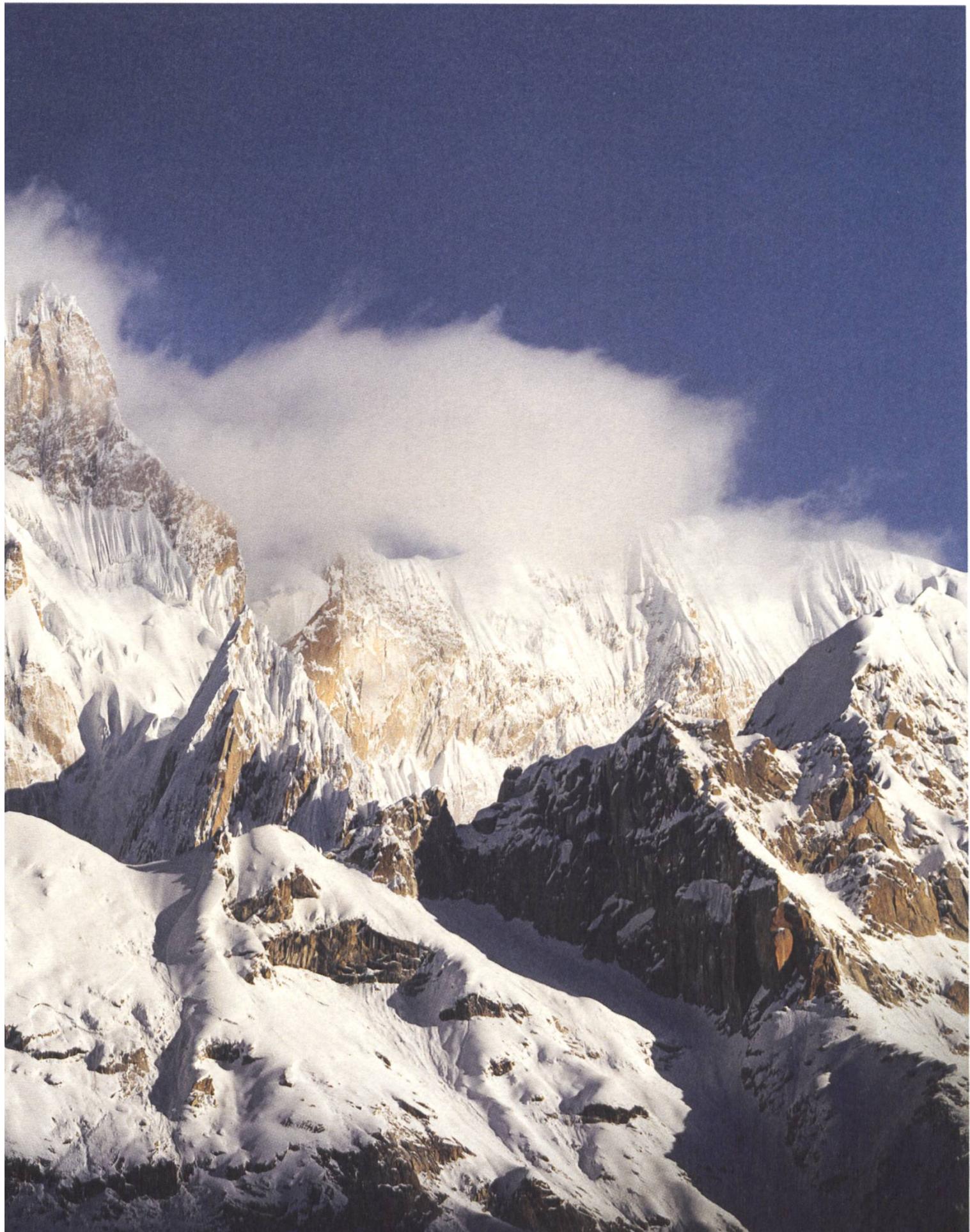
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South face Pumari Chhish East (Photo Rizwan Saddique)





EXPEDITIONEN

AN ELUSIVE SUMMIT - THE SOUTH FACE OF PUMARI CHHISH EAST

On June 25–29 2022, Christophe Ogier (AACZ), Victor Saucède, and Jérôme Sullivan made the first ascent of Pumari Chhish East (ca 6,850m) via the south face and upper west ridge. They later received a Piolet d'Or for this climb, which they named The Crystal Ship (1,600m, 6b A2 M7). The following article is adapted from a report originally written for the American Alpine Journal.

Pumari Chhish East (ca 6,850m) is part of a group of steep mountains north of the huge Hispar Glacier in Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region. The main summit, Pumari Chhish (7,492m), has only been climbed once in 1979 by a Japanese team that tackled the north ridge. Over the past 15 years, half a dozen expeditions had hoped to climb Pumari Chhish East via its south side, because of its beauty and also because it accords with the rules of the modern alpine game.

In April 2022, I was riding my bike to work when my good friends and climbing partners Jérôme and Victor called me. They know me well and convinced me to attempt Pumari Chhish East with them. Surprisingly, my higher-ups too approved my request for an eight-week vacation, and after a chaotic start, dealing with postponed visas and delayed gear shipments, we landed in Islamabad in mid-May. After four days of strenuous negotiations with the porters at Hispar village, on May 25 we started the three-day hike toward Pumari Chhish base camp, at about 4,500 meters, our relationship with the porters warming as we went.

The south face of Pumari Chhish East is a mighty 1,600-meter-high structure consisting of four soaring rock pillars crowned by snow mushrooms, with hanging seracs on the sides. We wanted to climb a direct line up this wall, not only for its aesthetic appeal but also to avoid hazardous snow on the ridges (a well-known peril in the Karakoram) and dangerous snow-loading in the large couloir systems. As we studied the face from base camp, our best option looked to be a beeline up the biggest snowfield, then the rightmost of the two massive rock pillars directly above the snow – the middle-left of the four pillars – ending at a snowy shoulder just right of a huge serac. It was one of the steepest but also safest lines, we felt, offering protection from debris falling from the mushrooms. From the shoulder, only a couple of hundred meters of easy terrain would gain the top.

We had decided to go earlier than previous expeditions to this massif, tackling the approach and acclimatization in May. This would set us up to be climbing in June, when we predicted the best conditions – with the alpine terrain still frozen and with snow cover on the glaciers – rather than later in summer, when rockfall and thawing snow mushrooms would present greater risk. The trade-off for our early arrival at base camp seemed to be more snowfall. The Karakoram climate is driven mostly by the westerly weather system rather than the monsoon coming off the Indian Ocean, which hits the mountains in Nepal, but in the last century, the shift of the westerly jet stream and the

Exposed bivy spot on the morning on the fourth day of climbing
(photo Christophe Ogier)



The route on the 1600m high south face of the Pumari Chhish East, climbed in 5 days



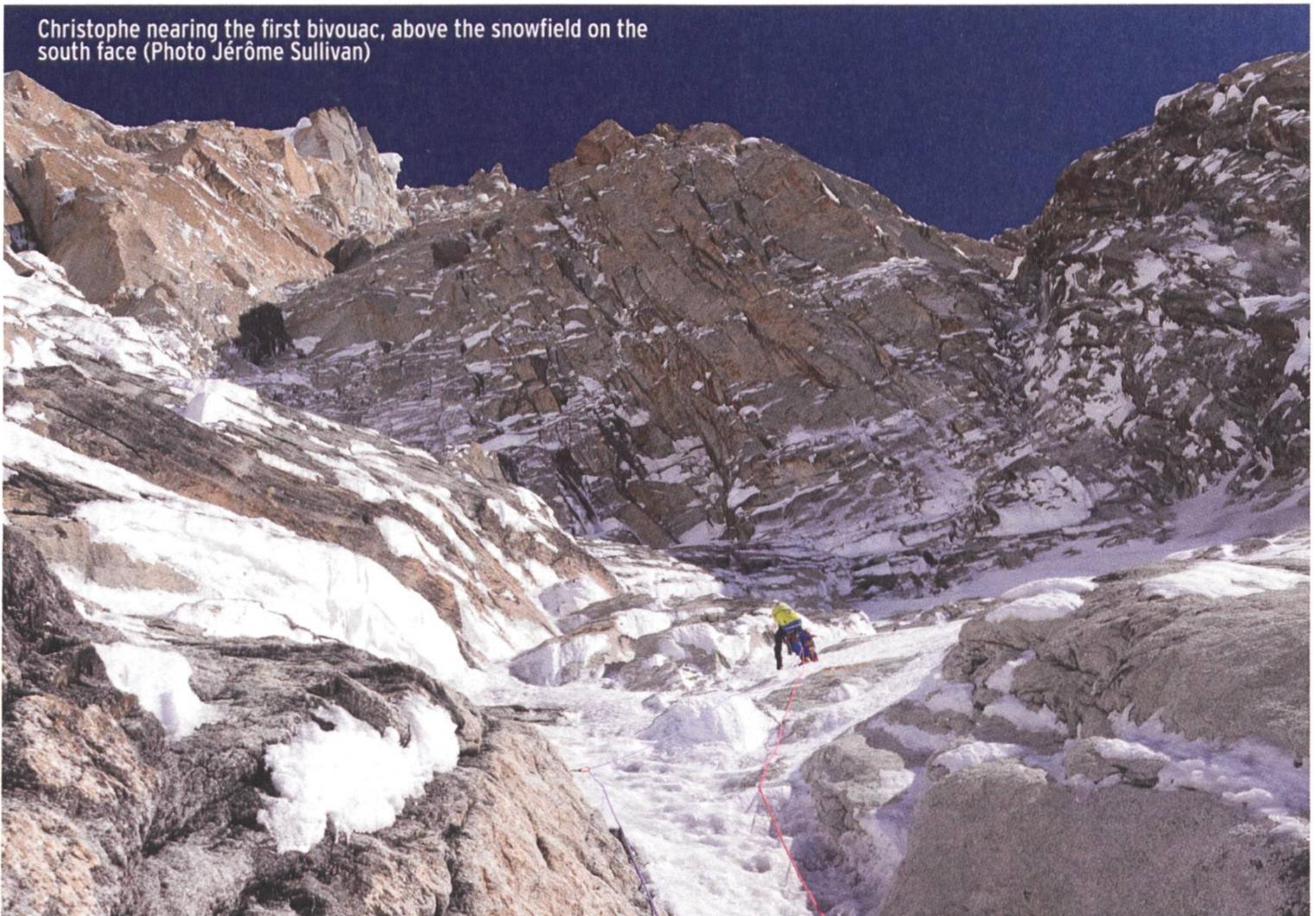
increasing use of irrigation in China have led to an increase in regional air moisture. The resulting precipitation is amplified by the Karakoram's particularly strong mountain relief, which lifts air masses and condenses moisture in the alpine valleys. This partly explains why the Karakoram's glaciers are among the few in the world that have not experienced dramatic retreat — a remarkable phenomenon called the "Karakoram Anomaly". During our 27-day wait at base camp, we had 26 days of snowfall, ranging from light showers to dumping events.

Eventually, a cloud-free day allowed us to acclimatize for a night on top of Rasool Sar (5,980m), an elegant summit above base camp, after completing the first ascent of its west ridge. After this climb we felt acclimatized, but were still doubtful about

the weather. To our surprise, Karl Gabl, our forecaster back in Europe, announced a seven-day weather window via satellite phone! Conditions still looked far from optimal — the kind that would turn you around in your home range. Snow had plastered almost all the crack systems, even on the overhanging sections, and the snowfield below was avalanching constantly during the warmest hours of the day. Still, we figured we'd at least have a look.

We left advanced base camp (5,300m) at midnight on June 25. It was a moonless night, and the steep wall was invisible in the darkness. We found our way up the snowfield by headlamp. Because of the avalanche hazard, we'd agreed on climbing and descending this 700-meter stretch of snow only by night or early morning. Due to soft snow

Christophe nearing the first bivouac, above the snowfield on the south face (Photo Jérôme Sullivan)



conditions at the bergschrund, we reached the top of the snowfield in late morning — slightly later than we'd hoped. Above us reared the 700-meter rock pillar. Aside from a handful of easy mixed pitches, the rock pillar involved steep, sustained climbing. We often used aid to overcome the overhangs or to clean snow blobs, ranging from microwave- to fridge-sized, that were plastered in the cracks. We made slow but constant progress using big-wall techniques: free climbing what we could and resorting to aid when the going became too difficult or too obstructed by snow; the two seconds jugged while the leader hauled. Frequently encountering blank terrain and having no clue where we would sleep next, we could have bailed after every pitch. But we kept going because the weather was holding and the chemistry between us was excellent. We each knew we should keep any doubts to ourselves to maintain high motivation — if any one of us were to voice his fears, it might topple our fragile equilibrium.

The fourth climbing day was key to our success. At that point, we'd endured three uncomfortable bivouacs. For the first night, hard against the foot of the rock pillar, we dug small, individual platforms in the snow, but constant spindrift forced us to hide deep in our sleeping bags in awkward positions. For the second bivy, which we reached long after sunset, I sat on an icy ledge with Victor, while Jérôme found a dubious hanging snow mushroom ten meters below us and draped himself over it. For the third, we pitched our two-person tent by excavating a platform in a snow spine just big enough for the tent's exact footprint. This bivy was the most stunning. The wall fell away below the paper-thin rib, leaving a fathomless void filled by the last golden rays of the sun. That night I lost a game of rock-

paper-scissors and so took what I felt was the worst spot, slightly hanging off the edge. After another miserable night, I declared myself incapable of leading that day. Victor saved us from bailing by making breakfast, after which he promptly kicked Jérôme and me out of the tent (one of his own specialties) to get on with the climbing.

Later that day, Jérôme put on our only pair of rock shoes and committed to the last unknown of the wall: two dead-vertical rock pitches at 6,600 meters. On one overhanging passage, he suddenly cut his feet loose and screamed, "Ha-ha, look at these jugs! It's like climbing at Riglos!" [Riglos is a massif of very steep conglomerate rock towers in Spain.] I gazed behind me at the thousands of peaks in the fading, late-afternoon light. K2 and Nanga Parbat had slowly emerged over the horizon as we climbed. Jérôme's pitch did not look much like Riglos, but I did feel my friend's excitement for realizing the lead of a lifetime. The last problem had been unlocked. That night we slept at the shoulder atop the pillar, a flat spot below easy terrain leading to the top.

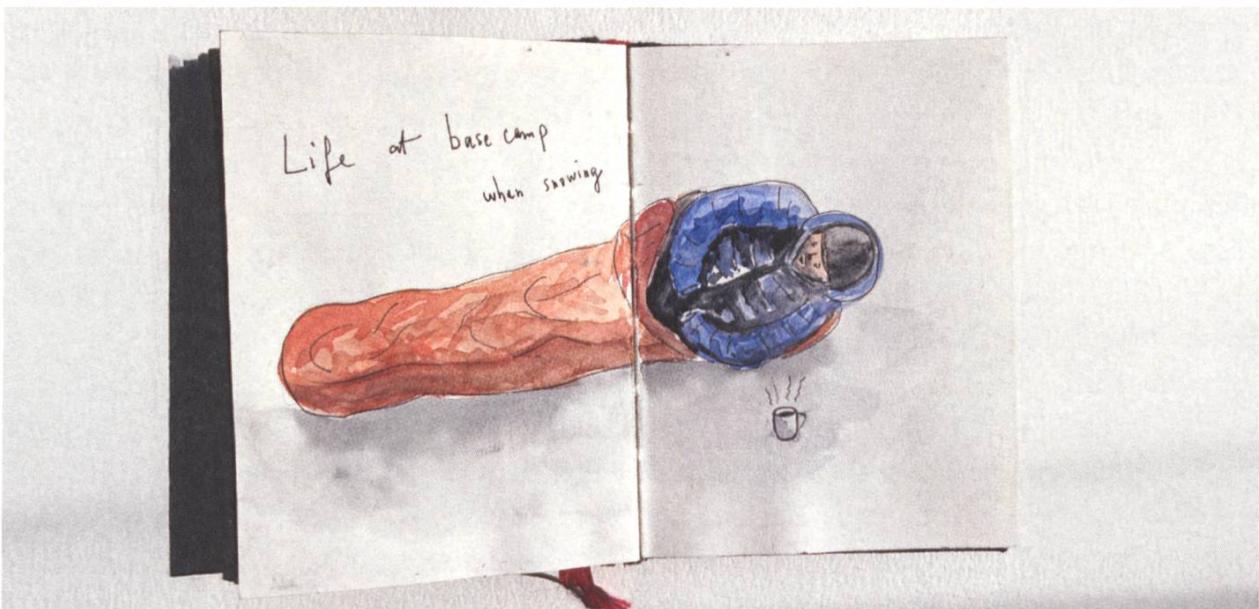
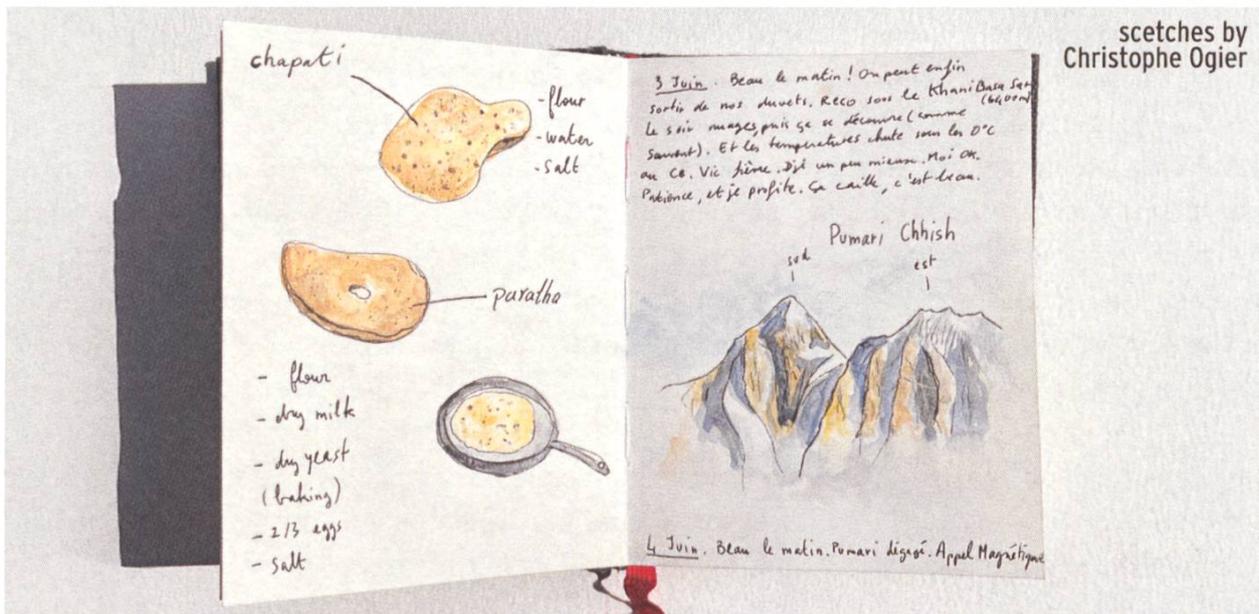
On the fifth and last climbing day, we found our way through the summit mushroom via its the north side and were on top at 10 a.m. We couldn't believe it. There was no wind, no clouds. Yet it was already time to go down. Back at our last bivy, we waited until shadow fell over the wall to minimize the risk of falling objects, then started rappelling in midafternoon. We reached the snowfield by nightfall, and at midnight we crawled into advanced base camp. It was June 30. We were supposed to meet our porters from Hispar that afternoon and then fly home four days later.



It felt good to see the porters again. On the second day of our hike out, we stopped at a shepherd's hut a few hours from Hispar where we'd also paused over a month earlier on the way in. Four walls made out of stone and an iron stove in the middle — that was it. A circular hole in the roof let in a ray of sun, brightening the weathered faces of the Burushaski people who gathered there. We shared yak-milk tea with an old shepherd. He'd once served in the Pakistani army and spoke broken English. "Success summit?" he asked. "Yes, success!"

I answered. "Dangerous?" "...A bit." At these words, he took me carefully in his arms and laid his head on my chest like a child, dropping a tear on my heart. Later in the evening, we reached Hispar in the vanishing summer light. We simultaneously felt deep exhaustion, brutal happiness, kinship, and nostalgia (already) over leaving this special place. It was obvious to all three of us that we'd just had one of the most memorable experiences of our lives.

Christophe Ogier



DUTCH PAMIR ALAI EXPEDITION

In September 2022, I took part in an expedition to the Pamir Alai region of Kyrgyzstan with nine other motivated young Dutch alpinists as the closure of a three-year program of the Dutch Alpine Club (NKBV). During the expedition I was involved in three first ascents in the Min Teke Valley. The valley has been visited by western climbers only twice. However, it's thought that most peaks have been climbed in the past by climbers from the Soviet states, presumably via the most accessible routes. In July 2019, a French expedition team visited the valley and climbed a route on Tobokal peak and Peak Achu. In September 2019, a group of Swiss alpinists visited the valley, climbing Kyzyl-Muz, Pik 3, and Pik Min Teke, and opened a new rock route on Peak Achu.

We arrived in the valley on September 7th and established basecamp at 3000m (39.68361N 70.46603E) on a plateau before the junction of the two branches of the valley. Earlier, French and Swiss teams had established basecamp a bit higher up. We reached the basecamp in a three-day hike from Bezpass. During the first two days in the valley, both the east and south branches of the valley were explored in small groups to identify potential lines for ascent. We utilized the opportunity as well for acclimatizing by bivouacking as high as possible up in the valley.

I was part of the reconnaissance group for the south branch where the most prominent peak is Min Teke, climbed by the Swiss team following the north-west ridge. We scrambled up a small rock peak (4105m) at the entrance of the valley. From there we envisioned a link-

up of three unnamed and unclimbed peaks on the east of Min Teke, of which one was attempted on a solo climb by one of the Swiss team members.

Two days later we left basecamp with a group of four to try our route. After navigating through the wild icefall of the Kapa Typ glacier we installed an ABC on the right branch above the icefall at around 4100m. The next day we summited the first peak (39°36'30.5"N 70°27'11.9"E, 4830m) via the easy west ridge. We named the peak "Borborduk çoku" which means "Central Mountain" in Kyrgyz language. After descending we decided to set up another camp on the col between the first peak and the second peak to take some rest and save energy for the next day which promised to be long.

The next day we continued, climbing the east face of the snowy peak which we named "Ak Too" (5149m), meaning "White Peak". The east face turned out to be an exhausting endeavor because we weren't very well acclimatized and the 50-60° firn/ice turned out to be tougher than we expected. After reaching the summit we continued to the third summit, which could be reached over a snowy ridge and a steep face. The snow on the ridge was knee deep and the traverse to the foot of the final face was again further than we estimated. When we reached the foot of the final face we found bad ice with a lot of air covered by a layer of snow. Perfect to climb, bad to protect. Being unacclimatized and not having bivy gear with us, we decided that it was too far to continue and turned around.



Looking back from our basecamp to the peaks, I could not get the last summit out of my mind: it was the most esthetic peak, and I wanted to be on the summit of this "screensaver mountain". It had to be tried once more... A week later I found three people motivated to leave basecamp for a second try. This time we skipped the first summit and climbed the east face of Ak Too in two days from basecamp. On the summit of Ak Too we made an ABC to be able to try the summit of our third peak on the third day. The next day we climbed the steep northeast face, following a 60° ice and snow slope. After the face we only needed to climb a rocky east ridge (up to 4c) to reach the actual summit which was formed by a rocky pinnacle. This rocky pinnacle seemed steep and compact, which made us unsure if we could climb the

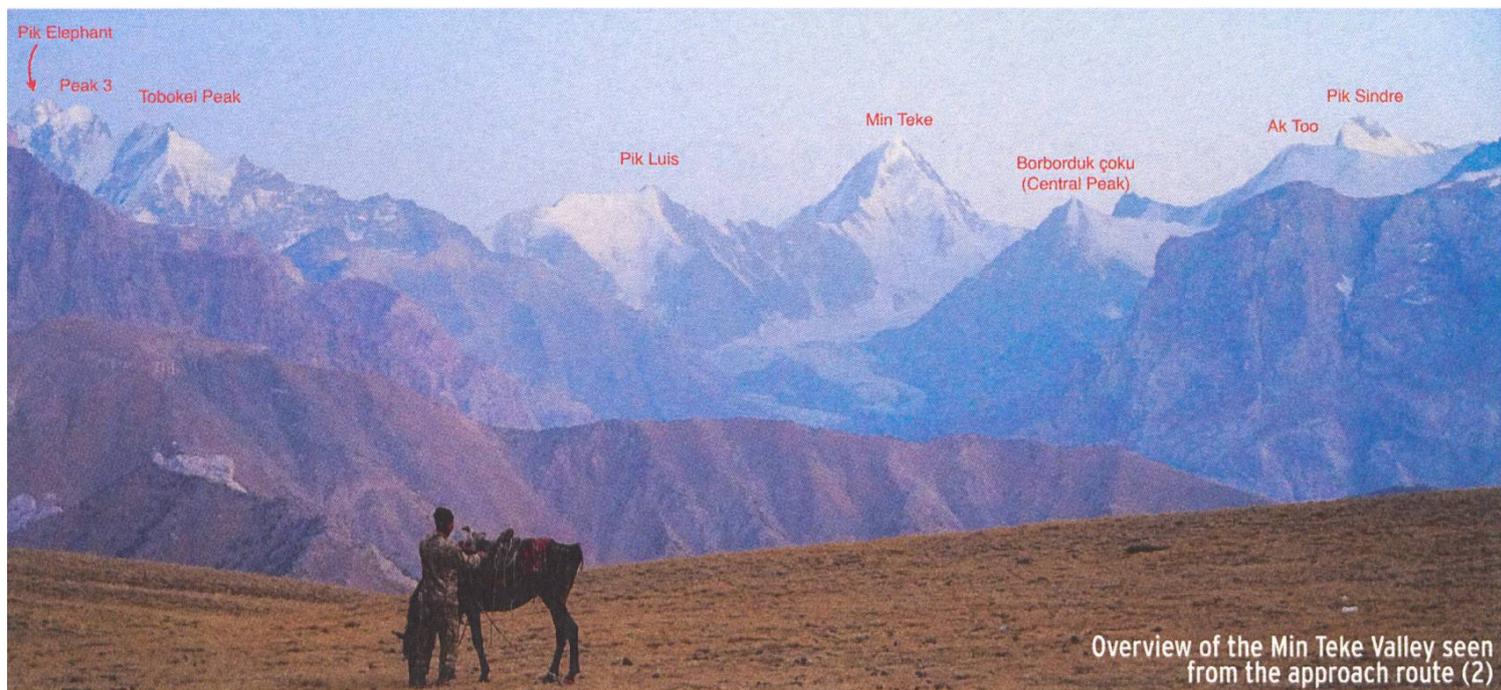
summit. Luckily, we found a way around the pinnacle by climbing an airy but awkward traverse around the rocky summit which was easier to climb from behind. Finally, we made it to the summit of the peak around mid-day on September 24th. We called the peak "Pik Sindre" (5380m, 39°35'51.1"N 70°26'06.0"E), after a deceased friend of one of our team members.

During our five-week expedition we climbed in total seven new alpine routes and 11 rock routes on the limestone walls around basecamp, with Pik Luis (600m rock up to 6c and 400m ice, 3 days) and two lines on Hidden Peak (100m TD+ AI5/M4) as most inspiring routes.

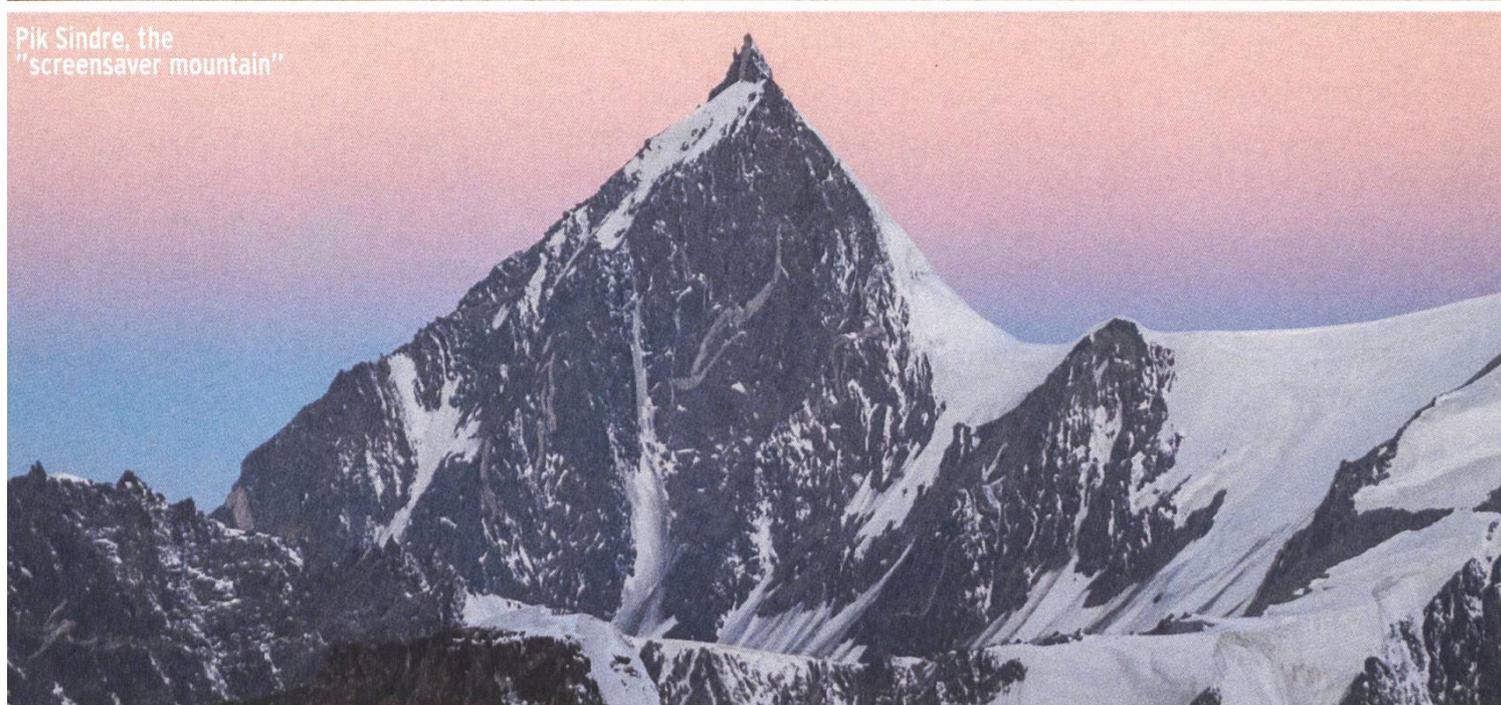
Martin Platteschor



In the ice fall
of the Kapa Typ
glacier



Overview of the Min Teke Valley seen from the approach route (2)



Pik Sindre, the "saversaver mountain"



The final ridge to the summit of Pik Sindre

EXPLORATIVE EXPEDITION NORTHERN CHANGLA HIMAL

In autumn 2024, Diogo Santos and Bas Mulder from the AACZ, together with Florian Büchting and Alex Sternfeld, went on an explorative expedition to the Angsi Glacier in Changla Himal, Nepal, with the goal to climb an unclimbed 6000m peak. The Angsi Glacier basin lies in the northeastern part of the Chandi Himal on the border with Tibet. It was first reached by a British expedition in 2019, then again in 2023 by more British climbers, who made the first ascent of Ganglung Kangri II (AAJ 2024). Although the basin could be accessed quickly from the Tibetan side, this is politically impossible at present and a long trek in West Nepal would be needed to reach it from the south.

After a flight to Simikot, we trekked up the Chuwa Khola for six days to a base camp at 5,050m (30.321393°N, 82.087713°E), east of the Angsi Glacier, arriving there on September 30th. We knew from the 2023 trip report that there was an easy passage to the Angsi Glacier basin over the col between Peaks 5,936m and 6,254m. We also think it might be possible to access the basin directly from the lower valley farther to the west, but we did not explore this. We established a camp in the basin, then on October 7th made the first ascent of Peak 6,013m (30°19'20.46"N, 82°2'13.53"E). It proved to be good acclimatization for the team, and we reached the top relatively easily (AD-) via the north ridge. Both the cold and altitude posed problems, giving us a good sense of the climbing conditions we should expect. Back at our camp in the basin, we found that one of the tents had been flipped upside down by the wind. Two sleeping pads were lost, and one tent pole had broken. Bas and Alex decided to return to base camp, but

Florian and Diogo stayed and the next day made the first ascent of Ganglung Kangri I (6,256m, 30°20'33.43"N, 82°0'42.25"E) by the south ridge (AD). The granite on the lower ridge was high quality, but in the upper section it became loose and brittle. From the summit they traversed east to Ganglung, completing the second ascent, and descended by the British route to the south. After returning to the basin with a repaired tent, Bas and Alex found out that the food that they had stacked on the glacier had been eaten by birds. Making due with a rationed breakfast and dinner, they climbed the north face of Peak 6,119m. It proved challenging due to deep powder snow and a general lack of ice, making good protection scarce. It was also bitterly cold, despite little wind. We descended the face by rappelling and downclimbing, naming our route Frostbound (D+). On the route Bas unfortunately suffered frostbite, and after a large blister formed, a heli evacuation was performed to prevent further damage. Luckily, Bas made a quick recovery and was able to keep all digits.

On the 13th, Diogo and Florian climbed Angsi Dong Dong (6,171m) via the southeast ridge (AD+) and then traversed the mountain by descending the north ridge. They accessed the southeast ridge by a beautiful northeast-facing couloir and reached the summit at sunset. On the 15th, using the existing tracks on Angsi Dong Dong and Ganglung Kangri, Alex made a solo traverse of the two, following the frontier ridge and finishing with an ascent of Ganglung Kangri II. During this AD+ traverse, Alex had great views of Kailash and the steep north face of Ganglung Kangri I. Diogo returned slightly earlier to Simikot

First approach to the Angsi glacier basin with heavy backpacks (photo Bas Mulder)



Florian on the Angsi Dongdong at sunset, 6171m (photo Diogo Santos)

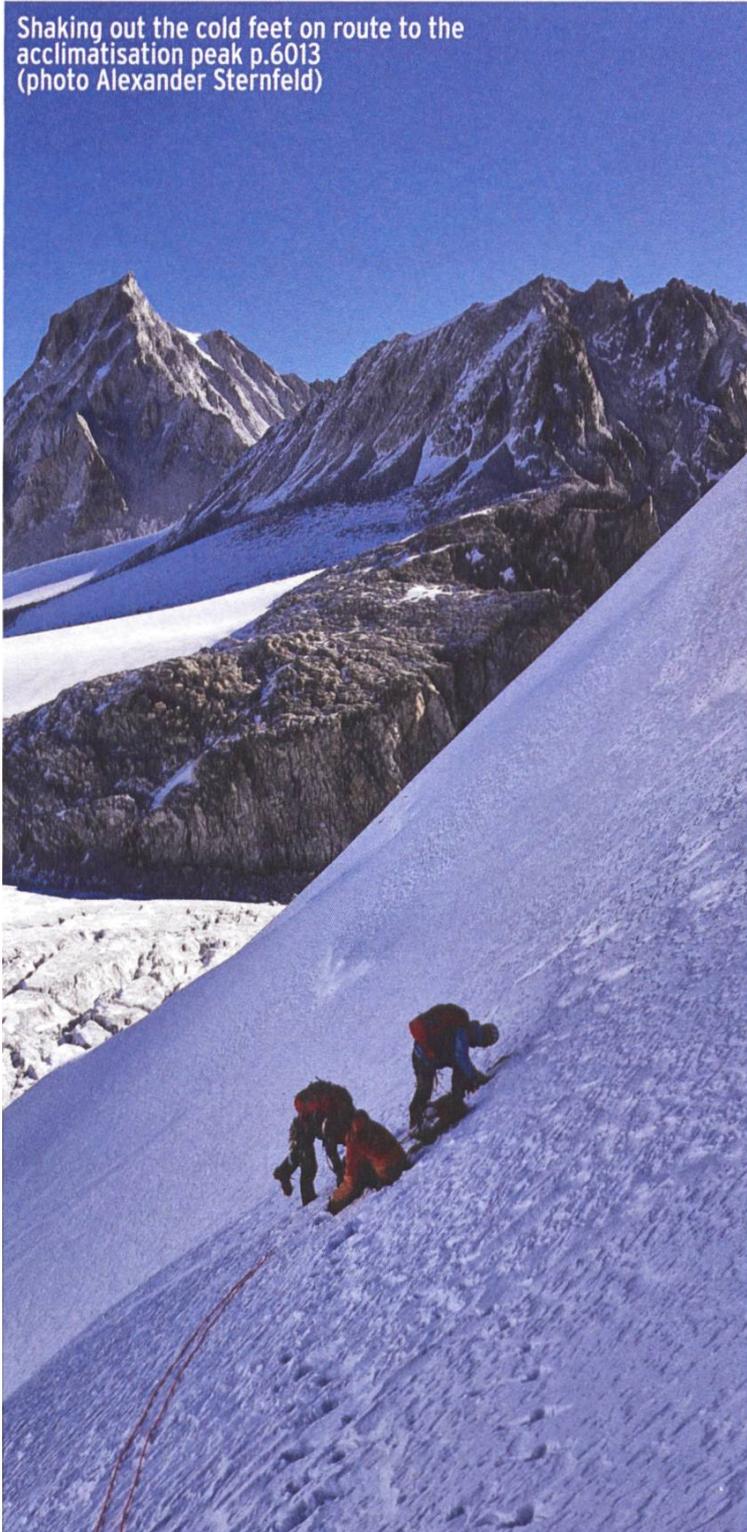


to prepare for his next expedition. For the final climb, Florian and Alex attempted the attractive northwest side of Peak 6,222m (30°16'20.60"N, 82°6'58.55"E), a border peak southsoutheast of base camp in the Changla Himal. Unfortunately, Florian contracted a sinus infection, and after an uncomfortable night beneath the face, he decided to go back. Alex continued alone but

was stopped by a challenging bergschrund. The next day, Alex and Florian began their return journey to Simikot. The weather during our stay had been generally good, with only two days of precipitation; the main difficulty had been the wind, which on some days reached 70 kph at 6,000m.

Bas Mulder

Shaking out the cold feet on route to the acclimatisation peak p.6013 (photo Alexander Sternfeld)



Frostbound, D+ North Face of P. 6119 12/10/2024, Bas Mulder & Alexander Sternfeld



EXPEDITION TO LARKYA

In mid-October 2024 I led a small team to Nepal to explore and climb in the northern Manaslu Himal, in the region around the Larkya La (5,106m). With me were club members Manuel Bonnet, Sarah Marti and Christina Zimmermann, plus my old friend Billy Pierson from California and Nepal newbie Samuel Gozel from the Romandie. The plan with this mixed-ability group was to acclimatise together while the first-timers learned their way, then climb a remote but non-technical peak and finally for the veterans (me and Billy) to try something technical, unclimbed and unlisted.

The Manaslu Circuit is by now the least secret "Geheimtipp" in Nepal. With landscape and culture to match the Khumbu and the pass-crossing geography to match the old Annapurna Circuit, it is the best trekking experience in Nepal and is gaining the crowds to match. We decided to use the plethora of teahouses, menus and transport options by making our base camp (BC) in a lodge in the last east-side village, Samdo (3,860m). This meant a dramatic reduction in transport and staff costs, and much more interesting and effective rest days than tents at 5,000 metres; the cost of gaining an extra 1,000 metres each time we went climbing was largely preprogrammed, as we had plans for four peaks in three different valleys.

The feeling of adventure started two weeks before departure, with Kathmandu submerged under one or two metres of water. Reports of a metre of new snow in Manaslu BC suggested we might repeat the 2022 Changla Expedition's trail-breaking marathon. Still, our

faithful agent Rajendra from Mountain Sun Valley was reassuring: "we are getting back to normal" and "they are reporting no problems on Larkya La."

Kathmandu was back to normal, meaning bad air but no floods, and we avoided the dense traffic due to the start of the Dasain holiday season. Our preparations were minimal, as we needed only high-camp food and cooking gas. However, our climbing permit for Larkya Peak (6,418m), an NMA "trekking peak," was not recognised as a Manaslu trekking permit by the Ministry of Tourism, and this led Rajendra into some paperwork gymnastics to let us stay in the area for 30 days.

Our one staff member was our trekking guide, Sambhu, a friend from the 2023 Kangchenjunga trip who handled all our baggage and checkpoint paperwork expertly. The six-hour drive to Machha Khola (930m) meant a leisurely day in the bucolic countryside of the lower Budhi Gandaki river. A puncture on one jeep cost little time, but the driver's sloppy repair led to an immediate second flat tyre with no spare. Luckily this happened only four kilometres from our goal, and the affected team members hitch-hiked with their baggage. The rest of the day was lost to another essential component of Nepalese expeditioning, acrimonious negotiations with mule owners followed by repacking our bags (from 25 back to 30 kilos).

In reality they had 13 mules and we needed only five, so the others were loaded with rice and cooking gas for lodges up the trail. Both the mules and the young muleteer,





Sarah and Christina in glacial terrain on P6621 (photo Bruce Normand)

Manaslu viewed from P6621. In line are Manaslu North (6694m), Larkya Peak (6418m) and Larkya North (6249m) with the route of ascent on the broad right-hand ridge.



whose only baggage for the week was his smartphone, were the best-behaved and most efficient we had ever seen. The first day was a hot and dusty "lowland" trek to Jagat (1,370m), admiring the massive river carving its way between 2,000-metre slopes. Our second day began with Dr. Sarah assisting a German trekker who was having a heart problem. Beyond the colourful village of Phidim, where we watched a local mask-dance festival, the landscape steepened dramatically, with waterfalls cascading down tall cliffs and vertiginous forested slopes bringing us to a bridge suspended a hundred metres above the river at the junction to the holy Tsum Valley and Ganesh peaks. The Manaslu route turned northwest on steep trails carved into the canyon walls to the waystation of Deng (1,860m).

Our third day took us into a transition zone, with terraced fields of corn and amaranth hemmed in by snow-dusted mountain walls rising directly to 6,000 metres, and red chili peppers drying beside mani walls. Already tired of the trekking scene, where local guides herd large flocks of foreigners (mostly staring at the ground or their mobile devices) from one teahouse to the next, we skipped the regular stopover in the stone-built village of Namrung and continued to a deserted wooden lodge in Lihi (2,920m). Day 4 took us through the Manaslu heartland, where the Sherpa community enjoys its new-found trekking affluence by building new lodges on every street corner, as well as new monasteries in Lihi and Shyala to accompany the traditional ones in Lho and Sama. Thickening clouds prevented us from enjoying the postcard view of Manaslu's E Face, and a grey afternoon did nothing to help us appreciate unaesthetic Sama (3,500m),

which suffers from its proximity to the eight-thousander circus in Manaslu BC.

Our final trekking day was to Samdo, located at the confluence of three valleys and founded by Tibetans leaving the village of Ru, just across the 5,000-metre Lajyun La, where the Chinese arrived in 1950. Today the multiple border passes do not seem to be strictly policed, allowing some cross-border economy. We continued acclimatising with a day hike to P5177 to admire the local giants, Manaslu, Ngadi Chuli and Himal Chuli, all with orange granite walls, cascading glaciers and multiple satellites. To our north were the dry, red hills of Tibet, to the west Larkya Peak with its "trekking" summit (Larkya North, 6,249m) and directly south the unclimbed and precipitous Pangpoche six-thousanders. The Larkya La was indeed snow-free, highlighting the dramatic rain-shadow effect of the giants.

Our "acclimatisation" plan was P6621, north of the Larkya La. Accompanied by two day-porters to bring our climbing equipment to 4,900 metres, we passed many slow trekkers and a grazing herd of unconcerned blue sheep while enjoying blue skies and Manaslu vistas. On the next day, double-carrying all our gear into rising winds and afternoon snowshowers brought us back to reality. A troublesome approach over talus fields and granite slabs put us in a high camp at snow line (5,400m). Now moving much more efficiently, we split into two rope teams to optimise a cloudless day with spectacular views of Manaslu. Manu led Billy and Bruce through straightforward crevasse terrain to a plateau at 6,000 metres, later reached by Christina and Sarah. From there we attacked a 40-degree firm slope, reaching 6,250 metres, where we could peer over the East Ridge into Tibet, before Bruce's

crampon bail broke. This sudden end to the day meant a quick abseil/downclimb for an orderly return to high camp, and the next day to Samdo.

Our adventure plan was P6767 on the Tibetan border, named Phu Kang Go by the only team to have reached it. Only two expedition reports exist for the Fukan valley, which lies north of P6621 and south of the long border ridge leading to P6767 and Himlung. We found a flat, wild valley with vultures circling above us and blue sheep jumping down crags to make fun of us. Our one porter had orange-dyed hair and took 150 selfies while carrying more of our excess load than his obedient horse, which he said was tired. Luckily the broken red-black rock formed good moraines, which helped with route-finding and load-carrying on Days 2 and 3. Double-carries and heavy trail-breaking by Manu and Bruce in deep snow on Days 3 and 4 brought us to an airy camp at 5,800 metres on the ridge separating the crevasse-riven Fukan and Hindu glaciers, with a clear view to the upper plateau. Our summit day was among the best even in my long career: no major difficulties and no desperate trail-breaking, only endless wide vistas to the south over the Manaslu Himal, north over the red hills of Tibet, west past the Himlung-Himjung-Nemjung triptych of triangular seven-thousanders to the Annapurna Himal and east over Pangpoche to the pointed Ganesh peaks. Unfortunately Billy felt ill and Samuel had cold-feet problems, but Sarah and Christina kept pace admirably and we celebrated four-way success in one of the most remote and beautiful spots on the planet. A safe descent by nightfall set us up for one marathon return day to Samdo.

With Manu, Christina and Sarah wanting a last peak and Samuel his first, we decided for Larkya North. Billy was still ill and we had no time for both Larkya Peak and our "real" project, so he chose to focus on the latter, instead helping Sambhu find horses to transport our gear over the pass. Losing another day to weather meant we had only three to spare, so would need to tag the summit and descend to Bimthang (3,700m) on the same day. Reaching BC at 5,100 metres, we met a Swiss client with three guides, one of whom had run up to check – "many rope, no problem." The next day we continued to the high camp at 5,600 metres, where we met the guide and client descending – "yes, summit; many summit, no problem." Indeed the route was festooned with white static lines on well-trodden tracks from 30 to 45 degrees. On our last morning, we left before dawn and Manu led Christina and Sarah up ropes and moderate snow while Bruce stayed with Samuel, again needing many foot-warming breaks. At 6,000 metres, however, the tracks just stopped. Suddenly we understood "many summit:" the guides announce that some random dome is the top and the clients buy it – game over and we can all go home.

Team AACZ did not share this ethic, and Manu ploughed up a steepening and deepening slope until his way was barred by a large crevasse, still well short of the summit. Now we had a time problem, and Christina, Samuel and Sarah decided to head down while Bruce and Manu roped up to navigate the crevasse, an exposed ridge and finally some 45-degree firm to the real summit. Clearly the first party there this post-monsoon, we enjoyed another angle on the fantastic mountainscapes and retraced our steps, catching the others at high camp. A slow and heavy carry took us

over the Larkya La shortly before sunset, and we used our headlamps to reach Bimthang by 8 pm for a well-earned daal bhat.

Sunrise in Bimthang reveals the most dramatic mountains yet, with the shadowy vertical walls of Phungi down-glacier and a glowing orange rock spire up-glacier. This is P6358, part of the three-summit Kechakyu massif, and was the real mission of the expedition. Billy and Bruce took a half-day rest to prepare while Christina and Manu left with Sambhu. With Sarah carrying their ropes for the first two hours of the approach, Billy and Bruce hiked along the moraine of the Kechakyu Glacier to camp at 4,300 metres with ghostly evening views of Manaslu above the Hochnebel. The next day was simple: straight up a thousand metres of grass, moraine, snow and ice to an unknown col with a one hundred-metre snow descent to a hanging glacier entirely inaccessible from below, 100% remote only hours from the Manaslu Circuit. A convoluted icefall guarded the upper basin below the Kechakyu peaks and the pair decided to take one day to find a way through then one to climb a peak. Some hours of hard effort and unsettling ice blocks later, only one fin leading to a step across a deep hole onto a five-metre ice face separated them from the upper basin, and Billy led the galling move. The view from the basin was disappointing: the southwest side of Kechakyu Spire was completely snow-free and would require multiple pitches of slab-climbing. A snow route on Kechakyu I (6,530m) would require crossing cascades of steep, red gravel. Kechakyu II (6,479m) seemed to have an ice ridge above a snow face. We took pictures to discuss options over dinner back at the tent. Reversing the hard move on my snow belay,

some ice broke under Billy's foot and he pitched over backwards into the ice fin, then hung upside down above the void. Yelling with pain and anger, he righted himself and climbed out, but the damage was done: two fractured ribs and his next four weeks would be painful and miserable. Game over. At the tent Billy ransacked our painkillers but could barely move or sleep. Freezing morning wind made packing doubly slow, then I carried extra weight to the col before Billy insisted on bringing his share down. We were back in Bimthang just after dark.

Other than wrangling four haul bags with almost all the team gear for six people, our exit was the same as for the others: a long day's hike down to Dharapani, the junction with the Annapurna Circuit, then a long day in a shared jeep and van back to Kathmandu. Billy had a friend who was training Nepalese mountain guides in Manang, and headed up to visit, but could not do more than sightseeing. Back in Kathmandu, Dr. Sarah had been at the overloaded and under-resourced neurology department of the Bir Hospital all week, installing a donated Swiss EEG machine she had brought in her hand luggage. We rounded off the trip by continuing our new habit of donating the surplus mountain food and gas to Rinzin Lama, the snow-leopard researcher we assisted as part of the Changla Expedition, for his next cat-counting campaign in Western Nepal. In summary, despite the massive and ongoing changes to the mountains and to modern Nepal, it remains a place where one can still find all the adventure, drama and technical difficulty of a full expedition experience.

Bruce Normand

