

Kondus Valley, Pakistani Karakoram 2019

Location: Kondus Valley, Pakistan
Dates: June 4th to September 2nd 2019
Aim: The FA of Link Sar (7041m)
Expedition Reference: 19-16
Author: Graham Zimmerman
Year: 2019

Introduction

Steve Swenson, Chris Wright, Mark Richey and Graham Zimmerman spent the summer of 2019 on an expedition to the Pakistan Karakoram's Kondus Valley. They spent their time in the Kondus attempting the East Face of unclimbed Link Sar (7041m), on which they were ultimately successful.

Expedition Members



Graham Zimmerman, Leader (NZ/USA)

32 years old, Bend, OR, Film Producer

15 years of experience alpine climbing with 18 expeditions to technical routes in the greater ranges

- 2014 Finalist, Piolet d'Or (France)
- 2010 NZ Mountaineer of the Year (New Zealand)
- FA West Face Direct, (M6 5.10x A2+ 95°, 6,000'), Celeno Peak (13,395'), Saint Elias, AK May 2016
- FA Southwest Ridge (M6, 90°, 6000') of K6 West (7040m), Pakistani Karakoram, August 2015
- FA Changi Tower (6500m) via the North Ridge (M6, 5.10 A2, 2,800'), Pakistani Karakoram, Aug 2015
- FA Northeast Buttress (V, M7, WI4, A1, 4,700') of Mt Laurens, Lacuna Glacier, Alaska, May 2013
- FA Vitalogy (V, WI5, M6+, 5.9, A1 4,600'), SW Buttress of Mt Bradley, Ruth Gorge, Alaska, April 2010
- Numerous other FAs in Alaska, WA state, CO state, British Columbia, Patagonia, Kyrgyzstan and New Zealand
- Ascents of 5.12, M9, WI6+ and A3+



Chris Wright (UK/USA)

36 years old, Bend, OR, Mountain Guide

12 years of experience alpine climbing with 10 expeditions to technical routes in the greater ranges

- IFMGA Mountain Guide (93rd American), February 2014
- FA West Face Direct, (M6 5.10x A2+ 95°, 6,000'), Celeno Peak (13,395'), Saint Elias, AK May 2016
- FA (solo) Wish You Were Here (IV WI4 M6 A0, 1,400'), Abrahamstind, Lofoten Islands, Norway, February 2016
- FA Daily Bread (III WI5 M6 1,200'), Falkfjorden, Lofoten Islands, Norway, March 2015
- Schmid Route (TD WI4 M5 4,200'), Onsite solo in 4 hours Hörnli to summit, Matterhorn, Switzerland, Oct 2014
- FA (route and peak) Purgation (VI WI6+ M6 3,600'), Pangbuk North (6,589m), Khumbu, Nepal, Oct 2013
- FA Terror (VI WI6 M7 R/X A2 5,000'), Mooses Tooth, Alaska, April 2013
- Numerous other FAs in Alaska, OR state, CO state, Nepal and Norway



Steve Swenson (USA)

65 years old, Seattle, WA, Retired

40 years of experience alpine climbing with 30+ expeditions to technical routes in the greater ranges.

- Winner of 2012 Piolets d'Or
- FA Changi Tower (6500m) via the North Ridge (M6, 5.10 A2, 2,800'), Pakistani Karakoram, Aug 2015
- Sasser Kangri II in Indian Karakoram 7518m First ascent via south face. 2012
- Latok 2 7108m in Pakistan Karakoram - 2nd Ascent of S Ridge, 1st alpine style ascent 2006
- K2 8611m in Chinese Karakoram North Ridge – w/o oxygen. Led expedition, second US ascent of K2. 1990



Mark Richey (USA)

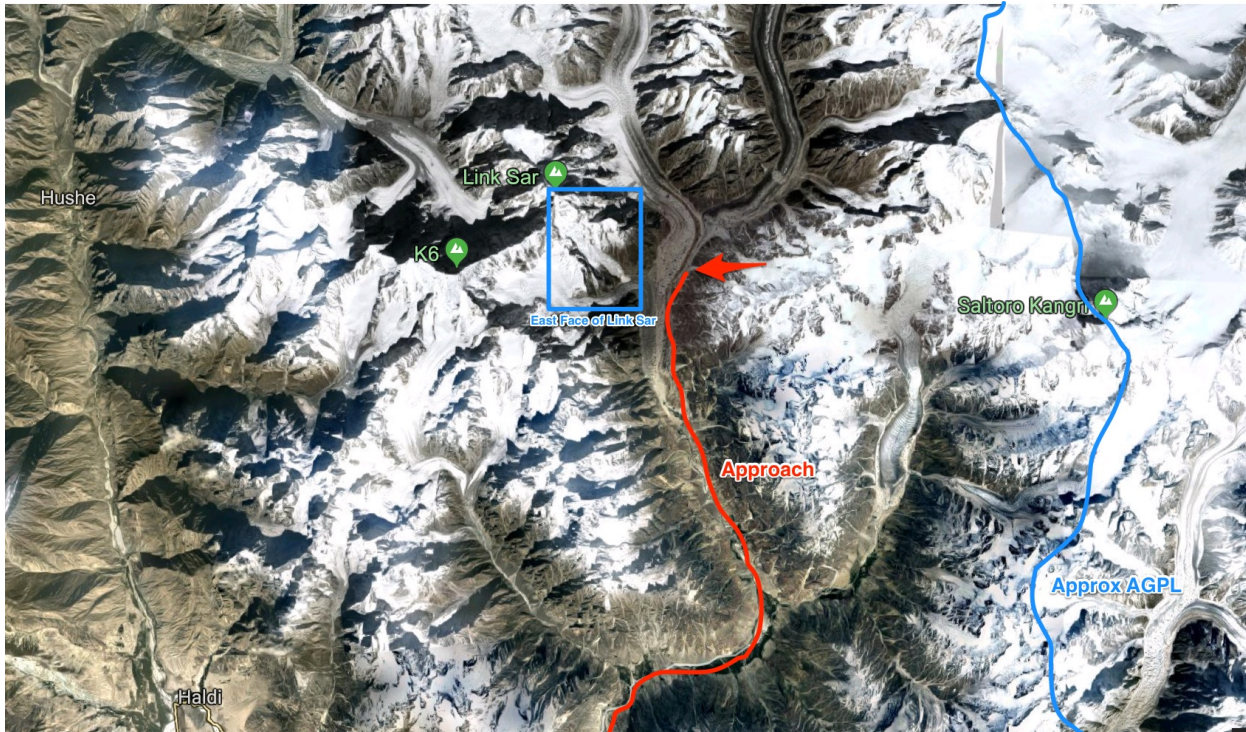
61 years old, Boston, MA, Business Owner

35 years of experience alpine climbing with 30+ expeditions to technical routes in the greater ranges.

- Winner of 2012 Piolets d'Or
- Sasser Kangri II in Indian Karakoram 7518m First ascent via south face. 2012
- Numerous significant ascents in the greater ranges including Mount Everest.

Adventurous Activities

Destination Area



Satellite Imagery of general area (google maps)

GPS coordinates

Basecamp - 35°25'21.2"N 76°39'37.5"E

Link Sar - 35°26'51.5"N 76°35'54.2"E

Research materials and Information Sources

The research for this trip was thorough and took place through the American Alpine Journal, the Alpine Journal, the British Alpine Club's Himalayan Index and direct contact with alpinists who have been in the area including Steve Swenson (a member of this expedition who has spent extensive time in the region and did the vast bulk of the research for this trip). These resources provided a very strong idea of what the team should expect in terms of costs, timing, logistics and weather. The route itself remained fairly unknown as the only attempts were either by Swenson (in 2001 with little success) or in the 1970s.

Consultations with other alpinists as well as individuals familiar with the political situation in Pakistan allowed the team confidence that they would be able to maintain security while in country. Just before the expedition departed a wealth of beta was procured from the Polish Alpine Club which was very helpful in accessing Changi Tower.

Training

In order to prepare for the expedition the team members adhered to a rigorous training regime which involved aggressive circuit and cardiovascular training as well as time in climbing gyms. Training in the form of climbing itself was of course also undertaken by the team. This included ascents in Canada and the USA.

Permission and Permits

The climbing permit for Link Sar was applied for in January, it was assumed that this would provide a large amount of leeway in terms of time to get the visa (in most cases the approved permit is required for the visa application to be processed).

Three weeks before departure, the team received the permit for Link Sar.

Finally, it needs to be noted that the requirements for the Liaison Officer have remained the same as in 2015. Before 2015 it was required that the team outfit the LO, now it is simply required that the team give the LO a 1500\$ stipend to purchase his own equipment. Seeing as most of the LOs have no experience with mountains (let alone with the snow) it needs to be ensured that they are adequately prepared for their time in the mountains (there is a lot of used climbing equipment available in Skardu). They are also paid a stipend during their time with the team of 30\$/day in Islamabad and 15\$/day in Skardu and beyond. This should not be paid for days the team is covering their expenses since it is to cover food and lodging. Many larger commercial expeditions will simply give the LO their food stipend for the whole time as well as the equipment stipend while also giving them equipment and paying for all their food and lodging.

It is important that smaller expeditions hold a hard line with these stipends since they incur huge additional costs to the small budgets of smaller teams. A precedence must be maintained that small teams only pay the stipends for days when the LO is paying for their own food and lodging and do not bring the LO additional equipment and rather allow them to purchase their own with the equipment stipend.

In Country Logistics

For climbing expeditions in Pakistan it is highly recommended to hire a local service provider to help with logistics. In this case the team hired the highly reputable Nazir Sabir Expeditions. The owner Nazir is deeply connected and has been running expeditions in Pakistan for decades.

In the case of this expedition the team opted to deal with many of their own logistics, including hiring and paying cooks and transportation. Many expeditions these days chose to have their logistics support company take care of all of this with a lump sum. This team chose to deal with this themselves due to Steve's experience in the area and his personal connections. It is also the best way to ensure that all those involved with the expedition are paid fairly.

Security

The team took a few major considerations due to security concerns.

The first was to not take the land route from Skardu to Islamabad (via the Karakoram Highway). The team felt that this drive would expose them to areas they felt unsafe and therefore decided to wait for the flights between these two cities. Luckily for this team the weather was good and the flights were running on schedule when they needed them, this should not be considered the norm.

The second was to keep a low profile in Islamabad, utilizing private drivers to get around when needed and staying in a nice hotel which had it's own security detail.

In Baltistan (Skardu and beyond) the team was far less concerned about security, despite this the government was supplying police officers for foreign teams. The armed guard was not felt to be necessary but was by no means unwelcome.

The final note needs to be that this team felt at not point were they threatened during the trip.

Transportation

USA -> Islamabad - All team members from their homes in the USA and congregated in Dubai followed by a second flight to Islamabad. Both legs were with Emirates, were on time and were very comfortable.

Islamabad -> Skardu - The team flew from Islamabad to Skardu due to security issues. This flight was taken with Pakistani International Airlines. While the team had no issues with weather delays on this flight, this should not be considered the norm, long delays are a regular occurrence.

Skardu -> Basecamp - The team hired jeeps to carry all of their equipment, food and gas to the basecamp which was situated on the road in the Kondus Valley.

On the exit from the mountains all of the same methods were used in reverse.

Insurance

All team members carried rescue insurance through Global Rescue. They made sure that GR was well aware of the plans for the expedition and had the gps coordinates of Link Sar and basecamp.

In Pakistan it is required to purchase insurance for all personnel. This was purchased to cover all porters and cooks. This was done by way of Nazir Sabir Expeditions.

Travel Transport and Freight

All equipment was carried with the team members on their plane flights.

Food and Accommodation

All specialty climbing food was transported from the United States. This included bars, freeze dried meals and recovery powders. In Islamabad there is a 'western store' where many items can be purchased including peanut butter, chocolate, pasta and jams. All the most basic meal items (flour, sugar ect) were purchased in Skardu.

Communications

The team carried a Iridium Sat phone for forecasts and in case of emergency.

Medical Arrangements

On this expedition Graham was appointed the medical expert due to his experience as a EMT on the Yosemite Search and Rescue team.

An extensive medical kit was carried that included equipment and medicine for dealing with both trauma and sickness. Special equipment worth mentioning are a stethoscope (for monitoring lungs for liquid indicating HAPE) and a pulse-ox (for monitoring both recovery and blood o2 saturation).

Below is a list of medications carried, it is also noted whether they were purchased in country (at a chemist in Islamabad) or brought from the US (in most cases they were both brought from the states and more was purchased in country, the notes below are to serve as a reference for what can be bought in country since it can incur a significant cost savings to purchase drugs in country).

- azithromycin (Pakistan)
- ciprofloxim (Pakistan)
- amoxicillin (Pakistan)
- diamox (Pakistan)
- Dexamethazone (USA)
- naproxen (USA)
- ibuprofen (USA) (note, a large amount of ibu was brought since it can be helpful to porters)
- paracetamol (Pakistan)
- peptobismol (USA)
- Dramamine (USA)
- vicadine (USA)
- OxyContin (USA)

Beyond this it should be noted that all team members were well versed high angle and glacier rescue techniques.

Environmental and Social Impact Assessment

A strict 'leave no trace' policy was followed on the entire expedition. In town the teams was careful to be respectful of the local Muslim culture by wearing pants and not eating pork.

Diary/log:

From July 31st to August 8th, 2019, Graham Zimmerman, Steve Swenson, Chris Wright and Mark Richey made the first ascent of Link Sar (7,041 meters) in the Central Pakistani Karakoram via its 3,400-meter Southeast Face. Having been the object of at least nine expeditions, the first ascent of this peak has been a highly sought-after prize for the climbing community. The team is calling their route the Southeast Face (M6+ WI 4 90°, 2300m), but the grade does a poor job of portraying the challenge of this route that Karakoram veteran Swenson calls “one of the most complex and difficult routes I have ever climbed.” Swenson originally attempted the route in 2001 with George Lowe, Joe Terravecchia, Steve Larson, Andy Tuthill and Eric Winkleman. It was an amazing opportunity for the team since the face lies very near the contested border between Pakistan and India (known as the Actual Ground Position Line or AGPL), and the eastern aspects of the mountain had not been permitted since the mid 1970s when a Japanese team made the first attempts to reach the summit. Despite the fact that the team did not make it very high on the peak, it inspired Swenson to return, and he made repeated attempts over the following decade to get another permit for the peak but was denied.

Over the ensuing years, a number of attempts were made on the peak's western aspect via the Charakusa Valley.

In 2015, Swenson and Zimmerman, along with Scott Bennett, made the first ascent of nearby Changi Tower (6500m) via its North Ridge (M6 5.10 A2, 1200m) and from its summit caught an excellent view of the massive southeast face of Link Sar, supplying better information about the best way to climb the route and further spurring motivations to attempt the mountain.

In 2017, it looked like the area was once again opening to climbing, and Swenson and Zimmerman were finally given a permit to access Link Sar's southeast face. They also invited Wright on the expedition as he and Zimmerman had formed a strong partnership in the mountains of Alaska. During this two-and-a-half month expedition, the team experienced atrocious weather, and after multiple attempts reached only 5,900 meters. Despite the failure to climb the peak that season, the team made a myriad of observations of the face's immense complexities, providing them with the information that they needed to make an ascent that was safe from the many objective hazards that litter the wall.

This year, the three climbers, alongside Mark Richey, with whom Swenson won a Piolet d'Or (the equivalent of a gold medal in alpinism) in 2012, returned to the southeast face. They departed their homes in the United States on June 4.

The approach to the peak is made via the Kondus Valley and then up the Kaberi Glacier. Since it is in the militarized area near the AGPL, there is a road that runs adjacent to the glacier and up to the location of the team's base camp where they arrived on June 10. The elevation of this base camp was 3,600 meters. From their past experience, they knew one of the primary cruxes of the route was acclimatization. The Kaberi valley is one of the deepest in the Karakoram and its walls are precipitously steep. On most 7,000-meter peaks, a nearby easier 6,000-meter peak would be used to acclimatize before starting on the primary objective, but no such peak exists in the Kaberi, so the team was forced to use the lower portions of their route on the Southeast face for acclimatization. To help with this, they set up an advanced base camp at the top of the meadows that make up the bottom 1,100 meters of the face. In order to do this, they hired five local porters for whom they fixed a network of ropes on a series of easy, but exposed, low 5th class slabs to ensure their safety while making the ascent to ABC.

The team had ABC established by July 4, but at this point were forced to wait for the conditions on the mountain to improve. The 2018-19 winter in the Karakoram was one of the snowiest on record, making the mountain very dangerous, a fact that was emphasized by a size 3 wet slab avalanche that was observed low on the mountain from ABC on July 7. Thankfully, the weather in early to mid July was excellent and allowed for conditions to improve considerably at which point the team was able to climb to 6,000 meters on the peak and consider themselves sufficiently acclimatized to attempt the route. On the morning of July 31, the team started their alpine style attempt on the route from advanced base camp at 7:30 am (the disparity between the 3,400-meter face and the 2,300-meter "route" come from the fact that they started from ABC). During the cool morning hours, they climbed steep snow and glacial terrain to a camp at 5,100 meters where they spent the afternoon resting before launching on the lower crux of the route in the early evening.

Climbing at night was a necessity due to the intense heat at that altitude on the southeastern aspect. The crux section of the route involved 10 sustained pitches of climbing up to M6+ that even in the middle of the night were in very warm, wet and subsequently challenging conditions. Arriving at an excellent and safe bivy at 5,900 meters around 9:30 am, they once again stopped to wait out the heat of the day and recover from climbing through the night.

The following morning, they departed just before dawn. Above the second camp was a serac barrier that was both a cause for concern in terms of overhead hazard and presented a considerable challenge to circumnavigate. It is important here to note that this serac wall had changed significantly from when the team had observed it in 2017 and presented as a major surprise. Luckily, the team was able to find a way around the righthand side of the wall that involved minimal exposure and well formed WI 4 ice climbing. After one hundred meters of easier climbing, the team found themselves at another large and safe bivouac at 6,200 meters, situated below the final mixed band of the route.

At this point, the team hunkered down for a forecasted 36 hours of bad weather that arrived in the mid-afternoon of August 3, their third day on the route.

On August 5, at 3 am, they departed their third bivy in poor weather relying on the clearing forecasted for that morning. An hour above camp, they were forced to stop as they were facing technical mixed climbing in weather that had still not improved. They dug a snow cave in order to stay warm and get out of the blowing snow, where they waited until 9 am. When the weather finally cleared and they were able to continue, three excellent pitches of ice and mixed ground led to a large snow fin that involved five pitches of very challenging and unprotectable snow climbing and one pitch of steep and hard serac ice. At sunset, they finally reached a good bivy site at about 6,700 meters.

Starting at sunrise on August 5, the team left their tents in place and launched for the summit. An excellent pitch of alpine ice led to more challenging snow climbing intermixed with short sections of ice and mixed terrain. The nature of the climbing gave the team little confidence in their ability to reach the summit, even as it seemed to loom just overhead. In the final dramatic pitches to the summit Wright gave an excellent effort, reaching a point approximately 20 meters below the top after a long lead block, where he was turned around by steep, unconsolidated snow. Richey, who has a deep background in the steep challenging snow conditions of Peru, then set off into the final meters reaching the summit at sunset. As can be imagined, the team was elated. The route had taken six days of hard climbing during which they ascended over thirty technical pitches and covered roughly 8,000 vertical feet from their advanced base camp and about 11,300 feet from base camp proper.

On August 8, nine days after departing, the team arrived back at advanced base camp. The descent off the peak had taken three days due to the challenge of making anchors in the bad snow conditions and the need for the team to once again wait out the heat of the days.

This first ascent of Link Sar had taken a maximal physical and mental effort from the entire team. It required all of their collective experience and strength. They are proud to report that the intense decision making required to make the ascent safely came from a very democratic, discussion-oriented decision-making process without which they do not feel that they would have reached the top of this elusive and beautiful summit.

Finally, it is important to note that the expedition was undertaken adhering to strict environmental standards, deep respect for the communities local to the Karakoram, and that the carbon footprint incurred by the expedition has been calculated and will be offset (with the help of Protect Our Winters). The team would like to first and foremost thank their families and friends for supporting them in the endeavor to climb this peak.

Conclusions

The Kondus Valley, Pakistani Karakoram 2019 Expedition was a major success with everyone having come home safe and sound having made the first ascent of Link Sar. Huge thanks to the Mount Everest foundation for their gracious support, you can expect to be hearing from us again soon. :)

Appendix 1 - Budget

Date	Expense		Graham	Chris	Steve	Rupees	Comments			
5/3/17	Rescue insurance	USD			407.55					
5/3/17	Flight	USD			1,443.06					
5/3/17	Cashier's check for visas	USD			576					
5/3/17	Cashier's check fee	USD			8					
5/10/17	Postage for visas	USD			34.5					
5/10/17	Sport drinks	USD			77.97					
5/11/17	Postage for visas	USD			35.64					
6/16/17	Sport foods	USD			261.03					
6/20/17	Health supplies, sunscreen, etc.	USD			171.01					
6/24/17	Rescue insurance	USD			407.55					
4/27/17	Flight	USD			1383.06					
6/16/17	Petzl - ropes, slings, headlamps for the boys	USD			275					
6/16/17	Jim Woodmency	USD			400					
6/26/17	Repair tape	USD			17.5					
6/13/17	Amazon - food	USD			560.53					
6/27/17	drugs	USD			584.17					
5/27/17	Flight	USD	1383.06							
5/11/17	Rescue Insurance	USD			407.55					
6/21/17	Edelrid Ropes and Belay Devices	USD	5323.82							
6/26/17	Amazon Order (zip ties, recovery mix)	USD			80.82					
6/30/17	REI, shoe goo, water bottles, sunscren etc.	USD				78.34				
6/30/17	Hardware store - tape, file, glue	USD				55.57				
6/30/17	coffee	USD			96					
6/30/17	dinner	USD				108.73				
7/11/17	Trader Joes	USD			204.66					
7/11/17	Sunglasses for the boys	USD				33.03				
7/11/17	REI Graham and Chris	USD	184.7							
6/30/17	Ice cream	USD			14.97					
7/11/17	Starbucks	USD			68.43					
2-Jul	excess baggage	USD	615.83		468	350				
6/30/17	Feathered friends	USD	6.25							
7/6/17	scotch in Dubai	USD				119.34				
7/6/17	drinks	Rs				240				
7/6/17	Western Store	Rs				93465				
7/7/17	dinner w Nazir	Rs				3950				
7/8/17	Royal Crown w tip	Rs				58000				
7/8/17	food at airport	Rs				1600				
7/8/17	tip for Skardu airport driver	Rs				200				
7/9/17	tip for luggage driver	Rs				1500				
7/9/17	haircut, shampoo, fruit, taxi	Rs				3000				
7/10/17	Rasool vegetables and misc	Rs				38826	25000 from Rehmet. Paid Rasool 13826			
7/9/17	Husein General store	Rs				93695				
7/9/17	Skardu Hotel	Rs				59610				
7/9/17	laundry	Rs				2500				
7/9/17	Jeeps to Kondus	Rs				40,000				
7/11/17	Tagas hotel food	Rs				4600				
7/11/17	Tagas lodging	Rs				1200				
7/11/17	Chickens	Rs				1860				
8/15/17	BC Atta and resupply	Rs				4200				
8/28/17	Jeeps to Skardu incl tip	Rs				24000				
8/28/17	Dinner in Skardu	Rs				4000				
8/29/17	Melons	Rs				830				
8/29/17	maps	Rs				700				
8/29/17	postcards	Rs				480				
8/29/17	Pastries	Rs				650				
8/29/17	Money to Doug for storage						already included in cash input tab			
8/29/17	Pay Rasool						already included in cash input tab			
8/29/17	Pay Nadeem						already included in cash input tab			
8/30/17	hotel Skardu incl tip	Rs				64000				
8/31/17	Askari fee	USD	100	100	100					
8/31/2017	Zafar	USD			500					
9/1/17	excess baggage	USD	474							
9/1/17	Nazir Sabir-air tickets etc (see tab for breakdown)					139,000	25000 rs Sultan gave to Rasool already includ			
9/1/17	excess baggage-Skardu					21000				
9/1/17	Royal Crown w tip					16217				
8/30/17	misc in Skardu					2450				
10/13/17	Jim Woodmency final bill					1080				

Appendix 1 - Images:





