

Ref: 08/29

# **British Hispar Sar Expedition 2008**

## **Final Report**

**An account of a lightweight visit to Pakistan's Hispar  
Muztagh between September and October 2008**



Emily Peak, 5684m

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## Summary

In September 2008, I travelled alone to Pakistan to attempt the first ascent of Hispar Sar, 6400m via the SW face. I hoped to climb the striking couloir attempted by Andy Parkin and Simon Yates in 2004. The mountain is located just north of the Hispar Glacier in the Hispar Muztagh.

After setting up base camp at Jutmal, within sight of the couloir, I made a series of acclimatization outings which culminated in the ascent of a previously unattempted and unnamed peak nearby of 5684m. I named it *Emily Peak*, after my girlfriend, who missed me decidedly during my trip, climbing the SW face at AD-.

Then I made two attempts at Hispar Sar, the first finishing before it started after a surprise snow storm.

During the second attempt, I climbed the couloir to 6000m, 50m or so beneath the S ridge. There, I encountered precarious slabs covered in unconsolidated snow, and opted to retreat by abseiling back down the line of the couloir. It had taken me just over 10 hours to reach my high-point climbing up to ED AI IV.

***The compiler of this report and the members of the expedition agree that all or part of it may be copied for the purposes of private research.***



Looking across to Spantik from 6000m on Hispar Sar; Jutmal Chok and Emily Peak are to the right in the middle ground.

# Introduction

## Style

I had been intending to undertake another solo expedition for awhile. In the winter of 2007, I had had an unsuccessful solo trip to the Qionglai Shan in China. Despite not getting to the top of any peaks, I had learnt a great deal, and I wanted to put my experience to use by trying another expedition solo.

Style is important to me. I can summarise my ideal climbing style as follows:

- **Minimisation:** equipment and personnel must be reduced to a minimum. Minimisation is part of my motivation to climb solo.
- **Alpine style:** no fixed ropes, fixed gear or camps established on the mountain.
- **Speed:** the ascent must be as fast as possible. I believe that fitness and attitude can obviate bivouacs on most routes on peaks lower than 7000m and bivouacs are usually an uncomfortable waste of time.
- **Remoteness and Difficulty:** the best climbs are as remote and difficult as possible within acceptable parameters of risk and as determined by the previous factors. A climb of great difficulty that therefore requires a great deal of equipment is not preferable to an easier climb that allows a more simple approach.
- **Retreat:** levels of acceptable risk must be lowered to accommodate the above factors. Summiting mountains is not important in the grand scheme of things, so retreat is never something to regret.

Why do I climb solo? There are many reasons. In the first place, it is part of a general attempt to make mountaineering as simple as possible. The soloist typically uses less equipment, travels faster, etc. than the roped party. The preparation that a soloist requires might of course be more involved, but once in the mountains, he or she tends to have a more simple approach.

But it is not purely a question of style. In my experience, soloing allows a more immediate and thus richer encounter with the mountain environment, beyond the influence of sociality of any kind. It also allows a more immediate encounter with oneself, one's abilities and one's limitations, outside of the influence of those of another.

Further, climbing solo enables one to make all decisions unilaterally; something impossible or certainly unethical if climbing with a partner. This of course greatly increases the burden of responsibility; but for me, precisely shouldering all the responsibility, and understanding how I cope with it, is extremely rewarding.

But is soloing not more dangerous? Well, it all depends. Soloing has its own rules, its own parameters of risk. If all of the soloist's decisions are made with these rules and parameters in mind, then it is not more dangerous than climbing with partners; indeed, it can be much safer, since one's safety is squarely in one's hands; not in the hands of another.



## Objective



The SW face of Hispar Sar, 6400m

Hispar Sar presented itself as an ideal objective for my purposes. Firstly, it was remote, high and imposing. On the other hand, it was not inaccessible. Transport connections to nearby Hunza are good, and from there I expected to take only two to three days to reach my base camp. Further, base camp lay on a well established and once-popular trekking route, which connects Hunza and Baltistan via the Hispar La and the Hispar and Biafo glaciers. 126km taken together, these glaciers form the longest continuous stretch of ice outside the Polar Regions.

Secondly, it was still unclimbed. However, since it had had a number of previous attempts there was a large amount of available information on the peak. This made the organisation of the project much more manageable.

In the summer of 1991, an expedition from New Zealand comprising Dave Bamford, Matt Comeskey, John Cocks, John Nankervis and John Wild traversed the Biafo and Hispar glaciers on skis making ascents and reconnaissance along the way, including an attempt on Hispar Sar. Making their approach from the north east, they were thwarted by impassable ice falls.

In September 2004, Simon Yates and Andy Parkin went to Pakistan to attempt the mountain via the attractive couloir line just right of centre on the mountain's SW face. In Yates' words:

'Over a four-day period of variable weather we climbed the couloir, exiting by a steep ridge to the right to gain a shoulder approximately 300 meters (reasonably angled snow slopes) from the top. Unfortunately, an accident on the first cramped bivouac had resulted in most of the food, the brew kit, and a spare can of gas being dropped. A storm set in on the night of the 30<sup>th</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> and with only vapor left in the remaining gas cylinder, we were forced to descend the couloir in the morning.' (*American Alpine Journal*, 2005, vol. 47, p. 345)

The fact that the couloir had been reconnoissanced to this extent, as well as the remarks that Yates and Parkin had made on the quality of the climbing were particularly influential in my decision to make this peak my objective.

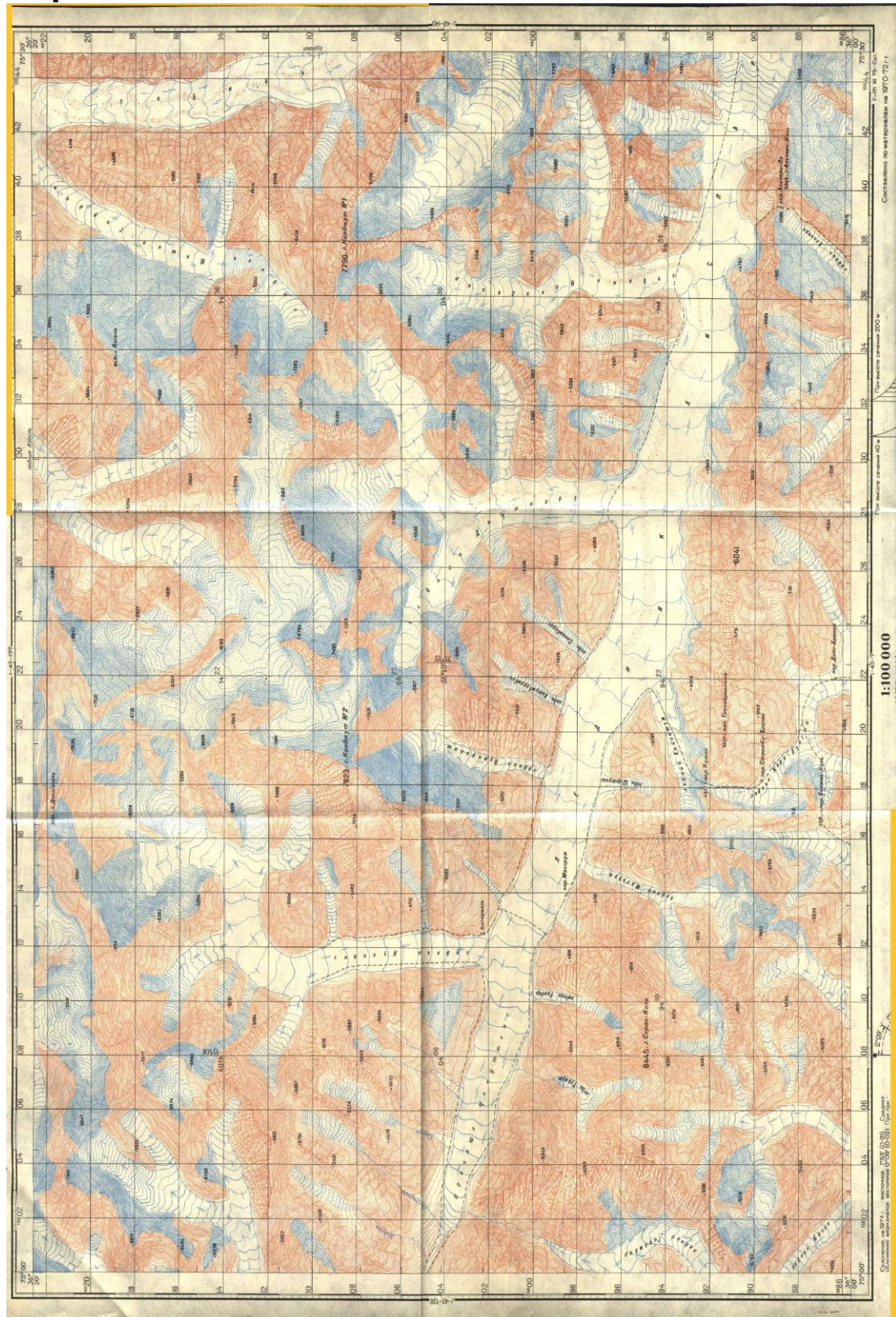
Finally, the couloir seemed to provide a line of climbing ideally suited to my own strengths and experience. Soloing an ice couloir has often proven to be a particularly safe, fast, efficient and rewarding way of ascending a mountain.



Base camp, with the Hispar La in the distance



# Maps





# Karakoram





## People

### Rufus Duits (28)

My solo climbing experience includes over 40 solos at E1 5b and above throughout the UK and abroad, numerous icefalls solo, numerous Alpine climbs solo up to ED 1 (Supercouloir with the Gervasutti Pillar start, Mt Blanc du Tacul) numerous Scottish climbs solo up to Grade V (Point Five Gully, Zero Gully), and a solo expedition to China's Qonglai Shan.

I had participated in five expeditions before going to Pakistan, the most notable of which culminated in the ascent in 2006 of *I am Dynamite* (TD+) with Alistair Gurney on the SW face of Colque Cruz 1 (6102m) in Peru's Cordillera Vilcanota. This was the first ascent of the face.

I hold a PhD in philosophy from University College London, and I work intermittently as an academic.

I travelled alone to Pakistan, but I would like to mention two other major contributors to my expedition:

### Murtaza

Murtaza my cook was brilliant. As well as being an excellent cook, he spoke good English, and was generally extremely resourceful and willing to help. He was also extremely patient, spending three weeks at a cold base camp, often alone. He lives in Karimabad, and I would recommend him to all future expeditions to the area.

### Javed Ali

Javed Ali of North Pakistan was extremely helpful and easy to deal with. He spoke good English, knew the area well and was invaluable in organising jeeps, porters, food, etc. He is also one of Pakistan's best rock climbers and works primarily as a guide, having trained in Chamonix. He too I would recommend:

[javedalija@yahoo.com](mailto:javedalija@yahoo.com)  
[www.north-pakistan.com](http://www.north-pakistan.com)

## Climbing

I arrived in base camp on the 17<sup>th</sup> September. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, I scrambled up to 4750m for acclimatisation purposes, and the following day, I decided to try and attempt the attractive peak (henceforth *Emily Peak*) just north of base camp and immediately east of Jutmal Chok. After scrambling up interminable scree, I reached the snowline. The route to the summit looked straightforward, and although I was moving slowly, I thought I would make it. The route involved a long rising traverse rightwards across the SW face of the mountain. At about half way across, I decided it might be easier to climb up to the west ridge above me, and traverse the ridgeline to the summit. This is the ridge connecting the peak to Jutmal Chok. Upon reaching the ridge, however, I saw my mistake: it was a very sharp knife-edge, unpredictably corniced, and was no terrain for a solo climber of my disposition. I descended, vowing to return to climb the SW face proper. I had reached approximately 5600m, however, and the altitude had taken its toll.

Bad weather limited me to base camp over the next few days. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, I opted to ferry some equipment up to the bottom of the SW face of Hispar Sar, where I hoped to bivouac prior to my attempt. It was a long day, across the Yutmaru glacier and up an unnamed glacier just SW of the peak, and I didn't manage to reach the face. Instead, needing to return to base camp the same day, I deposited my equipment on the scree, marked its position with the GPS, and returned.

After another rest day, I returned to Emily Peak on the 26<sup>th</sup> September. Leaving base camp (at 4250m) as late as 08:50am I climbed to the summit via the SW face in 5hrs 25mins.

The peak is marked on the Swiss Karakoram maps on the west bank of the Yutmaru glacier as 5684m, and my altimeter agreed. Its coordinates are approximately 36°07' - 75°16'. The SW face had gone at a straightforward AD- with 60° snow slopes.

My cook, porters and the villagers of Hispar agreed to my naming the peak *Emily Peak*.

I thought I was well enough acclimatised now for an attempt on Hispar Sar itself. After another rest day, I moved up to an advanced camp on the small glacier immediately beneath the face. The weather was set fair and I was poised to begin my attempt in the early morning. But to my dismay, a freak snow-storm during the night deposited six inches of fresh snow. The morning dawned clear again, but spindrift avalanches, reported to be a problem by Yates and Parkin, were pouring down the couloir above me. Despondently, I returned to base camp.

Another rest day, and I returned to the advance camp once more. This time the weather held and I left the bivouac at 01:15am during the night of the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> October. I carried minimum bivouac gear, and minimum climbing equipment.

Crossing the Bergschrund was no problem at all, and the ice in the couloir was in great condition. It was very cold! I climbed fast during the night and before dawn I had passed the point at which Yates and Parkin had traversed out of the couloir to the right. Here the couloir steepened and I slowed down. It was important to make good decisions as to the route. Studying the line from base camp had not revealed any very obvious way to break out of the couloir, either to the right, as Yates and Parkin had done, or at its top. There seemed to be 70m or so of complex mixed terrain at the top of the couloir beneath the S ridge.

I passed a number of potential traverse lines which reached the sharp ridge to the right of the couloir, but they all looked precarious to some degree, across slabs on top of which lay fresh snow, and not nearly so inviting as the good ice in the couloir. So I remained in the couloir hoping finally to be able to break out at its top through the mixed section and onto the S ridge.



Atop Emily Peak, Hispar Sar to the left in cloud and the Hispar La in the distance.

Just shy of 6000m and just 50 or so meters beneath the S ridge, the good ice ran out. It was 11:30am. I remained at this point for an hour assessing my options and waiting for the sun to warm me up. I could see the S ridge above me, but between it and me there was only badly formed ice and slabs covered in unconsolidated snow. It looked climbable but precarious, and I was alone, already tired and totally committed. I decided that I had reached the limit of risk acceptable to me and began to descend.

On the way down, I pondered the possible passageways out of the couloir rightwards. They looked precarious too and the mental tension I had been sustaining had already begun to relax: I was on the way down. I stopped many times to justify my decision to myself again and again.

The parameters of risk are lower when I climb solo. I was happy with steep and solid ice, but not with steep slabs covered in unconsolidated snow. I had stuck to my principles. But regret is sometimes difficult to chase away.

I descended by down-climbing and rappelling the rapidly softening ice, primarily on abalakovs and a fifi hook. The sun hits the couloir at about midday, and I had made the right decision to climb at night. The spindrift avalanches became heavier and more frequent as the afternoon wore on.



The descent was long, I was tired, and eventually I made a stupid mistake. A couple of rope lengths above the Bergschrund, I opted to rappel from a deadman; the ice had turned to mush, and I had used up all my rock protection. For some inexplicable reason, I failed to test the strength of the anchor I had created, and after I was fully committed to it, it ripped out and I began to tumble down the remaining section of the couloir. My crampons caught and I turned over head-first, crashing into rocks, my arms outstretched to protect me. My senses on ultra-alert, I was absolutely focussed on stopping my now very rapid descent. I don't know how far I fell – perhaps 20, perhaps 50 meters – but eventually there was a massive tug on my harness: the pick of my ice axe, connected to me via one of Grivel's Double Spring Leashes, had caught on a rock. I stopped dead. Righting and steadying myself, and dislodging my ice axe, I felt basically uninjured. I was wary of shock, so I began to down-climb again quickly. The pick of one ice axe had been bent sideways by about 35 degrees and I was aware of deep bruising to my hip.

This bruising was to cause me agony on the subsequent descent back to base camp and later to Hispar Village. It had been caused by the waist belt of my harness. During the climb, the leg loops of my harness had somehow come undone, and, without taking the harness off, it was very difficult to do them back up. Consequently, I had left them undone for the descent. When I stopped so suddenly – testament to the strength of the Springer Leashes – all the force of my fall was transferred, via the waist belt, to the kidney area of my right hip.

It was another two nights before I was back in base camp, and then another two days of rest before the porters dutifully arrived.

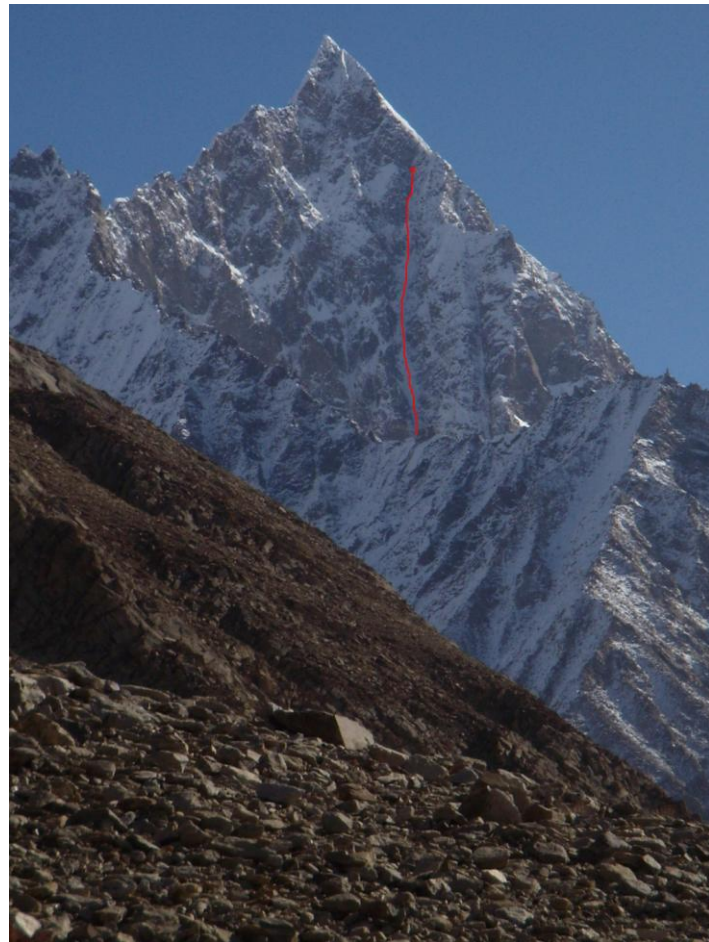


The last 50 or so meters before the S ridge, from my high-point of 6000m on Hispar Sar

## Route Diagrams



The SW face of Emily Peak, 5684m, with the route of first ascent shown (AD-, 60°), Rufus Duits, 26<sup>th</sup> September 2008



SW face of Hispar Sar, 6400m, with the top half of my route and my high-point shown (ED AI4).

## Logistics

From a logistical point of view, the expedition went very smoothly. I had hired the services of North Pakistan, and I was generally happy with the help they gave me.

The morning after my arrival in Islamabad, I flew on to Gilgit. With the benefit of hindsight, I would probably have made this journey by bus. Not only would that be much cheaper, it is supposedly more reliable. Closure of the Karakoram Highway due to impassable rock falls is far less likely than cancellation of the Islamabad-Gilgit flight due to bad weather. I was lucky and I flew in good weather according to schedule in both directions. But when one has to make it back to Islamabad to catch an onward international flight, concerns over the reliability of the weather are magnified.

From the bus station in Gilgit, I took a bus along the Karakoram Highway to Karimabad. There I met Javed, and we began to organise the expedition's food and equipment. I decided to hire a kitchen from North Pakistan. I hadn't budgeted for this, but I felt that it would be much easier for the cook if he had some decent equipment; it was going to be hard and lonely for him in any case. Although it was Ramadan, procuring supplies and food and eating during daylight hours was no problem.

A note about money: changing money in Karimabad is easy; but getting hold of more cash is impossible. I managed to get some extra money from a bank in Gilgit on my return from the mountains, but I would advise taking all necessary cash from home. There are ATMs in Islamabad, as well as international banks, but for the most part they tend only to cater for domestic transactions.

I had some difficulty hiring a cook; the first candidate introduced by Javed failed to turn up at our departure amid rumours of a jeep accident. In the end, Murtaza stepped in at short notice, and proved brilliant – a real asset to the trip.

Javed organised a jeep to drive us and our supplies the four hours or so along rough tracks to the impressively remote Hispar Village. On the return jeep journey, we discovered that part of the track had fallen down the cliff and into the river below. It was several hours before we had widened the track enough (by digging into the cliff on the uphill side) for the jeep to pass.

Organising the porters was not easy. The first issue concerned the number of 'stages' distant my base camp was to be. Apparently, one of the tributary glaciers, the mouth of which we had to cross on our way up the Hispar Glacier, had become impassable in recent months, necessitating a long detour across the Hispar Glacier and back again. This, the porters claimed, put the number of stages up to seven. Javed and I had no evidence of this glacial movement, but were obliged to accept the porters' terms. The porters each charged 600r for each stage, plus a one-off surcharge of 400r. This was quite expensive, although there was no bartering, and apparently significantly more than the Balti porters charge at the other end of the Biafo Glacier.

The second issue was weight. Each porter would carry a maximum of 25kg plus their own supplies. I had enough money for just seven porters and the weight was tight. If I had had an accurate scale with me, debate would have been easier; the porters produced their own scales of dubious accuracy. In the morning, though, seven porters carried off all my equipment. I had said goodbye to Javed the evening before as he departed with the jeep, so I hoped there would be no further problems.

There was a final hidden charge: the cost of crossing their bridge (located just beneath



the village): 50r per person. This had to be paid on the way down too. The porters used donkeys to carry the equipment up as far as the first glacier crossing.

Overall, I found the men of Hispar to be hospitable, friendly and generous, but unfortunately acquisitive.

The first day of the trek was a long one and we reached Bitanmal in the dark. The porters' fears about the glacier proved correct, and we had to make a long, tortuous detour. We reached base camp at Jutmal in the late morning of the third day.

Jutmal is certainly an idyllic spot. It was flat, grassy, had an abundant supply of fresh spring water, and was in direct view of the upper half of Hispar Sar's SW face. However, it was quite a long way from the foot of the mountain. An alternative spot, closer to the climbing, across the Yutmaru Glacier, may have served my purposes better, and indeed there was a possible spot. Locating base camp there, however, would have meant an extra stage for the porters and there did not seem to be as reliable a source of water nearby.

The trip back to Hispar involved just two days of trekking with four porters.

For the reference of future expeditions to the area, I paid Javed \$14 per day for his services, and I paid Murtaza \$9 per day for his services. In addition, I paid a small daily fee for the hiring of the kitchen (tent, stove and cooking utensils).



Me at my high-point on Hispar Sar

## Diary

- Days 1-2 (10<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> September): fly from London to Islamabad  
 3: fly from Islamabad to Gilgit; take bus to Karimabad  
 4: organise supplies with Javed in Karimabad and Aliabad  
 5: take jeep to Hispar Village and organise porters  
 6: trek from Hispar Village to Bitanmal fine  
 7: trek from Bitanmal to camp site beyond the Pumari Chhish Glacier fine  
 8: trek to base camp at Jutmal snow  
 9: rest day snow  
 10: acclimatisation trip up to 4750m fine/cloudy  
 11: attempt at Emily Peak; retreat from the W ridge at approximately 5600m fine/cloudy  
 12: rest day fine  
 13: rest day snow  
 14: rest day snow  
 15: ferrying up to an advanced camp beneath Hispar Sar's SW face snow  
 16: rest day fine  
 17: success on Emily Peak, 5684m fine  
 18: rest day fine  
 19: trek up to advanced camp fine/snow during night  
 20: retreat to base camp after heavy snow fall fine  
 21: rest day fine  
 22: trek up to advanced camp fine  
 23: attempt at Hispar Sar's SW face; retreat from 6000m; back to advanced camp fine  
 24: return half way to base camp fine  
 25: reach base camp fine  
 26: rest day changeable  
 27: rest day; porters arrive snow  
 28: trek down to Bitanmal fine  
 29: trek back to Hispar Village fine  
 30: take jeep back to Karimabad  
 31: organisation of payment in Karimabad  
 32: return to Gilgit by bus  
 33: fly to Islamabad  
 34-35 (13<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> October): fly from Islamabad to London

## Possibilities for future climbing on Hispar Sar

What potential does Hispar Sar still hold? Well, in the first place, despite substantial attempts, the summit remains outstanding. I think that both the route taken by Yates and Parkin in 2004, which traversed rightwards out of the couloir before continuing up a ridge line to the S ridge proper, and the route that I attempted, which climbed the couloir to its very top, are feasible. I bailed because I encountered ground I wasn't prepared to risk on my own.

However, I spied a few other potential lines. On either side of the major couloir, which I ascended, there are smaller couloirs which look as though they would give good climbing. The one to the right terminates at the subsidiary ridge reached by Yates and Parkin. The one to the left, however, stays largely in the summit fall-line and looks very technical. Its ice is perhaps not continuous.

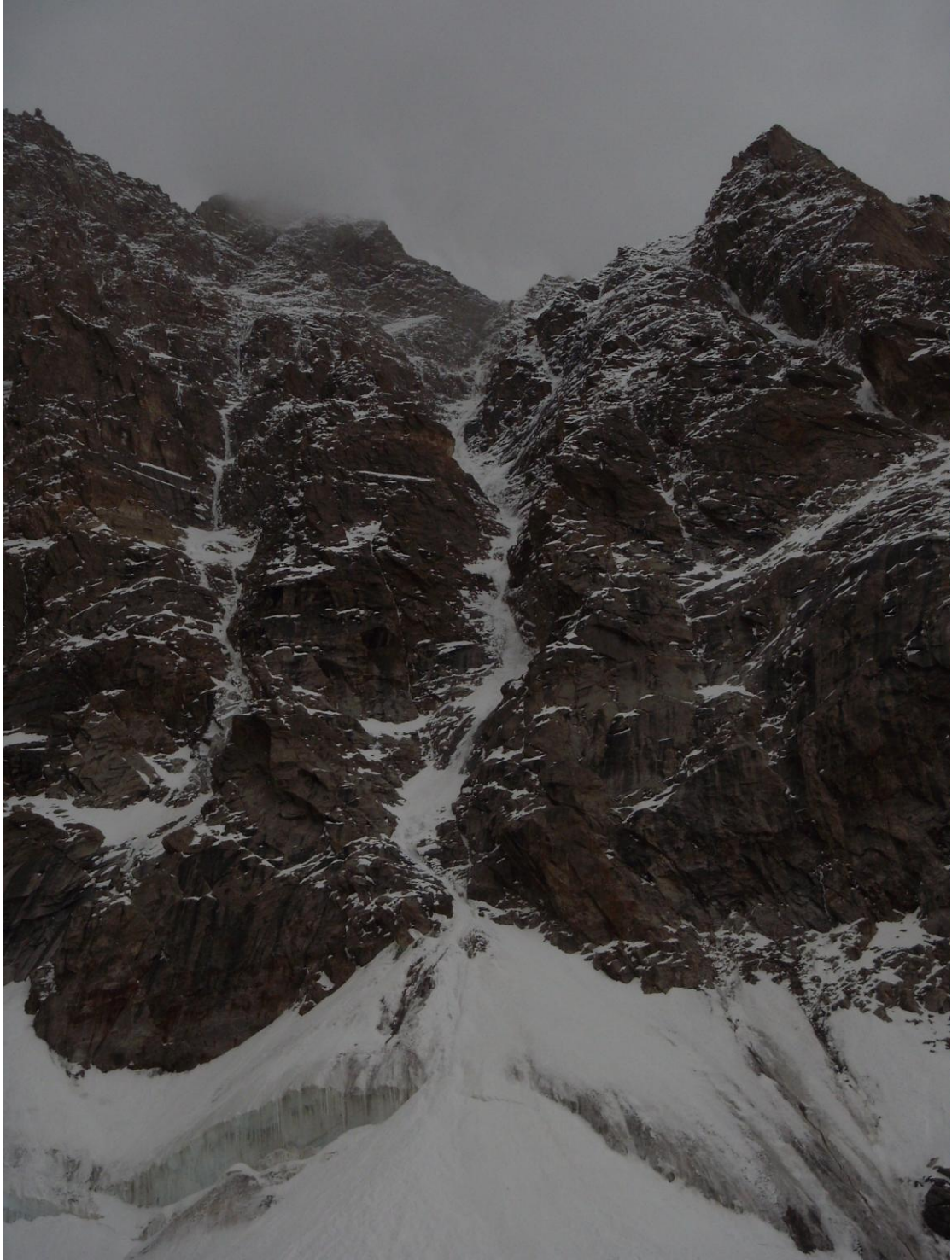
Round on the S face, there was also an intriguing line, one I failed to capture on camera. After an initial section of snow slopes, scree and small cliffs, an enormous ice fall, which looked about 200 metres high and must have been quite vertical, would give access to the upper snow slopes. This route would require an approach via the small glacier neighbouring to the east the one at the foot of the SW face.

From what I could see of the NW side of the mountain, and judging by previous reports, I think attempts on any other route would encounter severe problems on approach.



Steep ice in the couloir on the SW face of Hispar Sar





Hispar Sar's couloirs; I ascended the central one

## Finances

### Costs:

	Sterling	Rupees
International flights	£571	74 230
Insurance	£224.81	29 250
Visa	£55	7150
Domestic flights		12 525
Bus to Karimabad		150
Hotel 12/13 September		800
Stove repairs		310
Stove parts		180
Gas		4500
Food		10 600
Vegetables		410
Kerosine		2040
Jeep up		6000
Porters up		32 200
Bridge up		450
Bridge down		300
Porters down		18 400
Jeep down		6000
Javed/Murtaza/kitchen hire		33 000
Hotel 9/10/11 October	1200	
Bus to Gilgit		150
Total expedition costs:	£1845	239 845

Rate of exchange: £1 = (approximately) 130r

### Income:

MEF grant	£750
BMC/UK sport grant	£300
Personal contributions	£795
Total expedition income	£1845

## Acknowledgements

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of the MEF and the BMC. I would also like to acknowledge the generosity of Stephanie Duits and Tom Hutton in providing me with a lot of much needed equipment. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the generous hospitality of the people of Hunza and Hispar.



Hispar Porter