

## Pakistan, Charakusa Valley, Link Sar Expedition 2014



### Overview

Team Members: Jonathan Griffith and Kevin Mahoney

Our aim for this trip was the first ascent of Link Sar (7041m) in the Charakusa Valley, Pakistan. We were on a tight schedule and after arriving at base camp we left the following day to acclimatise on nearby Sulu Peak (6000m). It proved a little too fast height gain wise and I came down with the worst altitude sickness I've ever had whilst bivying on the summit. Arriving back at Base Camp we set our eyes straight away on Link Sar deciding to acclimatise further by setting up and sleeping at an ABC at the foot of the North Face. After spending two nights at ABC we sat in Base Camp in bad weather and waited for a weather window. Our attempt on the face took us 6 days from Base Camp but we did not summit. We found the face in very bad condition and very tough work. In addition after our first day on the face we found ourselves climbing through a storm system that exhausted us. Our second night on the face sitting on a boulder without the tent up in a storm really took it out of us. We topped out of the North Face but were unable to continue on to the West Summit due to the weather and dangerous run out climbing. Feeling like we'd given it everything we had, and more, it was one of the easiest decision of my climbing life to come back down. We both felt like we'd climbed way further than we should have done given the weather and conditions. We also felt that if we'd had either good conditions or good weather we would have had a very good chance at making the West Summit but without them it was just too much. I had a really good time with Kevin and I definitely felt

like he was maybe the only person I've tied in with who would have been ok with pushing it as far as we did.

### **Itinerary**

6 July- Arrive in Islamabad

7 July- Fly to Skardu

9 July- Drive to Hushe

10 July- Walk to Saicho

11 July- Arrive in Base Camp (4300m)

12 July- Head up to the base of Sulu Peak

13 July- Climb Sulu Peak (6000m) and bivy on summit

21 July- Recce approach glacier to Link Sar

22 July- Carry our ABC to the base of the North Face of Link Sar (5400m)

24 July- Head back to Base Camp

30 July- Head back up to ABC for attempt

31 July- reached 6000m after a very tough day

1 August- Traversed over to join the main couloir and spent a night in a storm without the tent up

2 August- Arrived at the top of the North Face

3 August- Tent bound

4 August- Attempted to go on to the West Summit but conditions and weather were far too dangerous to continue on

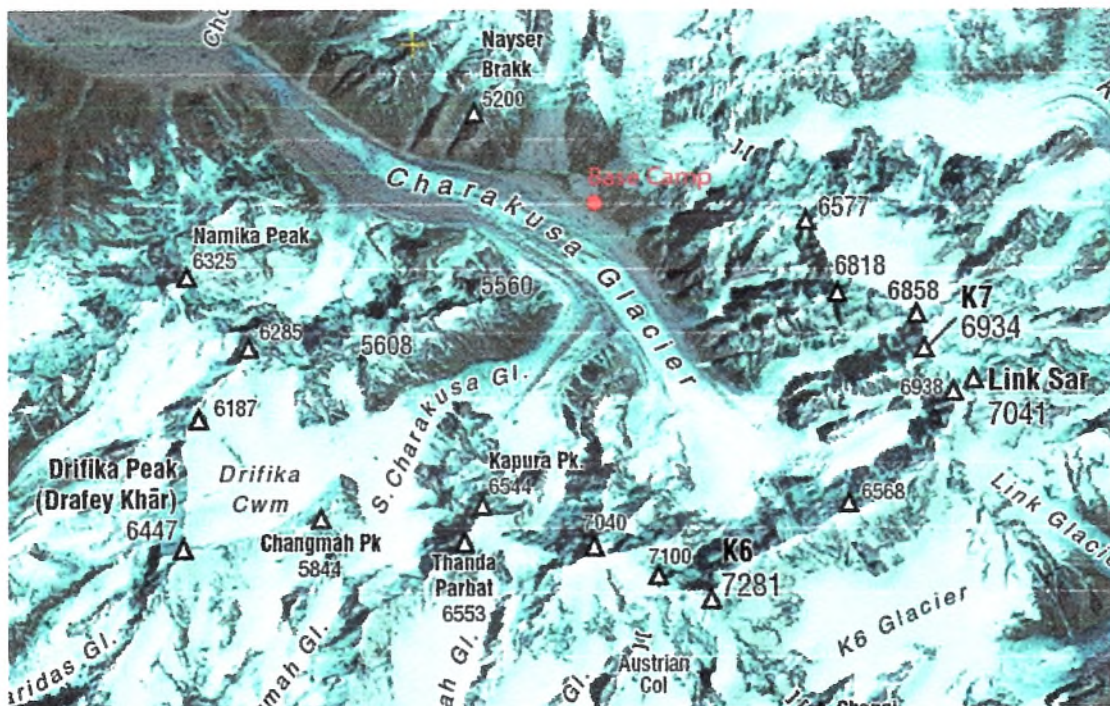
## Charakusa Valley Overview

The Charakusa Valley is a mecca for Himalayan pristine granite. Whilst it has been extensively developed there are still hundreds of new granite rock routes to go at. There are still dozens of major lines still to go at on K7 and surrounding high peaks.

Base Camp is situated on a huge flat plain which means you have the luxury of living off of the snow and glacier; one of the huge advantages of this place. Temperatures rarely dip below freezing at Base Camp.

The weather has been consistently some of the best Greater Ranges weather I've ever experienced. The start of June is the earliest you want to visit but there will still be a lot of snow on the high peaks. By July things are starting to warm up very fast and by the end of July you need to be careful as the freezing level will often be above 5500m meaning that mixed objectives can become quite dangerous. However it also means that you can climb on high peaks in mixed conditions in very clement temperatures, which is a big bonus (light sleeping bags etc). I've also found that the wind is, in general, pretty light at high elevations.

For more info on objectives in the area please refer to my two previous reports submitted to the MEF archives.



## Link Sar Detailed

Link Sar is proving a bit of a thorn in my side seeing as this was my third attempt on the mountain. What makes it so intriguing is that it is so hemmed in by narrow valleys that you cannot see it very well. Picking a line on it is very much down to intuition and guess work as you cant actually see any in their entirety.

Our aim was to climb the North Face and traverse the 1km long ridge from the West Summmmit (approx. 6900m) to the Main summit (7041m) and descend the South Face. The climb is huge and very committing. The ridge between the summits would be very hard to reverse and is still the big unknown about this peak- is it possible to actually to this ridge traverse? Given that the North Face is no push over and we would be climbing Alpine Style it would involve covering a huge amount of distance everyday to be able to make the summit before running out of food and gas.

It seems like the technical difficulties are concentrated on the final summit tower. The ridge traverse, we feel, would be incredibly committing and may very well have some scary moments in it (steep snow pitches) but the steepest part of the route definitely lies on the final summit block. However this year I took a huge telephoto on Sulu Peak with us to get high res shots of it and the granite on our line is splitter and bomber so we know that the line up the summit tower would go- whether free or by aid.

The North Face presents, what I feel, is the safest line up Link Sar. Naturally it still holds objective hazards but once established on the face it is not threatened by seracs which most of the mountain is. The approach glacier is one of the most complex ones I have ever been on- the earlier in the year the better, but of course the earlier in the year the snowier you will find the ridge traverse which would be a nightmare. So it is a bit of a gamble. When I say complex I really mean it- it has taken us days in previous years to work a way through involving very sketchy crevasses and being exposed almost the whole length of it to seracs and couloirs.

Our original line went direct through the heart of the face via a series of steep WI5 waterfall ice pitches, however on our recce trip this year we found it to be a deathtrap. Even though it is very tempting to climb I would never recommend this to anyone- even at 4 in the morning a huge avalanche funnelled down it. During the day time the huge bowl that feeds in to it comes in to the sun and it releases constantly. This is a real shame as the direct line really is one of the most stunning I have seen in the Himalayas, but even at soloing speeds I don't think you would get through it without something major coming down.



**Kevin on the approach**

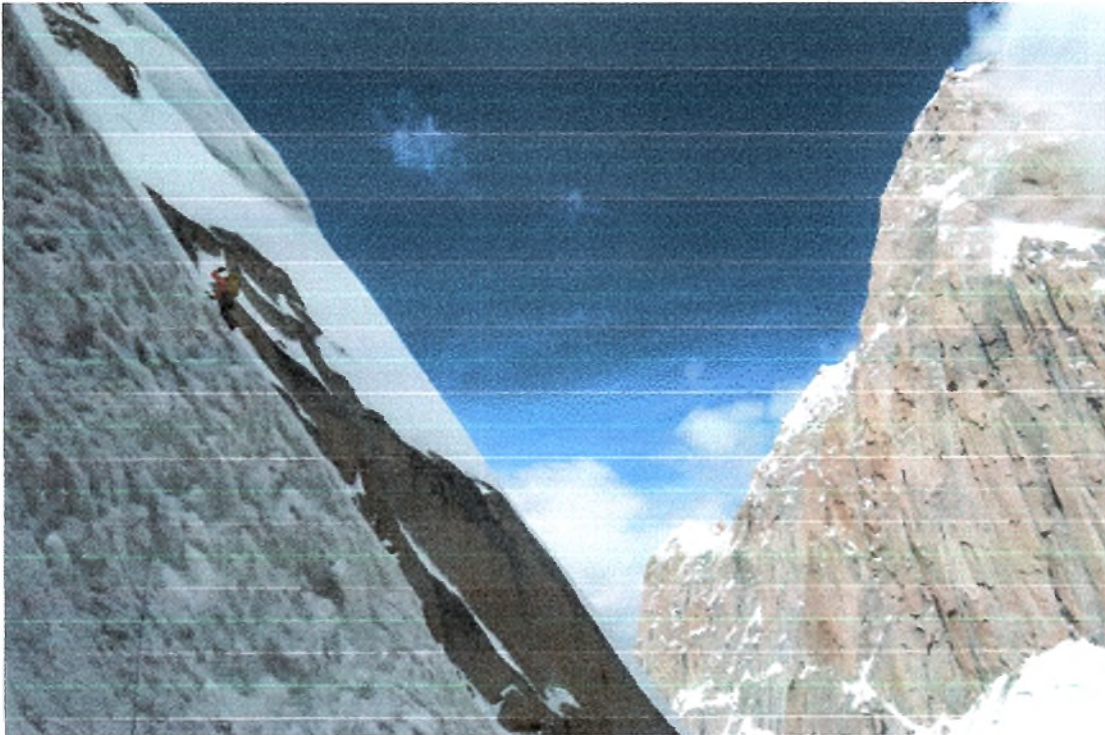


**At our ABC**

Our attempt on Link Sar started off with a clear weeklong forecast. Frustratingly we'd been sitting at Base Camp for 4 days of perfect weather whilst the forecast was predicting snow. Arriving at our ABC nice and early we sat about in the 40 degree heat that this valley produces under a Himalayan sun- it really is unbearable in there. The following morning we headed off with 5 days of food

and gas for 6-7 days of climbing. We carried two 60m half ropes and also a very extensive rack given the technical difficulties we would encounter on the way.

**Day 1:** We climbed the same line that I have been on the two previous years. This year was in by far the worst condition I have seen it in. Straight from the bergshrund we found ourselves on bullet hard black ice up to 70 degrees. The average angle is about 50+ degrees. We had hoped to arrive at about 6200m but by 6000m we were really feeling the strain of climbing so much black ice and at such elevation and decided to call it a day. We spent a further 2 hours hacking out a tent platform out of a black ice ridge. That night it snowed.



**Lots and lots of black ice**



**Our bivy ledge for the night**

**Day 2:** We waited until 9am for the snow to clear before we pressed on. At this stage we started a very long and at times complicated traverse over in to the main couloir that we had tried to avoid for safety reasons lower down. The climbing was never very hard but it was often incredibly run out on poor rock. We climbed around 5 pitches of mixed terrain at the end of the traverse that brought us into the upper part of the face. It had started to snow hard towards the middle of the day with strong winds. This was a worrying time for us as we had always said that being on this upper face in bad weather would be lethal. We very cautiously climbed up the upper face towards a col that we thought would bring us out of the North Face and to safety. However conditions were still very tough and I could see that we were moving too slowly to make the col before sunset. In addition the ridge line above us, that straddles the whole North Face, is hideously corniced and I did not fancy trying to break through in the dark. So I found a rock that protruded out of the face and to the side of the main gully that we spent a further 2 hours hacking the ice off of. The bivy was poor to say the least- a sloping boulder that kept pushing me off the mountain. I slept slung through multiple hoops of tat and rope. We settled in to our bivy very late that night and felt too wasted to make any food or much water. After a litre of water we did our best to get comfortable as the first snow flakes started to fall again. It snowed hard all night with avalanches pouring down around us. Without a bivy bag or unable to get the tent up we waited out til daybreak soaking wet.



**Arriving at the non-reversible rap point**



**Some delicate mixed traversing on poor rock**



**The weather comes in again**





**The final bit of mixed climbing, still in bad weather**



**Our bed for the night**

**Day 3:** At this stage the sensible decision would have been to call it off. It was still snowing hard with no signs of letting up. We, and all our kit, was soaking wet. We were also pretty worn out by our efforts so far. In addition the face was

getting dangerously loaded and already there was a few rivers of spindrift that were near constant on the face. However I felt driven to keep going due to two previous failures and I knew that Kevin was made of tougher stuff so we talked about it and decided to keep going up to the Col that we hoped would give us somewhere to put the tent up and re-organise ourselves.

Setting off in to the main couloir again felt very threatened. Surrounded by, now very laden, cornices this was not a place to hang about, but at the same time the last few days and especially the last 24 hours with no proper food or rest had really taken it out of us and we moved at crawling pace. The altitude was not helping either on this black ice now covered in powder snow.

Thankfully we arrived to a point that wasn't threatened by cornices without incident. Kevin led up to where we hoped we'd find salvation in the form of a tent platform to get out of this weather. As he topped out from the face he couldn't find a single belay or anything resembling a bivy spot so he had to come back down again. It was still snowing really hard and things were looking pretty desperate. He described a knife-edge ridge with huge cornices and very steep sides- not what we were hoping to find. I then lead up through another break in the north face between two monster cornices that I never want to repeat again. The last 5 meters on 80 degree snow and crumbling rock underneath was particularly memorable. Straddling the ridge as best I could I understood what Kevin was talking about. This was a nightmare ridge.

I brought Kevin up to me and the options weren't great. We were both tired and needed to stop. But in this weather descending wasn't particularly appealing either. So Kevin decided to climb round the backside of a huge cornice I was belayed to see if we could get the tent up further along the ridge. As he climbed around the cornice he managed to break through it. With a huge crack I felt the cornice over my head split and I thought that my belay was going to go with it. Thankfully it didn't but Kevin still took a ride down the North Face. Lucky miss. It turned out that the rest of the ridge was just as bad and our only option was to hack in to the South Side of this immense cornice hoping we wouldn't just dig right through it.

2 hours later and we had the tent up in a full on Himalayan storm. Getting inside the tent is a feeling I'll remember for a long time- just getting out of the wind and driving snow and in to the shelter of the tent was a huge relief. We spent the next couple of hours trying to dry out our soaking wet sleeping bags with hot water bottles, which actually worked surprisingly well. Unfortunately in such a small tent in a storm everything was still getting soaked anyway.

Eating was tough after so long on the go without having a proper meal, in addition at 6600m we were far higher than we'd been at any point in the trip and we could both feel the altitude.

We decided to try for the West Summit and not the main summit. In any case we had spent too long on the North Face to make the Main Summit and the weather would never allow us to get that committed. The West Summit still lay a fair way

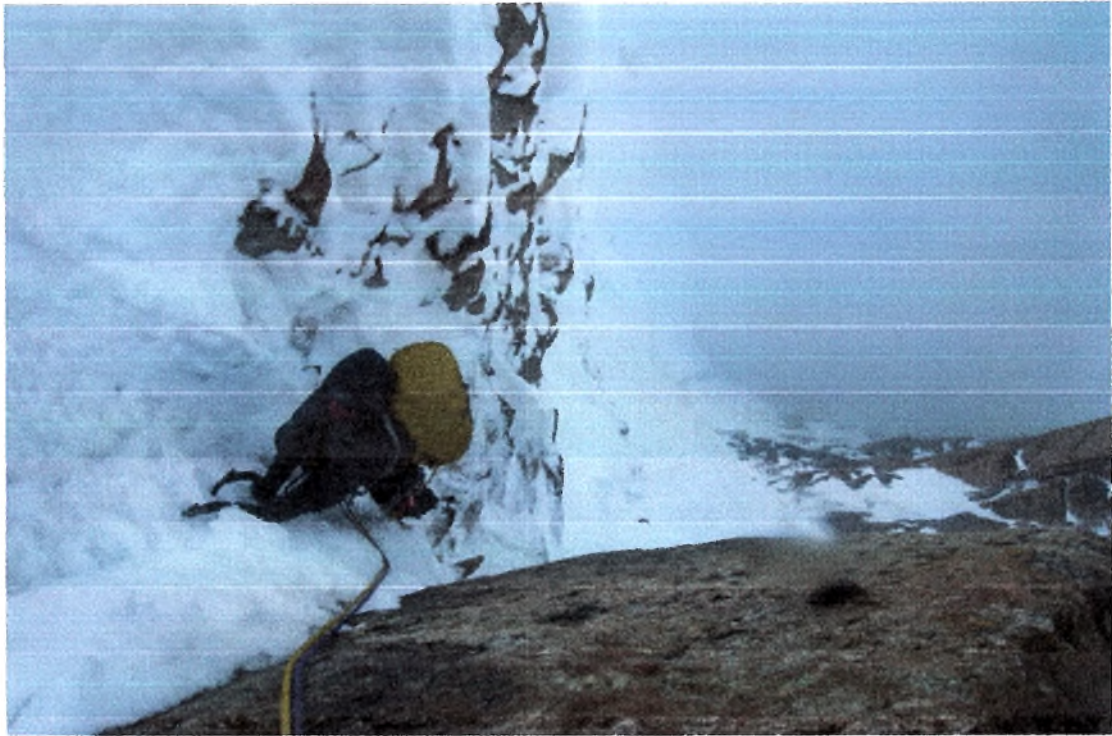
from us but we felt that light and fast we could push a big day out and make it back to our bivy cornice. However we were wasted. We were seriously dehydrated, sleep deprived, and hungry. So we decided to spend the next day giving the storm another day to blow itself out and to let our bodies recover a bit for the final push. It wasn't easy to adjust to these elevations after putting the body through so much and eating was still hard.



**The following morning during a brief clearing in the weather**



**Heading up to some very corniced terrain**



**Kevin tops out of the North Face**



**In our tent at last**

**Day 4:** We awoke to still more snow that had buried our tent. But we spent the day as scheduled trying to rest and eat and drink as much as possible.



**Snow, snow, snow**

**Day 5:** During the night the wind had finally died down which was a huge relief. Unfortunately it still continued to snow and we awoke the following day to our tent buried in snow again. Not ideal for many reasons- not just for continuing on in these conditions but also our retreat back down the North Face was now becoming very dangerous indeed. Kevin voiced his concerns not only about the descent but also about how we'd been sitting on a cornice for the last two nights and he didn't fancy a third one- wise thoughts. I was keen to at least give it a go to the West Summit, we'd come this far and persevered through so much to get here. I led off along the ridge in terrible weather and sketchy climbing. The ridge had to be climb-traversed on its south Side but it was honeycomb ice meaning no runners and dangerous climbing. After a pitch I turned a corner and saw that we still had about another 7 or so pitches like this until we could reach faster ground to the West Summit. By now I had lost complete sensation in both my hands and feet. I've never lost sensation in my feet this badly before. They felt like wood. With the weather showing no signs of letting up and realising that even getting to easier ground would be a huge undertaking let alone having to somehow reverse this to get back to our tent, I called it a day. Kevin seemed completely at ease with the decision and oddly enough so was I. The last two times I'd felt very disappointed that we hadn't continued on, I hadn't been tired or given it my all yet on my previous attempts. This time round though I had pushed further than I'd ever done on any route in my life. We'd climbed ourselves in to very dangerous terrain in tough conditions and near constant stormy weather and kept going until neither one of us could find another ounce of energy no matter how deep we buried.

I came back to our bivy spot and had the worst hot aches combination of my life as my feet and hands came back at the same time. We packed up our kit and headed off on the first of many abseils back down the North Face. Always very wary to stay out of the main couloirs to try and avoid any avalanches coming down from a now very heavily laden North Face. We had to cut one of our ropes almost the full length about a third of the way down the face and proceeded to use a 5mm tag line in its replacement. We were unable to reverse one of the traverses that we did and so were forced to head down the Direct Line- a much faster descent but also the last place in the world we wanted to be with all this fresh snow on the face. We did our best to keep to the side and as we neared the bottom we managed to tuck in to the relative safety of a buttress which was just in time as a huge avalanche roared down. You could see it plume up hundreds of meters above us and then come crashing down the Direct Line as we cowered to the side, hit by the blast that filled the Direct and the Valley below, but not hit by anything substantial. It did not help that at this exact time the weather finally decided to clear up and the sun hit the face full on. Somehow we got off the face unharmed and arrived back at our ABC. Relieved to be off the face. I think we were quite lucky on that descent- we could very easily have been hit by something huge.

From here we still had to get off the approach glacier that had changed considerably during our time on the face. The sun had been on it most of the day and created mush out of huge snowbridges. After some sketchy moments we finally made it to what we normally assumed was safer ground and unroped. I promptly punched through a crevasse with only my pack holding my out of a bottomless dark hole. Another lucky moment.

We finally stumbled in to Base Camp late that night, tired but relieved to have made it back in one piece.



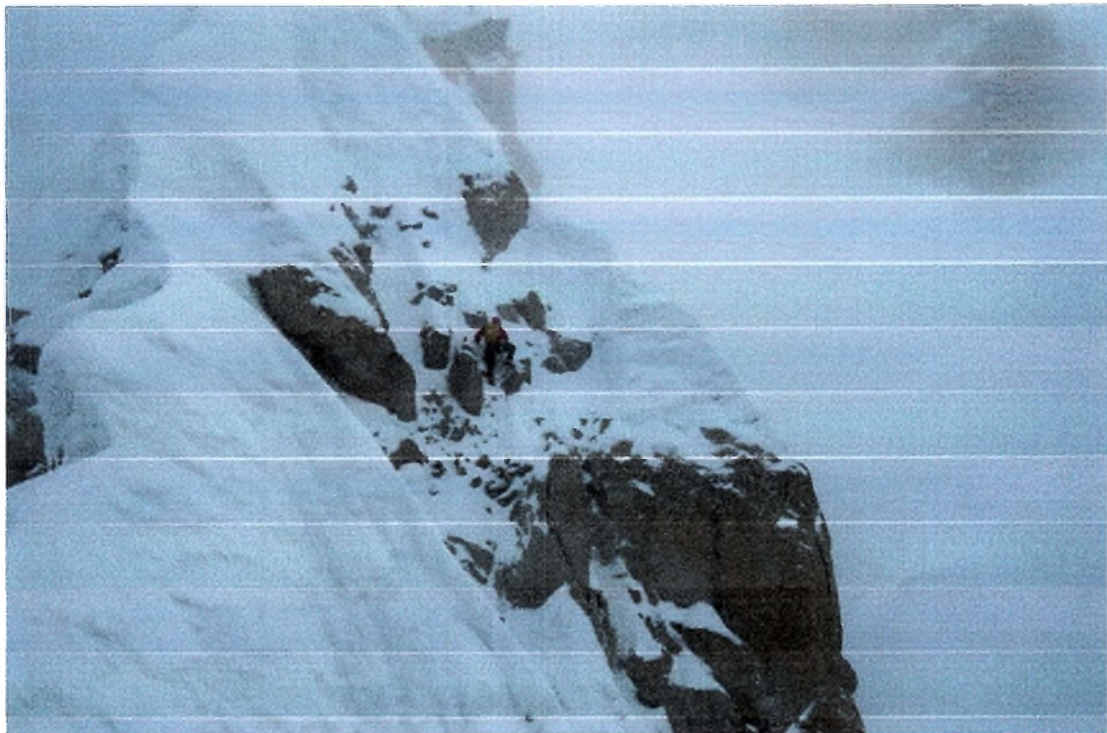
**Heading off on our last day**

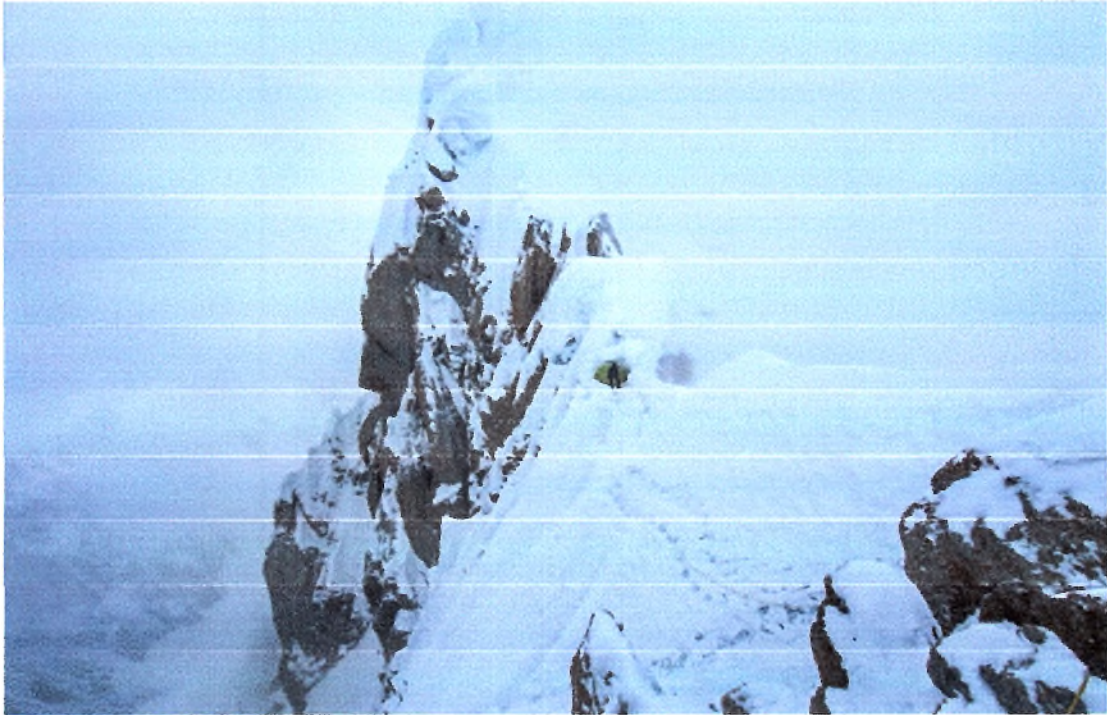


**Looking back to our cornice bivy**



**Honeycomb ice**





**Bailing back down the North Face**



**Rapping the North Face**



**The weather was clearing up by the bottom**

Epilogue: I was content to hang up my ice axes for a while and go sport climbing once we'd decided to bail. I'd suffered on a level that I just never wanted to do again both physically and mentally. But the following day after getting to Base Camp, I was already feeling psyched again. Unfortunately Kevin had to head home for family matters and I didn't fancy crossing the approach glacier alone so that left me with coming back again next year!

In retrospect we should have traversed the top of the North Face and exited at a much easier spot to access the West Summit and the ridge to the main summit. But as is so often the case you only know these things once you've tried another way. Exiting as we did on the North Face was a complete shut down.

I'm finding the biggest crux of this mountain is to work out a viable route to the Main Summit. As I said earlier you can't see it properly apart from the air so a lot of the route I'm choosing has been down to trial and error. Which is why I'm not putting any images up on this report of the mountain or the line. It's still a work in progress for me and I don't want anyone pinching it just yet!

## **Logistics**

Visas for Pakistan are part of the expedition workload. Apply as early as you can in advance. You will need a trekking or climbing permit from the Ministry of Tourism that always comes last minute, if at all. You will also need an invitation letter from a Tour Operator. Do not leave this til last minute- you should start applying for Permits months in advance.

A Tour Operator is essential. Pakistan is not a country to go it alone. I have used Blue Sky Treks and Tours every time and they have been amazing. Their attention to customer service is incredible and you will get no better service than Ghulam at Blue Sky. I highly recommend him- your trip will be so smooth and in a country like Pakistan, which has no tourist infrastructure, this is essential.

I have found that sending cargo is relatively pain free compared to other countries. In the past it has taken 5 days from Europe to my agent in Islamabad and is well worth it to save on extra baggage allowances. Be very careful with baggage allowances as from Europe and the UK it is very expensive, it is not as cheap or as liberal as when flying to the US for example.

Don't expect to be able to buy anything you actually need once you land in Pakistan. This isn't Nepal. The gear shops in Skardu look more like museums so make sure you don't leave anything at home.

Gas is the only thing you should buy over there and you should buy it from your agent. Buying it in the shops in Skardu has been mixed as I've had refilled gas canisters before which are a total disaster on the mountains. My agent imports them himself as he knows how vital it is to success at the high altitudes.

Be overly cautious with hygiene until you arrive in the mountains. I tend to go vegetarian when I'm in Pakistan. Only drink bottled water obviously.

Take a day to read up on Pakistan and what is going on there for the moment. The political situation is very volatile for the moment and that directly affects the security situation. As of writing this the Pakistan Taliban have pledged allegiance to IS which is never good news. It is a very dangerous country but if you are sensible then I have never felt in danger before. The people in the North of the

country are some of the kindest people I have ever met anywhere in my life. But like all parts of the world there are good and bad people and you should treat Islamabad and any areas until you reach Skardu as dangerous. Stay inside your hotel and NEVER drive the Karakorum Highway. This is an incredibly dangerous stretch of road due to the areas that it travels through- climbers that still travel this road rather than wait for a flight from Islamabad to Skardu are taking a huge unnecessary risk.

The situation in Pakistan is evolving almost daily for the moment. It doesn't seem to be deterring climbers that much though, which is an indication of seasoned climber's confidence in the people up North. However it is entirely a personal choice and please remember that you can pull out at the very last minute if you don't feel it's right. I think that is crucial to a trip to Pakistan- **plan everything but don't ever be afraid to pull out at the last minute and make sure your climbing partner knows this.**

Please tip your porters and cooks. Tourism has taken a huge hit since 9/11 and you can see it in the Northern areas. The porters and cooks I have had in the past have become great friends and have, in a way, become part of my trips for me. They live off almost nothing but work incredibly hard for a tiny wage when portering. They are incredibly welcoming and will always try and talk to you rather than keep quiet. The standard tip for the Charakusa is \$3 per porter. I tip them \$5 as work has been almost non existent these last few years and in the grand scheme of things its nothing towards a Himalayan budget but it makes a huge difference for them. You should aim to tip your cooks a minimum of \$100 per person in your team (you will normally have two cooks so that would be \$200 per person in total).

Photography is ok but never take photos of women. The men love to get photos taken of themselves, but this is still a very traditional society and pointing a camera at a girl or woman is strictly frowned upon. Please respect traditional customs.

## **Budgets**

If you chose to climb on summits beneath 6500m you can save yourself a huge amount of money as you don't need a climbing permit and you don't need a Liaison Officer. The Liaison Officer is very expensive, as they are in all countries where they are needed.

### **Per Person Costs (GBP):**

Flights	750
Tips	300
Permit (7000m)	940
Insurance	450
Tour Operator	2100

(Tour Operator costs cover the Liaison Officer, all food, transport, and lodging in Pakistan)

You should also consider variable cost such as Excess Baggage and Satellite Phone costs. Cargo is roughly \$5 per kg.

Our Actual Costs (Costs given earlier are an indication that you should tweak to your own wishes)

Flights	2033 (Kevin flew from the US)
Tips	600
Permit for Link Sar	940
Tour Operator	4200
Excess Baggage	900
Satellite Phone	350
Kit + Mountain Food	300
Flight changes (return)	<u>250</u>
Total Costs	<b>£9573</b>

We were funded by the following grants:

**Mount Everest Foundation – £2450**

**British Mountaineering Council- £950**

*We were also supported by Black Diamond on this trip but the amount they donated was more than eaten up by bringing a camera man on this trip which was part of the deal with Black Diamond. NB the above expenses do not include the camera man.*

There is a 10,000USD deposit that is 'required' for climbing teams that goes to the Helicopter company that sends out rescue choppers. It is entirely a personal call but I never do this anymore. It is not really enforced and you can very easily not put the deposit down. They take out a service charge of 300USD which I think is a bit tight. In any case the fleet of Pakistani helicopters is poor and apart from a possible rescue at Base Camp you can forget anything higher up. You are completely on your own out here. Even getting to Base Camp elevations is not guaranteed with their fleet and their pilots.

**A huge thank you goes out to the British Grants which have been so vital to all my trips so far. I think the support we get from climbing grants is one of the greatest things about being a British climber and we re lucky to have them. This expedition was funded by the Mount Everest Foundation and The British Mountaineering Council**