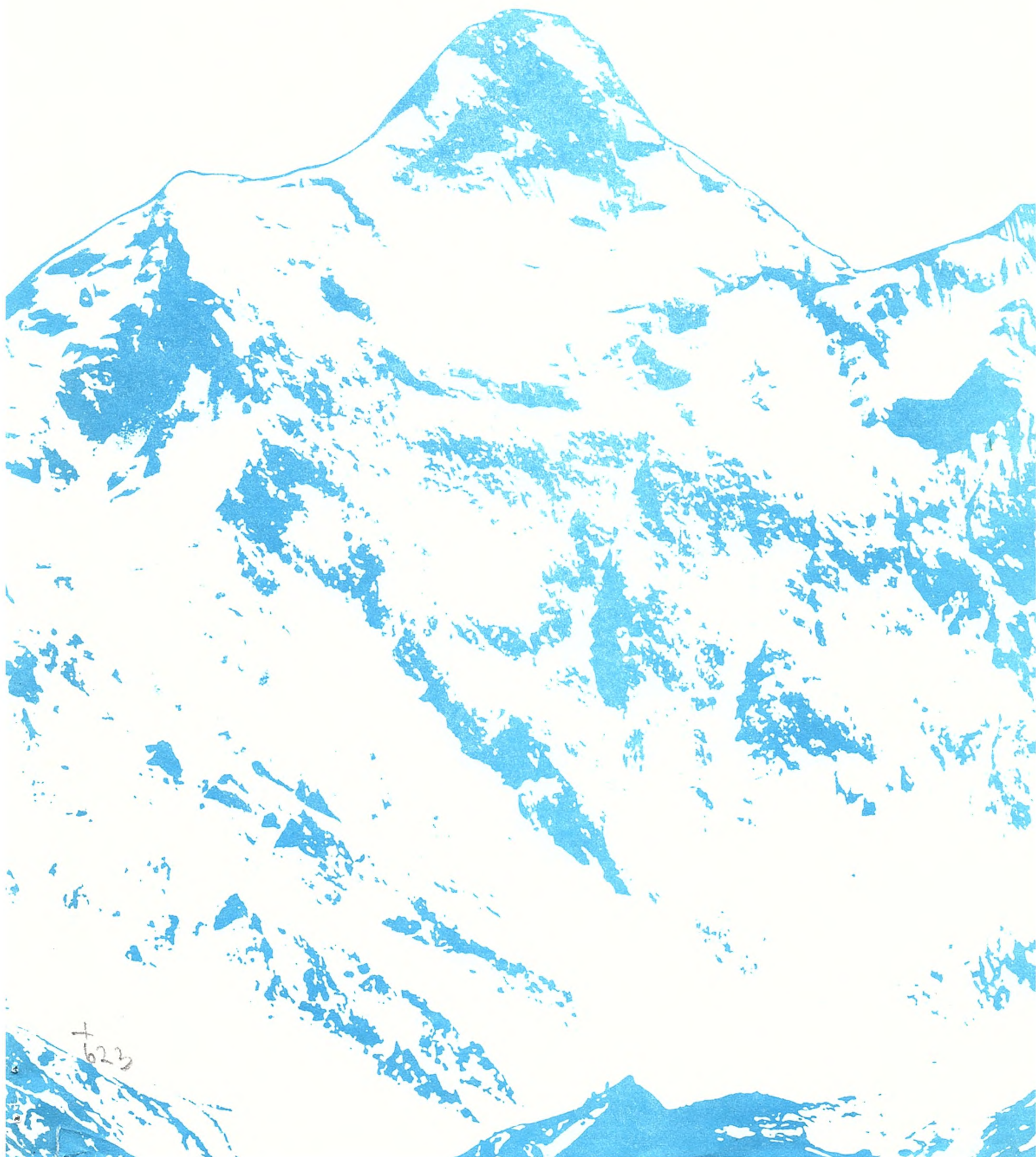


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# THE MARKHUN KARAKORAM EXPEDITION 1987

Patron: Chris Bonington



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### Introduction

The idea of an expedition was in part, at least, originally Richard Haszko's and therefore by default he took the role of warrior, buck-stopper and general goffer, otherwise known as the leader. Having decided on an *expedition*, the second problem was what to climb. Here it is not as some people imagine one of trying to find an unclimbed line or mountain, but rather choosing a suitable possibility from the thousands of poorly-mapped, undocumented peaks in the Himalaya. To this end we are grateful to Chris Bonington (our Patron) and the late Alan Rouse, who drew our attention to the area and showed us photographs taken on their attempt on Karun Koh.

They told us of a remote desert region high in the Karakoram, which although part of Pakistan was inhabited by people who were neither like the Chinese or other Pakistanis. They also told us about the remoteness and beauty of the mountains and the very limited amount of western exploration in the area.

"I saw the Markhun peaks for the first time in 1984," Bonington was to later write. "We had a superb view of them from our base camp on Karun Koh and they were a perpetual temptation to divert our energies from our main objective. The principal summit is a stately snow peak with a fine ridge sweeping up to an almost fairytale sharp summit around 6000 metres. Nobody has ever attempted it and it is a particularly attractive objective at a time when almost all the major peaks in the Himalayas have been climbed."

### The Karakoram

The Karakoram is a vast and complex range of high mountains lying behind and almost parallel with the Punjab Himalaya, at the western end of the Great Himalaya. It is about 250 miles long, from the Batura Glacier in the west to Saser Kangri in the east. The lower Shyok and the Indus rivers separate it from the Punjab Himalaya, and the Shaksgam river from the Aghil mountains.

The area is extremely complicated topographically but can be conveniently divided into the greater and lesser Karakoram. The greater Karakoram includes the main crest zone of the system and includes K2 (28,252ft), the second highest peak in the world; the lesser Karakoram lies between the greater Karakoram and the Indus; it is shorter but contains many important peaks such as Rakaposhi, Masherbrum and Karun Koh.

The Karakoram contains 19 peaks over 25,000ft high - only Nepal, with 22, has more. It also contains the world's greatest glaciers outside sub-polar regions; Hispar - Biafo, 76 miles; Siachen, 45 miles; Baltoro, 36 miles; Batura, 36 miles.



## Getting There

Richard flew out from Heathrow on June 10 to be met at Islamabad airport by Major Asadullah Khan, The Major (as he became known) was a friend of Tom's friends who'd met him on their trek in 1986. He took Richard into his home and for the next week did an invaluable job to help organising transport, food, and base-camp equipment, such that when the others arrived (all except Andy who'd come out separately, turning up on June 15) it was necessary to have just one night in Islamabad before piling into a mini-bus and setting off for the mountains, taking The Major with us.

Our objective was Gilgit, the administrative town in the Hunza region, via a 400-mile journey along the Karakoram Highway. This amazing piece of civil engineering links Pakistan to China, following the route of the old Silk Road. It took 15 years and countless lives to build, cutting through some of the world's wildest, rugged mountain scenery and has only been opened to visitors in the last 10 years. In winter the high passes are cut off and in summer long delays are not unusual as the Pakistan Army clears debris from the latest rock fall or repatches landslipped sections.

From Islamabad the road led easily enough through a wide valley. The driver was fast and it was all very exciting. However, after just over an hour there was an ominous "clunk" and we stopped. Our driver looked underneath, nodded his head, took some cash and hitched back to Rawalpindi. Five hours later he returned and the van was fixed - a vital suspension part had broken before and been (badly) welded together.

Onward through forested hills, gradually getting higher. The driver's antics - screaming round bends, overtaking blind and blasting the horn at anything that moved - were still quite amusing. We entered the Indus Gorge, a place of staggering wildness and savage beauty, the road dangling on by its kerbstones to precipitous cliffs. Just after dark we stopped in a real wild west town (Besham) for a meal. The restaurant was dingy and full of wild-eyed, mean-looking characters who handed in their guns as they came through the door! Tom immediately called it "the restaurant at the end of the universe", for such it could have been. Further progress up the Karakoram Highway was halted while a gun battle raged in the hills. We weren't sorry to be on our way again from that place.

As the evening wore on our driver began to get sleepy, but this didn't make any difference to his speed as he misjudged bends, sometimes 1000ft above the river, and threw us all over the van. We began to get worried, and then more and more frightened until eventually we could take no more and demanded he stop. In short, we went on strike. The rest of the night was a nightmare of shouting, bargaining, a laughing lorry driver giving our driver an opium-filled cigarette to make him sleepy, hitching a ride in this lorry, our van speeding past with Joe, John and Andy white faced inside, all of us back in it, and eventually - thank God - the driver pulling over with the words "sleep now" and collapsing instantly comatose. Next morning we pulled into Gilgit, 32 hours after leaving Islamabad, our lives shortened by years.

We spent a full day in Gilgit, getting last-minute supplies, a cook, and a new van and driver (!), organised by Nazir Sabir, one of Pakistan's top climbers who

now runs his own trekking agency. On June 21 we were driven (safely this time) further up the Highway to Sust, through scenery that resembled something from *Lord of the Rings*. It was raining hard so we saw no mountains but in Sust were made welcome by Ibrahim, proprietor of a lodge. We stayed the night with him and arranged for porters to meet us at the start of our walk-in at Markhun, and also some bottles of a fiery Chinese liquor known as "mai-tai", to supplement our diminishing supply of Famous Grouse.

### The Walk-in

The weather cleared in the morning, revealing immense mountains fingering the sky. It all looked stupendous and horrendous at the same time. We got to Markhun in two of the ubiquitous buzzing Suzuki vans and met our porters. We negotiated a price for their services, one of them fortunately speaking good English and obviously college educated. Our attempt to get them to carry more than the official 25 kilos was thwarted when the headman produced a set of scales. This resulted in all the expedition members carrying 35-40 kilos, a crippling load, but our budget didn't stretch to more porters.

The way up was via a narrow gorge, past huge slopes of mud and scree. After two hours we ascended a horribly loose slope and clambered up an unlikely-looking funnel in the conglomerate to emerge on flat pastures and soon enough an empty village (Abgach) for a campsite.

Walking on next morning we turned a corner and got the first site of our mountain, which the locals called Topopdam. At around 6000m high it looked colossal, but incredibly beautiful, and we all had doubts about being able to climb it. We walked up on through trees to another campsite by a large boulder, which gave good sport for climbers and porters alike after dinner. Joe ordered a sheep from a passing shepherd so we had some meat to look forward to at base camp.

It took about four hours the next day to get to base, at around 14,000ft, tucked under a small glacier moraine and with a large melt-water pool lapping very close by. The tents were soon up, the porters paid off and we were there, the 24th June!

### The Climbing

After a night disturbed by the roar of avalanches we woke to a fine morning. John and Richard went for an exploratory walk towards the col, which would give access to the east ridge. This looked the most likely line, with another 3,000ft of climbing above the col, over an obvious shoulder to gain the summit pyramid. They gained about 1000ft, being stopped by an icy runnel, and reckoned the col was only a little further and higher. They descended in high spirits to find Steve and Hugh digging a canal and Joe locked into negotiations with a gnarly old shepherd over the price of a very sorry specimen of sheep. Agreement was reached, only for a further argument to erupt within the team over the method of despatching the poor beast. The cook wouldn't touch it, or carry on cooking, unless it was killed *ha!a!* and one member had strong objections to this method of killing. It was eventually decided that "When in Rome ..."

The cook later presented us with fried liver which was delicious. Unfortunately, our eager anticipation of lamb curry for dinner turned to horror on being presented with all sorts of squiggly bits and tubes, which none of us could stomach. We went to bed hungry. However, we decided to go for the col in the morning.

At 5am in a beautiful dawn, Andy, Joe, Tom, Richard and John set off for the col, carrying loads of gas, ropes and food. Soon reaching John and Richard's highpoint, they found the way on to be far further and higher than expected, crossing gullies and snow slopes to gain a main gully system but not seeming to get any closer. After a couple of hours Tom decided to go down, shortly followed by Richard who was in some pain from his boots. John joined them and they went directly down gullies and steep slopes to the glacier and base camp. The distance to the col had been totally misinterpreted but no insuperable difficulties found. Andy and Joe descended later having got to within 500ft of the col, leaving a stash of gear at their highpoint.

We all rested the next day (June 27), deciding to have another go at midnight. On this attempt Steve and Hugh followed along but Tom elected not to go. It was a warm night with the snow soft and tiring. We followed our descent route of the first attempt, believing the direct approach to be quicker. Andy and Joe pushed ahead, John and Richard following them. About two-thirds of the way up, Richard gave up, with very painful sores on his feet, and went down to meet Steve and Hugh who also turned back.

Andy, Joe and John made the col, encountering black ice and avalanche-prone slopes on the top section, and dug a snow cave. The following morning the weather clouded over so they decided to descend, not via the way they had come because of the dangerous ground just below the col, but going down gentle slopes leading into a parallel valley. Joe and John took a short cut up and down avalanche-prone gullies over the ridge between the valleys while Andy went the long way to the confluence of the two and then back up to base. While they were away base camp had been hit by an avalanche from across the valley. Fortunately its force was spent but it was still very impressive and not a little frightening.

After Joe and John returned Tom felt an impulse to go to the col via the long route. He packed and set out, shortly followed by Richard who also wanted to try that way. They spent a night in the parallel valley but Richard returned to base in the morning, his feet too cut to walk far. At this point Tom had decided not to take part in the climbing above the col, as had Richard. This left Joe, Andy and John who decided to go for it in two days time after a good rest.

The weather continued fair with a lot of sun and occasional snow flurries. Steve and Hugh left on June 30 for a long walk, hoping to reach the col or go into the Shimshal valley across the Karun Fir pass. In the event they made the col and left a valuable stash of food and gas at the snow cave.

Tom returned on July 1 having reached the col but unable to find the snow cave in white-out conditions. He had resolved to go home fairly soon, as had Richard, and a plan was hatched whereby those not climbing would move base camp down to the village just below the confluence of the two valleys so that descending climbers wouldn't have to go all the way back up the original valley. At 9pm on

July 2 Andy, Joe and John left for their summit attempt. However they returned at midnight as much of the snow on the way up to the col had melted, rendering that approach suicidal. They decided to go up later via the other valley. This they did, meeting Hugh and Steve on the way back from their trip to the col.

In the morning everyone at base, including the cook, packed big loads and went down to the village, re-establishing a campsite of the walk-in on a grassy meadow. In mid-afternoon Joe hobbled into the camp. His knee, badly injured on a previous expedition to Peru, was collapsing and he feared to go further with it. Andy and John had continued on up.

The completion of the transfer of base camp was accomplished the following day by Tom, Richard, Steve and Hugh, who along with Joe then faced an anxious wait for Andy and John, particularly when a storm enveloped the mountain. Fortunately it cleared in a few hours.

On July 7 Tom and Joe walked up the valley towards the descent route and met Andy and John. They all returned to camp and told the story. After Joe had left, Andy and John went to the col and spent a night and most of the next day there, intending to continue when the sun was cooler. A storm developed but they decided to head for a prominent rock buttress about 1000ft higher, bivouacing there as they waited for the weather to clear.

A 4am start took them up to the shoulder, finding excellent snow conditions which rapidly deteriorated when the sun came up. A long gentle traverse led to the final summit slope. They dumped most of their gear, taking just waterproofs and some food bars, and started the long haul to the heavily-corniced summit, reaching it at about 10am on July 6. For the only time in a day of perfect weather it clouded in! They descended to their sacks and collapsed in the hot sun. At about 2pm they set off again, descending past the snow cave and right down into the valley for another night out, before continuing until they met Tom and Joe.

We had quite a party that afternoon, flushed with excitement and relief - the mountain had been climbed with no injuries or worse problems. Our pre-arranged porters turned up in the morning, everyone hoisted big loads and we walked down to the road in a couple of hours. After paying the porters we hired a van to take us to Ibrahim's at Sust, had a meal there, hired another van and were taken back to Gilgit, with incredible views this time.

The rest of the trip passed pleasantly, lazing about in the Hunza Inn, meeting three dis-chuffed Austrians who had been about to set off to climb our mountain, until Tom, Richard, John and Joe travelled to Islamabad, this time in a safe and respectable 14 hours, and caught a flight home the following day. Andy met up with a British team who had just arrived in Gilgit, while Steve and Hugh went trekking in the Nagar valley.

### Conclusions

It had been a very successful expedition. We had made the first ascent of a very fine mountain with the main expedition away from home for only four weeks. The expedition was low cost, though it may have been more comfortable with greater expense (eg. hiring more porters). We made a big mistake with food,

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