



BRITISH BIALE KARAKORAM EXPEDITION 1988

Patron: Doug Scott

EXPEDITION REPORT

An attempt to climb the south face of Biale (6730 m) for the first ascent from the Baltoro glacier, Karakoram mountains in North Pakistan.



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A view of the south face of Biale (6730 m) taken from Masherbrun Base Camp on the Yermanandu glacier in 1985 showing line of ascent during the expedition in 1988.

EXPEDITION MEMBERS

- Mike Searle (Leader)
- Mark Miller
- Sean Smith
- Nick Groves
- Simon Yates
- Maryrose Fowlie
- Capt. Naveed Ghaznavi (L.O.)
- Hakim. Hushe (cook)

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623

BIALE EXPEDITION
Timetable

June 1 Searle, Groves fly London - Islamabad
Miller, Smith, Yates, Fowlie fly London - Karachi, and
travel by train by Rawalpindi

7-9 Drive Rawalpindi - Gilgit - Skardu

12-20 Walk-in Dassu - Base Camp

24-26 Lobsang Lower Spire climb

28-29 Climb through Biale glacier icefall

July 1-6 First attempt Biale reaches 6,200m (Miller, Smith, Yates
Groves, Searle)

10-14 Second attempt Biale reaches 6,000m (Miller, Smith, Yates,
Groves)

29-22 Third attempt Biale reaches 6,000m (Miller, Smith, Yates)

25-31 Walk-out to Dassu

SHIMSHAL - SIM GANG (SNOW LAKE) TREK
Mike Searle, Nick Groves, Steve Razetti

August 11-13 Trek Pasu - Shimshal

15-18 Trek Shimshal - Shuwart

20-22 Trek Shuwart - Wezm-i Dur, cross Braldu river by yak

23-26 Ascend Braldu glacier to Lukpe-La (5,460m)

26-27 Storm, heavy snows

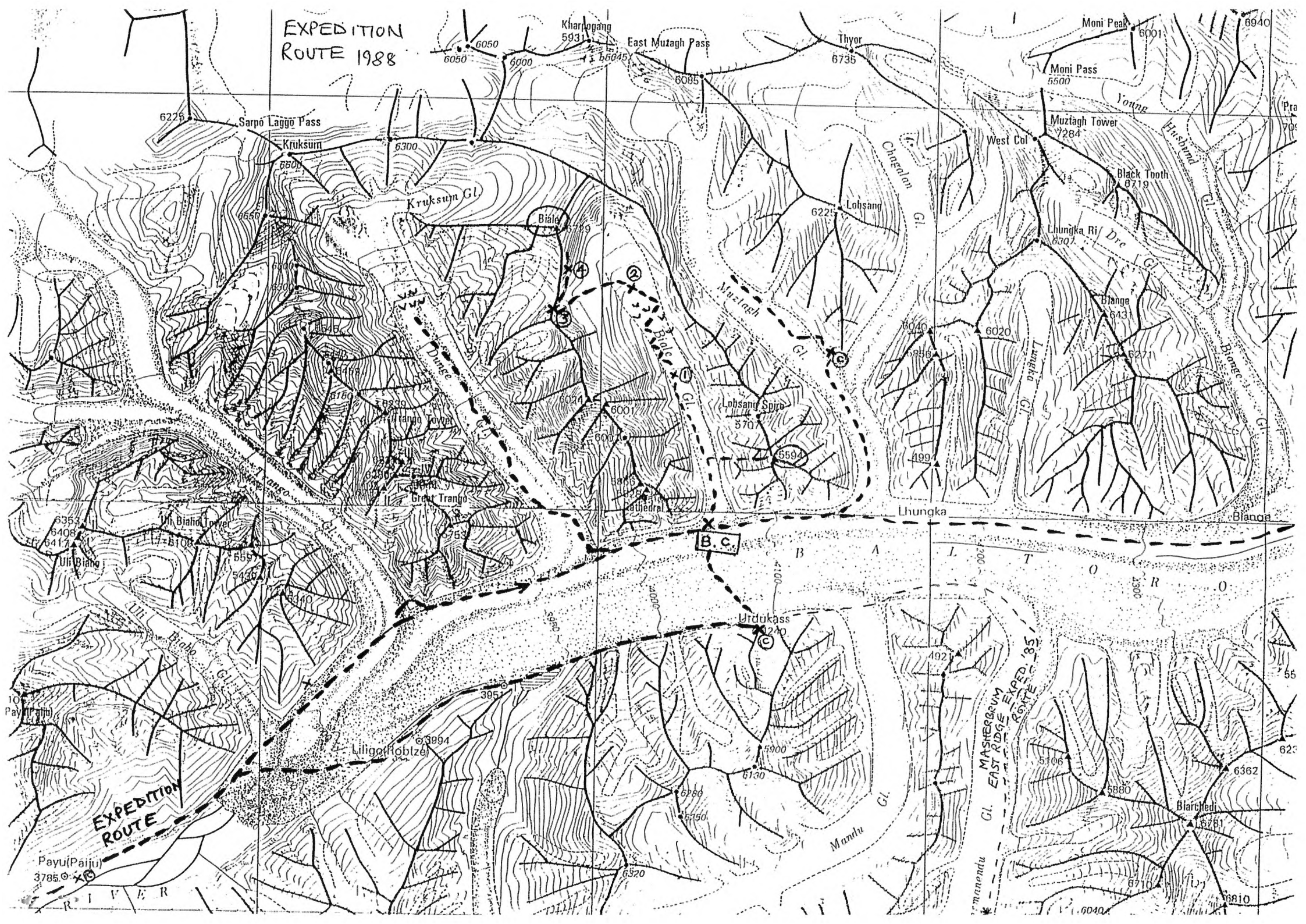
28-31 Cross Sim Gang glacier (Snow Lake) and descend Biafo
glacier to Askole

September 1-2 Trek Askole - Dassu, jeep to Skardu

4 Fly Skardu - Rawalpindi

6-7 Fly Islamabad - London

EXPEDITION ROUTE 1988



Biale (6,730m) is a massive fortress-like mountain on the watershed between the Baltoro glacier and the Sarpo Largo glacier west of the Muztagh Tower and north east of the Trango Towers. It can be seen from the main track up the Baltoro glacier between Urdukas and Goro, although it is hidden behind (but much higher than) the Cathedral and Lobsang spires.

When we were attempting the east ridge of Masherbrum in 1985, Biale dominated our views looking northwards across the Baltoro, with its three prominent buttresses and castellated summit ridge. The east ridge of Masherbrum was a problem for the year 2000, but Biale looked tantalisingly climbable. Mark Miller, Simon Yates and I had climbed in the Hushe area in 1986 and Simon and Sean Smith had climbed several notable peaks around the Gondoro glacier in 1987 and I persuaded them that Biale would be a good objective for this year. My long-time Himalayan climbing partner, Nick Groves, made up the climbing team of five. Maryrose Fowlie walked in with us and stayed several weeks at Base Camp on her way back to New Zealand.

Our 1988 Karakoram expedition also had geological objectives. After three previous expeditions to the Biafo glacier (1984), K2 and Masherbrum (1985) and the Hushe - Gondoro glacier area (1986) a team from the University of Leicester had mapped and sampled a wide area of the Central Karakoram. One "blank on the map" was the area north of the Baltoro along the northern margin of the Karakoram granite batholith. One of our objectives was therefore to fill in this blank on the geological map, collect samples for geochemistry, geochronology and microprobe work from the Muztagh, Biale and Trango Towers and also to collect granite samples at specific altitudes on Biale for fission track dating and determination of uplift rates.

We received generous grants from the Mt. Everest Foundation and British Mountaineering Council, plus lots of sponsorship from food and gear manufacturers in the UK in terms of discount or free goods. Sean Smith and I also planned to take a movie film, receiving £300 worth of free film from the BBC at the Open University to film the spectacular geology of the Baltoro area.

Biale is unclimbed and when I applied for permission to the Ministry of Tourism in Islamabad they had never heard of it. However, having ascertained that the mountain was actually in Pakistan they gave us permission and we flew out to Pakistan on June 1st. Nick and I flew straight to Islamabad; Sean, Mark, Simon and Maryrose flew to Karachi and braved the 26 hour train ride up to Rawalpindi. In Pindi we stayed with our old friends Mohammed Ali Changazi and Ghulam Ahmed, and I went to Peshawar to pick up our Leicester University jeep.

After five days of beurocracy in Islamabad, including a minor epic when Mark managed to roll the jeep, we were all set for the three day trip to Skardu. The jeep had suffered about 15° of shearing to starboard and Sean and I received some amazed looks and lots of head shaking from villagers as we drove lopsidedly all the way up the Karakoram highway.

At Skardu we bought all our basic food rations and hired 30 porters for the 9 day walk-in to Base Camp. Our Liaison Officer, Cpt. Naveed Ghaznavi did a marvellous job hiring the porters, and proved himself to be extremely easy-going, friendly and helpful in every way. Very soon we were all firm friends with Naveed and as a result life at Base Camp and throughout the whole trip was totally relaxed, laid-back as far as horizontal and generally very good fun. It was probably one of the most enjoyable expeditions that we'd been on.

The main track up the Baltoro glacier sticks largely to the lateral moraine on the south bank until Urdukas. Our Base Camp was to be on the north side of the Baltoro, but we did not know if our attempt was to be from the Dunge, Biale or Muztagh glaciers. Mark and Simon went ahead and spent three days reconnoitering these approach routes and found an excellent site for Base Camp at the confluence of the Biale and Baltoro glaciers. The rest of us arrived on 20th June after quelling a minor porter strike at Uli Biaho Base Camp. Porters rarely go along the north side of the Baltoro where there is no track and the going is somewhat more difficult. The only other expedition on this side of the glacier was a small Swiss-Polish team - the Karakoram professionals, Voytek Kurtyka and Erhard Loretan, who climbed a spectacular line on the Nameless Spire (Trango Towers). No trekkers or porters passed through our Base Camp the 5 weeks we were there.

Our first excursion was a 3 day attempt to climb the lower Lobsang spire - the southernmost of the long line of about seven granite spires that divides the Biale from the Muztagh glaciers. These spires all have very steep or vertical south faces and a 50-60° northern slope following prominent jointing sets in the granite. We climbed up snow and ice gullies between the lower spire and the main Lobsang spires (where the Child-Scott-Thexton route goes) and put a bivi camp on the high col at 5,200m between the two spires. The views from here were inspiring, perched on a knife edge ridge looking down to the Biale glacier with the Cathedral's cliffs westwards and the Muztagh Tower in the east. I was suffering from splitting altitude headaches and went straight down first thing in the morning. Mark, Simon, Sean and Nick climbed a few pitches up steep ice to the summit ridge where they could look down on to the motorway-like moraines of the Baltoro glacier and up to the Gasherbrum Range and Chogolisa. The ice was in a very unstable condition and the summit, although only 100m or less above, was a long traverse away so they abseiled down back to the col and that night went all the way back to Base Camp. From high on the Lobsang spire we could see the entire south face of Biale and the approaches which included a dangerous looking icefall near the top of the Biale glacier. It looked like a long and complicated route winding through the crevasses to gain the far eastern bank of the icefall but the weather was calm and clear, the mountains looked stupendous and we were all in high spirits and hopeful.

During 28th - 29th July, we all carried ropes, gear and bivi tents up to a dump at the foot of the icefall and then found a route through the maze of crevasses and serac barriers which wound up through the icefall to the far right-hand edge. We left the gear stashed in a bergschrund tied on to the rock wall above, and descended back to Base Camp as driving snow swept up from the Baltoro. The first attempt on Biale lasted six days during the first week of July. On 1st July we left late in the afternoon, bivied at the foot of the icefall and climbed through the icefall by headtorch during the night. We arrived at the dump at first light and climbed on to the large snow plateau, put up bivi tents and rested all day. Nick climbed up to the main ridge connecting the south east end of Biale with the Lobsang ridge where he could peer over into the Muztagh valley. The snow softened drastically during the day, and walking became a tiring ordeal, involving wading through knee-deep soft snow. Most of the days were spent sweltering inside tents trying to escape the devastating heat of the Karakoram sun, our climbing was largely done between midnight and dawn.

Next day we left at midnight, crossed the large snow basin and ascended a series of steep snow and ice gullies to gain the main connecting ridge joining Biale with the summit of the Cathedral. Three pitches of rock climbing midway were needed to climb a band of granite cliffs. All the ground to the right of us was threatened from a band of overhanging seracs on the summit ridge of Biale. Long, tiring snow plodding up a seemingly endless convex slope brought us to the main ridge dividing the Biale glacier from the Dunge glacier and the most fantastic views in every direction.

The campsite was at 6,000m, perched on the crest of the ridge. Thousand metre high granite cliffs plunged straight down to the Dunge glacier directly below us. We could look across westwards and down on the huge cliffs of the Trango Towers and Nameless Spire. Two or three massive snow peaks west of Biale defined the border ridge between the main Baltoro drainage to the south and the Sarpo Largo glacier over in China to the north. South of us we could look along the summit ridge of Cathedral, which was at the same height, and over to the spectacular sight of Masherbrum looming up above the clouds, dominating everything to the south of the Baltoro. To the east we could see K2 just visible behind the pyramid of the Muztagh Tower plus the whole Broad Peak massif, the Gasherbrums, Hidden Peak, Sia Kangri, Baltoro Kangri and Chogolisa. Away in the distance over the Biarchedi massif were the peaks at the head of the Siachen glacier, the Apsarasas and Teram Kangri Ranges. It was, I think, the most spectacular vantage point I had ever had the privilege of witnessing.

It was a magnificent clear, cold starry night, but soon after dawn clouds started welling up from the south. Mark, Simon and Sean moved further up the ridge to the base of the 500m headwall and bivied. Nick and I decided to wait a day to see what the weather was going to do. I had another splitting altitude headache, and during the night I started to have breathing problems, feeling nauseous and dizzy. The next morning a fiery red dawn was soon enveloped by thick storm clouds and we had no option but to retreat. Mark, Simon and Sean had already descended, leaving before dawn, and got all the way back to Base Camp that day. I was feeling extreme altitude effects and going very slowly. Nick and I spent another night bivied out on the plateau while the storm developed. That night 2 feet of snow fell, adding to our problems and we spent 5 hours the following morning wading down through the icefall, now looking completely different. It was a harrowing descent but at least my headaches vanished as we got lower. Finally staggering back into Base Camp late in the afternoon to find the whole place under flood water, as our ablation valley campsite slowly turned into a lake. Hakim was digging trenches vainly trying to divert the torrents away from the kitchen tarpaulin. Maryrose and Naveed had spent several days walking up to Concordia and were weathering the storm in style at the army camp at Goro.

Rain and storms lashed the Baltoro for two days and the campsite was totally flooded out. We went across to Urdukas to meet some friends trekking up to Concordia and collect mail. Maryrose left to walk out and catch her flight back to New Zealand.

Two further attempts were made on Biale from 10th - 14th July and 20th - 22nd July; both were defeated at 6,000m when three-day storms set in. I decided not to go up again after my altitude problems on the ridge, and Nick had had enough after the second attempt. He trekked up to K2 Base Camp when Mark, Sean and Simon tried for the last time. The evening they returned rain began lashing down and for four days storms swept the Baltoro. It was a real shame that, despite good weather during most of June and July, the three bad spells of weather all arrived when we were high on Biale. The upper 500m headwall looked like it would have been steep with some technical climbing, but feasible.

On July 25th Hakim went across to Urdukas, collared about 10 passing porters and brought them across to our Base Camp. We packed up, burnt all the rubbish, and left no trace of our 5 week stay at Base Camp. Nick had still not appeared back from K2 Base Camp so we went across to Urdukas, Sean and I waiting a day there for him.

While we were filming, a massive avalanche swept the entire south face of Biale, peeling off from the summit seracs. The avalanche filled the entire snow basin across which we'd walked and on down across the icefall as we watched with increasing awe. We all met up at Paiyu on July 27th and walked out in two days to Askole and two more to Dassu. In the Braldu gorge one of the side rivers had flash flooded, swept away the bridge and caused an amazing 6 foot rise in water level, the water being the colour of thick mud. We had to rig up a tyrolean traverse rope crossing and it took most of one morning to get all the expedition and gear across.

We arrived back in Skardu on August 1st. Mark, Simon and Sean went straight down to Pindi by bus with Naveed. They then flew to Katmandu to join Doug Scott's expedition to Makalu. Nick and I went around to Gilgit where we met up with Steve Razetti. Steve had made a dump of food on top of Snow Lake earlier in the summer and was looking for trekking companions to do an adventurous 3 week trek from Hunza to Dassu via the Shimshal Valley, Lukpe-la (5,460m), Sim Gang glacier, across Snow Lake and down the Biafo. It took him just a minute, over dinner in the Golden Peak Inn in Gilgit, to persuade us to join him.

SHIMSHAL - SIM GANG GLACIER - BIAFO GLACIER TREK

Nick, Steve and I set off from Pasu in the Hunza Valley on 11th August with six porters. Twenty-three days later we arrived back at Skardu once again, having trekked about 250km across the Karakoram, ten days of which were on glaciers. We walked to Shimshal in three days and to Shuwart, a high altitude pasture at 4,500m, in a further three long days. We had four excellent Shimshali porters, Shambi Khan, Dolat Kazi, Tafas Shah and Faisal Baig. Two days after Shuwart, the last settlement on the northern side we crossed the Braldu river using yaks which had to swim the glacial river three times to get us and the gear across. The yaks then returned to Shimshal with Azizullah, leaving us with little alternative but to cross Snow Lake in order to get out.

Nick and I had hoped to climb a peak near the Lukpe-La (5,460m), but heavy snowfall and a two-day storm made conditions extremely dangerous and slower than anticipated. Crevasses were all covered by a foot of fresh snow and we had to make several crevasse rescues. Both Shambi Khan and Steve took a serious screamer, falling through unstable snow bridges. The Sim Gang glacier was awesome in its desolation and Antarctic in its whiteness, being one of the most impressive mountain areas any of us had seen.

The food barrel that Steve had left at the Sim Gang - Biafo glacier junction had mysteriously disappeared and we had a hungry three day walk out down the Biafo glacier and finally, once again back to Askole. We were ravenously hungry by the time we reached Askole where Haji Mehdi, the Lambadar, plied us with omelettes and chapattis.

Snow Lake and the Sim Gang glacier area is very serious trekking - mountaineering country, especially in heavy snowfall conditions, and only people experienced in crevasse rescue, rope-work and with a high pain threshold should contemplate going there.

Mike Searle
December, 1988

More Information can be obtained from:

Dr. Mike Searle
Department of Geology
University of Leicester
Leicester
LE1 7RH
England.

FOOD

Living on a local diet for much of the duration of the expedition cut down the costs of freighting large amounts of western luxuries to Pakistan. We did, however, manage to bring out, between us, some 120 kg of highly concentrated goodies for the hill. These included some 75 Christmas Puddings, hundreds of muesli bars, fudge bars, high energy muesli, nuts and raisins mix, chocolate biscuits, savoury rice, quick pasta and 30 large tins of excellent vegetable pate (Tartex) for the vegetarian majority on this trip. These 'luxuries' were essential above base camp, and formed most of the food taken onto the mountain.

Local food, bought either in Pindi or Skardu (not the best place to shop), consisted of a basic, unvarying rice and dhal diet. The Baltis eat vast quantities of flour and ghee so, presuming a local cook is employed, it is vital to provide plenty of these two commodities.

Total man-days on the expedition were calculated at approximately 420, of which we estimated 300 man-days for walk-in, base camp and walk-out; i.e. when local food would be consumed, the remaining 120 man-days being on the actual climb. Below is the Pindi/Skardu shopping list:-

300 Man-Days/Local Food

Rice	65 kg	Semolina	5 kg	Eggs	150
Dhal	20 kg	Custard	1 kg	(90% bad upon arrival	
Flour	65 kg	Dessicated Coconut	1 kg	Base Camp - check by	
Sugar	40 kg	Porridge	5 kg	flotation when buying	
Milk	30 kg	Tomato sauce	5 litres (in	in Skardu)	
Ghee	20 kg		plastic cans)	Epigaz	50 cylinders
Tea	5 kg	Pickles, chutneys	c. 5 litres (in	Kerosene	85 litres
Coffee	1 kg		plastic cans)	Candles	100
Fish, tinned	5 kg	Jams, tinned	8 kg	Soap powder/washing soap/	
Meat, tinned	2 kg	Cheese, tinned	10 kg	bowls/cigarette lighters/	
Onions	15 kg	Butter, tinned	2 kg	cloth bags/poly. bags/	
Garlic/ginger	2 kg	Jellies	2 kg	toilet rolls	
Salt	3 kg	Biscuits	10 kg		
Spices, various	1.5 kg	Baking powder	0.5 kg	Above food weighed about	
Noodles	3 kg	Boiled sweets	2 kg	300 kg; kitchen gear and	
Tomato Paste	4 kg			fuel a further 100 kg.	
(tinned)					

COSTS

<u>In UK</u> (personal):	London - Islamabad flight (some members flew to Karachi which is much cheaper)	<u>£</u> 458
	BMC Insurance	90
	Pakistan Visa	<u>25</u>
		£573
<u>In UK</u> (group):	Peak Fee	600
	Organisational Expenses	130
	Epigaz	50
	Tent Repairs (from last year's expedition)	<u>160</u>
		£940

This, of course, excludes the cost of personal equipment, film, etc. which varied from member to member.

<u>In Pakistan:</u>	(£1 = Rps 30)	<u>£</u>
	Porters 32 x 10 days (c. Rp 1,000 each)	
	Total Porter Bill, walk-in	1,000
	Total food and kitchen gear for cook	500
	Cpt. Naveeds (L.O.) gear	225
	Porter Insurance	75
	Hakims (cook) wages	156
	Porter walk-out expenses (10 porters)	330
	Extra food, jeep hire to/from Dassu	<u>100</u>
		£2,386
	+ UK Group expenses (see above)	<u>940</u>
		£3,326

	BMC/MEF Grant	£1,900
	Skardu - Skardu Cost/Member	<u><u>£285/each</u></u>

It should be noted that the above costing is approximate and excludes such items as accommodation in Pindi, transport to the mountains, and inevitable extras. Including the personal costs incurred ex. UK (flight, etc.) it should be quite possible to climb a peak of this size for a 6-8 week period for under £1,000 per person. This, of course, assumes a similar grant from the BMC/MEF and support from our generous sponsors.