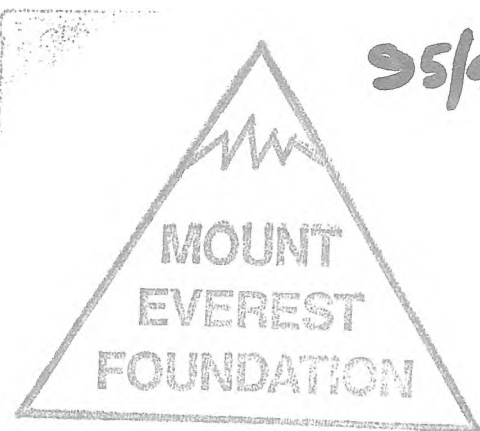


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BRITISH SHANI EXPEDITION 1995

EXPEDITION REPORT

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SUMMARY

The British Shani Expedition 1995 (or BSE for short) visited the Naltar Valley region of the Karakoram, Northern Pakistan from 30 July to 31 August 1995. The expedition's objective was the first ascent of the North face of Shani, a beautiful mountain of 5990m which dominates the head of the upper Naltar valley. A total of 24 days were spent at base camp, where the team experienced short but reasonably settled periods of very hot weather interspersed with impressively violent storms. Unfortunately, due to the hot weather, climbing conditions were not very good with very little climbable snow and ice around.

The team made an attempt on the North Face of Shani but this was short lived due to poor climbing conditions, high temperatures (only -5°C at 2am !) and excessive objective danger from stonefall. Progress was limited to less than 100m above the bergschrund ! We did, however, manage to make the 3rd ascent of the West ridge of Shani, which proved to be a very worthwhile route in its own right. The descent was made all the more exciting after being caught in a vicious Karakoram storm. Two members of the party also made an ascent of Snow Dome (c. 5500m) on the opposite side of the Naltar valley to Shani, with Jon taking his skis to make a probable 1st ski descent.

The expedition also undertook some medical research into Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS), and all of the members were quizzed at intervals by Martin to record the effects of altitude. Two of the expedition members even took Progesterone (female contraceptive) during the walk in as this was supposed to reduce the effects of AMS !

Manchester Airport - Base Camp, Sunday 30 July to Saturday 4 August

We had managed to book direct flights from Manchester to Islamabad with PIA via Allied World Travel in Middlesex. The flights cost £520 each. We also negotiated free excess baggage via PIA in London. On check in, we were told economy class was full so PIA kindly upgraded us to club class - luxury ! The 10 hour flight soon passed and we arrived in a very hot Islamabad at 8.30am local time Monday 1st. Nicks' mislaid ice axes caused some anxious moments until they were finally tracked down an hour later. We got taxis to Himalaya Treks and Tours, Rahim Plaza, Rawalpindi where Nasir Ali was very helpful. He let us leave all our gear at his agency office whilst we went off to arrange transport to Gilgit. He had even arranged for one of his colleagues to meet us at the airport when we arrived, Jon had arranged this in advance from the UK via fax. Unfortunately, the PIA flights to Gilgit were not running because there had been a lot of rain and flooding which had created a backlog in the flights. So, we resigned ourselves to the 18 hour bus journey up the KKH. We did, however, afford ourselves the luxury of hiring an 18 seater minibus all to ourselves for the journey, this cost 4000 Rp. We left Islamabad at 4pm that afternoon, following a short delay when we insisted that a frighteningly bald tyre was changed. This was money well spent as it meant we had a whole row of 4 seats each !

We arrived in Gilgit at 10am the following morning after a long and arduous journey, involving a several hour delay due to part of the road being washed away. The stunning views of Nanga Parbat on the way partially made up for it. We checked into the Hunza Inn where Martin crashed out whilst the rest of us went shopping in Gilgit. It was very hot ! We spent the day buying food and other supplies, we even managed to buy some Epigas cylinders. We arranged hire of 2 jeeps (Walji's tours, Gilgit) to take us up to Naltar (the start of the walk in) for 750 Rp each for the following afternoon. That night we tucked into a fabulous curry at the Park Hotel and thankfully retired to bed for a much needed nights sleep - the first proper one since leaving England.

The following morning was spent buying the rest of the supplies and packing the jeeps for the ride up to Naltar. Through Walji's tours we hired a cook who travelled with us from Gilgit and stayed with us until our return. Mirbas Khan from the Hunza Valley proved a great find. He was honest, reliable, resourceful, a good friend, and could cook! (250 Rp per day). We planned to arrange our own porters locally once we arrived in Naltar, despite several locals in Gilgit who had tried to persuade us otherwise.

The 2 hour jeep ride up the KKH and Naltar Valley that afternoon was excellent, with superb views of the surrounding peaks. We booked into the Prince Hotel and there was an immediate large gathering of locals who were obviously keen for work once they heard an expedition was in town. We told them all to return at 7am the following morning and resolved to sort out our porter requirements then. Jon's camera was stolen sometime that evening from outside the Prince Hotel, so future parties beware! Our cook proved very useful for keeping guard over all of our kit. A very sleepless night followed, too hot with lots of bedbugs and flies. Woken at 6am by sunlight streaming in through the open windows and bedlam ensued as hordes of porters arrived looking for work. There were some heated moments and fisticuffs as we sorted the gear into 19 x 25Kg loads (we had a lot of gear!), and our nominated porter sirdar was next to useless at organising the proceedings. We finally left at 8.30am and there were numerous further squabbles between the porters on the walk up. The whole portering experience was proving to be not a pleasurable one!

There followed a 4 hour walk up the alpine-like Naltar valley to the Naltar lakes, where there was further dispute with the porters because they wanted to stay at the lakes, we wanted them to carry on further. We eventually carried on for a further 2 hours to a camp just below Lower Shani on the true right bank of the river. Whilst here, we heard reports from passing trekkers of an experienced team of British Army climbers who were reportedly planning an ascent of Shani. This surprised us

somewhat as we were unaware there would be any other expeditions in the area. We were also worried that their objective may be the North Face !

We rose early the following day for the final leg to base camp, leaving at 7.45am and arriving at approx. 11am . There were good views of Shani E face during the walk in, with worrying amounts of stonefall coming down the whole face. We quickly paid off the porters, 175 rp per stage plus half rate back - Lower Shani to base camp was three and a half stages. Base camp was situated just below the lateral moraine of the Shani glacier, in the same spot previously occupied by Kate Murphy's and Simon Grayson's expeditions, next to a natural spring which feeds a small stream. There were already 2 tents present when we arrived, belonging to the British Army Expedition who, we were relieved to hear, were trying Sentinel and then hoping to do the West Ridge of Shani, not the North Face as first feared.

A hard afternoon's work followed establishing base camp, erecting tents, building a base camp shelter, sorting gear and digging a latrine. The weather deteriorated through the day with clouds building and rain showers later on. Our recently purchased MSR Whisperlite stoves were already causing big problems, clogging on our poor quality fuel. Mixing with a small quantity of paraffin seemed to help a lot.

First Forays, Saturday 4th August

Nick and Martin were feeling quite tired so decided to chill out at base camp doing odd jobs whilst Jon and Stan went for an initial recce up to the Phakora Pass to investigate the route over to the upper Shani glacier and generally get better views of the area. They met some of the army party whilst up there, who were trying Sentinel but not doing very well. They also had good views over

to Shani but the best route across was still not clear. Kate Murphy had taken a very direct line up the glacier directly above base camp, but this was very heavily crevassed. We had brought Skis with us with the intention of skiing across via the Phakora pass, after hearing Simon Grayson's reports of encountering vast quantities of snow. We were still unsure of how much help our skis would be, given the very hot conditions.

We made plans to go up to a bivi below Sentinel the following day (Mon). This would serve as useful acclimatisation and also afford good views of the approach to Shani. Unfortunately, later on Sunday afternoon, a storm developed and produced an orgy of very impressive thunder and lightening (quite exciting), whilst Nick and Jon clung to the shelter's tarpaulin to stop it blowing away ! Monday dawned the same, so Sentinel was looking doubtful. The army team returned 1 by 1 throughout the day, gladly accepting our offers of brews of tea on the way down. They had been caught in the storm the night before and were under no illusions about going straight down ! The highlight of the day was the arrival of 3 further Brits at base camp, 2 of whom (Bob Conway and Bill Deakin) were intending to climb the North Face of Shani ! It appeared, however, that they would respect our first ascent wishes. We decided that we would go up and bivi on the Phakora pass the following day (Tues) and, weather permitting, ski across to the foot of Shani the following day and establish an advance base. If the weather was not good enough, it would still be useful acclimatisation going up to the pass anyway.

We spent most of Tuesday sorting gear and finally left late afternoon was big, 25Kg +, sacks. It was a complete slog up to the pass which took 3 hours from base. Nick was particularly struggling and spent most of the following night ill with vomiting and diarrhoea. Because of this, plans to go across to Shani Advanced Base Camp (ABC) on Weds had to be abandoned and the day was spent

resting at the pass. Jon and Stan reccied a route to the edge of the glacier and carried the skis over there. Nick was feeling a bit better by later on so we decided to leave at midnight that night. A 50m abseil saw us on the glacier where we donned skis but it soon became apparent that there was nowhere near as much snow as previous years. So all but Jon abandoned skis and left them to collect on the way down. We continued up the glacier towards a prominent col which leads into the basin below Shani. We slogged up to the col only to see a depressingly long descent down a shaley scree face on the other side to get to the upper Shani glacier. Once down, an easy walk up the glacier followed to a good flat spot directly underneath our route, which was not looking good at this stage - the steep ice at the foot of the face had been replaced with a rubble shoot and waterfall ! Jon and Stan made a recce further up the glacier that afternoon to get a view of the descent route down the West Ridge. We put up the tent, sorted some gear then food and, finally, sleep soon followed.

We spent the following day “veging” out at ABC. It looked as if the weather would deteriorate but this never happened and evening brought clear skies. We had planned to establish ABC then head back down, but as the weather was proving to be so good we decided to stay at ABC and go for it the following evening. We had been examining the North Face during the day, trying to pick out a line. Our only chance, in the absence of the lower icefall, was to try and pick a route up rock to the left and rejoin the bed of the main couloir higher up.

Shani North Face, Saturday 12 August

We left at approx. 10pm and zig zagged our way up steep snow towards the bergschrund. Despite a good frost on the tent when we left, the snow and ice were barely frozen and it was only -5°C. A waterfall was coming down where our route should have taken us, and there were worrying amounts of rockfall coming down the face to our right. One rope-length led through the 'schrund to

emerge on the 55° snow slope on the other side, another ropelength up this saw us at the base of the rockband which guards the foot of the face. It was at this point that a massive rockfall came down the face off to our right, presumably from the main couloir system higher up the face. To make things worse, the rock quality in the rockband was appalling, lots of big loose blocks. 200m of this rock was going to take a long time to climb and, even worse, meant that by the time we reached the main couloir it would be in even worse condition. The combination of these meant that we reached a unanimous decision to retreat due to the poor climbing conditions. We were back at ABC by 2am, had some food, left as much gear as we could behind then set off down. We finally arrived back at base at 1pm the following afternoon. That afternoon and all of the following day were spent resting at base and planning the next trip up to ABC. The original North Face line was looking doubtful so we were hoping to go up and have a look at any other possibilities on the N Face, or failing that console ourselves with an ascent of the W Ridge.

On Tuesday 14th we once again headed up to ABC. This time, instead of going over the obvious col above the true right hand bank of the approach glacier, we carried on up the glacier to emerge higher up the upper Shani glacier, directly at ABC. This proved to be a very long and arduous approach through very heavily crevassed ground, and certainly took longer than the approach over the col. Finally arrived at the tent and spent the day resting, eating, sleeping and preparing for our ascent that night. We left at 1am and picked an intricate line through the complex slope on the N side of the W ridge, across crevassed ground at first then through seracs. When dawn broke, we had made good progress to c. 5200m but worrying dark clouds were building to our west. We discussed our options and decided to carry on, reasoning that the summit was surely not far above and we didn't anticipate any difficulties. The slope steepened to 55° for a few hundred metres to a breche on the W ridge at c. 5400m. The weather had not got any worse but was still threatening, although the summit looked much closer now. We decided to leave as much gear as possible at the

breche, and go for it lightweight from there. It continued steeply for a few more hundred metres, still all moving together, before easing into the final summit slopes and then the summit itself marked by a small cairn on the S side. (Our two altimeters read 5670 and 5750 m. as opposed to the given height of 5887 m. The true height, and that of Snow Dome seem unclear). Very impressive views initially before the clouds moved in, we were all quite tired but pleased with ourselves. We left the summit at 10.30am just as it started to snow !

By the time we had retreated to the top of the steeper section the weather had really closed in. A series of five 50m abseils in complete blizzard, white out conditions saw us back at the gear dump on the breche. There were huge amounts of snow pouring down the ice slopes all around us, we were concerned at this stage that these would be loading the lesser angled slopes lower down. For this reason we debated sitting out the storm in our bivi bags at the breche, but decided that sitting out a Karakoram storm of unknown length with minimal bivi gear was not too sensible. So down it was with 3 more abs. and finally over a 'schrund onto easier angled ground. The weather was now worse than ever large amounts of snow pouring down the face and lightening in close proximity - indeed Martin got a shock through his axe at one point. During this time there was a general air of concern regarding the well-being of the group.

Navigation on the complex lower slopes proved difficult in the poor visibility but we eventually found ourselves on familiar looking ground after several false alleys. Finally the visibility cleared enough for us to see a way down to the glacier with much relief all round. We descended the last 400m quickly, glissading our way down and finally back to ABC by 6pm. By this time Bob Conway and Bill Deakin had also arrived at ABC and helped us to welcome brews and soup. They made their own ascent of the West Ridge the following day, through much fresh snow.

We were in no hurry to do very much the following day and spent the day resting and packing gear for our descent to base. Left at 7.30pm and retreated over the nightmare shale col for one last time. We thought it would be the familiar glacier plod from here but the moonlight of previous nights eluded us and so we ended up getting lost on the glacier in pitch blackness ! We stumbled around for a while trying to find the right line but in the end resigned ourselves to a night out on the glacier until dawn.

This eventually came and we left at 6am for the final descent to base. We were all going more slowly by now and finally got down by lunchtime. Lots of eating, drinking and resting followed before retiring to the tents for a much needed nights sleep.

The end of the Expedition

The following few days were spent “veging” at base before a planned ascent of Snow Dome on the other side of the valley. We walked up the steep scree slopes to the col below Snow Dome and bivvied there but were thwarted by bad weather and storms which came in that night. Our ascent for the following day was abandoned and we descended back to base instead. Stan and Jon returned a few days later and made a successful ascent, and an interesting descent with Jon coming down on Skis. Nick and Martin spent the day exploring the ridge above base camp further up towards Sentinel.

The final few days of the expedition were spent chilling out at base camp, writing our diaries and packing before the porters finally arrived to help us carry our gear back out to Lower Shani. This return journey, with Shirbaz Khan from Naltar as Sirdar, was much smoother than our earlier

arrival. The porters and donkeys carried this in just one day arriving at Naltar by 4 pm. This counted as 3 stages, and with being paid at half rate for the ascent to our base camp, each man was paid 4 ½ stages at 175 Rp per stage.

Our pre-booked jeeps arrived the next day for an uneventful return to Gilgit. To return to Islamabad we again hired a minibus as all of the flights were fully booked. If we had put our names on the list at the Pakistan Tourist Development Office when we arrived in Gilgit at the start of the expedition we may have been luckier. Two seats each day are reserved for tourists, but these tend to be booked up about a month in advance. We spent the night at the Madena Guest House before the 16 hour trip back to Islamabad. The return flight was looking problematic when we found that we had no excess luggage allowance and were facing a £900 bill! Some suitable grovelling got us away Scott free.

An uneventful flight saw us back in the UK. Despite the fact that the climbing conditions precluded our attempt on the North Face, we had made the third ascent of the mountain and had thoroughly enjoyed the trip.

NW

Medical Report

Having checked on the health and any significant previous medical conditions of the individual members and arranged immunisations, I set about amassing a small “pharmacy” and medical kit. A useful reference source is available in the British Medical Journal : “How To Do It - Doctor on a mountaineering expedition” (A’Court H D A et al. BMJ 1995; 310: 1248-52). A number of pharmaceutical companies were very generous in donating requested drugs.

The health of the team throughout was generally very good. In particular we were only minimally troubled by any gastrointestinal upsets. This was probably largely due to the good standard of hygiene of our cook, Mirbas Khan from Hunza. In addition any episodes of true diarrhoea (more than three motions per day) were treated with antibiotics. There is some evidence in the medical literature that the use of Ciprofloxacin 250 mg twice daily shortens the duration of “traveller’s diarrhoea”, and also that its use prophylactically in the short term may reduce the risk of developing diarrhoeal illnesses. After the first episode of diarrhoea and vomiting within the expedition we employed this strategy and it seemed to work. No member lost more than 3 kg in weight between departure from and return to the UK. It is a slightly contentious area, but it is worth considering as protracted diarrhoea may seriously interfere with achieving mountaineering objectives!

On the approach walk to Base Camp we took the opportunity to investigate the effect of progesterone as a preventative for acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). I have been involved in this area on a previous visit to the Himalaya and while our observations were limited due to the small number in the expedition, we will be entering our data into ongoing trials. All four expedition members did experience mild AMS, as evidenced by significant scores on the “Lake Louise” AMS symptom score scale, (an internationally recognised scale). Members were commenced on prophylaxis against further AMS in the form of Acetazolamide (Diamox) slow release 250 mg once daily. This was well tolerated (minimal pins and needles in the fingers and toes), and as its only usual troublesome (?) side effect is to spoil the taste of fizzy drinks, and especially beer. In “dry” Pakistan this wasn’t a problem!

A complete list of medical conditions encountered and their treatments is given below.

Medical Condition	Number of “episodes”	Treatment
Sore throat	3	merocaine lozenges
Upper respiratory tract infection with productive cough	2	full course of antibiotics (azithromycin)
Diarrhoea	3	loperamaide ciprofloxacin (2 as treatment, then 4 as prophylaxis - see above)
Diarrhoea and vomiting	2	treatment as above plus “buccastem”
Acute Mountain Sickness (headache, loss of appetite)	4	acetazolamide
Heartburn	4	gaviscon, zantac
Sunburn	1	hydrocortisone cream
Graze and cut to toe	1	dry dressing
Blistered heel	1	dry dressing
Cut hand	1	glue
Sprained ankle (anterior tibiofibular ligament)	1	elasticated strapping, paracetamol and voltarol

MWC

