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The British Makrong Chhish Expedition

1996

Final Report

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Introduction

Lying at the western end of the Hispar Glacier, a short walk above the village of Hispar in the Pakistani Karakoram, Makrong Chhish (6607m) is by far the highest peak on the south side of this great glacier. As such, it has caught the attention of both trekkers and mountaineers passing through the area, although only a handful of parties have attempted to climb the mountain previously - all without success.

The aim of our small expedition, comprising of just two members - Steve Sustad and Simon Yates, was to make an alpine-style ascent of the east ridge of Makrong Chhish, and thus complete the first ascent of this beautiful peak.

The Expedition

Steve Sustad arrived in the Pakistani capital - Islamabad on Wednesday 7th of August. He immediately made contact with our agents - Nasir Sabir Expeditions, and started dealing with the formalities at the Ministry of Tourism. By the time I arrived on Saturday 10th August the pollution control fee had been paid, helicopter and environmental bonds deposited, gas collected and liason officer and porters insured. However, the officials at the ministry, having only had eight months notice of our arrival were struggling to find us a liason officer. We spent a further two days hassling the ministry before one was finally assigned, and after a short briefing we were allowed to leave for the mountains.

On Tuesday 13th August, very early in the morning we caught a local bus. Twenty painful hours later, after the usual arduous journey up the Karakoram Highway we arrived in the northern town of Gilgit.

The following day we met up with the expedition cook and helper - old friends, who at my invitation had travelled down from Skardu to join us. Together we shopped for food, supplies and kitchen equipment to last for a month, made everything into 25kg porter loads, and booked two jeeps for the next day.

Leaving Gilgit on the morning of the 15th we travelled up the Karakoram Highway to just past the village of Ganesh, before crossing the Hunza river to Nagar. The jeeps were only able to go as far as Huru - a small settlement 15kms short of Hispar village, because the road was broken by a number of landslides beyond this point.

We then started protracted and infuriating negotiations with a group of Nagar porters, and in the end had to settle for five porter stages from Huru to the base camp at Makrong (Huru-Hispar, 2 stages. Hispar-Makrong, 3 stages.) at

the extortionate rate of 330Rs per stage. This was a bit of a blow, as we had hoped to travel by jeep all the way to Hispar village, and expected the portering costs to be a little higher than elsewhere in the Karakoram - not 50% more expensive (the typical rate in other areas is now 220Rs per stage). These two factors combined virtually doubled our estimated porter budget.

On Friday 16th we started the walk to base camp with a total of fifteen Nagar porters carrying all our gear and supplies, easily reaching Hispar village, where we spent the night camped in the grounds of the rest house.

The following day we hoped to reach base camp but the porters proved very troublesome, and only managed to walk as far as Bitanmel on the north side of the Hispar Glacier. Fortunately, the crossing of the glacier to Makrong the next morning was very straightforward, and it was a relief to finally reach the base camp and pay the porters off.

Although located on the north side of our mountain, when we intended to climb on the eastern side, Makrong proved to be a perfect place for the base camp. Lying in a lush ablation valley above the Hispar Glacier, the site had a good supply of water, old shepherds huts - one of which we used as a kitchen, and was only an easy hours walk from the eastern side of the mountain anyway.

After spending a couple of days sorting out the base camp and carrying kit and food around to make stash on the ablation valley above the west side of the East Makrong Glacier, we set off on an acclimatisation climb.

Between the 21st and 23rd of August we returned to our gear stash to pick up the necessary supplies before crossing the East Makrong Glacier to beneath a small unclimbed peak of approximately 5500m on the watershed of the Haightum Glacier. After a long days climbing up a couloir and ridge to a very exposed camp at approximately 5200m, it was necessary to come down the next day due to bad weather. However, acclimatisation aside, the climb gave us good views of Makrong Chhish's eastern side - a hugely complex series of buttresses and ridges, that compress high on the mountain into one true east ridge. We picked a line to try starting from the steep glacial basin that fed all the way down to the East Makrong Glacier.

After two days rest and steadily improving weather we returned to our gear stash on 26th of August and spent the night just above it at the foot of the steep glacier. Very early the next morning we climbed up into the glacial basin, as disturbingly large blocks of rock trundled down around us. We reached a butress of rock at the back of the basin at about 10am and set up camp right underneath it. Our choice of camp was good, as during the rest of the day rockfalls and avalanches peppered the basin. The steep couloir line exiting from the upper lefthand side of the basin to join the east ridge, that we wished to attempt, avalanched several times. We quickly

changed our plans.

Leaving early the following morning, we climbed the culoir exiting from the upper righthand side of the basin, branching off rightwards into a smaller gully that led steeply up to the north east ridge. To climb quickly we soloed, but were still not able to get high enough before rocks started to fall down. There were several near misses before we reached the safety of the ridge, where the ropes were brought out. A number of interesting steep ice and mixed pitches followed before the top of a tower at approximately 5400m was reached. Unfortunately, beyond the tower was 200m of unstable, wafer thin knife-edge ridge which we had been unable to see from below. Any attempt to climb the feature would have been suicidal, so we turned round and started abseiling down. Because of the bombardment we had suffered on the way up and a lack of campsites we reasoned that it was best to go back down the culoirs at night. This we duly did, arriving back at our camp in the basin 26hrs after we left it, having survived one truly appalling rock-fall in the gully during the night. The following day we returned to the base camp.

During our following two rest days we decided to attempt the peak from the south east - the line first attempted by Steve Hillen and Dave Tyson in 1991. A line that I had initially seen in 1989 following a broad culoir up to a shoulder on the east ridge below the summit pyramid.

We left the base camp on 1st of September and walked along a series of beautiful ablation valleys up the East Makrong Glacier, before going up a hillside just before it forks. This enabled us to avoid going through an ice-fall above where the glacier split, and by contouring up and round the hillside gain the glacial basin above the ice-fall. We camped on a strip of moraine at 4600m at the side of the glacier. Starting very early the next morning we crossed the glacier and entered the deep culoir leading up to the east ridge. Climbing steadily through the day we made good progress soloing ice that was typically 50 degrees. The climbing was only marred by sporadic rock-fall. Eventually, late in the evening with worsening weather, sure we were at the top of the culoir, but unable to locate the ridge we dug a tent platform into a steep and exposed snow slope at around 6200m.

During the night the weather gradually deteriorated. The wind increased and it started to snow. By morning it was obvious we would not be able to continue until conditions improved. We spent a terrible day trying to stay on our platform, as wind driven snow from above falling down the back of the tent continually threatened to push us off. Fortunately, the weather began to ease during the night.

By morning conditions had improved sufficiently to allow a summit attempt. Leaving the collapsed tent, sleeping bags, cooking equipment etc on the platform we climbed up to join the east ridge proper. Several steep pitches of ice climbing followed before the angle began to ease a little, although going was still slow due to deep snow. As we went higher the snow

conditions deteriorated further, with deep areas of windslab lying over ice. After breaking off several small areas of such snow we decided to abandon the attempt at a height of 6400m, reaching the tent by mid afternoon and moving it to a less exposed position a little lower on the ridge to spend the night.

The next day we waited until the sun had gone off the culoir at mid-day before starting our descent. By abseiling mostly from snow bollards at the right hand side of the culoir we were able to make rapid progress and avoid rocks that continued to fall down well into the night. Fortunately, no rocks fell down while we were in the lower more constricted section of the culoir, although a large quantity of ice swept past us just before we gained the lower snow slopes down on to the glacier. It was a relief to regain our camp on the moraine in the early morning.

After a few hours sleep we returned to the base camp, where we started preparing to leave.

On the 8th of September we vacated the base camp, the porters having arrived the previous night and walked to Hispar village. The following day we were able to get a jeep to Gilgit as the villagers had repaired the broken sections of road above Huru during our time in the mountains.

We spent two nights in Gilgit, during which time we were able to contact our agents in Islamabad to arrange flights out of Pakistan and our debriefing. Having caught an overnight bus we arrived in Islamabad early in the morning of the 12th of september, attended the Ministry of Tourism for our debriefing, settled our liason officers expenses and flew out of the country in the evening.

We both feel that the second line we tried on Makrong Chhish is the most feasible way to climb this big complex and dangerous peak. Most years it would also be the safest line. But although we had deliberately gone late in the summer so that it would be cold enough to give good safe ice-climbing conditions, our trip was plagued by unseasonally hot weather that turned the whole mountain into a death trap, from which, we were fortunately lucky enough to escape.

Budget

Expenditure

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------|
| Peak fee | £ 800 |
| Flights | £ 1080 |
| Porters | £ 580 |
| Cooks | £ 250 |
| Jeeps | £ 140 |
| Insurance | £ 150 |
| Film | £ 150 |
| Tents | £ 480 |
| Boots | £ 300 |
| Gas | £ 100 |
| Trekking agents | £ 140 |
| Excess baggage | £ 160 |
| Pollution control fee | £ 140 |
| Liason officer kit | £ 140 |
| Climbing kit | £ 170 |
| U.K. food | £ 75 |
| Liason office expenses | £ 200 |
| Import costs | £ 35 |
| Transport - buses/taxis | £ 100 |
| Hotels and restaurants | £ 150 |
| Food, supplies etc | £ 300 |
| Visas | £ 60 |
| Administration tel/faxes etc | £ 50 |
| TOTAL | £ 5900 |

Income

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| Mount Everest Foundation | £ 800 |
| British Mountaineering Council | £ 600 |
| Nick Escourt Award | £ 1000 |
| Foundation Sports and Arts | £ 1000 |
| Polartec Performance Challenge | £ 2500 |

£ 5900

Acknowledgements

Steve Sustad and Simon Yates would like to thank the following organisations, companies and individuals for supporting The British Makrong Chhish Expedition 1996.

The Mount Everest Foundation.
The British Mountaineering Council.
The trustees of The Nick Escourt Award.
The Foundation for Sports and the Arts.
Malden Mills Industries - awarders of The Polartec Performance Challenge.
Karrimor International Ltd.
Terra Nova Equipment.
Lowe Alpine U.K.
First Ascent Ltd.

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Gilgit

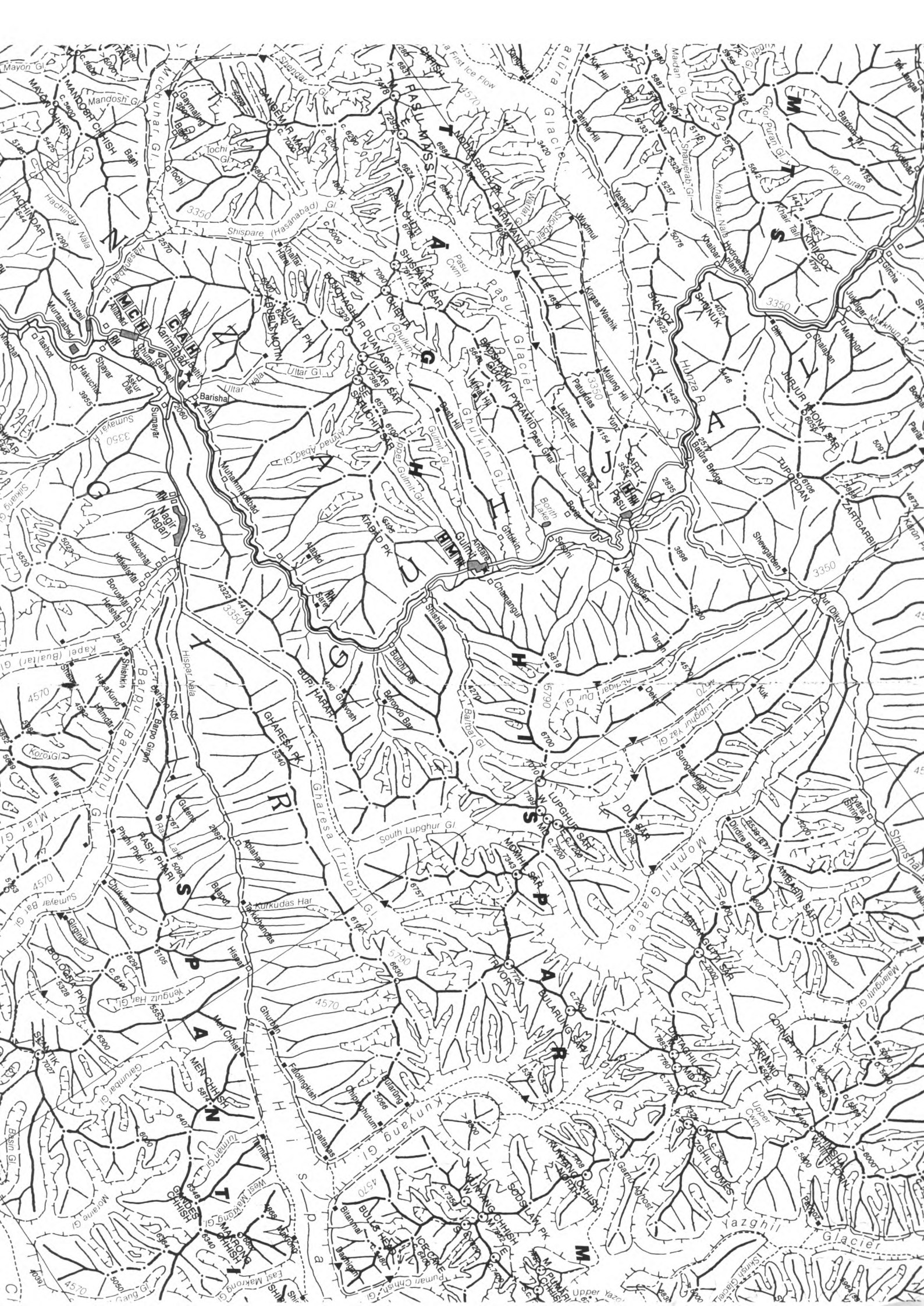
AMHPC
Tourism Information Centre

74° 30'

to Chilas and Islamabad

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C



Map showing topographic details, including contour lines, rivers, and place names. Key locations and features include:

- Major Rivers: Shispare, Gharsa, Hunza, Muztagh, and various tributaries.
- Glaciers: Pasu Glacier, Baltoro Glacier, Momi Glacier, and others.
- Mountains and Peaks: Numerous peaks are labeled with elevations, such as 7000, 6500, 5500, 4500, and 3500 meters.
- Place Names: Muztagh, Shispare, Gharsa, Hunza, Muztagh, and various mountain passes like the Karakoram Pass.
- Grid: Latitude and longitude lines are shown, with latitude ranging from approximately 34°N to 37°N and longitude from 73°E to 77°E.