Sangemarmar 1999

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MEF Reference 99/5

Introduction

Sangemar Mar, 6949m.
Location: In the Hasanabad Nala glacier system, on a south-westerly spur of the Batura Muztagh from Pasu Diar. It is sandwiched between the Shendar, Muchuhar and Shispare glaciers in the Hunza region of the Karakoram, Pakistan
Lat./Long.: 36°27' 74°34'
First ascent: 11 July 1984 via Southwest Ridge, Japanese from Osaka University.

The object of the expedition was to climb the mountain in Alpine Style, that is without any assistance above base camp and no fixed camps on the mountain above an advance base camp. The expedition was fortunate to receive grant assistance from both MEF and BMC.

Sangemarmar (6949m) is a roughly pyramidal peak set in the rugged mountainous terrain of the Batura Muztagh. The whole area, whilst easy of access is surprisingly little known, with maps being sketchy and many peaks being unnamed and unmapped. It is located at the end of a southerly spur from the range of peaks known as the Batura Wall in the Hunza region of Pakistan.

The area was mapped by Jerzy Wala's Polish expedition in the 1970s. Sangemarmar itself has only had one official ascent by the Japanese in 1984 via the south west ridge. Initial intentions were to explore the unclimbed ridge to the north which descends to a col at 5900m. However, access to this col is reported to be complex and dangerous despite its appearance on the Polish sketch map. The 1996 Pute towers expedition explored the west side and revealed a steep heavily serac'd headwall preventing safe access. The only remaining feasible route is the line of the first ascent, the SW ridge; given the restricted time available, that was the route the expedition attempted.

Expedition Members:

Allan Pilkington, UK - climber
Mike Franklin, UK - climber
Ned Blanchard, UK - climber
Tony Jinks, UK - climber
Sam Palsmeier, US - climber
Roger Webb, UK - climber (dropped out due to work commitments)

Expedition Diary

18/7/99 Arrived in Islamabad, meet LO, sardar and agent.

19/7/99 Buy extra kit for LO in Rawalpindi.

20/7/99 Briefing at Ministry of Tourism.

21/7/99 Travel up KKH to Gilgit.

22/7/99 Arrive at Hunza and stay at the Golden Peak View Hotel in Hyderabad, about five miles from the mouth of the Hassanabad Nala.

23/7/99 Start walk-in with 35 porters. Up the Hasanabad Nala and Muchuhar Glacier.
24/7/99 Porters walk out as they are from the "wrong village" to be replaced by 15 porters from the "correct" village.

25/7/99 To Gaymaling with the porters ferrying loads.

26/7/99 Established BC at Ilkish at c3800m, paid off the porters, Mike stayed at an interim height to aid acclimatisation.

27/7/99 Mike arrived at BC; gear sorting and acclimatisation. Gave Nadeem, our LO, some training in cravasse rescue techniques.

28/7/99 Ned & Tony explored the route towards a promising looking ice tongue (the route of the original Japanese ascent), while Sam ascended the slopes to the left of p5300m (which we christened the Shark's Fin) to investigate route possibilities that way. Mike & Allan feeling the altitude so remain at BC. Ned & Tony discovered the remains of a Japanese camp at the top of a scree ramp and what appeared to be a promising route to the col giving access to the first forepeak.

29/7/99 All five climbers ascended to place ABC at c4200m at the top of the scree ramp, descending the same day cacheing gear and lightweight mountain tents. Sam carried a huge load ensuring we had a good start for the logistics for the next few forays.

30/7/99 Set out again for ABC this time to spend the night there and explore the route further on. Tony turned back, feeling the altitude but all the other climbers bettered their times from the previous day showing that, although we might not feel it, we were acclimatising. That evening it rained at ABC.

31/7/99 Ned, Sam and Allan made an early start at four o'clock to explore the snow slope beyond ABC. Direct access to the ice tongue was prevented by a stonefall raked snow gully and the ice tongue itself had become denuded of snow and now looked very hard. We ascended a further snow ramp which we had hoped would give access to the col above but we were confronted by yet another snow and rock balcony which looked this time as though it might lead to the foot of a dirty snow gully formed by the rocks of the Shark's Fin on the left and the folded seracs of the glacier on the right. This hazardous looking route seemed the only alternative, one which would require us to proceed at night and with some speed if we were to avoid the stonefall which scarred its outfall.

By the time we began our descent at about 7.00am the snow had softened to a 3 inch slush covering which balled up our crampons making us very conscious of the ice beneath. The consequences of a slip would have resulted in dropping off the snow ramp and making a rapid descent into the main drainage gully leading down to the Muchuhar Glacier.

We descended to BC.

1/8/99 The weather, which had hitherto been reminiscent of the Western Alps with clear mornings and cloudy afternoons, was cloudy and drizzly all day. Mike, Ned and Tony went to ABC, Allan & Sam remained at BC.

2/8/99 Rained all night and most of the day. Mike and Ned set out from ABC at 7.30am to explore the route beyond the previous high point. Stonefall on the ascent was very bad and the pair took to a rock rib on the right of the snow ramp which proved slightly safer. After reaching the dirty snow gully, Mike led up the seracs at Scottish 3 to avoid the chute of the gully as the top exit curled out of sight and they felt it did not offer a safe or realistic way to the col. As he was climbing on iron hard ice to reach the top of an ice bulge, a further ice bulge above calved a six foot block directly in their path. Both climbers would have been swept off the ice but the snow above just changed the block's trajectory enough and it smashed into the ice immediately beside Mike and proceeded to scythe a path between the two climbers miraculously missing Ned in the process.

Mike and Ned returned to BC very shaken by their extremely close shave. Clearly a nightshift was needed.

3/8/99 Another wet day. Tony descended from ABC where he had spent another night.

4/8/99 Rained most of the day.

5/8/99 Fine weather. Started out for ABC with food and equipement for several days. Sleaty rain shower at ABC in the evening.

6/8/99 Set out at 1.00am and, this time, ascended the snow gully past the site of Mike's brush with the block reaching the top of the glacier at dawn. Pressed on for what we thought would be an easy ascent to the col. However, the heat of the day and rapidly deteriorating snow conditions forced us to stop frustratingly close to the col and descend to a flat area of the glacier to camp. At about 9.00am the heat was intense and we spent the rest of the day cowering in our tents melting snow and drinking.

7/8/99 An abortive day. We were moving by 3.00am with the intention of bypassing the col and gaining the ridge higher up by what appeared to be less steep ground. We made reasonable progress but were stopped by previously hidden crevasses which we considered too dangerous. From this point we descended again to our glacier camp to consider our alternatives.

8/8/99 Up at 1.00am this time for a more direct approach up snow slopes which from our foreshortened view looked quite feasible. We very quickly ran out of snow to be left with hard ice into which axes and crampons only just bit. Clearly this would be extremely tiring and precarious and really would require pitching which time would not allow. At this point Ned and Tony decided that they would descend back to the tents and make no further attempts.

Allan, Sam and Mike decided to return to the crevassed area for another look. This time we screwed up our courage and crossed the delicate snow bridge and ascended the sugary snow beyond to finally reach the ridge. We could now look down on the col where we had thought we would be able to place a camp and found it to be a knife edge. Had we reached it when we had originally intended we would have been in a very committing position having to dig out a platform whilst extremely exhausted.

We proceeded up the corniced ridge and reached a point where we had a close view of the slopes of the forepeak. The view ahead was stunning but bleak in mountaineering terms. The snow slopes of a few weeks ago had turned into stonefall smeared bare ice. The crucial slope up which we had gambled on moving together as it was overhung by a cap of seracs would now require pitched climbing on 50° ice with any rest steps having to be time consumingly cut. We unanimously decided that to continue would be too dangerous and so this became our high point at only c5500m. However, we were in a stunning position on a fine morning high in the Karakoram and, having made our decision, we could appreciate our surroundings.

We retreated back to the glacier camp.

9/8/99 We packed all equipment away and descended and were shocked to see the extent of the deterioration in the snow conditions in only three days. Most of the snow had melted leaving large sections of bare ice and the dirty snow gully had changed completely with evidence of continued stonefall and now resembled a hardened concrete slurry. We were forced to make five abseils placing us dangerously late in leaving the gully. Allan, who brought up the rear of the party, was relieved to note that virtually as he stepped out of the line of fire the first stones whirred down the chute.

The snow ramp was almost completely denuded of snow but progress was hampered by loose stones over ice, which made for a number of worrying slithers. This part of the descent was made by running the gauntlet of incessant stonefall. On reaching ABC we decided to carry on to BC and even the hitherto benign snow gullies we had to cross on this section disgorged a lively football sized rock, which bounded down, just missing Tony.

It was a very relieved team that arrived at BC at mid morning.

Later, the tension was eased somewhat by Allan's valiant efforts in trying to retrieve his thermal long-johns from a cow that had made off with them.

10/8/99 Rest and gear sorting.

11/8/99 Clear equipment from ABC.

12/8/99 Set out to explore E side of the mountain. We wanted to keep our options open to return to BC if we had time and possibly explore further up the Muchuhar Glacier so we left instructions with sardar Anwar and kitchen boy Ali to obtain porters and clear BC by 18/8/99. Nadeem was happy to remain and supervise at BC, no amount of encouragement could rekindle his earlier enthusiasm for exploration after our tales of the mountain. We descended as far as Tochi.

13/8/99 Descended the Muchuhar Glacier. The track we had ascended had disappeared, the baked mud slopes having simply slid off the underlying slabs. Additionally there was no evidence of any running water anywhere, the previous streams having dried up. We had to negotiate the entire length of the rubble covered glacier finding our own way through the shifting boulders. With the heat of the day exhaution and thirst were becoming a pressing issue. We passed the mouth of the Shispare Glacier, where we had hoped to go, but with no evidence of water we were forced to continue down the Hassanabad Nala. It was a very debilitated team who found some dirty pools where we camped.

14/8/99 Both Mike and Allan suffered stomach problems and felt very exhausted. Despite this we made an attempt to ascend back to the Shispare glacier. Hoping to find an ablation valley where a faint trail led, we continued up the right hand side until hemmed in between mud walls on one side, the active glacier ice on the other, constantly dribbling ice boulders into the narrow canyon and, in the canyon itself, a robust meltwater stream. We decided after some debate that given the obvious danger of this particular route, the scarcity of drinkable water if going up the centre of the glacier, our own poor health and the now pressing time we would beat a retreat out to Hunza.

15/8/99 Rest day in Hunza.

16/8/99 Meet Anwar Ali who is finding porters and told him of our fate.

19/8/99 Nadeem, Anwar and the porters return.

24/8/99 Travel from Hunza to Gilgit.

25/8/99 Day in Gilgit.

26/8/99 Travel down KKH to Islamabad.
27/8/99 De-briefing at Ministry of Tourism.
28/8/99 Allan, Mike, Ned and Tony departed Pakistan for London, Sam left for India.

Waste Management

On the walk-in and out we dug latrines, filling them in on departure.
At BC a large latrine was dug over which we placed the toilet tent. During our stay we used sandy soil from the leat which flowed through BC to cover our faeces, gradually filling the hole as we went along. This process worked admirably, keeping the smell down and the immediate soil burial aiding decomposition.

At BC we found that we generated mostly food waste and its associated packing materials. Originally we placed this in bin bags brought for the purpose. This would have been sufficient, the intent being to pack it into a barrel for transport out at the end, but the camp was invaded by cows who raided the rubbish bags scattering it. The cows became a serious problem with the waste, no amount of persuasion made them leave for any length of time. We eventually used a barrel directly, placing bin bags inside it. However, it had to be sealed after use as the cows would try to overturn it and get at what for them appeared to be a delicacy. We made sure before we left that any rubbish that had been scattered by the cows was gathered up and placed in the barrel. Although we were not present when BC was finally cleared, we were confident that with Nadeem in attendance that the place was left pristine.

On the mountain all rubbish was carried down the hill and placed in the rubbish barrel. Human waste was buried either in scree or cravasses depending where we were. We encountered some detritus left be previous Japanese expeditions (the writing on the boxes was Japanese). This was particularly irksome as it was cardboard and could easily have been burned or brought down. We brought it down from the hill and disposed of it in our barrel. Higher up we found four insulation mats which we would also have brought down but our own loads and the mats' position did not permit a return visit to clear them.

On the way out the rubbish barrel accompanied us to Islamabad and was entrusted to Ehsan Abbasi to dispose of correctly.

Liaison Officer

We were extremely fortunate in having Malik Nadeem Asif as our LO. His stated aims were to make us as welcome in Pakistan as possible and he went out of his way to ensure this. During the porter dispute he was in the thick of what could have been a very volatile situation protecting our interests to the utmost. He even bargained with taxis for us in Islamabad which is completely outside his obligations as an LO. Constantly smiling, he became an enthusiastic companion. We were keen that he should experience some climbing for himself but at BC it was clear that he was more than happy to remain there so we quietly dropped the subject. This was his first time as an LO and he was extremely diligent in his duties and yet flexible enough to allow us the freedom to explore some of the area on our own.

In the de-briefing in Islamabad we saw a Spanish expedition which reminded us of our good fortune with Nadeem as LO. Constantly frowning, their LO was from the military and quibbled with everything, making demands for extra payments and finally refusing to sign their environmental bond under what we gathered were false pretences.

Porters

Our porters were hired for us by our agent Explore 2000, ably run by Mr Ehsan Abbasi. However, as we were to discover later we inadvertently hired them from the "wrong" village. All the pastures and routes in the area have "porters rights" assigned to various Hunza villages so that if an expedition is going through a particular set of areas the portering jobs are shared by the villagers with rights for those areas. Apparently this is a gentleman's

agreement invisible to the hapless Westerner but was certainly defended very vigorously judging from the porters' debate at Tochi. Our first team walked out to be replaced by legitimate porters the following day who demanded double wages. This, however, was completely justified as there were half the number and they either carried double loads or ferried them for three stages. The route did apparently lengthen by a stage but this was an arguable bargaining point which we were happy to concede. All the porters were effusively friendly.

Weather and General Conditions

None of the team, including Sam who had trekked up to the Concordia area, had ever encountered area of such active erosion. Glacier snouts on either bank of the Muchuhar Glacier were constantly in action and changed markedly in the time we were there. Our BC was on the left bank of a gully extending 1000m down to the Muchuhar Glacier. The gully itself was dry but fed a constant 'cryoclastic' flow of rock and ice boulders down to a talus of mud and ice we had crossed unwittingly on the walk-in. Occasionally this would be enlivened by larger rockfall - on average probably one per hour, at night as well as day. As Sam pointed out - it was like living next to a freeway. The side of the valley we climbed on faced east and so was less active overall but its peak was, as the early morning sun struck the rocks of the Shark's Fin.

On the Muchuhar itself the paths which give access to the pastures further up both disappeared in the time we were there leaving future travellers no option but to go up the glacier itself. As the area is regularly visited by local herdsmen a trail should soon be established. However, any trail in this area will be subject to constant change.

The weather patterns for the area are not unlike the European Western Alps with periods of relatively stable high pressure systems interspersed with periods of low pressure and precipitation. The temperatures are extremely high and this undoubtedly contributes to both localised precipitation in the afternoons and the continuing aridity of the area. The highest winds we encountered were no more than fresh to strong, although the team felt that the conditions could produce storms at any time.

During this expedition temperatures steadily rose and the snow cover melted substantially. It was possible to observe this on the Mandosh and Mayon cirques opposite BC by the rising of a brown hue to the snow up to about 5000m and an increasing amount of visible ice above. Our own route was profoundly affected by this and reduced a moderately technical snow route into a very dangerous ice route.

Further Exploration

There are peaks of all difficulties in this area but the issue will always be the lower slopes which are often threatened by rock and icefall or are reliant on rapidly melting snow or ice features. To get the balance of conditions and dates right for this area will always be difficult, we felt we were perhaps two weeks late. Alternatively, avalanches may have made their presence felt earlier in the season, as it was three climbers were avalanched on Batura 1 and two were reported missing on Diran whilst we were there.

Acknowledgements

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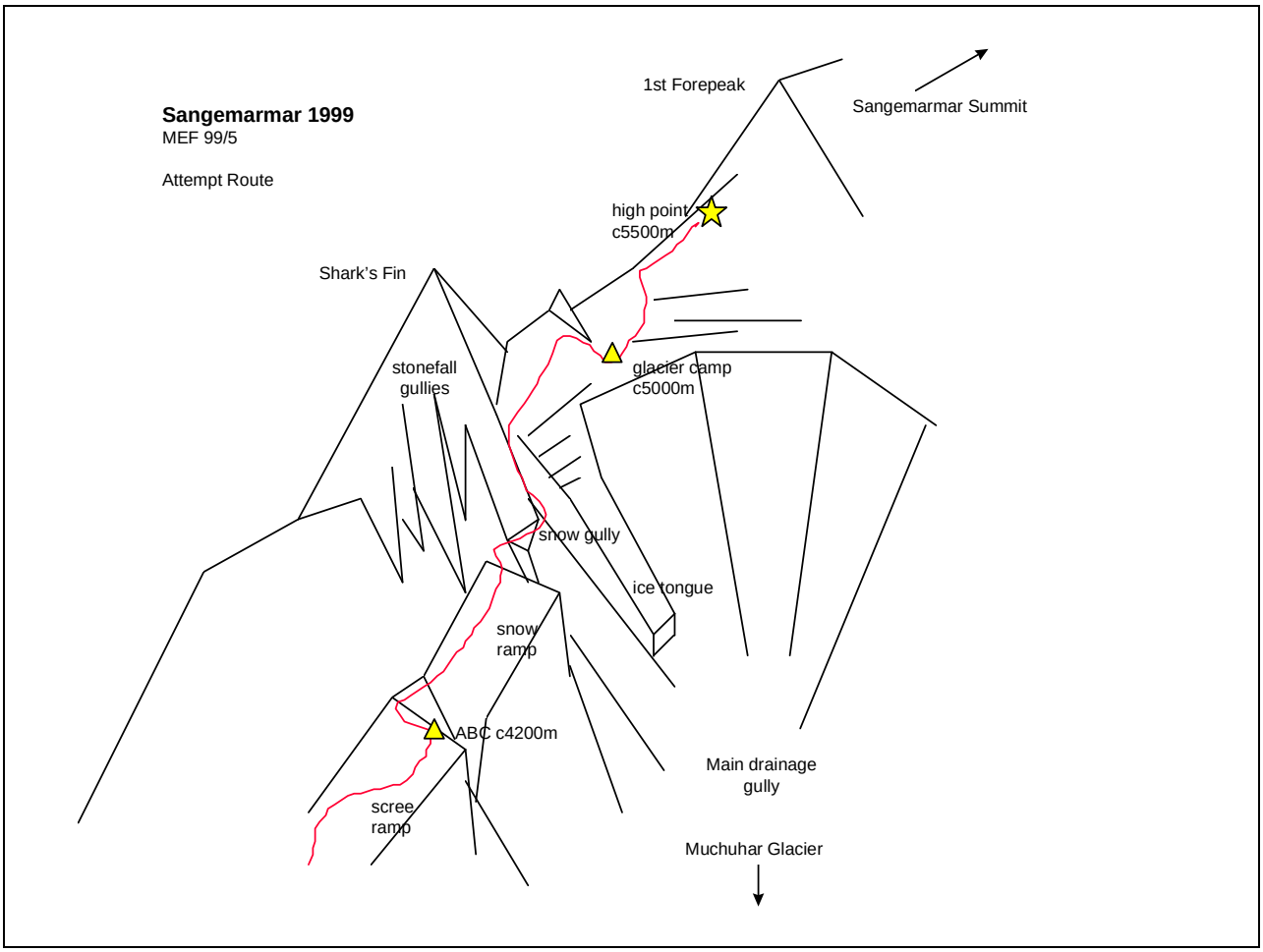
The British Mountaineering Council for grant assistance and information
Duncan Hornby who supplied advice and photos
Chris Schiller and Colin Beechey our referees
Anwar Ali and Ali Mohammed our sardar and kitchen boy
Malik Nadeem Asif our LO
Ehsan Abbasi our agent
All the various porters, drivers and local herdsmen who made our expedition a happy and enjoyable one.

Budget

Income	Expenses		
	Actual	£ Equivalent	
	$ 1200	£ 769.81	peak fee
	£ 800	£ 800.00	2 Integral Designs MK1XL mountain tents
	£ 170	£ 170.00	2 Bell ends for above
	£ 3.6	£ 3.60	tent guys
£1,150			BMC/Sports Council grant

£800			MEF grant
		£ 49.95	Energy Drink
		£ 12.00	Ab Tat
		£ 20.00	Fuel Bottles
		£ 110.52	lightweight food
	£ 82.79	£ 82.79	medical kit
	£ 120	£ 120.00	LO down jacket
	£ 50	£ 50.00	LO boots
	£ 85.45	£ 85.45	LO salopettes
	£ 140	£ 140.00	LO sleeping bag
	£ 40.5	£ 40.50	LO glacier glasses
	Rs 500	£ 6.05	LO shirt
	Rs 1000	£ 12.10	LO Ski pole
	Rs 1000	£ 12.10	LO torch
	$ 735	£ 490.00	LO wages
	$ 1010	£ 673.33	LO expenses
	$ 450	£ 300.00	hotel meals
	$ 200	£ 133.33	environmental "gift"
	£ 2666.5	£ 2666.50	Flights
	$ 8460	£ 5640.00	Agent fees (transport, accommodation, trek & BC equipment, food, fuel, porters and staff)
	Rs 896	£ 10.84	petrol
	Rs 190	£ 2.30	petrol cont
	Rs 2770	£ 33.52	extra technical kit
	Rs 90	£ 1.09	locks
	Rs 500	£ 6.05	tips
	Rs 12015	£ 145.39	extra hotel in Hunza
	Rs 3299	£ 39.92	extra meals in Hunza
	Rs 400	£ 4.84	tea & chocs
	$ 75	£ 50.00	staff tip
	Rs 2074	£ 25.10	phone
	Rs 320	£ 3.87	taxis
£1950			total grant income
£10760.95			total member's contributions
£12710.95			total income
		£ 12710.95	total expenditure

Sketchmap of Route Taken