

Pakistan Para-alpinism 2023

Members - Jake Holland and Will Sim

Other team members mentioned but who were not recipients of the MEF grant - Veso Ovcharev (BG), Antoine Girard (FR), Medhi Bidault (FR)

Objectives: To further our understanding of the use of a paraglider in Karakorum mountaineering, while exploring some lesser traveled corners of the Karakorum by a mixture of climbing, skiing and flying.

We travelled to Pakistan on the 7th of June. Without stopping in Islamabad we continued up the KKH to the town of Karimabad in the Hunza Valley, where we arrived on the 9th and settled in to a guest house where we would stay for the first 3 weeks of the trip.

Here I will list all the outings we had in Hunza which involved mountaineering/skiing/flying combinations. We also did some pure cross country paragliding, which I will briefly summarise at the end.

Petit Barbara - In the first few days of our time in Hunza we wanted to kick-start our acclimatisation by landing at 5000m on a mountain that has become known to us as "Petit Barbara" (36.12'59N 74.41'41E). We gave it this name in 2022 as the mountain behind it is called Barbara Peak (we did not make the first ascent).

We took off from just above the village of Druika (unless stated otherwise "take-off" in the Hunza Valley was always from the point known as The Eagles Nest, 20 minutes walk above the village of Druika at 3000m) (36.19'45N 74.41'08E). We carried skis, a tent, sleeping bags, a stove and some food. Due to a late takeoff - 4.p.m - the thermal lift was weak and Medhi was forced to land in the valley almost immediately, Jake and Will continued to 6000m on the south side of the valley. Jake at this point lost the last thermal required to get the height to land on Petit Barbara and Will landed alone at 4900m on the NW ridge of the mountain. Will spent the night there alone (with no stove but a tent...) and flew down the next morning to land by the river in Ganish and walk back to the guest house.

"Sorry Peak" acclimatisation - On the 14th of June Medhi, Jake and Will climbed an easy snow gully to 4800m on the ridge that leads to 'Sorry Peak' (GE 36.22'15N 74.38'37E). After spending the night there, we down climbed to Karimabad the next day.

Ultrar Sar acclimatisation - On the 16th of June Medhi, Jake and Will flew to a 5000m col (36.21'28N 74.42'29E) at the base of the S ridge of Ultrar Sar. This is a very easy place to fly to, given that straight after take off you can use the same thermal to climb more than 2000m and land immediately at the 5000m col. I believe this was the site of the 1996 Japanese basecamp.

After landing at the col we went searching for quartz crystals on a nearby cliff then went to bed. The next day we climbed the initial couloir of the South ridge of Ultrar Sar to 5700m where it reaches the ridge (36.22'05N 74.42'35E). Medhi skied the couloir, which I'm certain had not been skied before and is comparable in length/difficulty to the Couturier on the Aiguille Verte. Jake and myself down climbed. We then packed up camp and flew down to Karimabad.

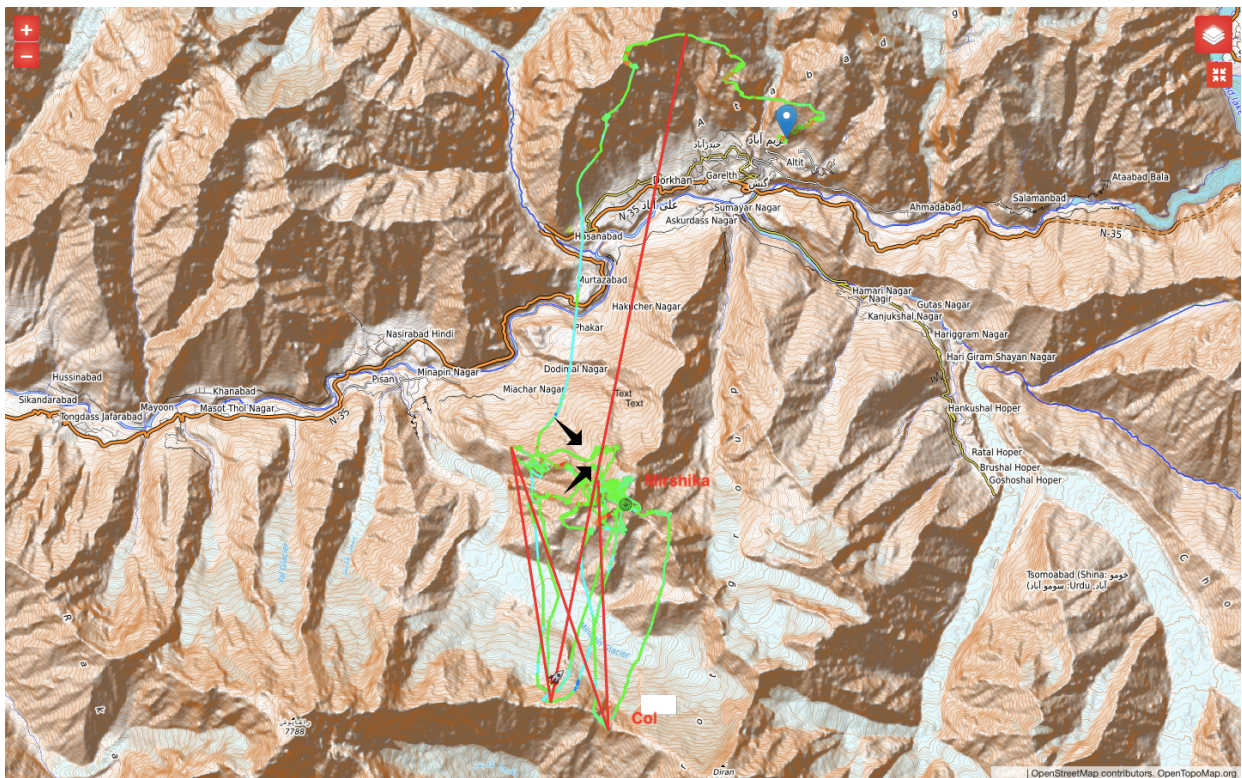
Unnamed peak with Medhi - On the 2nd of June Medhi and myself took off from Druika with skiing and glacial equipment with the intention of exploring some of the summits between Barbara Peak and Diran. We had originally planned on climbing/skiing the central, highest summit, which has a very attractive ski line on it. However, once overhead we agreed that the glacial plateau surrounding the mountain was so flat we might struggle to take off again. We decided to land at 5400m on the shoulder (36.09'47N 74.40'02E) linking Pheker to an attractive snowy mountain (36.09'26N 74.40'29E) that sits opposite Diran's NE ridge. After landing in the evening we set up our tent and went to sleep. The next day we climbed said mountain by its north arete and skied its NE flank. I don't have much information about this mountain, but I imagine it has been climbed before as an acclimatisation for Diran.

Mirshika - On the 23rd of June Jake and myself took off from Druika at around 11 a.m carrying skis. We landed on the summit of Mirshika (36.12'47N 74.37'08E) 5446 at around 2 p.m where we spent some time waiting for the snow on the west face to cool a little. After giving the snow time to firm up we skied a beautiful line down the west face, which had some 40 degree sections high up and then good lower angled slopes. After c1300m of skiing the snow ran out and we climbed 50m up to a col looking down at Aliabad. From here we flew to Karimabad. Either this line or a similar line was skied in 2021 by Francois Ragolski.

Diran/Mirshika

On the 25th of June Veso, Antoine, Medhi, Jake and Will all set off from Druika to attempt to land on the ridge that spans between Diran and Rakaposhi with many sub summits along the way. The plan was loose, but we wanted to sleep close to 6000m and do some skiing.

The plan was to take as much height as possible from the thermal which reliably forms off the summit of Mirshika and then traverse the huge glacier below Diran and cross over the ridge between Diran and Rakaposhi at its lowest point. By



doing this you pass on the south side of the ridge which has cliffs in the sun therefore forming a thermal which can be used to climb higher. The five of us all made it to the ridge but Antoine and myself were 45 minutes behind Veso, Medhi and Jake meaning that the thermal on the south face was weak and almost shaded out. We made the decision with 2 metres to spare to traverse back over the ridge before we ended up in Gilgit by mistake. Antoine and myself then flew back to Mirshika and settled for a night at 5400 sleeping on its summit for more acclimatisation.

Veso, Medhi and Jake spent the night on the ridge between Diran and Rakaposhi and we all flew down to Karimabad the next day.

Maiun Cchish/Barbara - On the 1st of July Jake, Medhi and Myself planned to land on the summit of Maiun Chhish (36.20'08N 74.28'01E) at 5900m to ski or partially ski the mountain. We made fast progress after takeoff and reached the mountain after 45 minutes of flying. Jake and Medhi found good lift close to the mountain and landed 20m below the summit. I struggled for almost two hours trying to get the height to land next to them, but the thermal that had been working well had since "turned off". I flew to the west face as it was now the afternoon and the east face was in the shade, but I couldn't quite squeeze the last hundred metres out of the weak thermal and decided to land down in the valley. Jake and Medhi skied the ridge that leads to the north, before taking off again and flying to the south side of the valley. They then landed on the top of



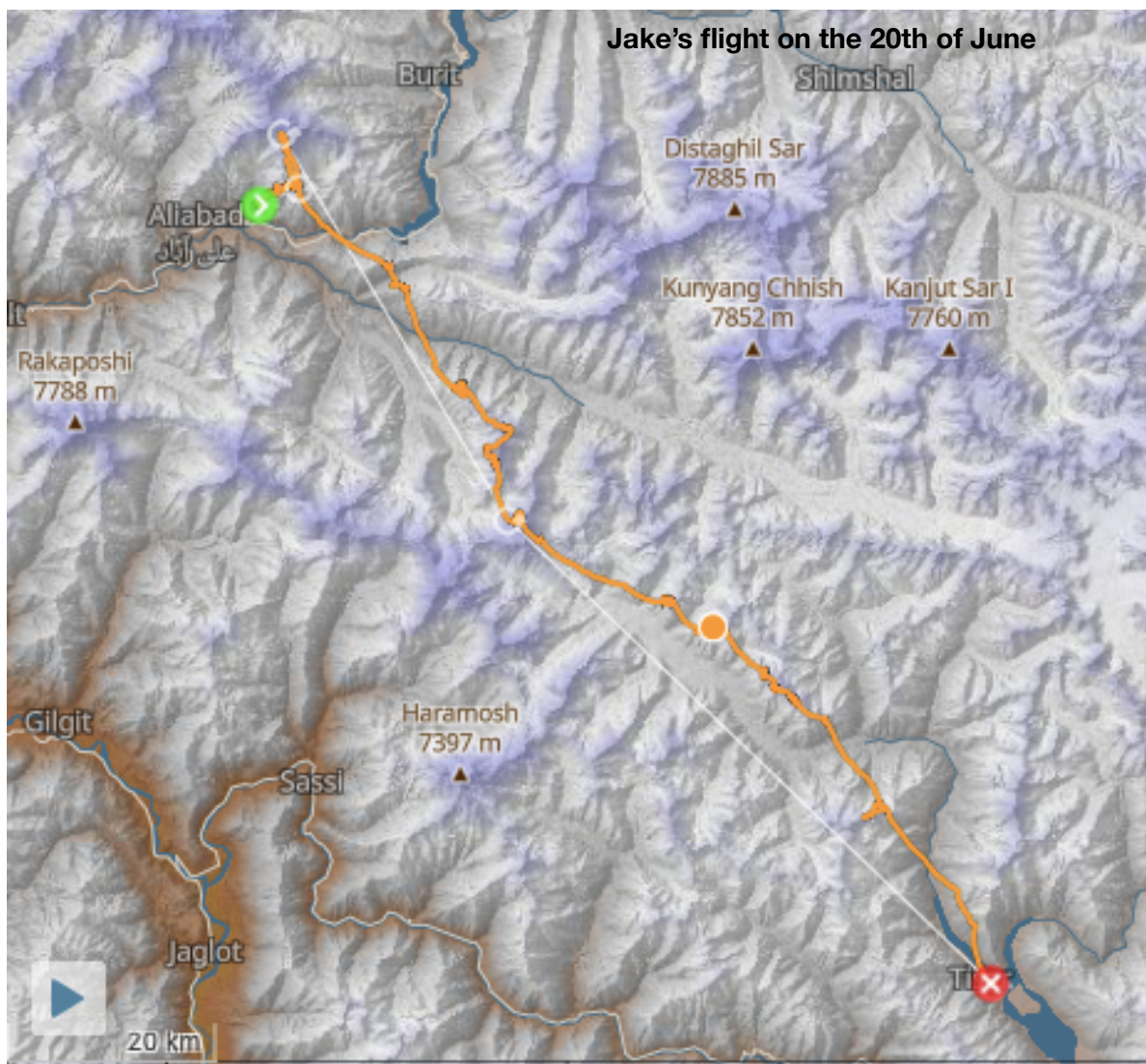
Barbara peak, skied to the lower glacier, took off once again and landed in Karimabad just before dark.

XC flying in Hunza

We didn't do much pure cross country flying during our time in Hunza, as we were more focused on skiing/mountaineering combinations with our wings.

However, on some days which leant themselves to flying more than mountaineering we did some relatively long distance flights. Of most note was the flight that Jake did on the 20th of June. Starting from Druika, along with Veso, they flew east towards Spantik, climbing as high as possible in the thermal that forms just to the right of the golden pillar they then crossed the Spantik summit plateau and in to the Chogolungma valley as far as the village of Dishupagon in the Shigar valley. This flight was first done by John Silvester, and subsequently by Antoine Girard. It's a significant flight as there are places where if you “bomb out” you will have many days walk out, and very special conditions are required to cross the Spantik plateau and not get dumped low by the katabatic air on the other side.

We all flew several c100km flights to the west, towards Gilgit and Rakaposhi, and I flew one c100km flight to the NE, Tupopdan and the start of the Shimshal valley.



Baltoro

On the 6th of July all five of us left Hunza and relocated to the Baltoro valley. The logistics of the next 2/3 weeks would be organised by Ali Saltoro of Alpine Adventure Guides Pakistan. The plan was to base ourselves at Paiju - 2 porter stages from Askoli and just at the snout of the Baltoro glacier. From here, by walking 500m up the hillside behind camp (below Paiju peak) we could then fly up the Baltoro and its tributary valleys.

We lived in the standard basecamp set-up of cook tent, mess tent and personal tents, and had a cook, an assistant cook and a guide. Ali Baltoro and Alpine Adventure Guides were great and I would recommend using them.

During this phase of the trip the weather deteriorated and we experienced many less flyable days than in the first half of the trip. During 10 days we only managed to fly three times. Once was a small flight when strong winds forced us to land before getting very far. The other two flights were more successful and we managed to reach Concordia (c70km round trip) and the next when we managed to reach Broad Peak/G4 (c90km).

The cloud base was not very high on the day we reached Broad peak, and so the highest we managed to climb on the side of it was around 6600m, which is not high considering the mountain is 8000m. Antoine had flown to 8400m here previously, but this was the world record for altitude with a paraglider, and it was clear that this was not going to happen on the day we were there.

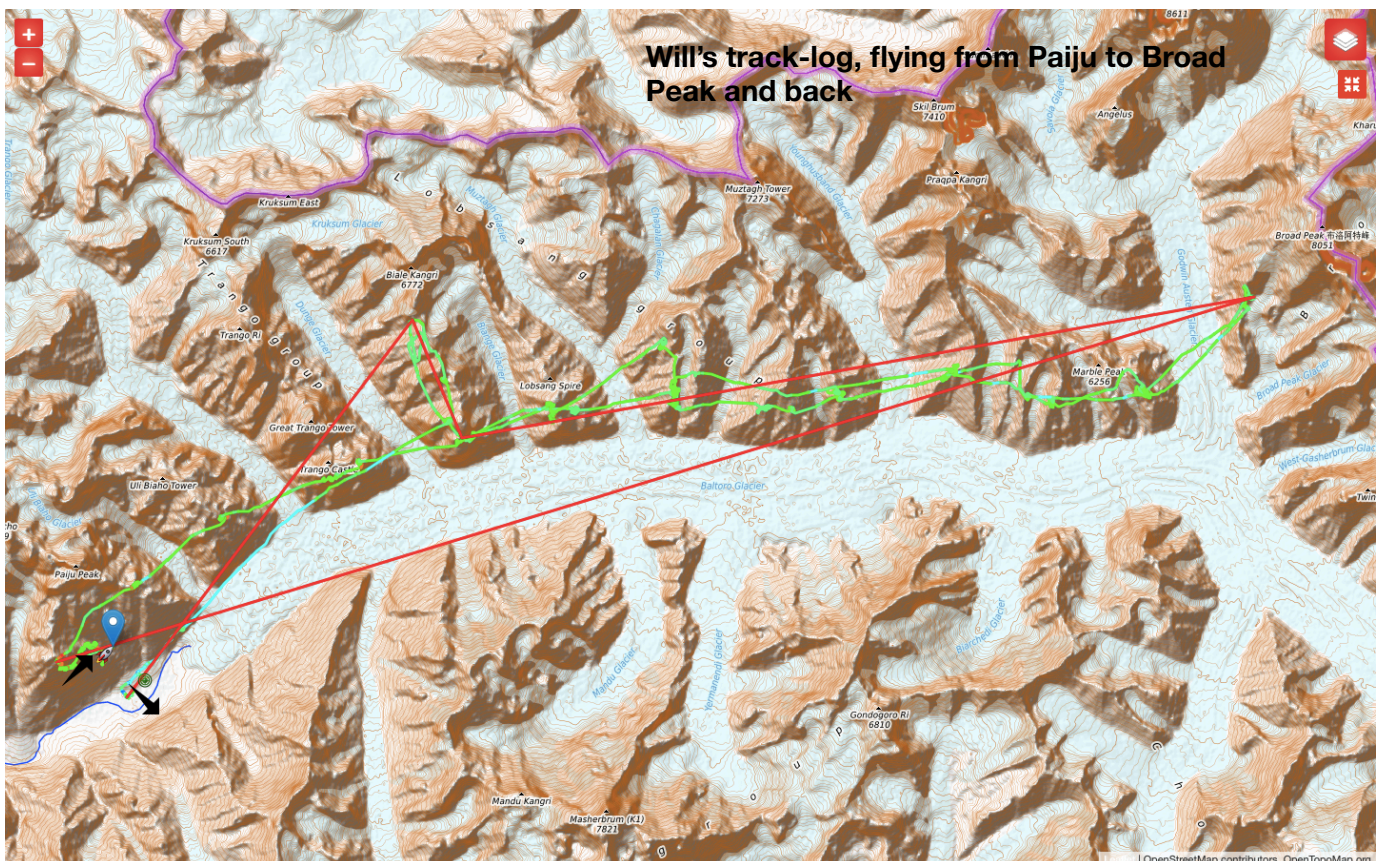
Flying in the Baltoro is very intimidating, mainly because there is almost nowhere to land in 80km of flying. Due to the chaotic nature of the moraine on the Baltoro Glacier and the steepness of the mountains, there are very few places you could land between Paiju and Concordia if you were to bomb out. There is a helipad at the Goro 2 army base close to Marble Peak, but it is definitely not recommended to land here, as there is restricted airspace around all army installations - it could be fine and they offer you a cup of tea, or they could be very angry and put you in an army prison and definitively ban flying in the area.

At Concordia there are places you could get away with landing close to the G4, Broad Peak and K2 basecamps, as there are some snow patches and some level looking bits of dry glacier (although what it looks like from 2000m above may be very different to how it looks from 50m above!).

I strongly recommend not bombing out on the Baltoro, you may get away with it, but you might be lucky just to break legs.

There are however many “top landing” possibilities in the Baltoro, for climbing/skiing combinations. Landing on one the 8000ers at the head of the valley is very doable, as is landing on the summit of Great Trango and many others. But you want to be sure you can take off again!

A practical problem with mountaineering/flying combinations in the Baltoro compared to in Hunza is the fact that you have to carry all your gear - flying, climbing and skiing - at least 500m up loose terrain to get to a point where you can take off and reliably climb in a thermal. Although by no means impossible, it takes away from the beauty of the concept. For example in Hunza we only had to walk for 20/30 minutes with our kit before we could take off and thermal to a high altitude. If you're having to walk a long way with very heavy bags to get started, I feel that it is not as logical as just climbing or skiing in a classical way, and doing away with the wings altogether.



A few words on:

Weather and conditions

It seems that for flying/mountaineering combinations in Pakistan May/June is a good time. On average it is slightly more unsettled than in July/August. However, because of the instability*, you can start thermalling from lower on the mountain earlier in the day compared to later in the summer, where the stability requires you to walk higher and wait longer until the thermals have installed themselves to a point where you can reliably not bomb out. However, for the use of a paraglider purely in descent, this is irrelevant, in fact you could argue that for just descending a mountain with a paraglider stability is a good thing.

*Stability/Instability. Lapse rates are the way we describe the change of temperature through altitude. It is the best measure of how well the air mass will allow a bubble of warm air to ascend through it. If the air surrounding the thermal is much colder than the thermal itself then the lapse rate is high and the thermal will rise quickly, but if the air mass is only marginally colder the lapse rate is low and the thermal rises slowly, if at all; this is stability.

Acclimatisation and use of bottled oxygen

When flying at high altitudes there is a very real risk of altitude sickness. When on a standard mountaineering trip, you might take 3 weeks to build up to 7000m, acclimatising in incremental steps. When paragliding in the Karakorum it is very feasible that you could go to 7000m on your first day in the country and make the 4000m altitude difference from takeoff at 3000m in as little as 30 minutes.

Some paragliding pilots decide to use bottled oxygen above 6000m. Antoine, who has flown above 8000m more than anyone has never used it, proving that with thorough acclimatisation it is not necessary.

Jake and myself in 2023 decided not to use oxygen which I put down to two main reasons: Firstly, we are alpinists and believe that using oxygen is less “stylish” than not using oxygen. Secondly, it is simpler to not use it, having already so much kit attached to you in flight. Having another piece of kit, extra weight and an annoying tube going in to your nose just doesn’t seem appealing. The highest we flew in 2023 was around 7200/7300. At 7000m you can definitely feel your mind being more sluggish and it becomes harder to breathe, but it is not for a long period of time and we feel like the efforts we made to regularly sleep around 5500m made flying at 7000/8000 without oxygen justified.

Local Hunza pilots

Some Hunza locals have shown an interest in learning to fly and have set up a club. There are currently around 15 members, of whom around 5 have already made their first small flights. We have got to know them all quite well and spent several days teaching them ground handling skills, basic aerology, wing maintenance and repair. The strongest pilot Sajid came with us one day for his first attempt at some thermal flying and we instructed him by radio. We found out subsequently that his radio was not turned on, but he did well!

It was great to hang out with these young enthusiastic locals, and we think that in the next decade it is quite plausible that there will be a tandem operation in Karimabad, hopefully run by these local pilots and capitalising on the large numbers of Punjabi tourists there seem to be in the Hunza Valley during the summer.

Bureaucracy and red tape.

As there are very few people paragliding in Pakistan, and only a handful of people using their wings to land in the mountains intentionally, there is currently very little red tape.

In Hunza in 2022 we were told that we needed an NOC (none objection certificate) to fly in the area, stating where we'd be taking off from, where we would land, and what our wings looked like. After much confusion we finally applied for the certificate but in the last days of our trip, after we had already flown a lot. I think they had created the paperwork at the last minute and that is why it took them a month to finally tell us how to apply.

In 2023 our local pilot friends sorted this for us through their club. We supplied ID photos and then they took care of the rest.

We had no peak permit, meaning that we were restricted to landing on mountains of 6500m and below, of which there are many!

In the Baltoro it is still unclear what the right route is to having a flying permit. Neither the government or the military knew who should process the permit. Currently trekking permits are issued by the government, and mountaineering permits by the army. We were in between the two, and after some discussions with the army at the last minute it was decided we would be processed by the government, hence no liaison officer. We payed for the standard Baltoro trekking

fee of 150eu and then 50eu for a “flight permit”. To sum up, it is a bit of a mystery what happened to get our “flight permit” but it all went smoothly and no further questions were asked.

We would like to extend our thanks to the MEF for supporting the trip. It is still early days in terms of Karakorum paragliding and “paralpinism” and we are pleased that the MEF deemed it something worth supporting. Hopefully our small contribution towards exploring this niche activity will inspire others to take it further and explore the enormous potential it offers.

Income	
MEF	£4500
BMC	£1250
Total	£5750

Expenses	
International transport including Chamonix- Milan Malpensa	£2100
Pakistan transport - Islamabad to Hunza - Hunza to Skardu - Skardu to Hunza - Jeeps in Hunza.	£800
Accommodation in Hunza	£700
Agency cost - Ali Saltoro - Baltoro	£1600
Insurance	£600
Extras - Generator, generator accessories, tarpaulin, fuel for generator	£250
Tips (jeep drivers, porters, guide, cook, assistant cook)	£200
Baltoro permits	£200
Total	£6450

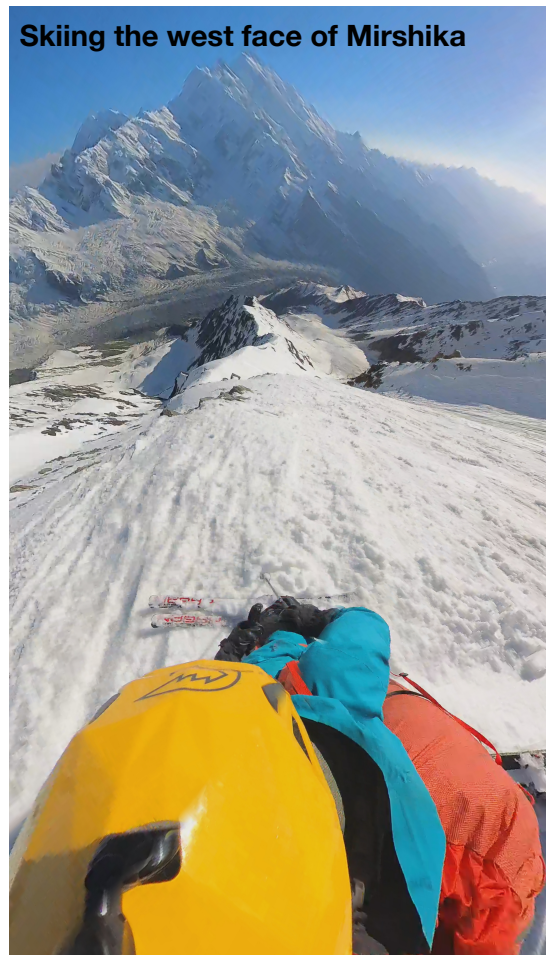
Scroll down to see some photos....



Will flying over Concordia. K2 and Broad peak behind.



Will on the ridge of Biale with Great Trango and Nameless tower opposite



Skiing the west face of Mirshika