



2025 Yukshin Gardan Sar British-International Expedition Report

MEF Expedition Reference: MEF-25-33

Expedition dates: June 27 - July 22, 2025

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Other members: Michael “Hutch” Hutchins (USA), Stefano Ragazzo (Italy)

Location: Shimshal Valley, Pakistan

Yukshin Gardan Sar: 36.25053, 75.37294

Basecamp: 36.32702, 75.44196

I. Summary

In my 2024 report on our unsuccessful expedition to climb the north face of India’s Chiling II, I began with the old adage that “you win some, you lose some” and in that case it was the latter. Unfortunately that would be a suiting description of this year’s outing to Yukshin Gardan Sar as well.

After some bad luck last time around, Michael “Hutch” Hutchins and I were keen for another trip to the mountains. Our plan was to try Rimo III in the Indian East Karakoram, after learning at our MEF debriefing that political conditions were favorable for permitting in the area and that we might actually be given permission. This time we thought we’d enlist a third member for the expedition, and it didn’t take much to persuade my friend, fellow mountain guide, and neighbor Stefano Ragazzo to come along as well. We applied for the permit feeling hopeful and with plenty of time, but as it so happens the world intervened. In late April, renewed hostilities escalated between India and Pakistan following the Pahalgam terrorist attack in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir. By May both countries were trading retaliatory cross-border missile strikes. Though the actual conflict lasted only four days, the situation at the border remained tense.

As a result, we found our hopes for visiting the East Karakoram diminished. We reasoned that if we would not be issued a permit for Rimo III, we would be unlikely to be issued a permit for anywhere in the Indian Karakoram, and would need to find an objective elsewhere instead. As the timing for our expedition was designed around the Karakoram, we looked to Pakistan. We initially applied for a permit to climb Saltoro Kangri as I had stared at it for many months from Link Sar in 2017 and 2019, and were



The team setting off from the village of Shimshal. (C.Wright)



One of many sporting sections of the drive in. (C. Wright)

half six the next morning were on the road westward, pushing through the cool morning air next to the raging Indus River en route to Gilgit. We reached the Hunza Valley that afternoon and spent the evening staring at the immense north face of Rakaposhi from our hotel in Aliabad. The following morning we were again up early and driving towards Shimshal, an oasis guarded by hours of rugged jeeping, stream crossings, and a canyon road worthy of Indiana Jones himself. We readied loads and set out on foot from town the next morning, beginning our march just four days after leaving our own doorsteps.

The approach itself went well enough despite some minor arguments with the notoriously difficult Shimshal porters. We can confirm the rumors: they are both

unsurprisingly denied. Seeking something equally grand, we settled on the north ridge of Yukshin Gardan Sar in the Shimshal Valley instead. The appeal was mostly that it was big and remote. The peak is 7530 meters high and our intended line was 3100 meters long. We knew from our research that the route would be complex, but upon arriving in Pakistan those already considerable complexities were compounded by atrociously bad conditions.

To go back to the beginning though, we never did receive a permit for Rimo III, nor did we ever get a refusal either. Our agent in India - Kaushal Desai of Above 14,000' - tried his best to get an answer as to what had happened, and concluded that we had actually been stymied by a civilian desk rather than a military one, but this was all we ever found out. Luckily the permitting process for Yukshin Gardan Sar was simple, and to my surprise did not even require our taking a liaison officer along, a first for me. Of course our getting to Pakistan was further complicated by world affairs, as in a stroke of perfect timing, hostilities between the US and Iran reached a crescendo just as we were to fly through the Persian Gulf, forcing us to change our plane tickets at the last minute to avoid flying through Qatar as it was under siege by Iranian missiles. Luckily we managed to procure flights through Istanbul instead, and arrived in Islamabad without incident. (This was unfortunately expensive, however, as is obvious in the budget.)

We landed before dawn on June 27, and by eight o'clock we were airborne again for Skardu and on the ground around ten. We spent the day in awe of how quickly it seemed we had left home and ended up in Baltistan. We shopped and dozed at intervals, and at



A serac collapse that greeted the team on their first day in sight of the face. (C. Wright)



Basecamp with Kanjut Sar and Yutmaru Sar behind. The shoulder of Yukshin Gardan Sar is at the far right. (S. Ragazzo)

expensive and difficult, though I must also say that some amongst them were genuinely lovely and we are grateful for their help. In our experience, visitors to the Shimshal Valley should double their expected porter budgets and be prepared to overpay compared to prices in other parts of the range. Still, it should be said, relatively speaking the rates are quite reasonable. Regardless, we reached a suitable basecamp in four days of walking, and with the porters' help made a kit depot on the glacier between basecamp and the mountain.

As we quickly found, the summer of 2025 was shaping up to be unprecedentedly hot and dry. Teams visiting the range in May and June had success on a number of objectives, while those there during July and August had comparatively little. For us, that meant limited snow cover and high freezing levels. We had hoped that dry

conditions would be favorable for climbing on the upper mountain, and they very well may have been had we gotten high on the peak, but they were very bad for just about everything else. For example, on our approach we had to abandon one of our proposed camps due to finding the streams both ourselves and the porters expected to provide water completely dry. Upon reaching our basecamp, we were also rewarded with some spectacular serac collapses on the north face of Yukshin Gardan Sar, reminding us of the need for extreme caution. It was both comfortable and deeply the opposite that we could lounge in t-shirts and shorts until dark at 4000m.

We soon found that acclimatization was made difficult as well. Travel on what might have in other years been easy snow slopes instead became interminable slogs up infuriatingly loose scree, dirt and talus, and the seemingly benign 6400m peak we had hoped to acclimatize on quickly made clear that it did not intend to cooperate. Freezing levels overnight seemed to hover around 6000m, turning our prospective route into a waterfall each day by mid morning. No other feasible way could be found as every possibility appeared equally dangerous. Instead we tried to get as high as we could on an objectively safe rock ridge that also turned out to be laughably bad, resulting in a considerable amount of necky scrambling, as well as two "rubble bivvies" fashioned out of precariously perched junk.



Advanced base with the lower reaches of Yukshin Gardan Sar behind. The team crossed the dirty glacier above the tent to gain the rock rib and the glacier above. (C. Wright)



Hutch moving on the rock rib in between the glaciers in the previous photo. (C. Wright)

After these efforts yielded more frustration than elevation, we concluded that we would have to acclimatize on Yukshin Gardan Sar instead. We began by raiding our cache on the glacier and humping heavy loads to a camp positioned well away from overhead hazard and in another pile of rubble adjacent to the glacier around 4400m. Our plan was to climb to 6500m on our proposed north ridge route and to descend back to basecamp over the course of five days. We would begin by crossing a mostly dry glacier, then find some difficulty in gaining a relatively low-angled rock rib, which would in turn lead

to a steep glacial climb up to a col at 5500m. From there an ice face led to a bivouac on a ridge at 6100m, and a climb up that ridge would take us to the base of the route's crux, a 400m rock step from about 6500-6900m. That marked the major question mark on the route as the rock appeared quite bad and had stopped the 1984 Japanese attempt. If that could be climbed, however, the route seemed to thread a feasible line above up a series of snow and ice ramps to the summit.

We began in the middle of the night crossing the glacier, and a few pitches of easy (VDiff-HVD) but extremely low-quality and poorly protected climbing led us onto the rib where we were able to climb unroped on a mix of hiking and scrambling terrain until we reached the glacier. Once there we roped for glacier travel and wove our way up, climbing on terrain up to 60° and running laterally on occasion to minimize our exposure to a few precarious ice cliffs above. Eventually we reached a very pleasant and mostly flat camp at 5500m.

The next morning we left camp around 03:00 and set out for the ice face above, moving easily up the glacier before leading a series of traversing pitches on 50-70° ice to



Hutch on lead high on the ice face, with the incident occurring on the ridge above him. (C. Wright)



Hutch working to prepare our first bivouac. The helicopter would pick the author up from this location two days later. (C. Wright)

gain the rib that bisected the face. We climbed this to the ridgeline above, encountering some unconsolidated snow and limited protection, but luckily ending with a nice anchor and promising bivouac site on a knife-edged ridge, which we reached at about 10:30. The day was hot and sunny, with all of us wearing only a single layer under our shells. As Stefano was engaged with something at the anchor, Hutch and I began to excavate the bivy, him swinging his axe at one end and me kicking with my crampons at the other. We were making steady progress when all of a sudden I felt an intense impact on my drawn-back foot. The world immediately turned red and I

yelled a guttural swear as my basest survival instincts told me something was very very wrong. Once the overwhelming urge to kill my friend had subsided, I realized what had happened: Somehow Hutch had drifted towards me and swung his axe into my foot. After the shock dissipated, we addressed the problem.

It was clear immediately that something bad had just happened. The pick went through my boot completely and into the back of my foot between the heel and ankle. (I will say as well that it did not embed itself as subsequent tellings of this story have resulted in people thinking I would have had to play the Arthurian and remove it myself.) I had a sense that it was bleeding profusely, and I feared that my achilles tendon or something else equally important may have been damaged. We attended to the matter by clearing a place for me to sit and removing my boot. This confirmed the bleeding, and given our position and the gravity of the situation, we quickly decided to call for a helicopter and to descend immediately. Using our meagre first aid kit, Stefano and Hutch first managed to stop the bleeding and bandage the wound. We then contacted our agent Abdul Ghafoor, who in turn was able to contact Askari Aviation to request a helicopter, and we began to make our way down. We abseiled the day's climb on threads without incident, though with no little stress as the sun bore down on the small but nonetheless menacing cornices above us. We reached the glacier in the late afternoon, hobbled back



Stefano maintains a sense of humour and communicates with Ghafoor as Hutch stops the bleeding. (C. Wright)



The bandaged foot after the abseil descent. (S. Ragazzo)

to our previous night's campsite, and received word the helicopter would come fetch me in the morning.

We spent a tense night in the tent and awoke to ten centimeters of new snow and a cloudy sky. The morning was spent trading texts with Ghafoor and wondering if the helicopters would indeed be able to fly. The skies cleared, then clouded, then cleared and prepared to cloud again. We were told they would come, then that they wouldn't, and finally that they would be there any moment. We struck the tent, and around 08:30 we heard the unmistakable rumble of engines, and made out two machines traversing the sky above us. One hovered at a distance, while one came in and set down virtually atop us. The pilots waved me in, and I

drug myself and my sack into the helicopter. The machine had clearly been stripped of all extra weight, including the rear seats, and as it lifted off I was sat on the floor as we ascended into the swirling clouds. One of the pilots, The Fearless Five High Altitude Squadron's Lt. Colonel Ansar, asked if I was alright, then gave me the most Pakistani of welcomes by handing me a small carton of mango juice and a wrapped sweetie. I was unable to consume either of them until much later, after the turbulence of the flight and my adrenaline supply had abated. I snapped a few final photos of Yukshin Gardan Sar's upper reaches, and soon we were descending the sweeping canyons back down past Shimshal and beyond. We stopped to refuel at Gilgit, where the helicopter's rear seats were replaced, and continued on to Skardu. When I asked the Lt. Col if flying conditions had been difficult, he said they had not expected to be successful, but that they thought they might as well try anyway. They turned back once after taking off from Gilgit, but were just about able to make it go on the second attempt.

Once at Skardu, I was taken straight to the military hospital under the care of Ghafoor's wonderful friend, Iqbal Qadri, where my foot was x-rayed, examined, cleaned, and sewn up. The doctor gave me some sternly confused looks, a tetanus shot and some antibiotics, and told me we would have to cross our fingers that the wound would not become infected, and that I was to come back to see him in a few days. To both of our surprise, he also told me he thought that the impact had miraculously left the myriad essential pieces of my foot largely undamaged. I spent the next few days drinking endless cups of tea and otherwise doing very little at Iqbal's hotel, then returned to visit the doctor once more. He again confirmed that I had gotten lucky and that the wound seemed



The mystery of the rock step remains. However, there seems to be little question when it comes to the poor quality of the stone. (C. Wright)

to be healing nicely. I returned to my convalescence to eat mangoes and pester the kitchen staff for cookery lessons until my partners joined me a few days later. We spent the night in Skardu, flew to Islamabad the next day, and on homeward the next.

Of course we know the mountains are dangerous, but this is not one of the hazards one accounts for. So what happened? Bad luck - sure, bad conditions - yes, but while those alone might have resulted in our being unsuccessful (and they surely would have as the weather continued to deteriorate after we exited the range, leaving friends on nearby Masherbrum to abandon their efforts as well), conditions don't put an ice tool into your foot, generally speaking. How exactly that happened is a matter of speculation, but for everyone's sake I'll abstain from conjecture.

Despite the unfortunate outcome, the expedition would like to thank the Mount Everest Foundation for their generous support. We also owe our thanks to the Alpine Club, the American Alpine Club and the Italian Alpine Club, as well as to Abdul Ghafoor and his team at Pakistan Higher Ground Expeditions, Iqbal Qadri at Summit Embassy, to Dr. Sajid Ameer at Combined Military Hospital Skardu, and of course to Lt. Col Ansar and the entire 404th Army Aviation Combat Group, without whom this story may have ended very differently.

II. Log

- June 27 - Fly Islamabad
- June 28 - Fly Skardu
- June 29 - Drive Skardu-Aliabad
- June 30 - Drive Aliabad - Shimshal
- July 1-4 - Approach and establish basecamp
- July 5-8 - Acclimatization climbs
- July 9-11 - Rest and move to ABC
- July 12 - Climb to 5500m
- July 13 - Climb to 6100m; incident and descent
- July 14 - CW Flies out and visits hospital / SR and MH descend to basecamp
- July 15 - 19 - CW convalesces in Skardu / SR and MH dismantle expedition
- July 20 - SR and MH reach Skardu
- July 21 - Fly Islamabad
- July 22 - Fly home

III. Spending

The following is an approximate record of the expedition's spending.

Expedition Costs	
Flights (international & domestic)	£7730
Baggage Fees	£4843
Food (during travel and hill food)	£2842
Equipment (inc. ropes, fuel canisters, and first aid supplies)	£2906
Weather Forecasting	£692
Expedition members' insurance	£1005
Visas	£79
Permit	£790.00

Agency fees (inc.round-trip transportation from ISB to Skardu,Skardu-roadhead,all lodging and food,portage with porters and pack animals,cook and basecamp staff,basecamp food and equipment,and porter/staff insurance)	£5971
Gratuity for staff and porters	£385
Carbon offsets (see section 14 for details)	£161
TOTAL	£27404.00

V. Conclusions

1. **Outfitter** - Pakistan Higher Ground Expeditions did an excellent job and I would highly recommend them.

2. **Visas** - We had no problem with simple online-sourced tourist e-visas, though you will want to print a copy before arrival.

3. **Carbon Footprint** - After much research, we decided to offset the expedition's carbon consumption by donating to a project approved by the internationally-recognized watchdog group Gold Standard. At only £8.00 per tonne, we were able to purchase 20 tonnes of carbon credits - 25% more than our expedition's emissions - for only £161. We recognize of course that does not negate the impact of our travel, but seems a reasonable and cost-effective way to mitigate it.



The pair of Pakistani Army A-Star helicopters on their approach to our camp at 5500m.
(C. Wright)

4. **Environmental Impact & Waste Management** - The expedition strove at all times to adhere to the best principals of environmental stewardship. With the exception of basecamp, all camps were on glacial ice and left no impact. Basecamp was in an established camp, but still our tents were pitched on sand and dirt and no flora was trampled. No firewood was collected (not that any was available), and the expedition used only fuel stoves that came in and out with them, as did all fuel containers. No wildlife were impacted, no other people were impacted, and nothing was left behind or removed.

The expedition also did its absolute best to dispose of waste properly at all times. All rubbish from higher camps was collected and carried down to basecamp. Human refuse was disposed of in crevasses when possible and toilet paper burned or collected when that was not possible. At basecamp a pit toilet was dug into suitable soil away from water sources and at a depth that would actually promote decomposition. Combustable waste was burned, and non-combustibles were brought back to the roadhead. A thorough

sweep of the basecamp area was conducted to collect micro-rubbish, and the expedition feels all of its camps were left as clean as possible.

5. **Weather** - The weather this summer was likely anomalous in exactly how warm it was, though sadly it is equally likely that it reflects an undeniable warming trend as a result of human-caused climate change. With that, it seems that earlier season ascents in the Karakoram will become more and more common, just as they have in the Alps and other ranges through the world.
6. **Mountain, Route and Range** - Before we set out, a friend asked why I was going to Pakistan - a country renown for its motherlode of unclimbed granite - to climb a peak made of junk. I told him because it was big, but in retrospect I wonder if I should have given the question a bit more consideration. That is to say, I am very happy to have seen Shimshal and the western part of the range, but I will be very unlikely to return. Certainly some of the peaks around Hunza (notably Ultar Sar and its neighbours) are stunning and of the highest quality, but the same cannot be same for Shimshal. The range is incredibly dry and desert-like, and composed of the worst rock imaginable. Though the peaks are enormous, they are in my opinion also quite dangerous, and our experience climbing there was far from my favourite. Admittedly there may be some gems, but having seen a few of the area's largest peaks close-up now, especially Yukshin Gardan Sar and Disteghil Sar, I do not wish to return.



A sign seen upon leaving the military hospital in Skardu. The quality of care received was excellent, but the author unfortunately came and went with his stress regardless. (C. Wright)