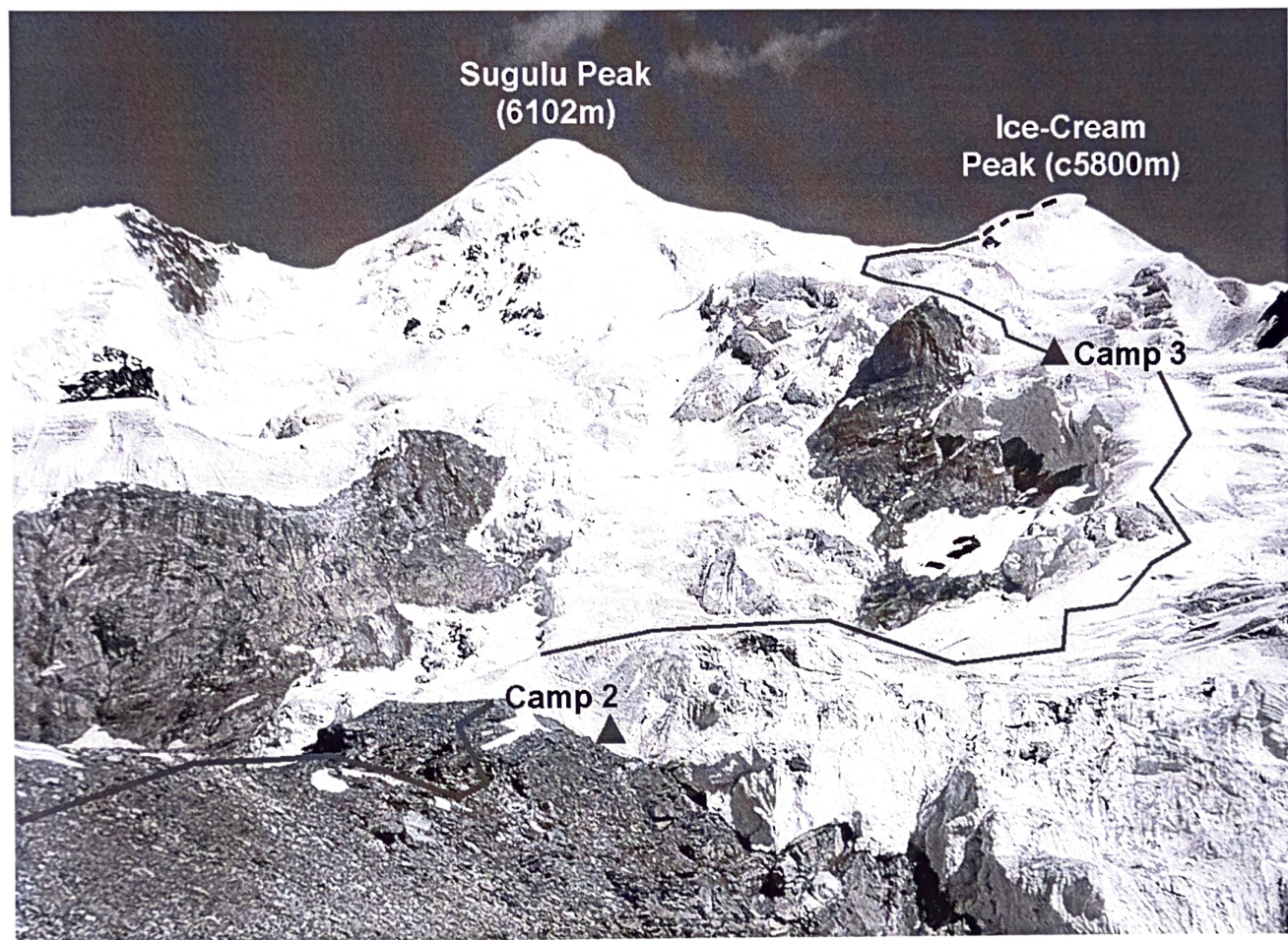


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British Solu Expedition 2001



Expedition Report



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British Solu Expedition 2001

Summary

Venue: Solu glacier, west/central Karakoram, Pakistan.

Approached via Skardu, Shigar, Tissar, Doko, Bisil.

Attempt on "Solu Peak", (5901m.), apparently unclimbed, at head of Solu Glacier, across Solu Col from Solu Tower, (5979m.).

This attempt failed due to impassable icefall in upper Solu glacier.

Subsequent attempt on "Sugulu Peak", (6102m.), possibly/probably unclimbed, on Solu/Hispar divide. This attempt failed due to poor weather & snow conditions.

Ascent (probable first ascent) of one small peak, a subsidiary of Sugulu peak.
Our name for this: "Ice Cream Peak", (c. 5800 m.)

Members: Dave Wilkinson, Stew Muir, Bill Church & Steve Kennedy.

Expedition Report

Main text by Dave

Diary by Stew

Sketch map by Dave

Map production by Stew

Cover photo-diagram by Steve

Other photos by various expedition members

Photo production by Stew

The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purpose of private research.

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Introduction

Dave had been to the Solu Glacier the previous year (British Solu Expedition 2000). He could not fail to notice a strikingly beautiful and challenging peak at the head of the glacier, unnamed on the Jersey Wala map, but marked as 5901 m. A photo taken the previous year was shown to the others, they agreed that it was a worthy objective, it was provisionally named "Solu Peak", and the expedition was planned to climb it.

Approaches

Dave and Stew flew out two days earlier than the others, to buy supplies in 'Pindi, then met the others at the airport with a minibus which took us to Skardu. The journey to base camp posed no problems whatever, being identical to that of the previous year's trip.

In Skardu we once again hired the services of Abbas as our head porter and cook, with Rasoul as his assistant. These two men come from Satpara, a village some 20 miles south of Skardu. Abbas had been employed by us the previous year, and on two earlier occasions, so we were well familiar with his virtues and shortcomings.

A five hour jeep ride took us from Skardu to Bisil, where a wire pulley contraption was used to cross the Basha river to the village. Bisil is a pleasant village with hot springs and fine walnut trees, moreover we had made friends with a number of the local men who had acted as porters the previous year, so hiring this year's team was a simple matter.

The first day of the walk-in led via a good but narrow path traversing steep slopes above the west bank of the Berelter river, to Dabadas, a herdsman's summer village. Doctor Bill spent an extra night here, tending the injury of a local youth who had quite seriously injured his foot with a careless blow of a wood axe. Bill did a double stage the following day and rejoined the party at base camp. The Bisilers were rightly impressed with his devotions.

The second day of the walk-in was mainly on lateral moraines and ablation valleys, to a smaller herdsman's encampment at Pakora. We camped a short distance past this place. The final day followed the rubble-strewn Solu glacier, passing the final herdsman's settlement at Sugulu, to our base camp in a small ablation valley with abundant flowers, rhubarb patches and a little glacier-dammed lake, as used the previous year. We even had the use of the previous year's tent platforms.

Reconnaissance and Change of Plan

On such trips, the first day or two at base camp is usually occupied with various settling-in chores. This year we had no tent platforms to dig, and we had to do without the usual home-brewed beer, as the person responsible had omitted to bring the kit! This gave us a more relaxed couple of days. One fine day followed by two days of steady rain caused us no concerns of an over-fast acclimatisation.

The following morning seemed a little clearer, so we set off in light early morning drizzle, for a lightweight reconnaissance and walked for four or five hours up the Solu glacier to the foot of the big icefall. We hoped to find a way through this to the foot of our mountain. We thought we spotted a weakness towards the icefall's right side, so we returned to base. The weather had now cleared up totally, and gave what turned out to be the best and longest spell of the trip, but sadly, we were unable to take full advantage. Next day, we returned fully loaded, and camped at the foot of the icefall.

We set off at 2am the following morning, full of hope and optimism. Past experience of similar icefalls has shown that with sufficient perseverance, a route is usually possible. But this one was different. A few hundred feet were gained, crossing various minor obstacles with short difficulties (up to Scottish winter grade III – mostly soloed). Then the way was blocked by an enormous hollow, which seemed to be guarded all round with overhanging ice cliffs. We retraced our steps and tried again to one side, but with similar results. This procedure was repeated several more times, but every way was barred. We then returned to our camp, getting back as day dawned.

An easier way may have existed to the right of where we had been trying, with a series of snowy shelves, apparently separated by crevasses, but perhaps linkable. However, the entry to the first of these shelves looked quite hard and objectively dangerous. In fact the whole of this line, which was at the glacier's very edge, was exposed to falling stones and ice from the mountain walls above. A closer inspection confirmed that the entry would not be easy. Another inspection of the icefall further left than we had tried confirmed our impressions that this was even more broken and convoluted. After some discussion, we agreed that, even if a route could be found, it would be too difficult, dangerous, and time-consuming to be practical as an *approach* to our peak, which would require us to go up and down several times. So, having travelled half way round the world to climb this mountain, we reluctantly gave up before even reaching its foot. Perhaps the icefall might be easier in a snowier year.

We returned to base camp later the same morning, and spent the afternoon and evening discussing alternative plans. We decided to look at the snowy peak on the Solu/Hispar divide marked on the Jersey Wala map as 6102m, and its subsidiary peaks. This area was close to, but a little west of, the area explored in 2000. The hill above Sugulu gave a feasible approach which avoided the very broken glaciers to either side. Above this, complex glaciers seemed to give a choice of possible approaches to the main peak and others to its east and west.

The local herdsmen had the previous year told of a visiting party of unknown nationality about six years previously. They had camped at "Hora Bransa", a small pasture just west of Sugulu, and had supposedly climbed "three peaks". However, no details were known, and past experience has shown that the locals, while very accurate about parties' movements in the valleys, are much less reliable when it comes to actual climbing. The Alpine Club's excellent Himalayan Index had no record of any ascent or attempt on peak 6102, so if it had been climbed, the ascent had not been well publicised.

Other peaks around the Solu glacier all appeared unattractive, with objective dangers, technical difficulties, or problematical approaches, often all three. So we decided to try peak 6102m, which we christened "Sugulu peak" after the cow pasture below it. This name also seemed to appeal to the locals.

The day after our rebuffal from Solu Peak, we retraced the previous year's "hidden valley" approach to camp 1. Next day, we took a left-trending line which led up very steep slopes of grass and flowers, to a col on the ridge. The scrambly ridge then led to the top of the hill above Sugulu at about 4500m., just below the snow line. Here we established our camp II by building comfortable tent platforms on the shaly ground. A number of previously built cairns were found hereabouts. Subsequent conversations with the Sugulu herdsmen revealed that their bolder fellows sometimes come up here for Ibex hunting. If a previous climbing party had been here, they left no signs: there was not a trace of litter, and no remnants of old tent platforms which do usually survive in such places. Perhaps they had a snowier year and camped on snow. After four active days, we left tents, stoves and some other items at camp 2, and returned to base camp in worsening weather for a well-earned rest.

We had plenty of time to rest, as the weather was bad for a whole week. We had plenty of food and drink (non-alcoholic!), and several visits from the men and boys of Sugulu. They keep a few sheep and goats, but mainly cows. The style of cooking in this part of the world puts a high value on food fried in ghee (clarified butter), which is their idea of healthy eating! This results in butter commanding a high market price, so there is good incentive to keep dairy cattle. The *valley* landscape in the Karakoram is not unlike neighbouring Afghanistan: mostly desert. So these summer pastures with their higher altitude and greater rainfall give much lush grazing. The life of a herdsman must be a strange one, with an early morning milking, and another in the evening, but a big gap for most of the day with little to do – except visit us. Their visits were sociable ones and they always got a brew of tea and a snack from us. They were also keen to scrounge any used food tins and other containers we could spare, for storing their own supplies at Sugulu. In return, we had a change of company, and also some free deliveries of fresh yoghurt and cottage cheese – a welcome change in our diet.

Climbing and Attempts

After a week of waiting, the weather finally cleared up, so we also went up, this time fully loaded, and all the way to our camp 2 in a day. The approach to camp 2 via the previous year's camp 1 (marked camp 1a on the sketch map in this report) followed the Solu glacier down *towards* Sugulu, but left it for a steep narrow valley of grass and flowers which was hidden from base camp, then a small but steep glacier snout had to be climbed on the way to camp 1. This snout was rather dangerous to climb due to stonefall, and required helmets, and axes and crampons, which then had to be ferried up to the upper camp, and subsequently backwards and forwards however many times. So we decided to change our approach and go via Sugulu. This required a longer walk down the main glacier, but avoided the unpleasant snout. We decided that we would not need helmets higher up, so we dumped them on the col where we joined the ridge leading to camp 2. This place was, of course, dubbed "helmet col".

On subsequent descents from camp 2, we dropped in for a brew with the Sugulu folks. During the day, between morning and evening milkings, they passed the time with sundry domestic chores, plus the vital task of making the butter. This was done by separating the cream, which was then churned in a rustic sort of wooden container with paddles operated by treadles driving a leather belt. Over an hour of hard pedalling was needed to produce a few kg of butter. This was an idyllic existence for those who could stand the hardship and lack of sanitation. We thoroughly enjoyed our brew stops, but wondered whether it was worth risking a dose of the runs.

Camp 2 was situated on shaley rocks immediately below the snow line. This was ideal for an advanced base. Leaving tents above the snow line can result in them being crushed or lost under fresh snow. Food supplies can also be lost to Ravens. These large and voracious scavengers are quite common throughout the Karakoram. They have learnt that people have food, which they can steal. Leaving it in tents, cardboard boxes, plastic bags or buried under snow is no use. For birds, they are highly intelligent. They are also hungry, have a very good sense of smell, and very powerful beaks. The best way of protecting food stores is to build walls of stones round them. Ravens are powerful birds, but they can't lift big rocks.

From camp 2, we set off fully loaded at 3.30 am. The way followed quite complex glacier terrain, but easy apart from one rope's length of hard ice at up to 50 degrees. The snow which fell during the recent bad weather had not fully consolidated, with much tedious breakable crust. We reached our camp 3 at 7.30 am, but felt like we'd had a full day's work. Camp 3 was situated on a snowy bowl at c. 5200m. The site was the best available, but surrounded by snow slopes with a few serac walls – not totally safe. After some discussion, we chose next morning to take a line trending up and right, leading towards a larger snow bowl below Sugulu peak. We set off with light packs at half past midnight, and climbed out of our bowl, with short pitches (Scottish grade 2), but more breakable crust. We arrived in the upper bowl after an exhausting ascent, but still well before dawn. A steep snow/ice slope would then have led to the col between Sugulu peak and its eastern subsidiary, a top which was very prominent from base camp, the summit appearing as a distinctive snowy cornice of gigantic size. The ridge from the col to Sugulu peak was now well lit by the moon. Traversing it would clearly be time-consuming, with big cornices hanging out on the far side over the Hispar glacier. These would necessitate much traversing below the crest on ice or crusty snow. The ridge faced east, and would catch the early sun, so the descent might cause problems. We decided to return to Sugulu peak later, when we were better acclimatised and the snow better consolidated. Instead, we turned right, Bill led us over an impressive bergschrund, and we climbed the south ridge of the monster cornice peak, subsequently named "ice-cream peak" for its obvious resemblance. We reached the cornice's top still in darkness. We now discovered that we were not at the top of this mountain. There were three slightly higher points on the ridge beyond the top of the ice-cream cornice. These appeared to be about the same height. We visited the first two of these.

But none of these points were very far above the col, so our ice-cream peak was a less distinctive one than appeared from base camp. However, the location on the divide overlooking the Hispar glacier gave wonderful views. A bright light was visible to the east: the camp of a trekking party on the Hispar La. The cold wind chilled us to the bone, so every stitch of spare clothing was donned as we waited for the dawn. The Sun finally burst out over a scene of heart-rending beauty. Distant views included the Ogre and K2, along with all the nearer glaciers, and peaks beyond counting. Shortly after the dawn, we scurried back to camp 3 before the snow went even worse. The next day, we took all our gear and spare supplies down to camp 2, and leaving everything there, descended to Sugulu for a brew, then back to base camp as the weather broke.

After two rest days, we returned to camp 2 ready for another go at Sugulu peak. But the weather had turned wet & mild in the night, so we sat tight. Then followed three days and nights of a very annoying weather pattern which is quite common in these parts: Clear weather in the afternoon followed by a starry start to the night, then clouding over later in the night with milder conditions and rain or snow showers. This is a sort of opposite of the common "Alpine pattern" of clear mornings and showers or storms in the afternoon or evening. The alpine pattern allows climbing to be done early in the day, but on the lower peaks of the Karakoram, the "reverse pattern" really prevents any action at all on snow/ice ascents. Apart from poor visibility, the mild temperatures give poor snow conditions, and if it clears in the afternoon, the sun causes equally poor conditions. After three days of this, Dave and Stew returned to base camp, followed a day later by Bill and Steve.

The latter pair had now run out of time, so they returned home to jobs and families. The other two had another week, so as Bill and Steve left in the inevitable perfect weather, Stew and Dave went up to camp two again for a final attempt. But the dreaded "reverse weather" pattern took hold again, and we were stuck in camp 2 for another four mild nights. Finally, our time was also up, so we returned to base camp, and so homeward.

Return Journey

This posed few problems. Porters from Bisil had been prearranged to leave base camp on specific days, Bill and Steve got back to Bisil in a single long day, Dave and Stew with the main party of porters took two days. In Bisil, we were treated to the best of their hospitality, before jeeps (also prearranged) took us back to Skardu. We then used the public bus for the return to Rawalpindi.

Our return flights to U.K. had been reconfirmed at the airport on our original arrival in 'Pindi on the outward journey. Reconfirmation must be done at least 72 hours in advance, otherwise the return reservation is likely to be lost, and alternative reservations are hard to get at this peak time for Punjabi families' return to U.K. There *is* a PIA office in Skardu, but apparently, the reconfirmation cannot be done from there, because of the peculiarities of their computer system.

Conclusions

(1) Solu Col. We have not heard of any party crossing this col. It would involve succeeding on the icefall which caused our failure in reaching Solu peak. Perhaps this is why the col has not been crossed.

(2) Solu Peak. 2001 had been a very dry year, so the crevasses were worse than usual. Although we failed to approach the peak from the Solu glacier, this might be possible earlier in the year and/or in a snowier year. Same comments apply to this side of the Solu col. Alternatively, the mountain could be approached from the Sokha or Biafo glaciers.

(3) Sugulu peak and its subsidiaries. As noted elsewhere in this report, the local men told us that an unspecified party climbed “3 peaks” in this vicinity in the mid 1990s. But such reports are often unreliable, and we cannot find any record elsewhere of such ascents. We have now climbed two small peaks in this vicinity (Ice cream peak in 2001, and Dragonfly peak in 2000), But that still leaves the main Sugulu peak and several others nearby. Sugulu peak itself seems easiest by our approach, followed by its E. ridge or S.E. face. These have the disadvantage of early morning sun. From our camp 2, an alternative route going further west looked harder and more exposed to serac and stone-fall, but would give access to the mountain’s S.W. ridge, which would get the sun later in the day.

Food and Cooking

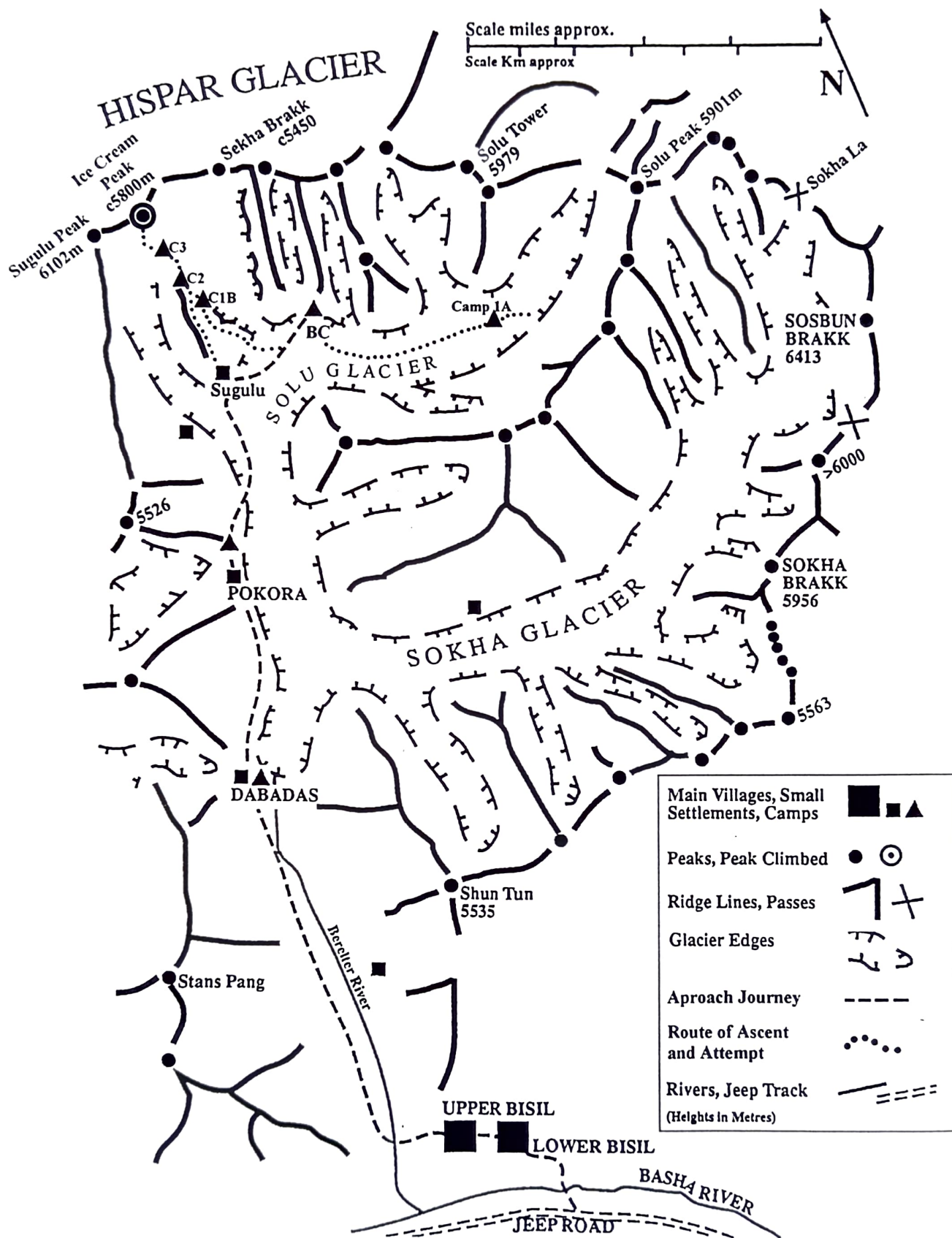
We gave our porters an overall payment, which included an allowance for their food. This simplified matters for us, and the porters prefer this, and are quite capable of carrying their own food for such a short (3 day) walk-in. So we only had to cater for ourselves plus cooks.

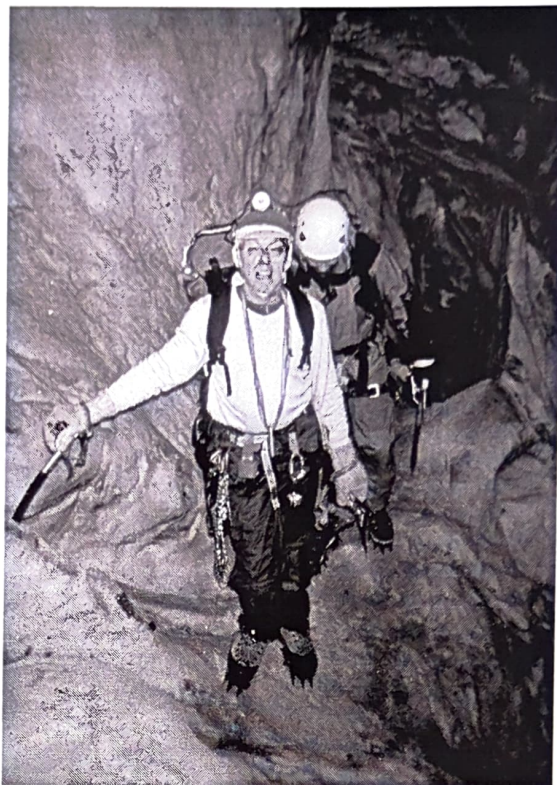
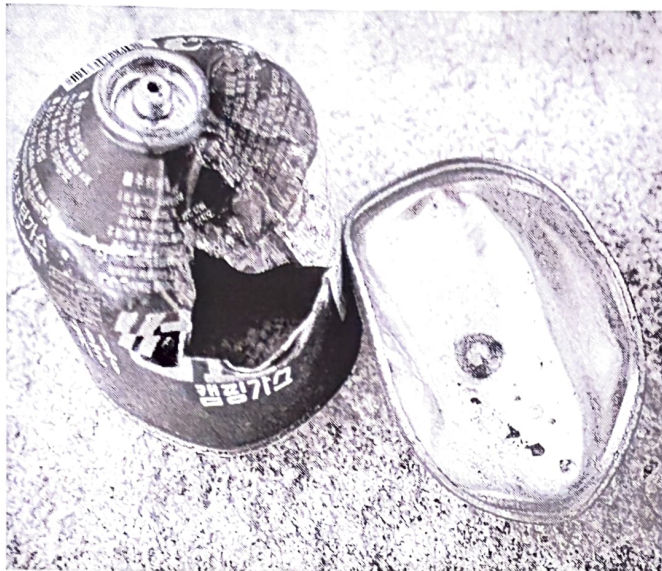
Most food for an expedition such as this can be bought in Pakistan. A few items of mountain food are unobtainable, principally instant soups and mashed potato. These were taken out from home. PIA now give a generous baggage allowance of 40 kg (plus a cabin bag), so various extra items can be taken as luxuries, which are not essential, or when the Pakistani equivalents are inferior. We took about 30kg of food from U.K. This was mountain food and luxury items, the major part of which was kindly donated by “Booths”, a small and traditional but vigorous supermarket company based in north-west England. Most of the remainder was bought in ‘Pindi. Nowadays, most of this *could* have been obtained in Skardu, but with inferior choice and less certainty of availability. Some expeditions do buy most of their food in Skardu. We made some last-minute purchases in Skardu, including 18 kg of fresh vegetables, and some cooks’ food, bought with Abbas’s assistance.

Even modest altitudes cause a reduction in water’s boiling point, which considerably lengthens cooking times. So all our mountain food either needed no cooking at all, or was “instant” which meant it needed a short simmer at altitude. Cooking on the mountain was done on stoves using the 250 gm. detachable screw-on gas cylinders (butane/propane mix). These cylinders were bought in Skardu, where a number of stalls on the bazaar sell cylinders acquired from expeditions’ surplus. A change in Pakistani taxation has recently been made, to encourage the use of gas-powered motor vehicles. As a result, big cylinders of pressurised propane gas are more readily available, and some unscrupulous people seem to be using this propane to refill the small 250 gm. cylinders. These are not strong enough to withstand the pressure of pure propane, which is not as readily liquefied as butane. This causes a risk of cylinders exploding at altitude or in sunlight. One of our cylinders exploded at base camp (see photo on page 10), and two others belled out at their bases. Such an explosion could be disastrous high on a mountain. In future, we will have to take more care in buying these cylinders, to avoid getting refilled second-hand cylinders.

At base camp, we cooked on one of the Pakistani-made double-burner paraffin stoves. We also had a pressure cooker, which permitted the use of rice, lentils, pasta etc.

Total food amounts were calculated as 1 kg (uncooked weight) per man day. This is sufficient for most appetites, even quite voracious ones. Average food consumption seems to be about 850 gm. per man day. So we had a generous surplus, which acted as a reserve, made it possible to feed base camp visitors, and to be generous with the walk-out porters.





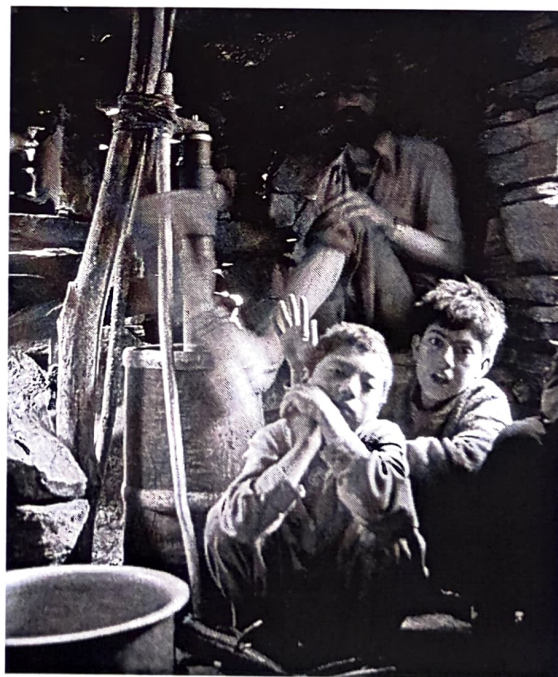
Top Left- exploded Epigas cylinder at base camp
Photo by Stewart Muir

Top Right- lost in the Solu icefall. Bill and Steve.
Photo by Stewart Muir

Centre Left- ice snout up to camp 1b
Photo by Steve Kennedy

Bottom Left- Solu peak (5901m) centre from C2
Photo by Steve Kennedy

Bottom Right- butter manufacture at Sugulu
Photo by Stewart Muir





Top Left- approaching C3

Photo by Dave Wilkinson

Top Right- the Karakorum dawn from the summit of Ice-Cream Peak (c5800m). K2 centre horizon with Ogre to the right

Photo by Dave Wilkinson

Centre Left- Bill and Steve crossing a bergschrund before the summit

Photo by Stewart Muir

Bottom Left- descending from the summit of Ice-Cream Peak (c5800m)

Photo by Stewart Muir

Bottom Right- above C3...few people could challenge its beauty

Photo by Stewart Muir

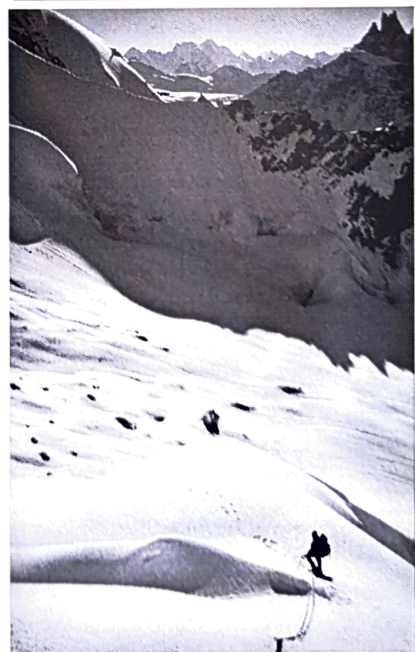
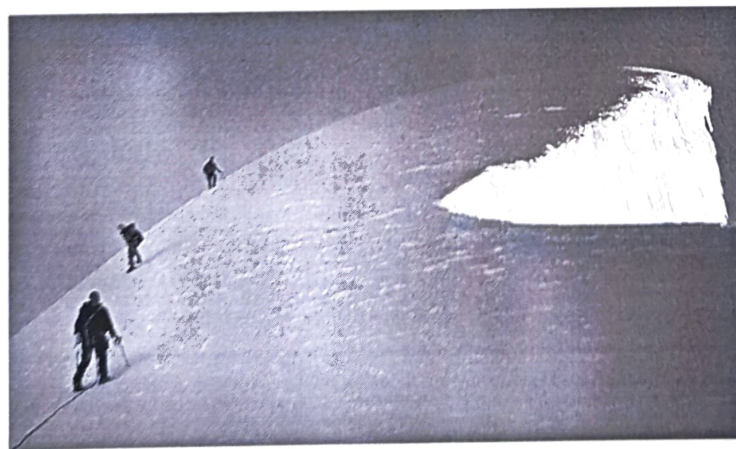




Photo by Stewart Muir

Dave Wilkinson admiring the superb panorama from Camp 3 (5200m).
Solu Peak 5901m (right of centre on the horizon, RH of twin peaks) remains unclimbed



Photo by Stewart Muir

Sugulu Peak (6103m) also remains unclimbed. This is looking at the SE face after our successful ascent of Ice-Cream Peak (c5800m), which is just off this shot to the right. Climber Steve Kennedy.

Medical

We had no serious health problems. Members had the usual injections for Hepatitis A, Typhoid, Tetanus, Polio, etc. as recommended on the World Health Organisation's list (available at any G.P.), and took proguanil and chloroquine for malarial prophylaxis.

As our doctor, Bill (who is a hospital consultant by profession) took a modest supply of medicines and dressings. He used few of these on us. His main activity was with the local people. He dealt very sympathetically with one serious injury (see p.4) and with divers less serious complaints, less sympathetically with the usual quota of village malingerers.

After the expedition, we donated most of our unused medical supplies to the hospital in Skardu.

Expedition Diary

- July 5 Dave and Stew fly from Birmingham.
- 6 Arrive Rawalpindi. Buying supplies etc.
- 7 More supplies bought. Bill and Steve fly from Manchester.
- 8 Bill and Steve arrive 'Pindi. Leave by minibus for Skardu.
- 9 Arrive Skardu midday.
- 10 Final preparations in Skardu.
- 11 Leave Skardu in 2 jeeps, arrive Bisil mid afternoon. Hire porters.
- 12 to 14 Walk-in to Base camp.
- 15 to 17 Mainly in Base Camp – bad weather.
- 18 Reconnaissance to Solu icefall.
- 19 Up to camp 1a below Solu icefall.
- 20 Failed to find route through Solu icefall. Returned to base camp.
- 21 Up to camp 1b.
- 22 Up to camp 2.
- 23 Back down to base camp.
- 24 to 31 Mainly in base camp – bad weather.
- Aug 1 Return to camp 2 in day.
- 2 Up to camp 3.
- 3 Climb Ice Cream peak. Back to camp 3.
- 4 Return to base camp.
- 5 & 6 Rest in base camp.
- 7 Up to camp 2 in good weather.
- 8 & 9 Wait in camp 2. Poor weather in mornings.
- 10 Dave & Stew descend to base camp. Bill and Steve stay in camp 2.
- 11 Bill and Steve descend to base camp.
- 13 Bill & Steve depart with 2 porters, arrive Bisil evening.
Dave & Stew up to camp 2 in good weather.
- 14 Bill & Steve jeep to Skardu.
Dave & Stew wait in camp 2. Poor morning weather.
- 15 & 16 Dave & Stew wait in camp 2. Poor morning weather.
- 17 Dave & Stew descend to base camp.
- 19 & 20 Dave & Stew walk-out base camp to Bisil. Bill & Steve fly 'Pindi to Manchester.
- 21 Dave & Stew jeep to Skardu.
- 22 Leave Skardu by bus.
- 23 Arrive 'Pindi.
- 25 Dave & Stew fly 'Pindi to Birmingham.

Financial Accounts (all amounts in, or converted to, £UK).

<u>Income</u>		<u>Expenditure</u>	
M.E.F.	490	P.I.A. Air fares, U.K. to 'Pindi (4 @ 497)	1988
B.M.C.	1100	Visas (4 @ £40)	160
Booths supermarkets (donation in kind)	100	Members' Insurance (4 @ £172)	688
Members' contributions (4 @) 956.95)	3827.82	Travel costs in Pakistan:	
		Minibus/bus 'Pindi-Skardu & ret.	177.01
		Jeeps Skardu-Bisil & ret.	152.87
		Local buses & taxis	20.11
Total income	£5517.82	Total travel costs in Pakistan	349.99
		Food:	
		Booths contribution	100
		Other food bought in UK	31.98
		Expedition food bought in Pakistan	381.10
		Food in Hotels and Cafes	104.79
		Total food costs	617.87
		Fuel (Gas & Paraffin)	76.70
		Other supplies (cooking, cleaning, packing etc.)	87.70
		Accommodation in Hotels etc.	112.33
		Porters and cooks:	
		Porters' wages etc.	486.51
		Cooks' wages etc.	429.12
		Cooks' clothing & kit	364.75
		Porters' and cooks' insurance	40.51
		Total porter and cook costs	1320.89
		Sundry costs in Pakistan	32.18
		Medical costs	33.85
		Money changing costs	25.62
		Report photo production	19.80
		Sundry costs in U.K.	4.89
		Total expenditure	£5517.82

Comments on these accounts

1. Costs in Pakistan converted from rupees to pounds at 93.215, the average rate we got.
2. Tents and climbing equipment are *not* included in these accounts. Members had their own personal gear, and although we all had to replace some items before or after the trip, this varied so much from one member to another, that it would have been unrealistic to try and include it here. Tents and other items of communal gear were loaned to the expedition by the members, apart from three tents loaned by someone else (see Acknowledgements).
3. Members' insurance. All members took out their own comprehensive cover, but did it in different ways depending on their circumstances. The £172 per person shown here is a notional rate, equivalent to the appropriate BMC expedition premium. Some members already had an *annual* policy which covered the trip, others took alternative policies which suited them better for whatever reason.

Acknowledgements

We would like to record our thanks to all people in the UK and Pakistan who helped us in a variety of ways, particularly the following:

Mount Everest Foundation and British Mountaineering Council (Sports Council and National Lottery money) for their generous cash grants.

Edwin Booth of Booths Supermarkets for a food contribution.

Stephen Venables for information.

Wolverhampton Mountaineering Club for the loan of three tents, and the Wolverhampton Municipal Borough Council, who paid for the tents on previous years' trips.

The porters, herdsmen and villagers of Bisil, for making us so welcome.