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British Charakusa Valley 2013 Expedition

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Objective: Link Sar (7041m), Charakusa Valley, Pakistan

Synopsis

Our objective was to make the first ascent of Link Sar in the Charakusa Valley in Pakistan. This year was incredibly hot which did not bode well for the north faces or for acclimatising on lower peaks as they were dangerously falling apart. We acclimatised as best we could but had to turn around on our main objective as Andy was ill.

The Charakusa Valley

The Charakusa Valley is one of the best places to get started in Pakistan.. The granite is splitter and the alpine offerings are vast. The Base Camp is an easy two-day walk from the trail head at Hushe Village which makes it very convenient.

The climbing is very varied and suited to all levels as well as all disciplines. The Base Camp itself is on a huge fluvial plain which makes for very luxury camping. The nights very rarely dip below freezing and in the day time you can lounge about in the sun in a t-shirt. There is even a glacial pool that is freezing cold but very refreshing on a hot day.

The weather is also pretty good as far as expeditions go. On both my trips there I have had a lot of excellent weather windows that I have not had in other places. In addition there are plenty of quick one day hits that can be done as well on 6000m peaks or cragging on a granite wall about 30 mins walk from Base Camp, meaning that even during mixed weather you can still make use of one or two days of sun. Essentially you will be hard pressed to come away from the Charakusa Valley with no climbing under your belt and that makes it very attractive as an expedition destination if you don't have much time or if this is your first trip away.





Map of the Charakusa Valley and the main peaks

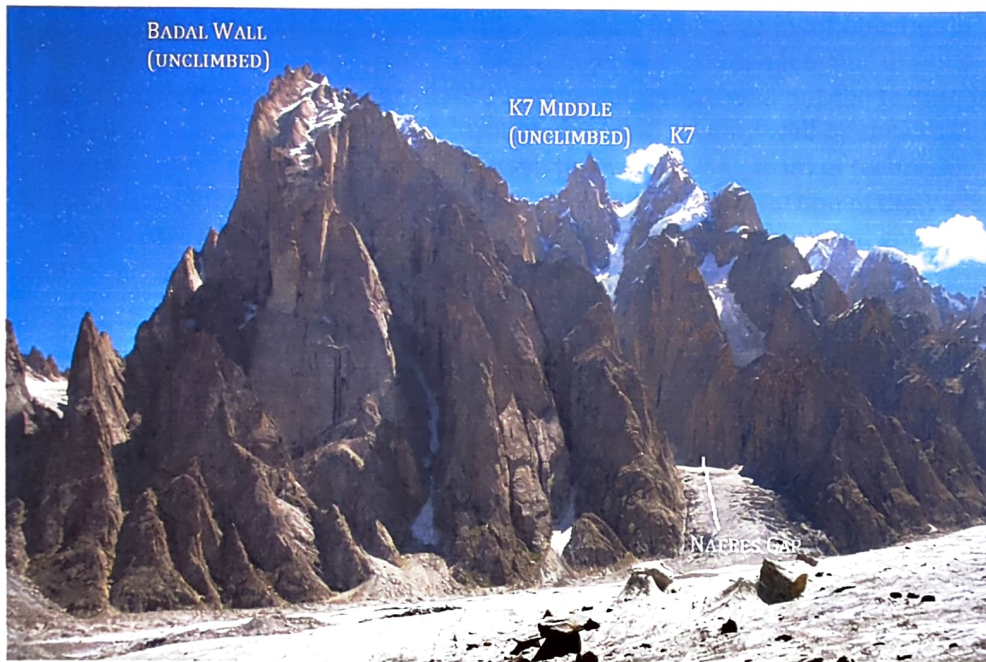
Objectives

There are so many objectives in this valley that I will split them up in to areas. The best times to visit are between July-beginning of September.

K7 (6934m)

K7 has seen the most attention in this area. It is a very Chamonix style mountain and reminds me a lot of the Tacul East Face. The Granite is very good on this side and offers an incredible amount of potential. Even though there are dozens of routes on it already there are still dozens more to go. It is hard to recommend anything in particular but the best thing to do is to Google Image search K7 East Face and you will see for yourself.

Nestled within K7 is a huge granite monolith called Nafees Cap that is definitely worth a look at if you want to climb very steep but clean looking granite. The Favresse brothers, amongst others, have put up lines there. There is a fair bit of useful info on Nafees Cap on the online American Alpine Journal.



The East Side of K7

K6 (7282m)

K6 is the signature mountain of the Charakusa Valley. It stands at the head of the valley and you see it every day, imposing and scary. K6 is terrain for serious alpinists only but it has a fair bit of potential. The North Side (which is in the Charakusa Valley) is very heavily seraced so you must pick a line very cautiously. K6 can be divided in to two peaks for the purposes of the North Face. The main summit and the West Summit. The North Face between the West summit and the Main summit is incredibly active and dangerous. Whilst the face between Hassan peak and the Main Summit is very futuristic and may appear safe from seracs it is not and climbers should definitely stay clear of this.

The NE face of K6 West was climbed this year by Raphael Slawinski and Ian Welstead. Info about their ascent can be found online. Essentially the approach glacier is objectively dangerous and I believe that the route is also threatened by a serac high up.

Nevertheless the line of the Charakusa (for me) is K6 West Integral. It is a huge ridge line with some pretty serious climbing on it. However the route is fickle with regards to objective dangers- in my first year I felt it was justifiable but in my second year the sun had made the face dangerous. You can let your dreams run wild and go for a direct line up through the summit as well but the terrain is steep and snow fluted. The exit out through the cornices may well be the crux of the whole route! It's a route that lends itself to a very strong team of technical and fast climbers- it really is a huge undertaking but I feel is the line of the Valley. But again that is a personal choice, it is a very serious undertaking and you should be ready to change objectives if it does not suit you.



Please Zoom in for more info. The Red line is the NE Face line. The Green line is a guide for the Integral line. It is a very complicated line but it could give a relatively safe passage up this face

Link Sar (7041m)

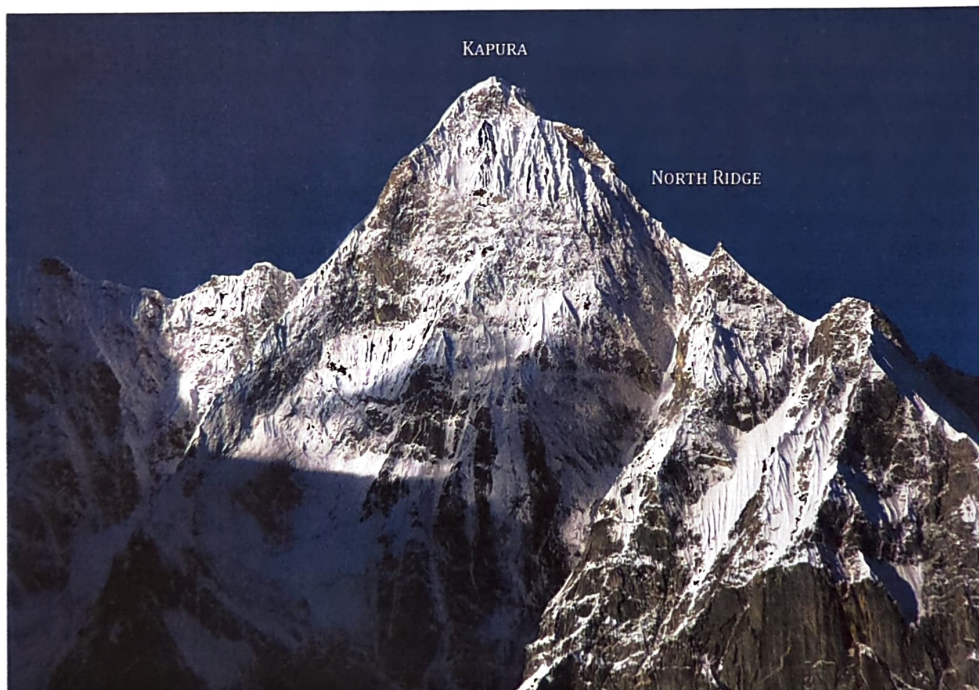
No picture am afraid! Got to keep this project to myself for just one more year!

Link Sar is the only other 7000m peak in the valley. It is still unclimbed but not because of lack of interest. This peak has seen some of the best try to forge a line from all sides but to no avail. I'm not going to reveal too much about Link Sar as it is my objective for 2014 but the real crux of Link Sar is finding a safe way up the mountain. It is a very complicated peak and also incredibly dangerous objectively apart from a couple of lines- but they are not obvious!

Kapura (6544m)

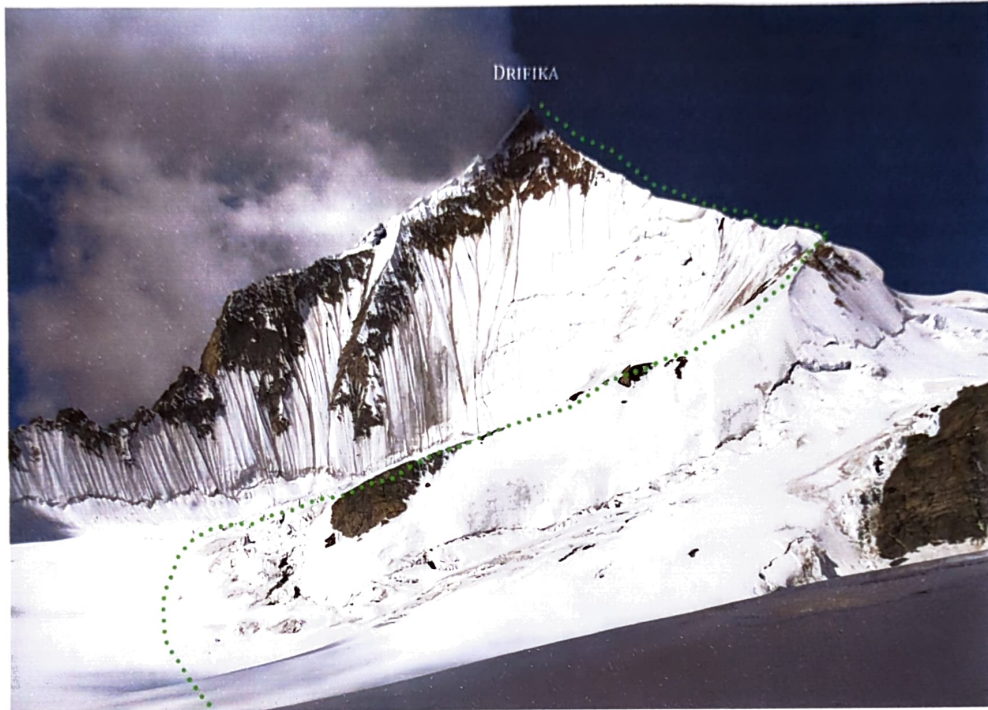
Kapura is a very beautiful looking peak that is joined to K6 and is worth looking in to if you want to do something serious but not overly so. Again I would look towards the American Alpine Journal for further info about this peak. The 'classic', but by no means 'easy', route on it would be the North Ridge route. This takes you to the main summit.

There are other routes to do on its West Face. Marek Holecek put up 'Wild Things' that leads straight to the South Summit. The routes on this side are more technical (As a side note this was the First Ascent of the South Summit, the Portuguese route in 2013 is claimed to be but this is not the case).



Drifika (6455m)

Drifika is a perfectly pyramidal peak at the end of the Charakusa Glacier. It is a long way to get to from Base Camp but the North Ridge provides an excellent alpine objective. The climbing is never hard or too steep and the views are incredible. There are great bivy spots along the way as well that are safe and flat.



Drifika with the North Ridge in green

Acclimatisation peaks

The Charakusa Valley can be hard to acclimatise for big objectives such as K6, K7, Kapura, and Link Sar. The easy peaks are really not that easy- ie they are not snow plodding which is what you want for Himalayan acclimatisation peaks. But there are two popular peaks that you should aim for.

Sulu Peak (approx. 6000m)

Sulu Peak sits right above Base Camp and can be soloed if need be. There is no glacial travel at all and the climbing up the central couloir is very easy and straightforward. To acclimatise I suggest walking up to the base and then climbing the couloir the following morning before it gets too hot. Just to the West of the summit there is a fantastic little flat patch on the ridge that serves as a great bivy spot. The views here are great and you get a lot of sun which is nice when sitting the day out in the tent.



Sulu peak with the very obvious central couloir in the middle

Farol Peak (6350m)

Farol is a bit more complicated than Sulu but it is slightly higher. The approach is longer as is the climb, and you will want a rope for part of it due to snow conditions. Nevertheless I would recommend heading up towards the South Summit for the best bivy spots and for the easiest climb.



Green line is recommended acclimatisation line

Cragging

There is good trad cragging about 30 minutes walk from Base Camp. A pretty vast granite wall called Iqbal Wall- there is plenty of info online about routes.

Bouldering

There are various boulders surrounding Base Camp. Bouldering mat not essential but it would be a shame to break your ankle!

Logistics

Pakistan is probably one of the more serious Himalayan destination you can end up going to. Safety is of course a major issue but I honestly feel that the Charakusa and Baltoro are relatively safe, but this of course is a personal choice. My main advice is DO NOT take the Karakorum Highway. The road itself is safe but the territories that you drive through are not. You may have to wait a few days in either Islamabad or Skardu for a flight between the two but factor that in to your travel days.

Permits must be asked for well in advance. Some peaks are more complicated than others. The Charakusa Valley is in the militarized zone meaning that you will need to have a Liaison Officer with you. Usually they come up with an excuse not to come in to Base Camp (which is fine) but since the Nanga Parbat incident they have to be with you at all times.

Flying in to Islamabad from anywhere in Europe is very easy but be careful for your excess luggage. I highly recommend shipping as much as possible before hand. It is much cheaper and means that you have less to do just before you leave.

There are very few ATM machines in Pakistan but you should have paid the vast majority of your expenses to your travel agent in advance anyway. Nevertheless you MUST bring tips with you- these are very important. For the Charakusa Valley you should tip anywhere between \$3-\$5 per porter each way. Ask your travel agent how many porters you will have. You will also have two cooks with you and you should tip them about \$200-\$300 each for the whole stay.

You are not expected to provide anyone with equipment. Your L.O is paid \$1000 for his equipment purchases. He will naturally keep the money and not buy anything, but it is not then up to you to lend him stuff if you have already paid him.

Tourist infrastructure is very poor in Pakistan, but that is all part of the experience. Bring your own medicine and everything else you need with you. Don't expect to be able to buy anything you will want out there. Anything electronics related should be brought with you. All mountain food as well. It is very different to Nepal.

You can buy Coleman gas in Skardu but I don't trust it. I think it is mainly refilled canisters. In the future I would see about shipping it out from Europe. A bit complicated as it's a flammable liquid but there's nothing worse than getting short changed on gas quality and only finding out at 6500m!

Pakistan is a dry country. They do not mind you drinking but you cannot buy alcohol out there. If you want something for Base Camp then wrap it up well and bring it from home. You cannot carry alcohol on board internal flights either- it has to go as check in.

Costs for expedition depends hugely on you as a person and on what you want to climb. I will not break down costs because if you are serious about going then it only takes 5 minutes to work out a total price. I highly recommend Blue Sky Treks and Tours as your travel agent. Feel free to drop them an email with all your queries and they will give you a quote asap as well as guide you through everything you need to do and know about permits etc.

<http://www.bluskytours.com>