

Climbs in the Cirque of the Ibex, Nuristan

JEFF DOZIER

ALTHOUGH all of the major summits in Nuristan have been ascended by at least one route, there still remain many peaks in the 17,000- to 18,000-foot range that have not yet been attempted. And there are also some truly formidable faces. My most vivid memories from four previous expeditions had been the veritable sea of climbs that one could see from the high summits and ridges. In Nuristan, where the main crest of the Hindu Kush bends to the south, the range is very broad, and even from the summits one cannot see any edge or end to the mountains. Very few of the peaks look easy.

In 1968 we climbed the east face of Koh-i-Tundy Shagai Sha (20,082 feet).¹ On the last leg of the approach, up the Suingal Valley, we caught restricted and intriguing glimpses of light-colored rock walls on the east side of the canyon. Once we were up on Koh-i-Tundy itself, we looked back to the east across the valley and up into a cirque backed by five large towers. "It looks like granite!" we thought. Once on the summit ridge of Koh-i-Tundy we had a great view of another peak, this time to the west, the immense south side of Koh-i-Mondi (20,453 feet).

In 1974 Dennis Hennek and I organized an expedition which included Ken Boche, Mike Cohen, Joe McKeown, Russ McLean, and my father and uncle, Jack and Bill Dozier. Among other ambitious plans, we hoped to climb Koh-i-Mondi and visit the cirque above the Suingal, in which the 1972 Cambridge Hindu Kush Expedition had made ascents of two of the towers.² In mid-July we drove from Kabul to Jalalabad, thence up the Kunar and Bashgal Rivers to a road washout only three miles below Barg-i-Matal, the normal end of the road. We were accompanied by Noor Mohammed, former *malik* of the village of Luluk in the Shkurigal. Noor had become one of our best friends on our 1970 expedition to Koh-i-Marchech,³ and he had worked in Kabul and learned English since then. In Luluk we were treated with warm hospitality. Six rugs, the entire village supply, were spread out in the grass for us, and each evening we feasted on chicken and huge mounds of rice.

We cached most of our food in Luluk and crossed over the Toluksa Pass (marked Kotal Parshui on Wolfgang Frey's maps) into the upper reaches of the Parshui Valley, a tributary of the Munjan. This put us below the south side of Koh-i-Mondi.

¹ *A.A.J.*, 1969, 43: 330-334.

² *A.A.J.*, 1973, 47: 501.

³ *A.A.J.*, 1971, 45: 463-464.

Bill, weakened from the crossing of the pass, became quite ill, and he, Jack and Joe decided not to participate in the climb. They hiked down the Parshui and crossed into the Pech, and then made their way back to Kabul. Meanwhile the rest of us went steadily up the mountain, which turned out not to be very steep. We eventually reached the east ridge about 1200 feet below the summit, but there we ran into snow conditions that robbed us of our energy and our will. On August 1 we made a summit attempt. Ken was sick and remained at our highest camp, while Dennis, Mike, Russ and I started up, sinking occasionally to our chests in the snow, which sloped to 50° in one section. Russ also became exhausted and dropped out, and Dennis, Mike and I reached a spot only 300 feet below the summit before we too gave in. It is a hard decision to explain now, especially to ourselves, but up there we made it very easily.

After this rather disappointing performance we crossed back over the Toluksa, retrieved the remainder of our supplies from Luluk, and established a base camp in the Suingal. After resting and reading for a few days, we made a six-day foray from the camp in which we climbed the east face of Koh-i-Tundy and the west ridge of Koh-i-Parshui (19,718 feet).

Then we turned our attention to the Cirque of the Ibex, as we named it because of the large number of tracks there. It apparently serves as a winter refuge for these elusive animals. Amidst the large blocks composing the moraines below the glacier in the floor of the cirque, we found one small flat area of soft dirt, and on it we pitched a comfortable camp. Five towers rose above up to about 17,000 feet, and these were bordered on both ends by smaller peaks. They were indeed composed of granite. We knew that the Cambridge group had climbed here, but we had neglected to bring their expedition report with us, so we knew not which peaks.

On August 19 Ken Boche and Russ McLean, carrying their EB's, a rope and a selection of nuts, ventured onto the south ridge of the second tower from the north, while Dennis Hennek, Mike Cohen and I went up the couloir between the third and fourth towers. "Xera Noodle Gully" we called it, after the Afghan spice that added zest to our diet, according to Dennis, who dumped large quantities into whatever he was cooking, particularly noodles. We had a late start, and the black ice in the lower two-thirds of the couloir shattered badly when struck with either axe or front points. After 10 pitches, we reached the top of the couloir, but it was four P.M. and we decided to descend and get an earlier start on the following day rather than attempt one of the two summits now accessible to us. We descended to camp and waited anxiously for Russ and Ken, who returned after dark in good spirits with reports of an enjoyable climb, including two pitches of F8. The summit was apparently virgin, and we named it the Suingal Tower.



PLATE 30

Photo by Dennis Hernek

The sunlit Peaks of the Cirque of the
Ibex are from left to right Wake-End
Fin, Suingal Tower, Koh-i-Canine, Horn
of the Ibex and an unnamed peak.

The next morning Dennis and I returned to Xera Noodle Gully, and with only two on the rope we moved rapidly, reaching the top of the couloir at 11:30 A.M. We first turned our attention to the summit on our left (north), which we reached after three moderate, enjoyable pitches. There we found a small pile of rocks and an indisputably British remnant, an 11mm perlon runner about 6 feet in circumference. The British had called this peak "Koh-i-Canine." After a quick lunch we descended to the couloir and then climbed one long pitch to a ridge on the tower to the south, whence we scrambled to the summit. We named it the Horn of the Ibex. Our descent involved some wet, gritty rappels down the couloir, but we were back in camp in time for the sunset.

On the following day Mike convinced me to go with him to the northernmost of the major towers. We climbed it by the west arête, which involved three roped pitches, the first up an appealing but awkward leftward leaning crack that Mike led with exuberant ease. After rolling boulders down toward the camp and its cheering occupants, we descended, and arrived in time for Mike to finish *Finnegans Wake*, on which he had labored for the entire trip. We could not deny him the choice of the climb's name—Wake-End Fin.

The southernmost of the towers in the Cirque of the Ibex has not yet been climbed, and routes on the faces there are certainly feasible. But the routes in this cirque represent only a sample of a wealth of enjoyable climbing in the Hindu Kush, as climbers, with a new sense of exploration, turn their attention away from the landmark peaks and search for the hidden treasures.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Hindu Kush, Nuristan, Afghanistan.

ASCENTS: Koh-i-Tundy Shagai Sha, 20,082 feet, fourth ascent, via second ascent of east face, August 12, 1974 (Boche, Cohen, Dozier, Hennek).

Koh-i-Parshui, 19,718 feet, third ascent, via west ridge, August 14, 1974 (Boche, Dozier, Hennek).

Suingal Tower, 17,050 feet (estimated), first ascent, via south ridge, August 19, 1974 (Boche, McLean).

Koh-i-Canine, 17,000 feet (altimeter), second ascent, via west-facing couloir and south ridge, August 20, 1974 (Dozier, Hennek).

Horn of the Ibex, 17,000 feet (altimeter), first ascent, via west-facing couloir and northeast ridge, August 20, 1974 (Dozier, Hennek).

Wake-End-Fin, 16,800 feet (estimated), first or second ascent (this may be the Koh-i-Molar of the Cambridge expedition), via first ascent of west arête, August 21, 1974 (Cohen, Dozier).

PERSONNEL: Jeff Dozier, Dennis Hennek, *leaders*; Ken Boche, Mike Cohen, Bill Dozier, Jack Dozier, Joe McKeown, Russ McLean.