

Kayaking and Climbing in the Karakoram

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THE KARAKORAM RANGE can be thought of as the edge of the Asian continental plate uplifted by the Indian subcontinent sliding underneath. While the Himalaya is composed of the sedimentary surface layers scraped up as the Indian tectonic plate is forced down, the Karakoram is the granitic core of the Asian plate. Dry, distant from the sea and lacking a true monsoon, the Karakoram is 400 miles northwest of Nepal. Cold winters and vast expanses of high-altitude terrain have created huge glaciers. Superb red granite, carved into monolithic spires by grinding rivers of ice, is a compelling vision. No less compelling for me was the vision of giant, raging red-brown and freezing cold rivers, roaring from glacier snouts.

On both sides of the upper Biafo ("chicken" in Balti as its snout looks like a cockscomb) Glacier is the greatest collection of granite spires in the entire Karakoram, to quote Galen Rowell in the 1981 *AAJ*. The Braldu ("canyon" in Balti) River is fed by the Biafo, half-way down its length, and Baltoro Glaciers and is well known to those making the approach to the big peaks of the Baltoro. Unable to decide between climbing and river-running, I planned an expedition which would include both.

The success of our attempt to run the Braldu, we knew, depended completely on our arriving before temperatures rose and water volume increased abruptly sometime in May. We drove ourselves close to exhaustion from our arrival in Pakistan, almost frantically rushing to get to the river. Eight days after arriving in Pakistan, after having hiked the initial day's stage up from Dasso, we put in at a flow of about one thousand cubic feet per second (1000 cfs). The winter had been a dry one, and recent weather was cool and overcast. At this water level, the river was technically very demanding, and the rapids were complex mazes of steep, twisting, blind drops through large, jumbled boulders. But there *were* defined drops with pools separating them, and though the gradient averaged sixty feet per mile (and was as high as ninety) it *was* possible to stop, scout, and (on nine occasions) portage. The carries came to less than half a mile out of about fifty overall, or about 1%; a far cry from what had confronted the ill-fated 1978 British team led by Dr. Mike Jones. Making the mistake of attempting the Braldu at peak flow in August, Jones was swept away and drowned saving the life of a teammate and was never seen again, though frag-

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

**Andy Embick in the Chokpo-Chongo
Gorge of the Braldu River.**



ments of his boat—and a month later his helmet and a shoe—were eventually recovered. Mick Hopkinson, the strongest member of the 1978 team, had estimated to me that no more than 5% of the Braldu was runnable, and had been vehemently negative about our chances.

With Balti porters eager and willing (for fifty rupees a day, about four dollars) to carry our kayaks upstream (or alternately, our gear and clothes downstream), we could hike with light loads and paddle empty boats. With a trail, albeit rough, along the river and, for its lower half, villages spaced a walking stage apart, we could run the river in a novel but necessary way: from the bottom up. Our most severe test would come in the Chokpo-Chongo Gorge, the fifth of six walking stages from the river's origin to its end. To be sure of completing this notorious section at low water, we planned to run the lower river below Askole first, then trek upstream again to run the upper half. We were thus obligated to walk twice as far (100 miles in all), but we also reduced as best we could the risk of being unable to run the river, either the upper half being too shallow above the inflow from the Biafo Glacier, or the constricted lower half being too violent. The plan would also permit Galen Rowell to photograph us from the bank, getting far more and better shots than we could ever hope to get from river level.

The plan worked perfectly, to my considerable personal satisfaction and great relief as its originator and promoter. The kayakers (Kathy Blau, Rob Lesser, Bob McDougall, Bo Shelby and I) ran first the lowest of the six stages, Chokpo to Dasso. Then, stages four and five, Askole to Chongo and the crux, Chongo to Chokpo, with Galen pounding the trail to keep up with us, at times being forced to climb and descend hundreds of feet of elevation where rock buttresses closed in on the river. We made use of the log bridges still in place from winter and criss-crossed from bank to bank. With just a dozen porters of the original 73 we had started with, a select group kept on after we had gotten all the loads to Askole, we had no organizational problems at all, our devoted group charging headlong down the trail to keep up or waiting patiently while we scouted. There was no hint of the resentment and distrust toward outsiders which some expeditions to Baltistan had encountered just ten years ago. Our rugged, cheerful group was as proud of us for our (to them) astounding feat of kayaking the Braldu as we were pleased with their helping set up our tents, their carrying the awkward boats, up to thirteen feet long, and their solicitousness about our welfare. Rather than supply clothing and food as had been usual in the past, we simply negotiated extra payment and they used their own rubber shoes and brought their own food, mainly atta, ghee and salt for chapattis, and sweet milky tea.

The most spectacular kayaking photographs may be those Galen took dangling on a rope down inside the famed narrows of the Braldu. Cut deep down through sculpted granite, the entire river flows through a rock cleft almost narrow enough to jump across. Running one at a time, we even stopped in eerie swirling cave-like eddies sixty feet below the surface before emerging into daylight again.



PLATE 25

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

**Kayakers leaving the Narrows of the
Braldu River.**

Spending time in the villages of the Braldu Valley, we were able to visit with villagers in their homes, and learn the oral history of the area's settlement over the Hispar La from Nagar in Hunza, some 400 years before. We tried to understand both the archaic Tibetan roots of the Balti tongue and the current Shiite Moslem influence of the Ayatollah Khomeini, whose baleful visage adorned the carved planks of the tiny mosque in Askole. Our willingness to provide free medical care for villagers (all of our left-over medical supplies being donated to the hospital at Skardu) and the presence of two female expedition members, Kathy Blau and Barbara Rowell, as well as Galen's renown in the region, all contributed to the warm reception we received and our thorough introduction to village life.

The completion by the kayakers of the river section below Askole coincided with the arrival of Jack Tackle and Gray Thompson, who were eager to climb. The paddlers headed up the river with ten porters, past Payu to the Baltoro Glacier's snout at 11,225 feet where the Braldu emerges from the black hole in the ice. Altitude, exertion and heat combined to force Rob Lesser to recover for a day from dehydration but permitted the others to hike on the lower Baltoro Glacier. I was, however, feeling urgently compelled to complete the run of the Braldu quickly and reach Base Camp to join the climbers. So my two trusty porters, Hussein Shah and Abdul Khaliq, shouldered loads at seven A.M. on May 24 and headed down from Payu at the same time as I headed up, a third porter carrying my orange Dancer, the last mile to the highest put-in. Solo, I then turned around and paddled the Braldu for 25 miles that day to Askole, rendezvousing with Hussein and Abdul once at Bardumal halfway down what was a triple stage for them and a seven-hour marathon for me. In places shallow and braided, in others very steep and rocky, the Braldu at one point essentially disappeared underneath huge boulders, compelling another portage.

The others followed the next day, taking two days to Askole and feeling the increasingly pushy character of the river as temperatures climbed to the 100° mark and water levels rose. Rob Lesser and Bob McDougall on reaching Askole continued downstream, running (this time at a marginal and very exciting 3500 cfs) the entire lower Braldu again. Where we had initially spent long periods scouting especially complex rapids, Rob and Bob ran on sight and after what was for them the trip's high point, returned to the U.S. Because on our low-water run technical difficulty reached V + , there doesn't seem much doubt that the Braldu by any definition can be considered a "Class VI" river. Though we avoided innumerable potential and dangerous pins, the rocky stream bed took its toll in the form of two broken paddle blades (for Rob) and once an entire paddle jerked out of Bob's hands (though he proceeded to demonstrate his virtuosity by hands-rolling up and then reaching shore). Tough, plastic boats were a major key to our success, roto-molded of cross-linked polyethylene plastic from Phillips Chemical.

The same hot weather which began to render the Braldu unrunnable simultaneously made our climbing objectives possible. On May 29 after sitting out a seven-day storm, the climbers began to move. Base Camp had been situated on

the east side of the Biafo Glacier a few miles up from the Baintha Glacier, at 13,500 feet. Galen, along with Rob Milne, Jack Tackle, and Gray Thompson, located the same strikingly steep and dramatically beautiful red granite tower he had photographed during his 1980 winter Karakoram ski traverse, and which we had selected as our prime climbing objective from those photographs. Rising directly from the glacier, its base at 14,000 feet and summit at 17,650 feet, the spire had never previously been climbed or even attempted, though later we were to learn from our veteran sirdar, shikara (hunter) Haji Ali, the peak was called "Lukpilla Brakk" (*Brakk* being Balti for rock tower).

Though I assisted carrying loads to the base, five climbers would have been too many, so I wished the other four well and began instructing an apt (and *very* fit) Balti porter, Ghulam Mahdi, in technical rock climbing on boulders near Base Camp.

Rowell describes the climb:

In four-and-a-half days of perfect weather (out of a six-day clear spell) the team climbed and descended 34 rock pitches up to 5.10 in difficulty, alternately leading and hauling in teams of two. With the lead team always wearing rock shoes, it was possible to climb the entire route free except for two points of aid on the overhanging summit block. Even sections of snow and ice on the final day didn't negate the advantage of smooth soled shoes. The climbing pace was more that of an American wall climb than the laborious siege normally experienced on steep routes in the Himalaya.

Caching gear at the first bivouac site to save wight, we were able to make rapid progress on the upper face, sometimes climbing in tee shirts in the midday sun. On the afternoon of June 2 we summited on an absolutely clear, still day. All proclaimed the summit view the most breathtaking ever with a 360° panorama of the Ogre, the Latok peaks, Snow Lake, Hispar La, the Biafo Glacier, and enough unclimbed rock peaks to keep a few future generations satisfied.

We did not carry bivy gear on the summit day and barely managed to rappel to the previous night's ledge by dark. Another full day of rappelling brought us back down the climbing route, where we picked up tents, boots, and extra food left at the first bivouac. Clouds moved in and a few snowflakes fell before the team returned to Base Camp after sunset.

Embick continues:

In the meantime, Bo Shelby and Kathy Blau arrived at Base. Bo, Ghulam and I attempted a route on the 19,000-foot peak behind camp, but the discovery of a huge, threatening cornice high up forced a retreat from 15,600 feet.

There was no lack of other climbing objectives on the Biafo, but now after successes on both the river and climb, the pressure was off. Our momentum now carried us into smaller groups with multiple objectives. Kathy, Bo, Jack Tackle and Gray Thompson trekked 120 miles, without porters, over the Hispar La (16,900 feet) and down to Nagar, reaching Hunza. Galen and Barbara stalked wildlife in the form of bear tracks, herds of ibex, and the fresh skin of a young

PLATE 26

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

LUKPILLA BRAKK. The Route follows the Right Skyline.



snow leopard clubbed to death by villagers. In meetings with district and regional officials, Galen investigated what appears to be the failure of Pakistan to adequately protect its large mammals, primarily from village poachers. As a result, World Wildlife Fund is working with Pakistani officials to help solve the problem.

Leaving Base Camp early as runner to send up porters, I descended to Askole and a convivial brunch with the hereditary chief or "lambardar" Haji Madi as well as Reinhold Messner and Hans Kammerlander, who were headed for a traverse of Gasherbrums I and II.

The Braldu had by now, in the second week of June, become more than what is normally known as a river, rather an awesome natural force unleashed, with nightmarish power and violence. Its flow had multiplied 25 times and the truck-size boulders which we had paddled around were themselves rolling down the river's bed. Bridges, except for a swinging vine rope *jhola*, were gone as well as was all semblance of being kayakable or survivable. This was the Braldu we had been warned of, with 20 Susitna-sized rapids per mile and five *worse*. As brown as Karakoram rock and as cold as glacial ice, the Braldu River was the embodiment of death immediate and irrevocable. Now for the fourth time I traveled the Braldu Gorge: hiking, not kayaking. Only at Chokpo did the gradient begin to decrease and permit tentative, brief and very nervous kayaking along the bank, high-velocity seconds of terror punctuated by tedious and fatiguing scouting and portaging in 90°+ weather in a wetsuit.

Once, standing awed on the bank, I watched an entire rapid move fifty yards downstream and felt through the earth the reverberation of the rolling boulders. To venture, even briefly, out into the probably 30-mph current was to court instant disaster—which I courted—and narrowly escaped.

American expeditions (and Aleister Crowley) in the past made use of *zahks*, rafts of inflated goatskins, to descend from Dasso to Skardu, where the Shigar, formed by the Braldu and Basra Rivers, joins the Indus. I kayaked the braided though fast Shigar 47 miles through a wide, mountain-rimmed valley where emerald terraced fields rose steeply up hillsides toward any available water sources. Villages were perched below nalas bearing snowmelt from high above, the apricots were beginning to ripen, and dust storms alternated with sunshine. In the river, huge symmetrical sand waves provided sublime kayak surfing.

A quick jeep ride up to Khapalu while waiting for the Base Camp group to arrive permitted my solo first descent of the Shyok River's 45 miles. The four portages were made easier by the eagerness of villagers to help carry my boat. Much of it was enjoyable Class IV kayaking. From Gol, the Shyok-Indus confluence, I sneaked 25 miles of the huge (100,000 cfs) Indus (in two hours) as it rolled out of Tibet toward its encounter with the Rondou Gorges.

We rendezvoused in Karimabad, capital of Hunza. Luckily, Jack Tackle didn't come down with malaria until completing his trek. Just as luckily, I had my tropical-medicine notes and a supply of chloroquine. Jack was weak but clearly improving a couple of days later, and the Hunza River had looked to me on the 70-mile jeep ride from Gilgit to be pleasant Class IV. But the clear air and

the size of neighboring peaks, like 25,550-foot Rakaposhi, make errors of scale inevitable, as Bo Shelby and I discovered. Though of continuous gradient rather than pool-drop, the 30,000 cfs of the Hunza *did* drop 30 feet per mile. We didn't feel completely in control in water of that awesome power and speed, and great care was required to avoid being pushed into gigantic holes by powerful breaking diagonal waves. However, 100° air temperatures did help make possible this first run of the glacial Hunza at high water.

On our return to Islamabad, at a relatively painless debriefing at the Tourism Ministry, we were given an opportunity to congratulate the Pakistanis for the superb job they have done in streamlining expedition regulations and removing various hurdles. We did indicate, however, that more timely responses by the Pakistanis to permit requests would be most helpful for those planning expeditions in the future.

Attempts at peaks under 6000 meters (19,685 feet) may be made without a liaison officer, peak fee or expedition permit. Some, in "closed" areas such as the Baltoro, require a trekking permit and mountain guide (obtainable after arrival in Pakistan). Others, such as on the Biafo, require neither. A passport, a visa, a plane ticket, clearing customs and registering with the police on arrival are the only bureaucratic hurdles and if a travel service is used, then almost all possible logistic problems are avoided.

Pakistan is entering the modern era, and nowhere is modernization more evident than in Baltistan, and to no one more readily than Galen, whose visits span the decade the area has been open to expeditions. Easier access has gone hand in hand with the proliferation of shops and vehicles in Skardu. Not yet catering to tourists, trekkers and climbers to the degree of Nepal, but rapidly moving in that direction, Baltistan is making the transition from a xenophobic mountain kingdom to a superalpine playground.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Karakoram, Pakistan.

FIRST ASCENT: Lukpilla Brakk, 5380 meters, 17,650 feet, summit reached June 2, 1984, VI, 5.10, A1 (Milne, G. Rowell, Tackle, Thompson).

RIVER DESCENTS: Braldu (V + /VI—) (Blau, Embick, Lesser, McDougall, Shelby); Shigar (III), Shyok (Khapalu to Gol) (IV +), Indus (Gol to Skardu) (V) (Embick); Hunza (Ganesh Bridge to Gilgit) (V +) (Embick and Shelby).

PERSONNEL: Andrew Embick, *leader*, Kathy Blau, Rob Lesser, Bob McDougall, Rob Milne, Barbara Rowell, Galen Rowell, Bo Shelby, Jack Tackle, Gray Thompson, *Americans*; Navy Lieutenant Hamid Khawaja, Pervez Khan, *Pakistanis*.