

Glacier side by an avalanche and were obliged to return to CIII. On July 28, Ajisaka ordered the retreat, and they started the descent, having reached a high point of 6780 meters. On August 2, they completed their climbing activity and gathered at BC.

After a week's stay at BC (on August 9), two of the camel herders arrived to report the inaccessibility by camel to BC due to the rising of the Shaksgam. (Two of their 35 camels had drowned in the flooded Shaksgam.) On August 10-11, the team transported equipment to the so-called American Base Camp with the assistance of nine camel herders. It was only on August 14 that they were at last able to start their return caravan. They reached the Mazar Dara on August 20.

TAKASHI MATSUDA, *Rikkyo University, Japan*

*Lao Ding Shan and Mt. Desio, First Ascents, and Exploration of the Chinese Karakoram.* It was an article by Kurt Diemberger in the 1995 volume of this journal that first inspired me to organize an expedition to the Chinese Karakoram. When I called the "Berg Fuehrer" himself to ask for information about the region, I couldn't believe my luck when Kurt wanted to join the expedition, which he promptly did. Around us gelled a team of Himalayan veterans including Dan Mazur, Greg Child, Chris Breemer, Andrew Brash, field technician Mark Dwyer and Nepalis Phurba Tamang, Kaji Tamang and Krishna XX. On April 9, we left for China with the considerable backing of Quokka.com, who would cover the expedition on a daily basis on their website.

After 3,500 miles of driving from Beijing to Mazar, six more days of walking with our caravan of 40 camels brought us to Base Camp on May 2, 1999. BC was situated in the Shaksgam Valley near the snout of the North Gasherbrum Glacier. This is an ideal base of operations for exploring this area as there is water and the spot is quite safe. However, camp must be placed on the north side of the glacier; otherwise, you stand a chance of being marooned when the Shaksgam River rises and floods the narrow gap between the glacier's snout and the opposite wall of the main valley. While the half-mile-wide Shaksgam River dries up almost completely every year (and wasn't there at all on our way in), the car-sized icebergs, torn from the North Gasherbrum Glacier and left strewn for miles along the riverbed, are a clear indication of the force the river can deliver when in flood.

From BC, we set out for our objectives, which were, in no particular order: to make a reconnaissance of the east face of Hidden Peak, to explore as far up the Shaksgam Valley as possible and to climb as many peaks as we were able. With the help of the camel drivers, we began by laying strategic food and gear depots in the Skyang Valley and on the south side of the North Gasherbrum Glacier.

The camel drivers are loath to go up the Shaksgam past the North Gasherbrum Glacier because of the danger of being trapped by a sudden flood. However, after cajoling them to help us, we headed en mass up the valley for approximately 35 kilometers to a point at which the Singhi Glacier flows across it and blocks further travel. We set up an Advanced Base Camp at the foot of the Shinghi's 80-meter ice towers. On the first day out from the Singhi camp, six members of the team, including Greg, Mark, Andrew, Phurba, Kaji and Dan, tried to climb a training peak. It is visible on the Russian maps of the area as the 5500-meter, ridge-shaped peak directly above the Shinghi camp. The climb was mostly moderate scrambling; the team, exhausted and unacclimatized, turned around just under the summit. The weather was stunningly clear and the team was able to make extensive photographs of Teram Kangri, the Singhi Glacier and the Shaksgam valley. Greg christened the peak "Mount Beckwith." From



*Dan Mazur above the Ramadan Glacier with "Lao Ding Shan" on the left. He and Andrew Brash made the first ascent of the peak two days after the photo was taken. ANDREW BRASH*

this mountain, Andrew and Dan were able to get a clear view of their ascent line on the mountain they later named "Lao Ding Shan," after the Chinese staff's nickname for Kurt.

The following day we split into three parties: Kurt, Greg, Mark and the Tamang boys left to try to become the first since the Visser party in 1935 to see the Shaksgam beyond the Singhi Glacier barrier. Breemer and I set out on an ill-fated mission to make an end-run around the Singhi via a pass we were uncertain actually existed. Brash and Mazur, acting sensibly as usual, opted to attempt one of the many fine unclimbed peaks they'd seen from their practice climb, budgeting three days for the task.

After three days of searching, Kurt et al managed to find a passage through the towers. Kurt had tried this route 11 years before and there were tears in his eyes upon reaching yet another goal in a range so rich in his personal history. Ultimately, the team traveled as far as the next major barrier, the Kyagar Glacier, which also completely blocks the Shaksgam Valley. There they found that the lake formed by Kyagar Dam, which we'd seen in a satellite photo from the year before, was completely gone.

After threading our way up a dangerous gorge, Chris and I located our pass, which turned out to be very close to the source of the Zug Shaksgam River. We decided that the avalanche conditions were too dangerous to cross it, not to mention our uncertainty over whether or not we would have enough food to retrace our steps back over it should our companions, with whom we were out of contact, fail to find us a way back to ABC through the Shinghi. Krishna was thrilled, suggesting that the pass be named "Shoe Leather Pass" as it reminded him of one near his village so named for what those who try to cross it generally end up eating along the way.

Andrew and Dan bit off a bit more than they expected, fighting for six days through chest-deep snow to make the first ascent of Lao Ding Shan (6200m). While the climbing

was not terribly difficult, this was a huge achievement given the totally remote location of this mountain.

Everyone headed back to BC at various times, repacked and set off for another round of exploring. Breemer and I headed up the Urdok Glacier to scope the east side of Hidden Peak. We picked up food from our earlier cache and after two days of walking and scrambling, we could finally see the east ridge. Given its size, location and appearance, it is the most impressive feature I have ever seen in the Himalaya. It rises roughly 10,000 feet and is incredibly steep. At one-third height, a horizontal section of wildly corniced gendarmes stretches for roughly a kilometer. It was this feature that stopped the only attempt on this face, by the Japanese in 1991, dead in its tracks. We left what is surely one of the "Last Great Problems" and headed further up the Urdok.

The goal was to try to be the first to reach the Indira Col from China. Unfortunately, snow conditions were terrible and stopped us as they had Younghusband and Desio decades before. Instead we opted for a small nunatak peak at the head of the Urdok. We climbed it the following day and named it Mt. Desio (5700m) for the pioneering explorer of the Duke of Spoleto's 1929 Karakoram Expedition. At the time, we assumed Desio was long dead.

Just before we returned to BC a second time, Kurt and his team headed up the North Gasherbrum Glacier to have a look at some nearby peaks and Dan and Andrew went up the Skyang Glacier to explore Skyang Kangri as a possible objective. Unfortunately, storms soon pushed both parties back to BC, where we were all reunited after more than two weeks apart. In typical Karakoram fashion, the weather never really improved and snow fell for the next nine days, during which we had the worst scare of the trip. Greg, who has previously climbed both Everest and K2 without oxygen, suddenly became seriously ill with what our doctor diagnosed (via sat phone) as either a stroke or HACE. Keeping Greg in the Gamov bag for an entire day improved his condition dramatically, though the episode got everyone thinking about wrapping things up. Fortunately, the camels arrived a few days later with the surprising news that the river was still just a trickle. This made for a nicely uneventful start to the long journey home.

As a footnote to the trip, I discovered in a discussion with Kurt that Professor Desio was in fact still alive at 102 and living in Rome. Via e-mail from BC, we arranged to go there and meet him after the trip. Still totally sharp in his second century, Desio reminded us of just how magic the Chinese Karakoram is. Three-quarters of a century had passed between our respective expeditions and unlike so many other mountains areas, nothing has changed there. The entire trip can be seen in exhaustive detail by looking for the First Ascent Expedition on [www.quokka.com](http://www.quokka.com).

JOHN CLIMACO

## GONGKA MOUNTAINS

*Mt. Reddomain, First Ascent.* Not a few virgin 6000-meter peaks still remain in Sichuan, China. One photograph, taken by a Japanese trekker in 1998, attracted our interest. Reddomain (6112m) rises fifteen kilometers north of Mt. Gongka Shan. The first introduction of Reddomain was in *National Geographic Magazine* in 1930. In the 70 years since, however, nobody had tried to climb this beautiful mountain. In May, we began to gather information on Reddomain and also commenced negotiating for climbing permission with the Chinese Mountaineering Association through Sichuan Adventure Travel. We got the permission in July and started preparing for our expedition.