

KASHMIR

Shafat Valley, first ascent of Kova Peak and Gulmatonga Tower. The Curbatts (the Crows) are a close-knit group of alpinists from Menaggio on Lake Como, Italy. In 2002 they planned to attempt a big granite wall on an unclimbed 5,500m peak in a side valley off Zanskar's Shafat Valley, the latter leading to the Kun Glacier. However, a combination of events thwarted this attempt. First, the airline lost their baggage and they were delayed 10 days in India before it eventually arrived. Then, the Indian army and the public safety officials



Unclimbed walls near Kova Peak. *Maurizio Orsi*

wouldn't allow entry to the valley. The mountain could only be photographed from a distance and all plans for climbing it had to be postponed. With time now at a premium the group had to make do with a much smaller peak of ca 4,600m, which they christened the Gulmatonga Tower. On this, they put up *Waiting for Militants*, a 1,000m-high rock climb with technical difficulties of VII+ and an overall grade of ED1.

In the summer of 2003 eight of us left Italy for Delhi, where this time we were able to obtain permission for the expedition from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. From there, we flew to Kashmir with our liaison officer. Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, is a like a decadent Venice. It has paid the price of political and military tension. Despite its beauty, it has been deserted by tourists for years.

Two days' bus travel brought us to the entrance of the Shafat valley, where we continued on foot, accompanied by a caravan of horses. We reached a site for base camp at 4,050 meters. The Kun Glacier was only a little further on and the 6,930m Pinnacle Peak, first climbed by the Bullock-Workmans in 1906, hovered above our heads. The Indian military was a constant presence (at times a bit cumbersome) during our stay, even though there were no apparent signs of great danger.

From base camp we continued up a large but yet unnamed lateral valley (which we affectionately nicknamed Dream Valley), traversed by an impetuous mountain stream, and closed by a huge granite wall. Between these, 5,500m Kova Peak (Kova means Crow in Hindi) formed an elegant and perfect cone. We set up Camp 1 on the highest meadow below boulders at ca 4,500m and spent a couple of days ferrying climbing gear from base camp and then upward to the foot of the wall.

Once we found a possible line, we needed eight days climbing to reach the summit. The most logical route took the southeast ridge, which we called *The Flight of the Crows*, in honor

not only of its first climbers, the Curbatts, but also the large black crows, which are the only real inhabitants of the wall.

The first two-thirds of the route were fixed. Halfway up the ridge at 5,100m, a large ledge nicknamed "the coffee pot" provided a comfortable bivouac. The weather proved very changeable, sometimes turning more than once during the day. Snow and wind would beat our faces and cover the fixed ropes with ice, making it necessary on occasions to scrape them clean in order to jumal.

The route was made up of a series of slabs, corners, and long cracks for a length of about 1,350m, and rose for a vertical height of almost 1,000m. There were a total of 29 pitches with a sustained level of difficulty from V+ to VII-. The rock was a magnificent compact granite and almost always easy to protect with nuts and cams. On the whole we used few pitons and not more than a couple of bolts for protection, although all of the belays were hand bolted. The summit was reached on August 18 by three team members, but more of us followed on subsequent days.

After the climb we used our remaining days to bring down gear, trying to leave as little trace as possible of our passage on the climb and at Camp 1. Those who still had energy to spend finished exploring the Dream Valley, reaching the pass at the head of the glacier.

MAURIZIO ORSI, *The Curbatts, Italy*

LADAKH

East Karakoram, Argan Kangri (6,789 m), first or second ascent? The Indian Mountaineering Foundation sponsored an all ladies expedition to Argan Kangri in the Arganglas range east of the Nubra Valley. It was led by IMF Vice-President Rita Gombu Marwah. The nine-member team, accompanied by four high-altitude Sherpas, successfully climbed the peak on July 20. Four ladies and four Sherpas reached the summit; Kavita Burathoki, Reena Kaushik, P. M. Tamang, and Shushma Thakur, with Sherpas Dawa, Pasang Dorjee, Samgyal, and Sangehuri. The team operated from July 1-31.

This peak was attempted by the Indo-British expedition, jointly led by Sir Chris Bonington and Harish Kapadia, in the summer of 2001. They failed to climb what they thought to be an unclimbed mountain and the highest in the range. After their expedition Josef Hala, a noted researcher of mountain history from Prague, Czech Republic, drew attention to a previous report about this area dating back to 1970. In that year a peak in this region was reported to have been climbed by the Indian Army. That peak is located at a similar latitude and longitude, has the same height and lies on the same glacier. The Indians called it Phunangma after the name of the glacier at its foot. However, currently it is not conclusively known whether both peaks are one and the same. Please refer to the following note printed in the *Himalayan Journal*.

From a letter by Mr Josef Hala in the *Himalayan Journal* Vol. 58, p 254: Argan Kangri climb 1970; *The Himalayan Club Newsletter* No. 28, June 1971 (Page 2), compiled by Soli S. Mehta. LADAKH: PHUNANGMA 22,272 ft. First Ascent. This peak in Ladakh was climbed on 4 August 1970 by Capt. F. C. Bahaduri, Nk. S. K. Thapa, Nk. S. Tashi, Hav. S. S. Bhandari and two Sherpas. Capt. N. K. Kalia, Nk. P. Stobdon and a porter again climbed the peak on 5 August 1970. Maj. R. C. Naidu led the expedition. There is also a mention in Ichiro Yoshizawa (670 pages) *Concise Alphabetical Register of World Mountains*, published in Tokyo, 1984. PHUNANGMA