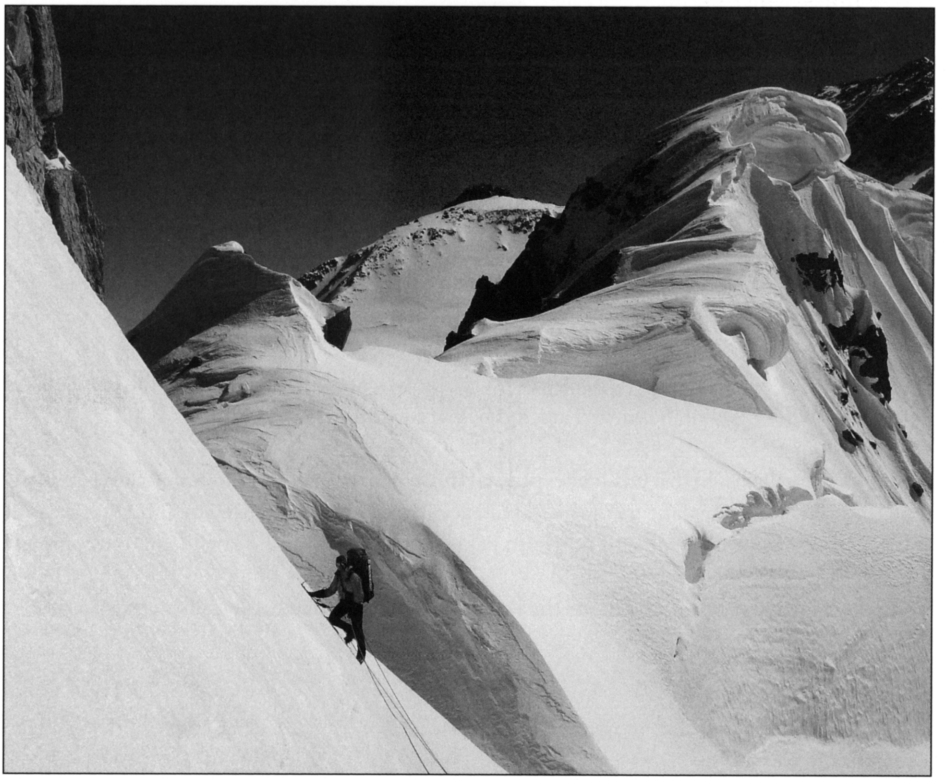
Mazeno Ridge

Nanga Parbat's 10-kilometer ridge caps a multi-peak Pakistan Summer, albeit without an 8,000m summit.

Doug Chabot



Steve Swenson skirting Peak 7,090 on the Mazeno Ridge. Mazeno Peak (7,120m) is the corniced peak behind him. *Doug Chabot*

Steve Swenson pulled a photo out of his back pocket. "We should do this," he prodded, showing me the unclimbed Mazeno Ridge on Nanga Parbat. I couldn't take my eyes off the image and instantly agreed. A month later I did some research and panicked. I called Steve and yelled, "A 10-kilometer-long ridge at 7,000 meters? Eight summits? This is crazy! We can't do this!" Steve was unflappable. He's also one of the most accomplished alpinists I know. He overlooked my outburst and calmly reassured me that, yes, we certainly could do this.

After six weeks of climbing in the Charakusa Valley with Steve and four other friends, we

were ready for Nanga Parbat. With a first ascent of Kapura Peak (6,544m) and an alpine-style ascent of K7 (6,954m) under my belt, I figured it was now or never.

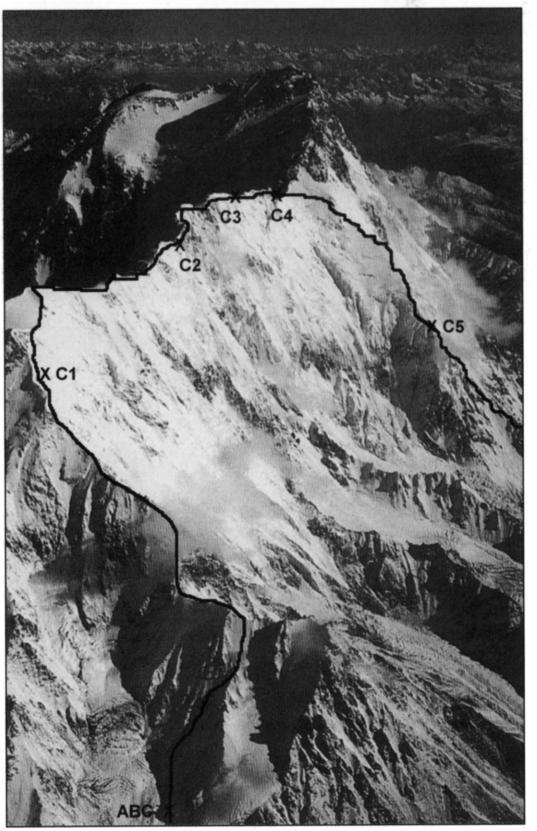
Our arrival at base camp (3,600m) on August 9 was perfectly timed. Two weeks of little snow was followed by jet-stream winds. Three days later, under clear skies, we launched. Going alpine style, we took seven days of fuel and five days of food. Our gear was one 60-meter 8-mm rope and a rack of two pickets, three ice screws, six stoppers, six pins, and eight runners. We took no bolts and no other rope.

Thigh-deep snow, bad weather, and avalanches had stymied previous attempts on this ridge. It curves up and down like the tail of a dragon with eight distinct summits until it drops down to Mazeno Col, the intersection of the Schell Route. The first attempt was in 1979 by a French expedition. In 1992 Doug Scott and team climbed the first three peaks on the ridge. Scott came back in 1993 and again in 1995, but got no higher. The last attempt on the ridge had been by Wojciech Kurtyka and Erhard Loretan in 1997.

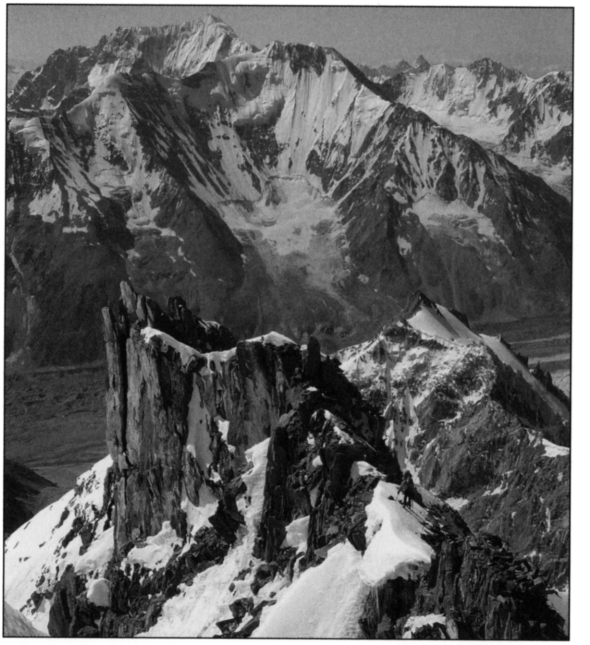
On August 12 we hiked to Advanced Base Camp at 4,900m. Along the way we met villagers who knew of the Mazeno from Scott's attempts. "You trying Doug Scott Route?" they'd ask. "Not possible. Schell Route much better." They looked at us like we were crazy. In their minds Scott had already proved that it couldn't be done.

The next morning we left at one o'clock and climbed moderate snow and ice to 6,200m. A three o'clock start the following morning quickly put us on the first summit of the ridge, at 6,880m, and gave us fine views of the Mazeno winding off into the distance. Conditions were excellent. Where other parties found deep snow, we found névé. We dispatched the first three peaks with ease and surpassed Scott's high point that morning. We chopped our second camp at 6,900m, quite pleased with ourselves; we might pull this off after all.

The stable weather eased our fears of getting pinned down on the route. Theoretically, we could reverse the ridge at any point. However, if one of us got sick or injured we couldn't realistically retreat. I wasn't too worried about sickness or injury (what climber is?), but storms would be another issue. The terrain is technical enough to make climbing in strong winds and bad weather almost impossible. A retreat would entail climbing back instead of simply rappelling. It was a committing route.



Nanga Parbat's 10-kilometer-long Mazeno Ridge from the air. *Robert Mantovani*



Steve Swenson climbing around gendarmes at 6,000m. *Doug Chabot*

We awoke on the 15th to clear skies and started mixed climbing right out of the tent on Peak 7,060. Steve led and skirted the next peak, 7,090, via an ice traverse. We reached Mazeno Peak, marked 7,120 on the map, soon after. In 1986 a Spanish expedition had climbed the steep north face of Mazeno Peak to within 200 meters of the summit before a storm forced retreat. For us it was a simple walk-up and over the snow dome, as was the next one, Peak 7,100.

I was getting tired, but Steve was an absolute machine at this altitude. Besides a 10-kilometer-long ridge, most of the peaks required 500 meters of climbing up and then back down. With only one peak left before the Mazeno Col, we felt confident as we set up camp that afternoon. Peak 7,070 consisted of several rock towers, but I predicted we'd only need three hours to climb it. We could see the Schell Route and Nanga's summit, and we had enough food and fuel to reach the top. We optimistically planned a short day over 7,070 followed by two days of relatively non-technical climbing to the summit. Our optimism was quickly crushed.

The skies began clouding up that night and Steve came down with a respiratory infection. The hanky he carried said it all. It was grotesquely covered in blood and chunks of god-knows-what; I had to look away every time he pulled it out. He coughed most of the night and didn't get much rest. Because of Steve's condition, I led the entire next day, and it was our most difficult climbing. My prediction of three hours turned into a dozen hours, all of it on technical terrain. The climbing was spectacular but mentally and physically taxing. We climbed sections of M4, did numerous rappels off towers, and kept finding another summit after the last. We drug ourselves to the Mazeno Col in the last rays of sunlight, chopped out a platform, and set up the tent. I was wasted. The deteriorating weather, Steve's illness, and our general exhaustion all pointed to retreat.

Both of us had a restless night, and we knew going down the Schell Route was the right option. But our descent was anything but easy. We had heard fixed lines were in place on the technical section between camps I and II. Thinking we were going to cruise to base camp, we cached our extra food and fuel and our climbing rope. We envisioned climbing the Schell to the summit later and thought this cache would allow an even faster ascent. Leaving the rope was a decision we'd regret.

Three hundred meters below the cache, in poor visibility and soft snow, I fell into a crevasse up to my waist. From then on we roped up with our remaining cordalette and slings. At the end

of the ridge we could see old anchors, but the fixed lines were gone. The weather was getting worse and we knew the avalanche danger would quickly increase if it snowed. Going back up to get the cached rope was an option, but it would've taken an enormous amount of energy and at least one full day. The terrain was too steep to downclimb so we searched for an old fixed line on the ridge. A strand snaked into the ice and after three hours of chopping we were proud owners of a 25-meter piece of braided line.

The next morning, with only 30 meters of visibility, we had a difficult time finding the descent. I had a digital picture on my camera—taken from base camp—and we referred to it often to pinpoint our location. We made good time simul-climbing but soon found ourselves in a steepening ice gully that forced us to rappel. With our rope we could do only ridiculously short 12-meter raps. Our lean rack dwindled as we set anchors, but luckily, after five abseils, we were able to downclimb once again. The rockfall was substantial, and at one point large blocks narrowly missed us. By the time we reached safety we had decided that ascending later was out of the question.

I think the last time the Schell Route was climbed was in 1992 by Doug Scott and team; this 12-year lapse helps explain the missing fixed lines.

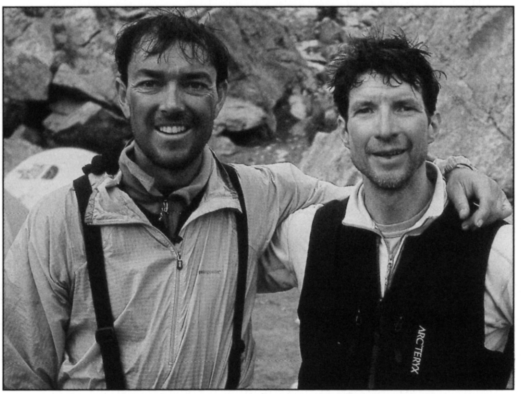
The Mazeno Ridge was one of the greatest climbs of my life. Relatively safe from objective hazards, it was fully committing. Although Steve and I did not reach the summit, we feel fortunate to have climbed the Mazeno Ridge to its conclusion at the Schell Route, as well as four new summits over 7,000m. We hope this route sees other ascents. Just don't forget to bring a rope for the descent.

AREA: Pakistan Himalaya

ASCENT: Nanga Parbat, first ascent of the Mazeno Ridge to the junction of the Schell Route at 6,940m—a 10km-long ridge with an estimated 6,500m elevation gain, VI M4 AI3. Along the route, first ascents of Peaks 7060, 7120 (Mazeno Peak), 7100, and 7070. August 12-18, 2004. Doug Chabot and Steve Swenson.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Born in New Jersey in 1964, Doug Chabot learned how to climb and ski at Prescott College. He migrated north in 1986 and made Bozeman, Montana his home. During the winter months he's director of the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center, while in the summer he works for Exum Mountain Guides in Grand Teton National Park.



Doug Chabot and Steve Swenson in base camp just after coming down from the Mazeno Ridge. *Bruce Miller*