

# A TASTE OF KARAKORAM ICE

*Exploring the early-season potential above the Trango Glacier.*

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DODO KOPOLD



Early-season base camp on the Trango Glacier. The icy north face of Uli Biaho Tower looms over camp. See Climbs and Expeditions for details of the route the Slovaks followed. *Dodo Kopold*

**I**n the Himalayas I don't look for adventure on the classic routes, where you stumble over hundreds of people. I don't look for it even on the routes that have been climbed only a few times. A new line is like a journey without a map, like a question mark at the end of a sentence. You leave for two months with a promise that you will come back alive. You close the door and suddenly you are in another world—in the world of risk, which you try to reduce by your good decisions and a ration of fortune that was given to you. You have two months to fulfill your dreams. The wall you've been observing for three years, looking for an unclimbed line. You study each meter; you think about the individual passages and consider

the right tactics. Questions accumulate. A huge avalanche breaks away from the summit ridge. You promised you would not give into the risk; you promised to come back home. But your dream is in front of you.



In 2006 we wanted to climb Gasherbrum IV via a new route on the Shining Wall. But the situation with money was worse than we had expected. Fortunately, our motivation to climb in the Karakoram was strong, so we chose Uli Biaho Tower as an alternative. Its unclimbed north face looked to be a fantastic icy line. For this target we had to go earlier, because usually in late season the ice conditions are not good. Ice climbing in the Karakoram was like a new dimension of climbing. We couldn't imagine what would await us.

We arrived at Shipton base camp at the end of May, more than a month earlier than usual. It was snowing a lot and freezing at night, but only in these conditions would we be able to climb Uli Biaho's enormous ice face. In our small team there was a sirdar, cook, kitchen helper, cameraman Palo Pekarèk, Gabo Čmárik, and me.

Our idea was to climb the face in perfect style: alpine style, without bolts, and as fast as possible. But snow kept falling at night, and during the day avalanches fell from the walls. We had to wait for a good period of weather to begin our acclimatization climbs.



We started climbing our first route, on Hainabrakk East Tower, during the nighttime, in order to avoid avalanches that fell through a steep couloir. This was our second try on this wall, and this time we climbed much faster. At dawn we arrived at the place that we had marked back at base camp with a big exclamation point. We had to rappel 60 meters in a narrow chimney and continue up steep ice to the summit ridge. This was also a main path for avalanches, and the morning one hadn't fallen yet. Our ropes tangled. "That will be..." I started to say to myself, when all of a sudden a huge avalanche roared by a few meters from me and disappeared. That was the one we were waiting for. The way seemed open.

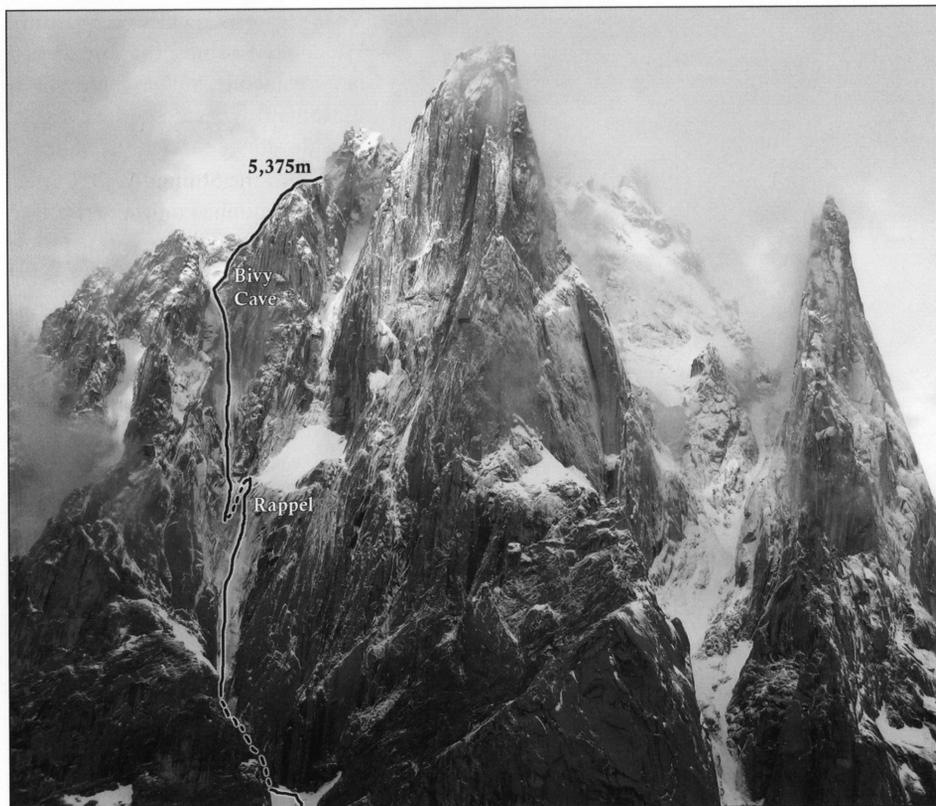
I waited for Gabo to ascend to the belay. "Watch out!" I yelled and cowered against the wall. We hadn't expected that one. We hesitated and discussed whether we should go down. But the way back was closed. We had already pulled the rappel rope, so we had to continue upward. Climbing where the avalanche had fallen only minutes ago, I moved as fast as possible.

In the evening we took refuge in an ice cave, protected from the falling ice. On the second day we reached the summit ridge at 5,375 meters. That was the end of our route; a rock tower blocked the way to the top. The long descent to base camp waited for us.



Our next step to perfect acclimatization was the north face of Shipton Spire. Its ice wall had dangerous seracs threatening the lower part of the route and also a hard mixed passage higher up. We began climbing early in the morning, moving fast through an ice chimney and wading through deep, drifted snow on the flats to reach a rocky buttress. We climbed 500 meters through this dangerous terrain, but at 8 a.m., when Gabo arrived at my belay, his face was greenish-red. Sunstroke. We went down. The north face of Shipton is still unclimbed.





The line taken by Dolzag Dihedral on Hainabrakk East Tower (5,650m). *Dodo Kopold*

**T**hird week in base camp. We had acclimatized very well, and we had studied Uli Biaho's minute details. We knew that it was impossible to enter the face by its lower rocky wall and that we had to go instead up a steep ice couloir. But we still had so many questions. How many days would it take? What would the summit ridge be like? What if it collapsed with us on it? Would we find a ledge for a bivy? Would the weather last?

We knew that if we wanted to succeed and come back home, we had to be fast. So we packed only the most essential gear for climbing, high-altitude food for a few days, and energy drinks. No sleeping bag, no reserve clothing.

We left our advanced base camp at 2 a.m., after a short nap. We climbed simultaneously to the col under the north face. The ice was hard, and huge seracs loomed above us. Not good. We climbed as fast as we could, and in four hours we reached the col, 1,000 meters higher. We carefully crossed the bergschrund, and after 200 meters we stood under splendid steep ice. But we were in the way of avalanches and had to move away from there as fast as possible. I climbed first, and when the rope ran out I just yelled to Gabo to climb after me. This tactic was not so safe, but time was the most important thing now.

We had been moving more than 16 hours; we were dehydrated and tired. But there was no ledge, no place suitable for rest, just steep ice and monolithic rock walls. So we hacked at the



Dodo Kopold leads steep ice just below the top of the north face of Uli Biaho. Gabo Čmárik

ice to create a small ledge for sitting. We cooked something and took a nap for a while, but we couldn't stay for long. It was cold and we started to slide slowly toward the valley. It was time to continue.

We climbed mostly vertical ice, here and there doing a few moves on rock. The ice was hard, and it was too strenuous to put in screws; our calves were protesting. I looked forward to finishing each pitch and maybe standing on a big belay ledge to take a rest, at least for a while. But there was no ledge. Just two screws in the steep ice for a belay, and above harder and harder ice.

Rasping crampons, axe tips in just a few millimeters of ice. Gabo shouted at me to put in a screw, but I couldn't; I just wanted to finish the pitch. I was fishing for microcams that I had somewhere on my back. The ice was desperately thin, and I climbed a thin crack that I hoped would lead me to the snow ridge.

I made a belay 10 meters under the summit. We didn't dare climb together to the top of the summit cornice, so Gabo went first and when he returned it was my turn. It was 3 p.m. and a lovely day, with a great view of the surrounding mountains. I felt very lucky to have succeeded on the line. The conditions were on the edge of climbability.

Rappelling the route, we arrived totally exhausted at advanced base, 54 hours after leaving it.

#### SUMMARY

AREA: Trango Valley, Baltoro Region, Pakistan

ASCENTS: Attempt on Hainabrakk East Tower (5,650m), climbed to east ridge at 5,375 meters (Dolzag Dihedral, 750m, VI 6), June 8-9, 2006. Attempt on the north face of Shipton Spire (5,885m); climbed first 500 meters. Alpine-style first ascent of the north face of Uli Biaho Tower (6,109m); the route is called Drastissima (1,900m, ABO VI 6), July 21-23, 2006. All ascents by Gabo Čmárik and Jozef "Dodo" Kopold.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Born in 1980, Dodo Kopold lives in Bratislava, Slovakia, and designs outdoor clothing.*