

BABA TANGI

*A team of sisters makes the first ascent of the northwest ridge of
Kob-e-Baba-Tangi (6,516m), Afghanistan.*

PAT DEAVOLL



Porters on the return to the village of Kret; Baba Tangi and the route in the background. *Christine Byrch*

I'd long wanted to climb in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, but with one war or another, the country had been out of bounds to climbers for more than 30 years. Finally a trickle of climbers and travelers began to return. So I thought, "Now's my chance." In 2010 I began cooing my sister Christine, also from New Zealand, and our Indian friend Satyabrata Dam into joining me. We chose Baba Tangi, which means Jade Peak in the local dialect. The highest mountain in the eastern sector of the Afghan Hindu Kush, its only ascent came in 1963, by an Italian team that included Carlo Alberto Pinelli. They climbed the west ridge with three camps, and Pinelli wrote in his book *Peaks of Silver and Jade* that the northwest ridge "seems to be particularly attractive ... a varied and hard route but probably not too dangerous, alternating sections of rock, mixed, and ice." So the northwest ridge it would be.

For the next 12 months we battled with embassies for visas, applied for grants, and appealed for sponsorship. We engaged an Afghan company to help with internal permits, 4WD transport, and local porters. In mid-July we flew to Dushanbe, the capital of neighboring Tajikistan, where we met Satya.

Dushanbe is a lovely uncongested city of elegant buildings, wide boulevards, and fountains. There was not a scrap of rubbish. But the temperature



Ladies from the village of Kret and their children. *Pat Deavoll*

was in the 40s (Celsius), so it felt good to be on the road with the wind in our hair after a day of arranging final permits and shopping. We'd pre-booked a 4WD vehicle with Pamir Silk Travel, which arrived promptly at our hotel at 10 a.m., driven by a cheerful Tajik named Gordo, who spoke not a word of English. Though we roared out of town, within 10 kilometers the state of the roads slowed us to 20km/hour, max. We progressed at this speed for the next three days, to the border.

Gordo dropped us at a gated bridge over the Panj River. It was about 50 degrees C (120°F). Two small buildings sat in the middle of the wide, dusty riverbed: the Tajik immigration post and the Afghan immigration post. Smiling soldiers let us through the gate as we struggled with our luggage. The formalities went smoothly, but where was the representative from Wakhan Tourism who was supposed to meet us? He eventually turned up, claimed he was gravely ill, accompanied us to the small village of Ishkashim, and then disappeared to hospital. That was the last we saw of him.

When no replacement was sent, it became obvious that we'd have to do our own organizing. This turned out to be a blessing, as it saved quite a sum of money. Wandering into the middle of Ishkashim (no more than a dirt crossroads around a rough bazaar, but charming in its simplicity), Satya and I shopped for the remainder of our food, purchased a pressure cooker and two five-kilogram gas cylinders for cooking at base camp, and arranged for a 4WD to take us 120 kilometers up the Wakhan Valley to the village of Kret. From there we intended to walk to the mountain.

The locals were friendly, helpful, and not averse to having their photos taken. On the street were plenty of women and girls in the colorful Wakhi dress. And the odd burka. A young man named Adab marched us round to see the regional governor and the police to obtain the bits of paper required to enter the Wakhan. Inside the border police compound, the men had laid down their AK47s and were playing chess at a large table in the sun. We spent two nights having fun with a smattering of other western travelers in an excellent guesthouse. Then we were on the road again.

The scenery in the Wakhan Corridor is otherworldly: vast arid mountains, with brief glimpses of glaciers and snow-capped mountains up the side valleys. Villages of mud houses.

And the vast Panj River, which barricaded us from Tajikistan and the Pamir Mountains to the north. Our driver was an elderly Afghan who cheerfully dealt with a puncture and backed over a huge rock, where we were temporarily stuck. Oh well, these things happen. We arrived in Kret late in the afternoon and were invited to stay in the village guesthouse. The next day I was ill with a stomach complaint, but Satya and Christine met with a village leader, and together they organized porters. We left the next morning for base camp with eight porters and a dog.

On the first day we climbed 1,000 meters, which required great effort by our porters, who were all humping 25 kilos or more. They were a delightful team: funny, kind, and generous, sharing their tea, rice, and naan with us. We spent the first night at the toe of the glacier, after climbing a steep incline all afternoon. The next day we moved up to where an Italian team had placed base camp three years ago, when they attempted the original route up the west ridge. (They gave up at 6,000 meters, 500 meters shy of the summit.) After a final cup of tea, the porters headed back to Kret with a promise to return in three weeks.

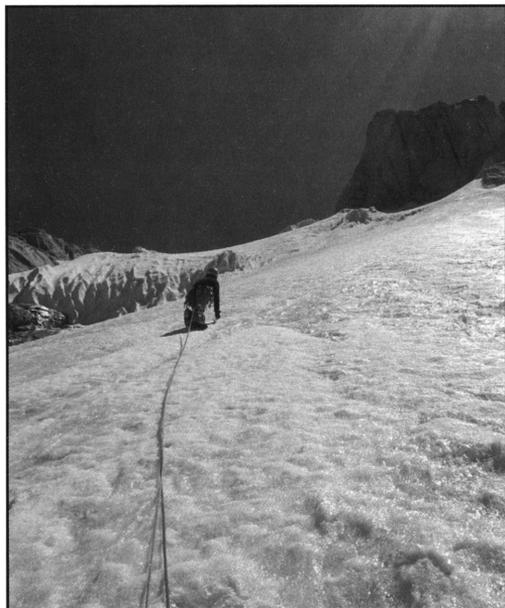
During 10 days of acclimatizing, we scoped the northwest ridge, our goal. The route would begin with a 500-meter ice face of 60 to 80 degrees, before progressing into a narrow ice gully. From there we weren't sure what would happen, but hoped a few days would take us to the summit plateau, then the summit. We would either V-thread our way back down the route or traverse the mountain and descend the west ridge.

When the time came to climb, Satya decided not to accompany us, much to our dismay. It wasn't the altitude—he's climbed Everest without oxygen—but an injury. Christine and I devised a plan for our pack-loads should we not be able to carry them on the steepest terrain. We decided that I would lead, while Christine would jumar with the heavier pack. If this proved too strenuous, we would haul. On August 4 we waved goodbye to Satya, who promised to raise

the alarm if we hadn't returned in 10 days. That night we camped under a crystal sky with beautiful views of Tajikistan and the Pamirs to the north.

The next day the ice face went surprisingly well. The bergschrund proved no problem, and after seven pitches we were perched beneath an 80-degree ice bulge. Time to try out our plan. I passed my pack to Christine, who attached hers to the end of one of our double ropes. Off I went, and it didn't seem long before I'd dispatched the pitch and Christine was seconding toward me. The pack, dangling 60 meters beneath us, duly followed. Another couple of pitches of lesser angle took us to a small col that offered a good camp. We were well on our way!

The next morning we woke at 3 a.m., in order to be away by five. We weren't sure



Pat Deavoll leads the initial ice face on day one. *Christine Byrch*

where the narrow ice gully would exit and wanted to allow plenty of time for hauling the packs. After some rotten fragile ice, it improved, and I started to enjoy myself. Here I was at last, climbing steep ice on a mountain in Afghanistan. How lucky I was! I felt confident and happy and knew that, if the weather stayed settled, and if we broke the mountain down into sections and dealt with each as it presented itself, we would climb Baba Tangi.



Christine Byrch traversing toward the top of the west ridge during the descent (day 6). *Pat Deavoll*

But during one pitch of hauling, the pack swung into the rock and lodged there. We yanked and tugged and jiggled to no avail, and Christine had to rappel to free it. By now the day was done. We chopped out a ledge at the apex of the ridge and settled in for another fine night.

When the sun rose on the third day, we could see a series of dark clouds marring the western sky. What would they bring? We were confronted with a large rock buttress and set off trudging in deep snow to round it on the left. Then we saw another steep ice slope, fringed by a nasty looking bergschrund. I tried my hardest to climb this but couldn't find any purchase in the rotten snow and kept falling in a heap. So I went around by a bridge and a nasty traverse back across the top of the schrund. Christine had an awful time jumaring, and the pitch must have taken us a good three hours. Meanwhile, the sky kept darkening.

In mid-afternoon it started to snow and the temperature dropped. Nearly at the summit plateau, we ran around looking for somewhere to camp, finally settling on an uncomfortable sloping ledge. It was still snowing at 4:30 a.m., so we gratefully settled back into our bags. However, by 8 it had started to clear, so we trudded through deep snow to the western side of the plateau until 4 p.m., when we stumbled across a perfect camp site at approximately 6,000 meters: flat and sheltered from the persistent wind. It felt good to know there would only be one more day of ascent.

We were away at 4:30 a.m., climbing mixed ice and snow slopes toward the summit ridge. It was bitterly cold and the wind hadn't let up. We were both wearing every stitch of clothing we had. At nine we were beneath what we thought was the summit. I led a moderate ice pitch, only to discover that the ridge continued up ... and up some more. But an hour later the true summit appeared. We were there! We looked south into Pakistan, north into Tajikistan, and east into China. It was a magic moment, only marred by the bitter cold. We were very happy, if tired, as we headed down.

The next day we started down toward the west ridge, with hopes of returning to base camp in two days. It would be a nice touch to do a traverse of the mountain. Six a.m. found us standing at the edge of the plateau wondering which way to go. Below was a large granite buttress, and there seemed no alternative but to rappel over the edge. But things went well, and five rappels later we found a long snow/ice traverse that took us to the top of the west

ridge proper. There we found cairns and an old camp site, complete with firewood. We began a scrambling descent down the 1,500-meter rocky spur. At the end of the afternoon, we came across another cleared campsite and decided to stop for the night—our seventh on the mountain. We were down to the last of our food, exhausted, hungry, and keen to be down. But it was a beautiful evening, and we didn't bother pitching the tent.

Next morning we arrived on the glacier elated. We were so excited. Then Christine spied a figure in the distance. There was Satya, waving both arms in the air, coming up the glacier to meet us.

SUMMARY:

Area: Wakhan Corridor, Hindu Kush, Afghanistan.

Ascent: On August 9, 2011 sisters Pat Deavoll and Chris Byrch from New Zealand summited Koh-e-Baba-Tangi (6,516m), via a new route up the northwest ridge, during a seven-day traverse of the mountain from base camp. Theirs was only the second ascent of the mountain, the first being in August 1963 by Italians Giancarlo Biasin, Giancarlo Castelli, and Carlo Alberto Pinelli, who placed three camps on the west ridge. In 2008 four Italian women (including World Cup Ice Climbing champion Anna Torretta)—most likely the first all-female climbing expedition to the high mountains of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor—attempted to repeat this route but found it more difficult than expected and retreated from 6,000m.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*New Zealander Pat Deavoll's 35-year climbing career extends from a three-month traverse of the Southern Alps in her home country to the solo first ascent of Karim Sar in northern Pakistan. In 2006 she made the first ascent of the much-coveted north face of Haizi Shan in eastern Tibet, with Malcolm Bass. She's also climbed hard in the Alaska Range and the Canadian Rockies, and taken part in 12 expeditions to the remote corners of the Greater Ranges in the past 11 years. Her book *Wind From a Distant Summit* was recently released.*



Pat Deavoll (left) and Christine Byrch on the summit, day 5.
Pat Deavoll

Many thanks to the organizations whose support helped made this climb happen: Beattie Matheson and Berghaus; Southern Approach and Black Diamond; The Mount Everest Foundation; The New Zealand Alpine Club Expedition Fund; Icebreaker NZ.