

Lobsang Spire

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THE PROBLEM with Himalayan holidays is that very little actual climbing takes place. We planned our 1983 expedition to the Karakoram hoping to remedy this state of affairs. In 1981 I booked K2 and Broad Peak and also planned to take advantage of the Pakistani Government's recent concession to climbers: they had de-restricted access to all peaks below 6000 meters. We knew that if an expedition has to resort to democratic voting procedures, minorities remain dissatisfied. For that reason we planned a flexible approach to cater to all tastes. We were a fairly large group of ten climbers: Alan Rouse, Jean Afanassieff, Greg Child, Roger Baxter-Jones, Andy Parkin, Stephen Sustad, Dr. Peter Thexton, Don Whillans and I; Gohar Shah would double as high-altitude porter and climber. Jean brought along Michèle Stamos and Peter brought Beth Acres.

In the interests of physiological and psychological acclimatization it seemed sensible to spend the first month or so climbing from Urdukas in and around the Lobsang group of unclimbed peaks and spires before moving up the Godwin Austen Glacier for Broad Peak and K2. To be included in the itinerary would be visits to the Mustagh Pass, Windy Gap and Savoia Saddle. By the time we came to take on Broad Peak and K2, we would have a better idea with whom, how and what we wished to climb, rather than having to stick to some long-range plan, which might no longer be appropriate. There would be enough food for four months and small groups of porters would be available throughout the trip. Because of the effects of high altitude, we knew it was important to go only when ready so as to go up and down safely and fast. We would then retire quickly and recover at lower altitudes where a good variety of food stuffs would be available, including fresh eggs and vegetables. Two cooks were engaged to make certain of well cooked meals.

On May 5 the whole team was together in Islamabad. After travelling up the Karakoram Highway and taking jeeps and tractors from Skardu, we began the walk-in on May 12 from Dasso. Eight days later we arrived at Urdukas at 13,310 feet and set up our first Base Camp on lush grass. Al Rouse, Andy Parkin, Peter Thexton and Greg Child made camp on the Biale Glacier, directly opposite Urdukas. From there they climbed in two days a relatively easy peak of 18,200 feet to the northwest of Lobsang Spire whilst Jean Afanassieff, Roger Baxter-Jones, Michèle Stamos, Beth Acres, Don Whillans, Stephen Sustad and I

PLATE 10A

Photo by Greg Child

**LOBSANG SPIRE. South Buttress
on the right.**



ascended the Mustagh Glacier to camp at Lobsang Bransa about 1000 feet higher than Urdukas. We were surprised to find a pasture so high and extensive and also to discover the ruins of old buildings. We were amazed to hear it had been used by shepherds from Hunza in the last century. Francis Younghusband had certainly been here in 1887 after crossing the Mustagh Pass during his solo journey from Peking to Simla.

We all climbed up to the 17,788-foot Mustagh Pass and the next day reached the summit of Karphogang (5931 meters, 19,460 feet), except for Don Whillans, who stayed back to look after the camp. Karphogang was easily attained by the straightforward snowy west ridge. It had been climbed before. (*A.A.J.*, 1976, page 536.) From the ridge we could see many fine peaks on the Sinkiang side.

Al Rouse, Andy Parkin, Greg Child and Peter Thexton later made an attempt on the peak directly opposite Urdukas, P 5607 (18,396 feet) from the Biale Glacier. However, they ran out of time and not having bivouac equipment, retreated some six pitches from the top. Al and Andy made an attempt on Lobsang Spire* (5707 meters, 18,724 feet) from the southwest. Unfortunately they were prevented from climbing the west ridge by heavy falls of snow and so retreated after some hard climbing on magnificent granite from about the same point that an American group had abandoned their climb in 1975. (*A.A.J.*, 1976, page 536.) On June 5 half of the expedition moved up to K2 Base Camp, but the rest of us remained at Urdukas. Greg Child, Peter Thexton and I again crossed to the Biale Glacier, hoping to climb the south pillar of Lobsang Spire. Roger Baxter-Jones, who had a severe backache, stayed at Urdukas with Beth Acres, our Liaison Officer Captain Javid and one of our high-altitude porters, Nabi.

Big-wall climbing came to the Karakoram in 1975 when a 13-man Italian expedition put up two routes on the Grand Cathedral (*A.A.J.*, 1976, pages 533-6) and again the following year when the British lads climbed Nameless Tower in the Trango Towers (*A.A.J.*, 1977, pages 266-8). Big-wall alpine-style climbing arrived in 1977 on the main Trango Tower when the Americans Dennis Hennek, Kim Schmitz, Galen Rowell and John Roskelley climbed a fine route up the south face in a four-day push. (*A.A.J.*, 1978, pages 436-446.) In 1979 Roskelley and Schmitz were back with Ron Kauk and Bill Forrest to climb the huge east face of Uli Biaho in ten days of continuous and magnificent big-wall climbing. (*A.A.J.*, 1980, pages 405-416.) Apart from these peaks and towers, there are not many unclimbed summits offering big-wall opportunities. There was one spire that I had considered whilst walking out from K2 in 1980. After a brief reconnaissance, I decided I would like to try Lobsang Spire by its south pillar. There appeared to be cracks and dihedrals leading up through 2000-foot-high blank walls of solid red granite.

*This is the highest spire of those which lie between the Biale and Mustagh Glaciers. It should not be confused with Lobsang Peak (6225 meters), which lies on the western side of the Mustagh Glaciers.

PLATE 11

Photo by Greg Child

**South Buttress of LOBSANG
SPIRE.**



Peter Thexton, Greg Child and I had already sat out three days of bad weather on the Biale Glacier and had retreated to Base Camp. We recrossed the Baltoro and camped again on the Biale Glacier on June 7. Heavy snow fell all the next day until about four P.M. when we packed up and climbed halfway up a 3000-foot snow couloir that took us to the base of our pillar. After a bivouac, we easily climbed the rest of the couloir to the col between Lobsang Spire and P 5607. From the col we could look across to the high point Al Rouse and Andy Parkin had reached on the west side of Lobsang.

On June 10 we started by clambering over a 200-foot minor pinnacle to a subsidiary col at the very base of the pillar. Greg Child set off, leading for 120 feet at 5.8 on the only loose pitch of the climb which lay beneath a perfect A1 crack. I sat on the minor pinnacle watching Greg, only 5 feet 4 inches, using what body weight he had to haul up our two mammoth haul sacks as Pete jūmared up cleaning the pitch with a 40-pound rucksack on his back. The sun was now shining full on the pillar and the snow-plastered rocks were dripping wet as the snow receded visibly. The Mustagh Tower soared above, and beyond K2, Broad Peak and the Gasherbrum group. Down the couloir lay our little tent on the Biale Glacier and beyond that, the Grand Cathedral, its spires also plastered in fresh snow. Greg, veteran of ten routes on El Cap, was giving instructions to Peter, who, whilst being a superb free climber, had not handled the paraphernalia of aid climbing on big walls. Peter left the belay ledge for the A1 crack, which ran up the wall to the right of a pile of flakes balanced on top of the other. "Do you put in the *étrier* first or clip in the rope first?" "You can do either," shouted Greg. Pete tried several peg placements before selecting the right one. "Need to get my confidence up," he said confidently. He was slow but methodical and as calm as if he were back in an operating theatre. Greg advised long slings to stop abrasions on the sharp edges of ledges. "Still up going," commented Peter as he moved up to another peg using "Bialese," a language we developed when playing the waiting game on the Biale Glacier and imitating our porters way of speaking pidjin English.

After three hours' work, Peter arrived at a good stance as I climbed the fixed ropes with another heavy rucksack on my back. It was good to be on the route with the problems close at hand and to wonder how big the features were which seemed minute from a distance. After 100 feet of 5.8 and A2 climbing, my pitch was complete. Greg led through another 70 feet, but now night was approaching. He retreated as we hacked out the snow to produce a reasonable ledge for one person—me—and erected two of our three porta-ledges for Greg and Peter as a snow storm blew in; it blew and snowed most of the night.

By eight A.M. on the 11th, first Greg and then Pete emerged from their porta-ledges completely kitted out, ready for the climbing. Greg set off to complete his pitch. I cleaned the awkward grooves and climbed via a tension traverse into and up a huge dihedral for 150 feet. Pete cleaned and passed my hanging stance around a sensational overhang as Greg came up and clipped onto the pegs, taking me to task for not having connected slings to all the five pegs and wire chocks that held me. To save time, I led the next pitch at A2 and 5.8 free climbing into a huge amphitheatre of walls which reared up above.

PLATE 12

Photo by Douglas Scott

**Greg Child on overhanging blade
crack on LOBSANG SPIRE.**



It was time to hang all three porta-ledges, one above the other. With blowing powder snow around us, we brewed up, made soup and slept for eight hours. This was the first time I had slept in a porta-ledge, but once it was in balance from the single point of attachment, it seemed an impressive way to spend a night on a blank wall. What a shock for a Himalayan climber the next morning to open the fly cap and peer over the edge past Pete and Greg and see nothing below until my eye caught the col more than 1000 feet away!

Greg emerged fully clothed with boots and harness on, hoping to lead us out of the amphitheatre in one long pitch. He got into a series of hairline cracks where he carefully placed tied-off knife blades, gently put his weight on the tiniest of wire chocks and moved up slowly but surely, crossing from one thin crack to the other. Pete and I melted snow with the last gas cylinder to fill the water bottles and packed the haul sacks with our porta-ledges, a juggling act on a Yosemite-like wall. Every now and again Greg upset our arrangements, calling for slack. He rounded an overhang and pulled the rope to full stretch to reach a tiny exposed ledge. I cleaned the pitch and Pete made a sensational Jümar ascent of the rope, hanging free for about 150 feet. We both marvelled at Greg's A3 lead. I led an awkward overhanging A3 V-groove with loose flakes in the back, but after 40 feet it gave way to free 5.7 climbing. Pete led a series of 5.8 hand-jamb cracks to a stance.

With little fuel left, we were in a hurry to complete the climb. We would be unable to produce snow melt to combat dehydration which is rife at these altitudes. The cracks I followed were 5.8 and ice became a problem as we neared the snow ramp and the top of the exposed spire. With only an hour to darkness, I made a series of aid moves off Friends cammed against ice and grit-lined rock and from chocks hammered into the same. Pete arrived and took off immediately. By now it was dark. His head torch swept the rocks, spot-lighting holds in wide open chimneys and up overhanging blocks. He soon arrived at the prominent snow ramp beneath the monolithic summit block. After we had his pitch cleaned and were all ensconced in snow caves on the snow ramp, we wine and dined at midnight.

As the early morning light lit up Masherbrum, we reached the top of the snow ramp and were able to look around the north side of Lobsang Spire. The summit block was completely featureless on this side, without a crack or ledge to be seen; the summit was less than 100 feet away! What to do? Only by drilling could we make further progress. I said that I could take it or leave it and Pete remained neutral. However, Greg recalled how once our friend Georges Bettenbourg* had written to Reinhold Messner for a place on one of his expeditions. Before then, Georges had stopped short of the actual top of several Himalayan summits. Messner merely asked why he thought he could get up the one in question. This led Greg to say, "Summits are important." Out came the

*Tragically killed by rockfall on August 18 above Chamonix while descending the Triange de la Vête after hunting for crystals.

PLATE 13

Photo by Douglas Scott

**South Buttress of LOBSANG
SPIRE on the right.**



drill and off went Greg whilst Pete belayed and I contemplated the “murder of the impossible” and decided it was not relevant in that place. Although we had expected to wait half a day, Greg had done this sort of thing before on El Cap. After about three hours, he reached the top, a huge shark’s fin of red granite. It had not been risk free. He had drilled very shallow holes for sky hooks, only occasionally put in a rivet and only two of the three bolts he carried.

By midday all three of us were on the summit as a giant lammergeier flew by, head cocked at right angles, eyeing the three intruders that sat in the sky with him. Clouds billowed around the valleys below and out of them we could see the Trango and Nameless Towers to the west and K2 and the Gasherbrums to the east.

That afternoon we descended rapidly via our route of ascent, with me first fixing the next abseil as Greg and Pete carefully lowered the haul sacks. Three pitches from the col we saw Gohar Shah and Roger Baxter-Jones appear from out of the couloir. They shouted congratulations and headed back down as they had to get all the way back to Urdukas. Just as it was dark, we reached the col and stumbled down in their tracks. Our camp on the Biale Glacier was hidden in the dark. After staggering around in the dark for three hours, we came over a moraine bank and three head torches lit up our tiny tent—it could have been Buckingham Palace. The next day we were back at Urdukas after eight days out. Fresh food and Beth’s home baked bread were a fitting end to the perfect climb. On June 16 we left Urdukas for K2 Base Camp. [For the second part of the expedition, see the *Climbs and Expeditions* Section.—*Editor.*]

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Baltoro Karakoram, Pakistan.

ASCENTS: P 18,200, 5547 meters, northwest of Lobsang Spire, first ascent, May 25, 1983 (Child, Parkin, Rouse, Thexton).

Karphogang, 5931 meters, 19,460 feet, second ascent, via West Ridge, May 27, 1983 (Acres, Afanassieff, Baxter-Jones, Scott, Stamos, Sustad).

Lobsang Spire, 5707 meters, 18,724 feet, first ascent, via South Pillar, June 10-13, 1983 (Child, Scott, Thexton).

Broad Peak, 8047 meters, 26,400 feet, via west ridge, June 25, 1983 (Afanassieff, Baxter-Jones, Parkin, Rouse); June 28, 1983 (Scott, Sustad).

PERSONNEL: Douglas K. Scott, leader; Roger Baxter-Jones, Gregory Child, Andrew Parkin, Alan Rouse, Dr. Peter Thexton, Don Whillans, *British*; Jean Afanassieff, Michèle Stamos, *French*; Beth Acres, Stephen Sustad, *Americans*; Gohar Shah, *Pakistani*.

TECHNICAL EQUIPMENT USED ON LOBSANG SPIRE: 15 Knife Blades, 15 Lost Arrows, 2 each angle stoppers and Friends from 1/8 to 4 inches, sky hooks, porta-ledges.