



# Shipton Spire

## Free as can be in the Pakistan Karakoram

by Steph Davis

The glacier below is so gothically crenulated and gnarled it makes my brain hurt. It's like a wedding cake that got dropped on the floor. A friend told me that this part of the world looks like it has not been cooked yet—raw and huge. Hanging off Shipton on a portledge, looking down, I see she's absolutely right.

Almost as soon as I'd committed to going to Pakistan, I started trying to talk myself out of it. The summer of 1998 was incredibly volatile, and the politics added an entirely new dimension to the hazards of climbing in Pakistan. Just before I bought my ticket, Pakistan and India seemed on the brink of nuclear war, and President Clinton jumped in and sanctioned both of them. My mother called every other day to alert me to recent hijackings, kidnappings, and anti-American sentiment, and to remind me of how stupid it is to put yourself in such danger when there are plenty of other rocks to climb in places where they don't hate Americans. I was incredibly frustrated; I'd always wanted to go to Pakistan, and now, though I had a Shipton-Tilman grant, strong partners, and a potential objective, I was actually considering canceling the whole thing. Luckily my partners Kennan Harvey and Seth Shaw were unwavering in their commitment. I couldn't stand the thought of not going and then hearing that everything turned out fine, so after much agonizing and no real decision-making, I bought my ticket. It would just be one more element of the adventure.

Once in Pakistan, we found that the many people who had been scared off by the politics kept the dollar rising and the locals rabid for our business. The Ministry and Police in Islamabad gave us no trouble at all. We were filthy rich and even the taxi drivers and shopkeepers served us like royalty. If it weren't for the spray-painted "Down with U.S.A." signs on rock walls along the Karakoram Highway and rumors of U.S. aircraft over Iran, we would have felt foolish for even having questioned the safety of this trip.

Still, as the days went on, I realized that I had no resources for understanding anything about the Pakistani culture or its mindset. I could interpret daily events however I liked, but there was no guarantee that anything I saw indicated either safety or danger for us as Americans. Getting onto the Baltoro Glacier and into the mountains was a relief in one way, but, although we were out of the cities and potential political danger, we would still be committed to re-emerging a month or so later into a totally unknown situation. We could step off the Baltoro into a culture that demanded instant assassination of all Americans, or we could find ourselves just as welcomed as we'd been thus far. There was no way of knowing.

We also didn't know exactly where Shipton Spire base camp was. We'd seen photos of Shipton, and talked about the area with Greg Child and Jared Ogden (who'd made the first and second ascents), so we knew it was just beyond the Trango Towers. However, none of our porters or cook/guides had been there. Ultimately, with the aid of a poster photo taken

from the top of Nameless and a little head scratching, we found the meadow we'd heard so much about.

We'd received the grant to climb a new route on a sub-6000 meter peak in the Shipton area, and there were a few excellent candidates. I was strongly interested in the "Cat's Ears"\* and Hainablak East Tower, conveniently located side-by-side just across from Shipton's base camp meadow. Both are unclimbed and, like Shipton, both are just barely under 6000 meters. Though each has good lines in steep granite, they would require a couple of thousand feet of approach work and would therefore yield less actual technical rock climbing than Shipton. In that sense, they are rather like Nameless Tower. Still, they virtually beg to be climbed.

Although the Cat's Ears appealed to me, Shipton has a good southeast face with a more convenient approach and offers over 4,300 feet of vertical granite coming almost right out of the glacier—nearly twice as much vertical rock as Nameless Tower. The peak had seen only two ascents, both of which required considerable aid. Kennan immediately made it clear that he wanted to not only do the third ascent of Shipton, but also try a continuous free attempt on a new line. Seth and I thought that sounded like a nice idea, but mostly just wanted to get up the proud sail of granite. Altitude was an issue; we'd start climbing at over 15,000 feet and summit at 19,700, which is pretty high to be doing hard free climbing. Moreover, extra days spent redpointing hard pitches could blow our chance to summit at all. Kennan was completely enthusiastic and determined, but this ambition was huge. We'd have to decide on our style later. For now, one thing was sure: we all wanted to climb Shipton.

We spent our first few days carrying loads to the base and squinting through a spotting scope from the base camp meadow, searching for continuous crack systems that could be not just climbable, but freeable as well. Knowing the center of Shipton was dangerous, we picked a line toward the right that seemed safe from rockfall. It looked like the best, most continuous line, until through the scope Kennan saw a white haulbag hanging partway up. With horror, we realized that we'd been seriously considering the route on which the Japanese soloist Ryuji Taniguchi had died in 1996.

The next day, as I picked a line through the crevasses on the glacier, I stumbled across Ryuji's shredded pink portaledge. All of my doubts returned with a vengeance. I'd been so busy worrying about the politics before the trip that I hadn't really had time to meditate about just how dangerous it is to climb in the Karakoram. The same unbelievably clear weather that had us all galvanized was also setting off countless tons of rock, snow, ice and mud around the glacier. I had to be brutally honest with myself: I was feeling edgy. Again. Still.

I'm never sure how superstitious to be when climbing, or what to take as a "sign." Certainly there had been more than enough warning in the form of political unrest to make me feel like a deserving fool if anything went wrong on this trip. Rather than burdening Kennan or Seth with my doubts, I spent the hours trudging to and from the base of Shipton analyzing them internally. Was I just nervous because this trip was bigger and more objectively hazardous than anything I'd done before? Was I paranoid because one of my best friends had just been paralyzed in a climbing accident? Or was I trying to ignore warning signs? If this were a horror movie, would the whole audience be shouting, "Run, you stupid bimbo!!!"? As I watched Kennan walk through the meadow after a ferry, I felt a shot of fear at either dying myself or losing him on this trip. But Shipton stood in full view of my tent, proud and constant, exerting an invisible and irresistible pull, refusing to take "no" or "I'm scared" for an answer.

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\*This formation appears to be unnamed on the maps in the Polish book *Western Baltoro Mustagh* by Jan Kielkowski. Hainablak East Tower sits to its immediate south (see cover). Most of the prominent formations around the Hainablak glaciers are designated variations on the Hainablak name. For further explanation of the names of the formations around the Hainablak glaciers, see footnote by Greg Mortenson in *Climbs and Expeditions*.

We chose a new line through the M-shaped fang-like roofs just left of the first ascent route. It shared the same start up the Footstool, a “small” 1,000-foot pillar pasted to the bottom of Shipton, then moved left into more continuous crack systems. I felt good about this route. It seemed out of the zone of rockfall, as far as you can get from the ominous white haulbag, and we all agreed it had free potential if we chose to try.

To free or not to free. . . . As daft as it seemed to stroll up to a huge peak at altitude with the hope of finding an independent free line, it wasn’t a new idea. In 1988, Kurt Albert, Wolfgang Güllich and Hartmut Munchenback freed the Slovenian route on Nameless Tower the year after it had gone up on aid. Looking to increase the challenge, Albert returned the next year with Güllich, Christof Stiegler, and Milan Sykora to attempt a brand new free route to the left of the Slovenian line. They were foiled by a pendulum and a section of A2, but *Eternal Flame* was perhaps the first route in the Himalaya ever attempted as an on-sight free ascent.

Such an approach is a gamble, especially if you move capsule-style without ropes fixed to the ground. On a remote, high-altitude wall, you can only carry a limited amount of food, water, and energy. You could spend days freeing a pitch only to find unavoidable aid higher on the route, and one storm can kill your chances of finishing at all.

Although daunting, the idea of trying a new free route on Shipton was seductive. As Kennan pointed out, it had already been climbed “anything goes” twice. Trying something really new and out there had a certain appeal. We’d done our work at the spotting scope, and we liked our line. It was time to go up and see what happened.

**B**y the time we had fixed lines, hauled gear, and launched onto the wall, we were almost 1,500 feet up, and we still hadn’t completely decided if this was a free attempt or just a push up Shipton. So far the climbing hadn’t been hard enough to force the decision, but now, at 16,500 feet, we were getting into the high-quality vertical rock.

I felt nervous racking up for my first “real” pitch. A seeping crack turned into a steep offwidth, with ten feet of moss leading into the wideness. I got wet and pumped climbing to the vegetation, then hung and gardened furiously for half an hour. Panting, muddy, and altitude-worked, I looked into the overhanging #5 Camelot crack above and started to French free. By the time I set the anchor, I felt bedraggled, more like I’d survived the pitch than climbed it. It was time for a decision: consider the line fixed and keep moving, or go back and free it.

So far I’d been noncommittal about freeing. With three haulbags, two portaledge, full aid and ice gear, a barrel of water, and countless assorted other stuff, all trying to go up a new route on a giant Himalayan wall, this whole enterprise seemed like challenge enough. But Kennan’s enthusiasm was rubbing off; after all, I *am* a free climber. The weather showed no signs of turning bad, and I was starting to feel sure that we could get up Shipton. So why not up the ante and try to free it? Suddenly I was equally committed, as was Seth. The uncertainty of success had just increased exponentially, but we were all of one mind about the goal.

To compensate for the altitude and the environment, we decided to “aidpoint” the harder pitches: the leader would start in free climbing mode, then switch to aid if necessary. With the cracks cleaned and the gear in place, we could go back down and free the pitch. I normally disdain preplaced gear since it makes the climbing easier, but the altitude was making things harder, so it seemed to be a toss-up—and really, the only reasonable thing to do up here.

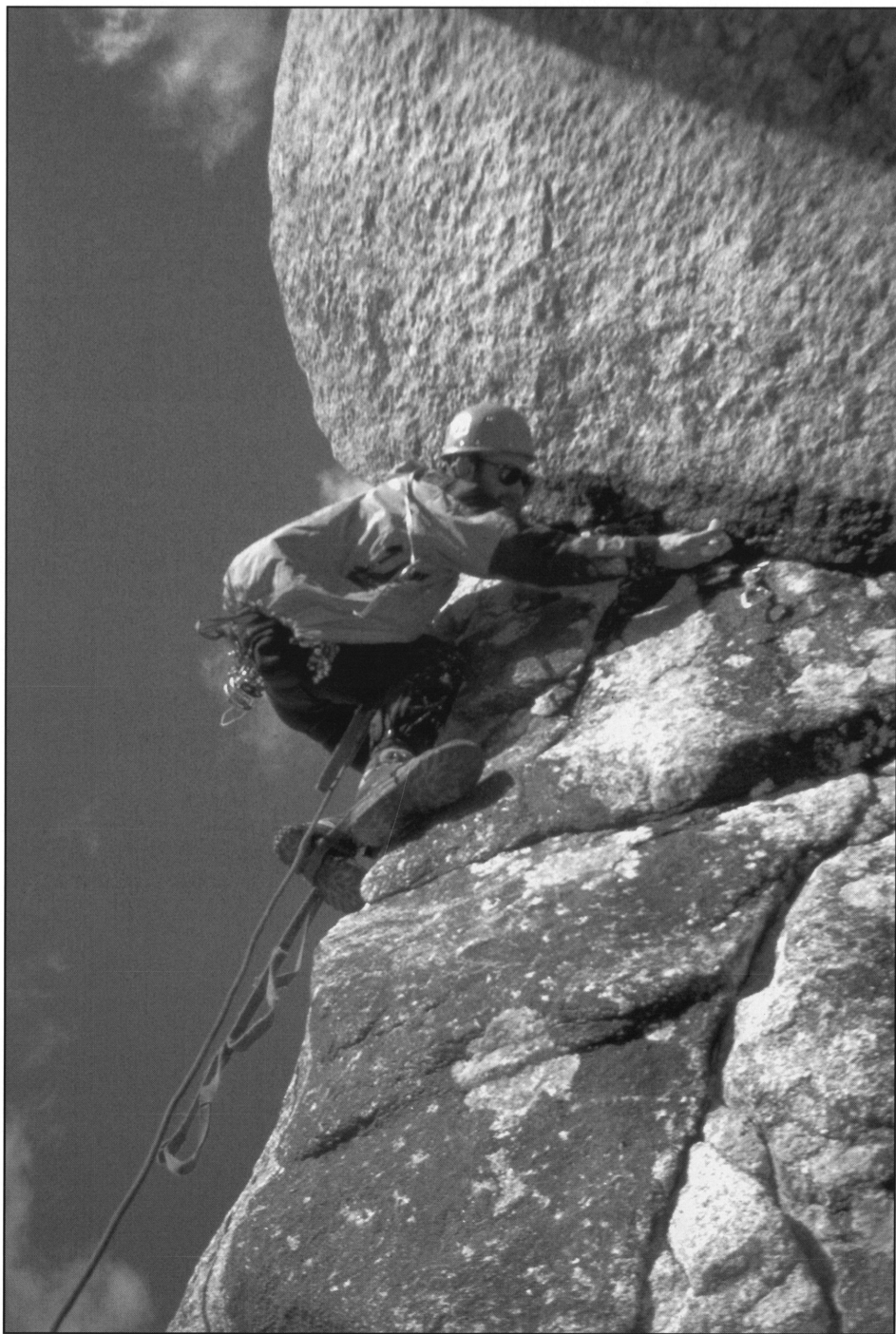
On the next pitch, Kennan followed the crack until it ran out. We needed to get over left and rejoin the systems that led to the fang roofs. Heads and bathooks got him to the end of the rope—where things did not look freeable.

“I don’t know, Kennan,” I said.





*Two bathook moves to a rivet later, Kennan Harvey steps into hard climbing on one of the climb's crux pitches. STEPH DAVIS*



*Harvey with industrial-strength Pakistani toilet paper on pitch 22.*

STEPH DAVIS

We decided to move our camp up, but leave the rope hanging and see how the next few pitches looked. We found them to be much more plausible, so Kennan was back in the hot seat.

"It's up to you, man," Seth said. "It's your pitch. If you're really psyched, we should go back down for it."

The next morning, Kennan pendulumed back and forth on the end of a 60-meter rope, searching for face holds and trying moves from his jumars. He pieced together a sporty sequence through hard face climbing, but there was no getting around a single, ten-foot section of blank granite near the end of the pitch. Mainly to entertain ourselves, Seth and I held an ethics committee from the portaledge while Kennan hand-drilled a few bolts below.

"Kennan! We decided you should chip it! Just kidding!"

"No, you should put anchors with really long slings in the blank spot! Just kidding!"

After displaying admirable restraint in ignoring the peanut gallery, Kennan ended up climbing dynamic 5.12, jumping into an aider for two bathook moves to a rivet, then jumping right back into hard free climbing mode to finish the pitch.

We were all inspired by Kennan's effort, and now truly committed to trying to free Shipton. Of course we were disappointed that our free attempt was foiled halfway up the wall, but we were still doing a new route on a high-altitude peak. We were there to climb as much as we could, and ten impossible feet weren't going to slow us down to aid mode. We hadn't been stopped by lack of ability, and the blank section was so short that we actually felt pretty lucky. If we could climb the rest of the route free, it wouldn't bother us a bit. In fact, the ten feet of aid were almost a statement of ethical purity; after all, there are various known ways of dispensing with ten impossible feet in the mountains. So no way were a couple of bathook moves on a 4,300-foot free route going to dissuade us from our mission—but those fang roofs still loomed ahead like massive question marks.

For the next few days we ignored them, accepting total uncertainty and focusing on climbing the clean, beautiful pitches in front of us. Twice we got down to our last quarts of water, only to be saved by small runnels on the route. Food supplies became scanty—we would eventually finish the route with two cans of sardines. We looked into the bolt bag one day and realized we'd only brought 18 bolts and a handful of hangers; fortunately, we would end up placing just eight. The only thing I could really count on was Seth's evening update about new uses for his toothbrush (nail cleaning, pot scrubbing), and his insistence that every desperate pitch he freed was merely 11a. Clearly we'd have to name the route for our cook's favorite comment: "Inshallah," God willing. If we ever got off this thing.

On our seventh day, we reached the fangs. The lower roofs formed giant, steep dihedrals against the face. Seth shouted down things like "Yosemite granite! Yeahhhhh!" as he pulled hard-looking moves toward the first roof—11a, no doubt.

Steep laybacks, fingerlocks, and stems allowed us to sneak around the roofs, and I could almost smell easy ground above. Seth aidpointed the final corner, running it out above RPs, tied-off knifeblades, and a pecker, and allowed that it might be 11+. It was starting to look like we could do this thing—until we reached the final roof crack.

We aided through water and slime, then retreated back to the portaledge to ponder the problem. Ten feet of blank granite in the middle of a 5.12 pitch was one thing; having to aid an entire pitch just because it was wet was quite another. I started to get depressed. Luckily, though we were slim on food, water and bolts, we had a mega-surplus of ultra-absorbent Pakistani toilet paper. We woke before dawn, juggled to the roof before the water really cut loose with icemelt from above, and wiped and sutured the mess into a free-climbable state. Our whoops of victory dwindled off as we realized that the next pitch, a flaring, mossy groove that was running like a water spout, was even wetter and harder. And we were almost out of toilet paper!

*F.A. Steph Davis, Kennan Harvey, Seth Shaw*

hole count: 8

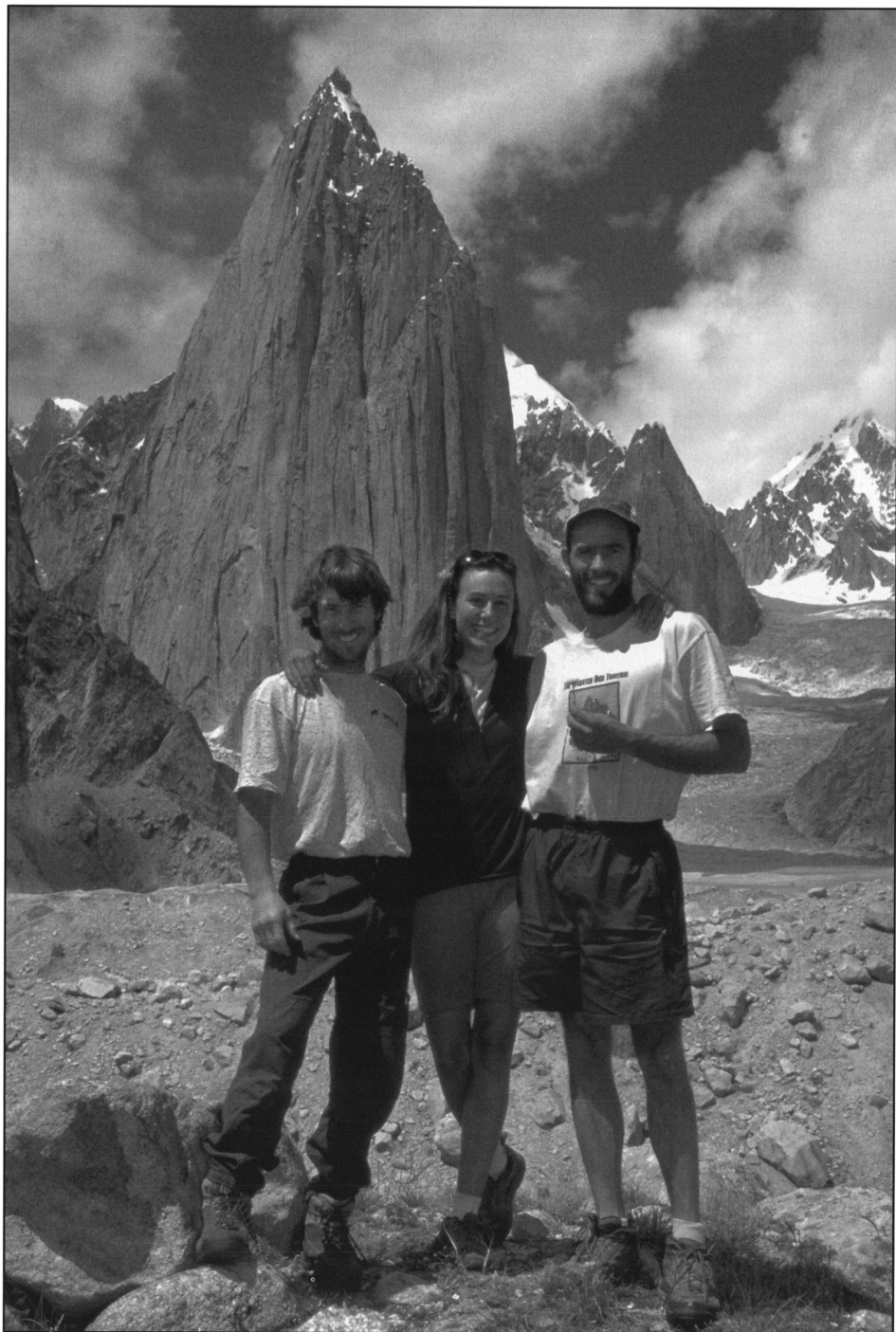
## (VII 5.11 A.4)

(VII 5.11 A.2 Wl 6)



**Inshallah (VII 5.12 A1)**

F.A. Steph Davis, Kennan Harvey, Seth Shaw



*Seth Shaw, Steph Davis and Kennan Harvey below the east face of Shipton Spire after the climb.*  
KENNAN HARVEY

Kennan cleaned for an hour, bravely sacrificing his hat and socks, and with a huge amount of willpower brought down the final, slimy crux pitch on his third try. We'd finally reached the promised land of continuous, low-angle cracks that led to the summit gully. Now, unless a big storm came in, we were truly in there.

On July 25, 12 days into our push, we woke at 3 a.m., juggled our lines, and blasted up the final 1,500-foot gully. Expecting difficult mixed or ice climbing near the top, we'd lugged three pairs of crampons and two ice tools up the entire wall, but found only easy rock all day instead. A final pitch of low-angle rock, and just a little snow wallowing, led to Shipton's summit. I sat on the summit at 19,700 feet, having climbed 2,500 feet that day, feeling happy but altitude-hammered. I was ready to get back to the green meadow and well-stocked kitchen tent.

For the next two days, we rapped on nut anchors and talked about food, wishing for such unobtainable delicacies as chocolate cake and donuts. Much to our amazement and delight, our beloved cook Ghulam had sent two porters and a ziplock full of, yes, fresh donuts, to meet us at the base of Shipton. Inshallah!

The final slog across the glacier to base camp was a festive event, since we knew we weren't going to have to make the trip again to carry back loads and the porters knew they were going to get historic tips. Ghulam greeted us with tears of joy, embraces for Kennan and Seth, a handshake for me, and more food. We were chowing hard in the meadow on July 28, having spent a total of 14 days on Shipton.

For the next week, I lounged in the sunny meadow trying to sort my thoughts about our route. I felt a bit dazed, and not quite sure what had hit me. It felt almost too fast, too smooth, if that can be possible. So much for foreshadowing.

Hainablak East Tower and the "Cat's Ears" sat enticingly across the glacier, but they would have to wait for someone else. Shipton stood just as proudly, but the magnetic attraction had been severed; I was freed, even more completely than the route. Our climb had reminded me that bringing an open perspective to a project can significantly affect the style and difficulty of the ascent, and that the "best style" is the one that leaves you the most content. It's all in the eyes, the mind and the heart.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Pakistan Karakoram

NEW ROUTE: *Inshallah* (VII 5.12 A1, 4,300 feet) on the southeast face of Shipton Spire (a.k.a. Hainablak Central Tower, 19,700 feet), July 13-27, Steph Davis, Kennan Harvey, Seth Shaw