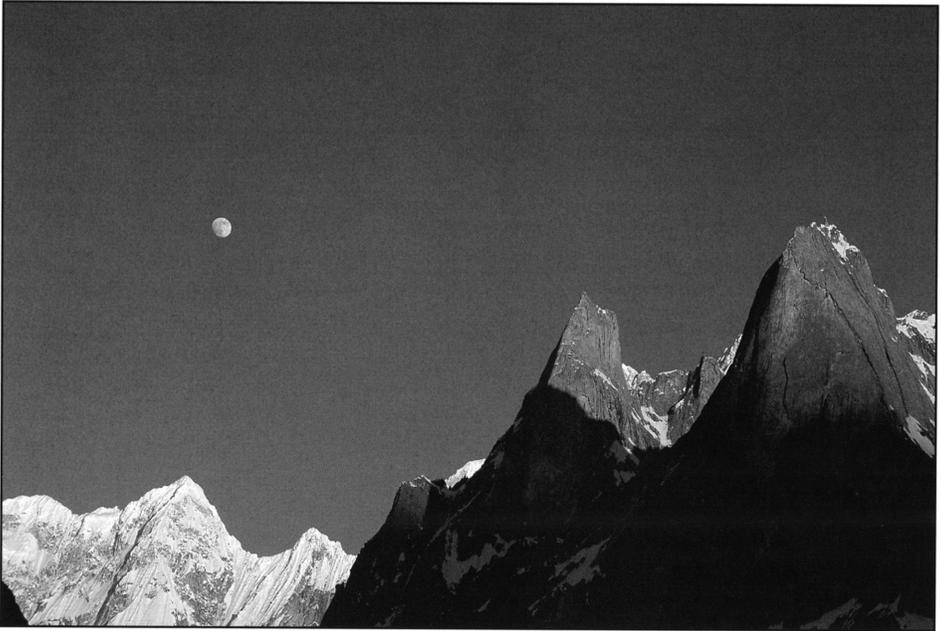


Modern Alpinism in the Karakoram

Collecting climbing's overlooked jewels

by Luca "Rampikino" Maspes, *Italy*



Moonrise over K6, Fathi Brakk and Parhat Brakk, Charakusa Valley, Pakistan. Recent expeditions have foregone traditional objectives like K6 in favor of lower rock pillars. GALEN ROWELL

There are many kilometers between Alaska and Pakistan, but in the month of July, the two places were extremely close together, almost connected in the sphere of my dreams. I had to make a decision where to go, and the airlines didn't allow me much time to sort out my doubts. On June 29, I boarded a plane with the conviction of having made the right choice: I was going close to my childhood dreams, close to the highest mountains in the world. No longer did I dream of K2 or Everest, however, but of raising the flag of what the weekend warrior calls "modern alpinism:" no permits, no specific projects, no information at all.

Three days later, after the normal routine of approaching the mountains, we reach the Chamonix of the Karakoram, the capital of alpinism: dusty Skardu. With me are the Karakoram veteran and my partner from Patagonian adventures Maurizio Giordani, Natale Villa, and the very young Mattia Locatelli. We are in good hands. Two of the most famous alpine guides in Pakistan, Little Karim and Rozi Ali, advise us to forget our objective, Amin Brakk. As an alternative, they suggest an area "like the Trango Towers." Ali's finger stops a little beneath the words "Charakusa Glacier," and all of a sudden my eyes start to shine. On

the somewhat rough map I can almost imagine a dream-like granite, and for some minutes I am able to forget the torment of the previous week that ate away at my stomach.

After three jeep transfers and almost 20 near-miss landslides, we arrive at Hushe, a chaotic village with hidden roads that end at the foot of mountains. Karim receives us in his home, and while he's trying to make us comfortable, I begin to ask him a thousand questions about where we're going and whether we'll find the Eldorado of rock that yesterday I was convinced I'd found.

The morning light that follows is accompanied by a ringing of voices. I wake up excited to begin my first day with the porters and thus celebrate the end of the motorized travel. Three days of easy approach—a piece of cake when compared to the steep approaches of my central Alps—and suddenly, in less than an hour, dozens of towers and pillars leap out at us with an unprecedented violence. From porter to porter, in an English ever more contorted, we succeed in understanding a bit more. We recognize Beatrice, climbed the previous year by a British expedition, but either my English gets totally lost, or the porters only know one word, for everything else is called unclimbed. To some climbers this word means danger; to me it means paradise.

Maurizio is the first one to move from base camp, and he decides to extend his “walk” for a good number of hours, climbing an unclimbed peak. In the meantime, he decides what will come the following day. He has found our target.

We start at dawn with our guide and a porter to get closer to a splendid rock tower that sits sublimely at the top of a long couloir. Its name is Cobra Peak, or at least that's what Little Karim calls it. Without delay, I start to climb at over 5000 meters on solid granite while Natale belays and Maurizio films us with our new digital camcorder. Mattia, meanwhile, waits for us in the couloir below.

I climb a bit slowly, still affected by the lack of acclimatization and the Pakistani cigarettes. I'm already smiling, though, at the idea that in a few hours we will touch the fabulous summit of this unclimbed peak. Optimistic? Well, there aren't any clouds to talk about, and even less wind. . . . A third of the route for each of us, with difficulties enough for this altitude.

The final slabs are pure joy for Natale, who finally screams at us that there's nothing left to climb. He plays a cruel joke on me, yelling down that he has found a Coca Cola can. Maurizio closes his eyes, keeping the joke that Natale has dreamed about for a year. I climb the last four meters in a state of delusion and desperation. Summit. But I see the 5400-meter smile on Natale's face: no cans of Coke in sight for thousands of kilometers. Two days after our arrival, the nightmare of not climbing enough and not having a “good expedition” is already gone, the first route and the first summit already under our belts.

It has been 36 hours since the first adventure on the wall, and only now do I realize I'm not in Patagonia. A damned hot sun, ever-free from clouds, torments us while we look for the next target. We get to the base of Fathi Brakk, the huge granite tower that attracts Maurizio.

“Let's take the bivouac gear,” he says. “I don't think we'll manage it in a day.” Good words from a man who has climbed for 25 years. We leave base camp the following morning and after four hours of approach, we “walk” an extra two up a steep icy couloir before deciding to leave all unnecessary gear—sleeping bags, stove, food, heavy clothing—and go for it. Take it in a day, or leave it.

We then start a race against time that will stop brusquely at half-height on the wall with two pitches of shattered rock. Delicate climbing is mandatory for Natale and Maurizio. They are occupied with a mix of aid and free climbing that is literally terrifying. The terrain kicks back a little, which allows us to speed up, but the afternoon

advances. We watch each others' faces, hoping to not have to be the first to utter the painful words, "Let's turn back." Instead, another hour goes by before our heroes declare, "A mountain like this is worth the suffering of an open bivouac." Now at least I know what we'll be up against!

Twelve, 13, 14 pitches, and the summit never arrives. We bid the sun farewell 60 meters from the top. This time I got it right, I tell myself as I hole up in my Gore-Tex suit, noting the slightly preoccupied look on Maurizio's face as he zips into his light fleece. Three cigarettes for me, while Natale fixes his gaze on the tiny dot of light 1000 meters below where Mattia is undoubtedly organizing his dinner. We await the dawn.

After nine hours, our open bivouac above 5400 meters is starting to get annoying, and damn cold. But when Masherbrum is illuminated by the sun, we yell, "Let's finish this route!"

The torture is over. I get up like a Ferrari racing car and sort out every kind of cam, nut and pin for the summit pitches. With my body still trying to wake up, I set out up the final pitch. It's always when you expect easy and warm rock that you get overhanging, cold and difficult pitches—and indeed, that's what I find: the hardest pitch of the route.

I arrange the belay, and with a yell I wake up Natale, who is finally getting sun. A final dozen meters and Fathi Brakk (or "Charakusa Tower," as we will later baptize it) is entirely beneath our feet. There's nothing more to say, nothing more to climb. We can only go down.

We rappel for the entire day without knowing where we will wind up, dreaming of Italian chapati, "K2" cigarettes and Pakistani tea, then drag the ropes (or the ropes drag us) down the glacier, collecting the heavy haulbag that proved to be useless along the way. When we get to base camp, I simply crash on the floor of my tent and sleep very deeply, dreaming of new mountains. I wake up one morning, realizing it has been two days since the climb. Oh, Patagonia, how I enjoyed all those days of bad weather during which I couldn't do anything other than rest!

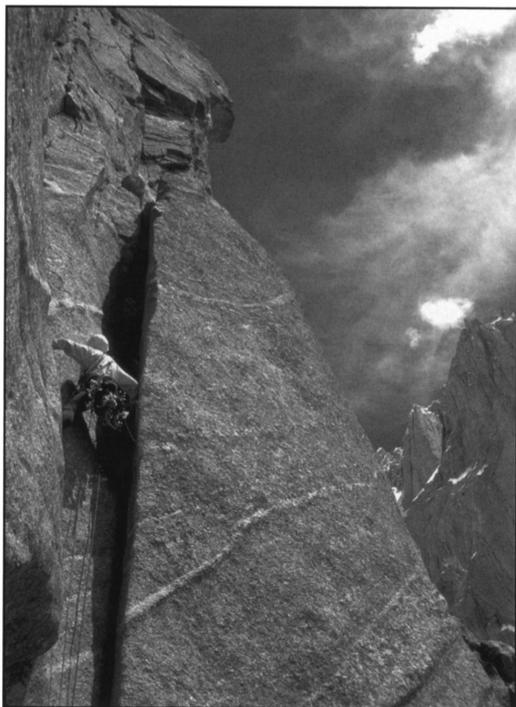
We've been here one week, and already the expedition could end, and we would return triumphant to our Alps with two new lines on unclimbed peaks. Maurizio actually does leave; he must go back to his business in Italy. For a few days, thank God, the weather turns bad, so I can rest more and, in the meantime, look forward to my classic annual solo blitz.

The Dog's Knob awaits me, but on the morning of the designated day, I stare at Mattia, who is supposed to help me on the approach. My selfishness abates. I simply can't help but say, "Would you like to climb with me?" Mattia is like a rocket: two minutes and 23 seconds later, he's finished packing, harness and climbing shoes included. One thousand meters higher, I remind Mattia what a "boy" of his age is getting on his 17th birthday with a new route in the Karakoram. The only bad part of the day is a storm that forces us down, but not before we have joined a line established previously by the first ascensionists of this marvelous tower of granite.

Ten more days, and ten more days of rock. We attempt a pillar on K7 and on our return to base camp we see new faces. They are Americans Conrad Anker, Peter Croft and Galen Rowell. They too are collecting new lines in this universe of virgin peaks. The one with the biggest pack of all—a pack loaded with more than just film—seems to be Galen. We agree to go with him to a vertical wall half a kilometer high that boasts more than a thousand dihedrals and cracks. Decidedly inspiring.

"He likes cracks, this Yosemite veteran, don't you think, Natale?" I ask. Only two days to go before our return to Italy, and we're ready to tie in afresh with this Italian-American alliance.





Natale Villa on Iqbal's Wall. GALEN ROWELL

We don't need to look for an obvious line. The first dihedral is good. Sun, t-shirts, more than 100 photos from one of the best photographers on the planet and a ton of jams: the Pakistan dream unfolds with each pitch, each more difficult and each better, accompanied by the best rock we've seen on the trip. Even the last pitch appears to have been placed there on purpose: it is the hardest and the most beautiful of all.

"OK, Luca, good pitch. 5.11a, I think. I'm very tired. . . . Now to the summit?" asks Galen.

"But we're already on the summit, Galen. Look! Here there's no top, just a very long ridge." The exhaustion of the conquering photographer seems to have all but disappeared, and our companion abandons the rope and gear as he goes searching for the true summit. I look at Natale and snort, glance at the deteriorating weather and get worried. We can't leave Galen alone (or at least we

can't leave him alone on the summit), so we begin our pursuit of this Californian who appears mad about the top. A toy train of alpinists runs after each other without ropes up and down tiny towers along the ridge.

At a certain point, having discovered for the umpteenth time he is not on the highest tower, Galen announces in defeat, "Finish. This is not the summit."

"OK, Galen," we say. "Let's go down. Tonight will be the last dinner at base camp. They've prepared Italian food for us, we can bet on that."

Suddenly, the expedition of dreams is over. . . .

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Charakusa Area (K7 Base Camp), Pakistan Karakoram

NEW ROUTES: The Northeast Couloir (IV 5.8) of "Gemelli Peaks" (ca. 5000m), July 6, Maurizio Giordani; the East Spur (V 5.10a A1, 450m) of Cobra Peak (ca. 5400m), July 7, Maurizio Giordani, Luca Maspes, Natale Villa; the West-Northwest Face (V+ 5.10d A3 mixed, 900m) of "Charakusa Tower" (Fathi Brakk, ca. 5600m), July 10-11, Maurizio Giordani, Luca Maspes, Natale Villa; the South Face (V 5.10b, 250m) of the Dog's Knob (ca. 5400m) (new route that finishes on the English Route, without summit), July 17, Luca Maspes, Mattia Locatelli; Italian-American Route (V 5.11a, 450m) on "Iqbal's Wall" (ca. 5000m), Luca Maspes, Galen Rowell, Natale Villa