The Karakoram

Whatever your game, the Karakoram has it

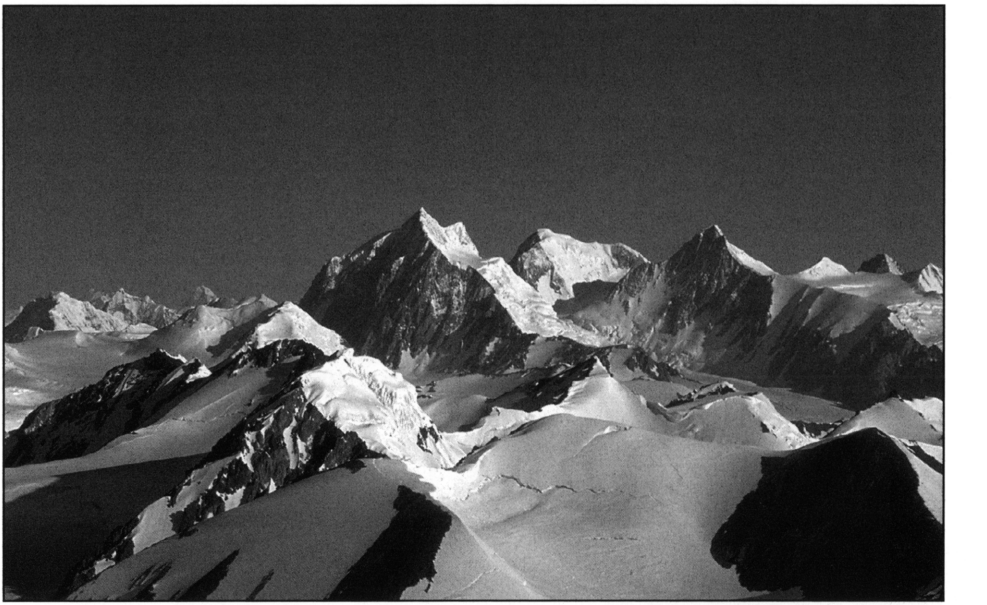
STEPHEN VENABLES, *England*

The Editor asked me to do something on "modern trends" on the smaller Karakoram peaks—a survey of the "small is beautiful" antidote to big-number ticking, with an emphasis on some of the astonishing rock climbs achieved in recent years. Fine, I thought, except that I know little about high-standard rock climbing and there are, I think, many other appealing aspects to the Karakoram. So, I want to discuss the whole gamut of mountain wandering, from ski tours to A5 nailing, and I am going to interpret "modern" very loosely, starting in the mid-1970s, when I was first thinking about going to the Karakoram myself.

In my case, inspiration came from many sources: those stunning photos in the Bullock/Workman and De Phillippi books, Shipton's *Blank on the Map* accounts of the 1937 expedition, Scott Russell's reminiscences of further wanderings with Shipton on the 1939 expedition, Trevor Braham's *Himalayan Odyssey* and Galen Rowell's photos from his first visit in 1975. Then, sitting in a Chamonix bar one evening in 1976, I heard Dave Wilkinson talking about a trip he had done the previous summer with Rob Collister and Rob Ferguson. It was a tale of crossing passes, heading up unknown glaciers, camping beside exquisite lakes, and reaching previously untrodden summits. The climbing was not outrageously difficult, but it was good solid alpine stuff. The summits were only in the upper 5000-meter bracket, but they were amongst 7000- and 8000er giants and the world's greatest glaciers outside the polar regions. It just sounded like a fantastic landscape to explore.

Between 1979 and 1987, I spent six summers in that landscape, ranging from the Naltar Valley near Gilgit, in the west, to the Rimo Massif in the east. The record was not brilliant, with two failed attempts on the nearly 8000-meter summit of Kunyang Kish and a failed attempt to make the first ascent of Rimo I. But, when not failing on the big summits, I covered some interesting ground and climbed some memorable smaller peaks. Most of them were snow and ice jobs, but the Solu Tower, near the head of the Biafo Glacier, gave some wonderful rock and mixed climbing. I would love to go back and try some harder routes in the area, but at the time, in 1987, the Solu Tower was a good compromise between old-fashioned wandering and serious technical climbing, done with one rope and a handful of nuts, during the course of a long glacial journey that covered some of the ground explored by Shipton's 1937 and 1939 expeditions.

The great thing about this type of climbing is that, in the Pakistan-controlled sector of the Karakoram at least, it can be done cheaply. Provided you are not heading into a restricted border area, and provided you stick below 6000 meters, you don't have to pay peak fees, get permits, placate liaison officers, and cope with all the other hassles that deter so many potential explorers. On our 1987 trip, we stopped for just one day in Islamabad to buy food, headed straight up the Karakoram Highway to Skardu, and a day later were on our way, with eight locals helping carry the baggage for the first stretch of our journey, up the Biafo Glacier. Thereafter we were on our own, free to wander wherever our fancy took us. Minimal planning gave us a framework for maximum spontaneity.

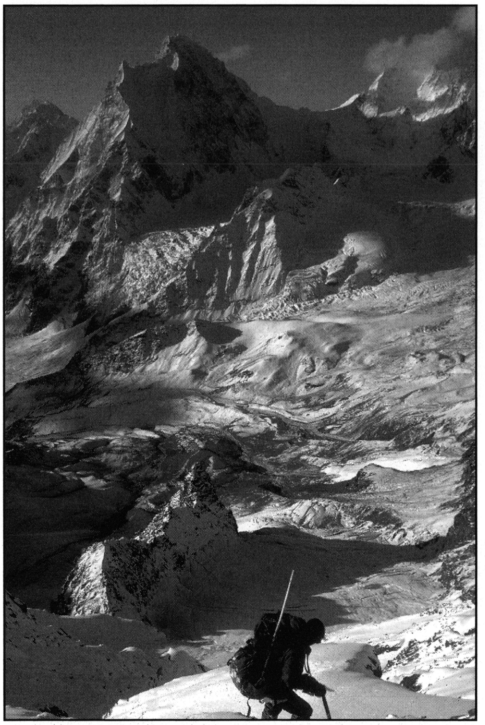


The Rimo group of peaks as seen from the east. HARISH KAPADIA

We found snowshoes invaluable for the upper glaciers. Skis would have been more fun; in the early summer, Karakoram terrain lends itself to big ski tours. The first was Galen Rowell's 1980 trip with Kim Schmitz, Dan Asay, and Ned Gillette that linked the big four glaciers—Siachen, Baltoro, Biafo and Hispar. This had to be an official "expedition" with the absurdity of a non-skiing liaison officer who tried to monitor events from a stationery base near Skardu. By approaching the Indian-claimed Siachen from the Pakistan-controlled Bilafond La, with a permit from the Pakistan government, Rowell's team became one of several who unintentionally helped to give India grounds for her subsequent military occupation of the Siachen. Politics aside, it was a fantastic mountaineering achievement, verging on the masochistic.

In more recent years, the British climber David Hamilton has led several similar, but shorter, trips across the Hispar-Biafo Divide. In 1989, Claude Pastre led a French team on a brilliant three-week continuous tour that linked the Biafo, Sim Gang, Nobande Sobande, Chiring, Sarpo Laggo, and Baltoro glaciers. To get the most continuous snow cover, these trips really need to be done early, in April. That means very cold temperatures and the probability of unstable powder on steep slopes. Add to those restraints the need to keep pulkas to a pullable weight, and the scope for tacking actual climbs onto your ski tour seems limited. However, later in the season, hiring porters to get your gear to a higher snowline, you could combine the two, as Giangi Angeloni's Italian team did in July, 1999, when they used skis to access several climbs around Snow Lake, including the first ascent (5.9 A1 55° ice) of the ca. 5800-meter Tarci Peak.

Apart from the Indian armed forces, no one since Rowell's 1977 party has used skis in the East Karakoram, although the potential here is enormous. There is also almost unlimited scope here for the climbing of small scale summits, but the only way of doing this legally is to be part of an official joint expedition with an Indian leader. This is what we did in 1985, joining Harish Kapadia for a memorable visit (the first in 57 years) to the Rimo Massif. While Victor



Dick Renshaw descending Sentinel North with Shani Peak and the Naltar Valley beyond.
STEPHEN VENABLES

Saunders and I failed on Rimo I (7385m), Jim Fotheringham and Dave Wilkinson made the first ascent of Rimo III (7233m). I mention this 7000er here because of the ad hoc, exploratory nature of Jim and Dave's ascent—done in a single push, onsight, crossing an unknown pass on the way—and because the expedition was a vehicle for all of us, British and Indian, to knock off smaller summits of around 6000 meters in the course of some extensive wanderings. Since then, Kapadia has returned many times to the Eastern Karakoram, taking friends to climb many other new summits. The peaks here are perhaps not quite as spectacular and architectural as those further west, and there is probably less immaculate rock, but if you are looking for wild country, with a feel of the endless spaces of Central Asia, this is a fantastic area to explore—provided you have time, money, and patience to cope with the vagaries of Indian military administration. (I should stress that, whatever the obstructions of the system as a whole, I have experienced much generosity and courtesy from individual officers and soldiers).

Back to the comparative freedom of the west. Other articles in this series are covering some of the brilliant achievements of official expeditions to peaks over 6000 meters, but on the lower summits there has also been a wealth of activity. Perhaps I am biased, but a lot of it, supported by the Mount Everest Foundation, seems to have been British—small groups of friends exploring side valleys above Hunza, looking round the back of Shimshal, heading up the massive Batura Glacier, or sticking to the gentler Naltar Valley, close to Gilgit. The latter is an example of perfect alpine-scale climbing in a grand setting, with huge summits like Rakaposhi looming in the west and the Himalayan bulk of Nanga Parbat on the southern horizon. Some of the summits, such as Sentinel, climbed by Trevor Braham's team in 1970, are not too difficult. Mehrbani, the peak whose ascent by Collister, Ferguson, and Wilkinson I mentioned at the start of this article, is a little harder. Shani is even more dramatic, although in 1986, Roger Everett and Guy Muhleman managed to find a comparatively easy hidden line to the summit. Subsequent British and Dutch teams have found harder routes to the summit—routes that in the European Alps would be given at least the fifth grade of TD (tres difficile).

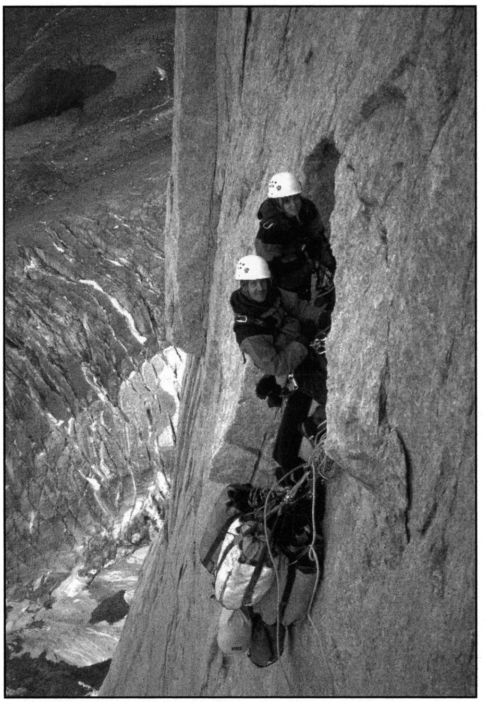
These are all fairly traditional snow/ice and mixed climbs—serious, but not cutting edge. The point I am making is that you can go and do wonderful things in the Karakoram without having to be a technical superstar. There is something for everyone. However, having said that, there are also rock formations which were bound sooner or later to attract the most skilled and ambitious. When access to the Pakistani sector began to free up in the mid-1970s,

the focus was inevitably on the big, obvious peaks. The first big superalpine rock climb was the Trango Nameless Tower, which had been in Joe Brown's mental filing cabinet ever since he saw it on the way to the Mustagh Tower in 1957. His dream was finally realized in 1976, with friends Boysen, Howell, and Anthoine. On the Biafo/Choktoi Divide, who could resist the challenge of the mighty Ogre and the Latoks? But then people began to look at the equally steep, dramatic satellite formations: row after row of deliciously spiky aiguilles too lowly to register on the lists of the Ministry of Tourism. In 1984, Galen Rowell and friends snatched up the delightful 5380-meter needle Lukpilla Brakk, providing a memorable front-cover image for this journal in the process. More recently, the Huber brothers have added some very hard rock climbs to the area, and in 1997 Maurizio Giordani and his Italian friends put up a fine route on the south face of the Ogre's Thumb (VII+ A3).

Peter Croft on his and Conrad Anker's 8,000-foot, 23-hour blitz of Spansar Brakk. GALEN ROWELL

The Hubers made a point of free climbing their new routes (also their intention on the bigger south buttress of the Ogre), as did Kennan Harvey and friends on the so-called Shipton Spire, near the Trango Towers. That deliberate emphasis on free climbing is interesting. When I was brought up on classic routes in the Alps, the prevailing ethic was that you climbed the route in big boots, with a rucksack on your back, as quickly and efficiently as possible. Most of the time you were climbing free because that was the most natural, enjoyable, and efficient way to move; but you thought nothing of pulling on the odd peg and standing in the occasional sling to speed progress. That, by and large, was the approach that we Europeans (and most Americans, I think) took with us to the Greater Ranges. Until recently, that is. Now it seems there are people with the determination—and technical ability—who set out deliberately to create a purely free route. Sometimes this is a rather artificial affair, involving much jugging, placing of protection bolts, dusting off of holds, rehearsing of moves, and general pissing about. To an outsider like me, who could admittedly never do the moves anyway, this seems a pretty tedious exercise. Far more appealing, to my way of thinking, is the real natural mountaineers who can both climb very hard moves and link them in one continuous, genuinely alpine-style, push.

Two examples spring to mind, the first in the Hushe region near Kaphalu. Pat Littlejohn, arguably Britain's greatest exploratory rock climber since Joe Brown, made some fantastic onsight ascents of new free routes in 1987. His best route, done with Mick Hardwick, was a great 1000-meter crack line up a rib with two pitches of British 6a and loads of 5a-5c, done



Sílvia Vidal and Pep Masip on the first ascent of Amin Brakk's Sol Solet. MIQUEL PUIGDOMÈNECH

completely "clean" with natural protection, on Ravens Pyramid (5200m). The hardest pitch was a smooth offwidth corner with no runners for 60 feet—"bloody terrifying," according even to Littlejohn.

Eleven years and many magnificent routes later, along came the awesome combination of Conrad Anker and Peter Croft in 1998. Their 23-hour non-stop ascent of an 8,000-foot ridge line on Spansar Brakk, carrying just one rope, a small rack, a couple of water bottles, and a few Power Bars, racing over difficulties up to 5.11a, is an inspiring example of what can be done if you combine rock-climbing virtuosity with mountaineering know-how.

Others prefer the sustained slog of the big-wall approach. In recent years, a few British climbers have adopted this essentially American habit for their annual holiday. In 1997, Louise Thomas and Twid Turner climbed with their respective female and male teams on two parallel lines up the stunning 800-meter southeast face of Beatrice, using portaledges to work their way up hard free and aid features. In this ultimate playground, other walls abound, such as Fathi Brakk and the stupendous, Eiger-sized, 1500-meter west face of Amin Brakk, first climbed in 1999 by two parallel routes, *Czech Express* and *Sol Solet*. The latter seems to have been a particularly impressive endurance test for the Catalans Pep Masip, Miquel Puigdomenech, and Sílvia Vidal. They spent 32 days continuously on the wall, overcoming difficulties up to A5 and 6c+. What impressed me about Vidal's account in the last *AAJ* was her comment that they left nothing on the route other than their rappel anchors and that they only placed 31 bolts, 27 of them on one single blank section.

All these peaks lie conveniently just below the 6000-meter watershed. Often, though, heights are uncertain. Visiting climbers often report reaching a summit of "ca. 6000 meters" to avoid hassle in Islamabad. Or, if they have climbed a mapped summit known to be higher, without permits and attendant liaison officer, they just keep quiet. Thus we had the comical situation of the spectacular fang of Laila (6200m) being climbed at least three times before its "official" paid-up first ascent in 1996. The irony is that there is not a huge qualitative difference between a peak of 5999 meters and one of 6200 meters rising from the same glacier basin.

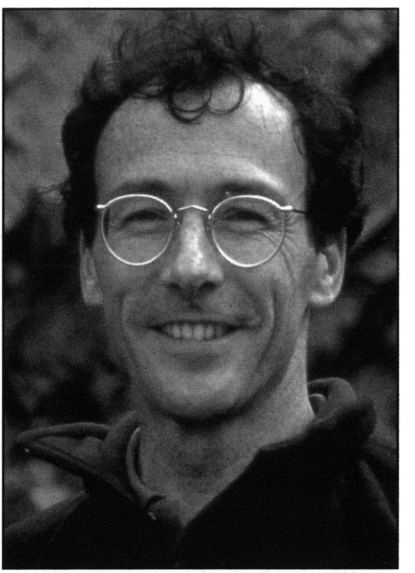
One can understand the Pakistan government wanting to encourage a flow of foreign money into the country, but that is exactly what small unofficial parties create. They stay in hotels, buy food supplies, pay for road transport, and even the most spartan neo-Tilman hires local labor at some stage. They bring money and trade directly to the mountain regions. The official "expedition" to a 6000-meter-plus peak does not necessarily bring any more trade to

the locals. The only economic justification for the complications imposed by the Ministry of Tourism is centered in Islamabad: expeditions have to spend money in the capital while sorting out paperwork, their peak fees help pay civil servants' salaries, the requirement for a liaison officer provides diversions for bored army soldiers.... None of this, as far as I can see, has any relevance to the people that actually live in Baltistan, Hunza, and Shimshal. In fact, if anything, it deters all those parties who might want to come and try one of the higher peaks, but who cannot face all the obstruction.

If the authorities are really serious about helping the local infrastructure, controlling environmental degradation, safeguarding the interests of porters, and attempting all those other worthy objectives that we all agree with, why don't they raise the money more simply? Why not deregulate all peaks up to 7000 meters (all peaks up to 8000 meters!) and charge a standard, modestly priced, climbing/trekking fee for every person who wants to trek, ski, climb, and generally wander around this magnificent landscape? If the money were collected locally—in Gilgit and Skardu (or Chitral for the Hindu Kush and Hindu Raj)—and administered locally, with visible results, few visitors would object to paying, say, $150 to have a mountain permit stamped in their passport.

That kind of thinking is probably complete anathema to the professional paper-pusher, and the present Byzantine system of elaborately controlled access to higher peaks is probably here to stay for a while. However, for the time being, we can all be grateful that, in the Pakistani sector of the Karakoram at least, there is still a wealth of peaks to climb, new routes to explore, and fantastic journeys to make without ever stepping over the 6000-meter mark. Regardless of what the officials think or do, it is up to us, the visitors, to safeguard that wealth—looking after our porters properly, bringing stoves and fuel so that no more trees are ripped up for firewood, taking all our trash home with us, removing our ropes, and refraining from the urge (felt, apparently, by a recent party at the Ogre base camp) to decorate boulders with bolts and egotistical graffiti.

Stephen Venables went to the Karakoram six times between 1979 and 1987, attempting two 7000ers, Kunyang Kish and Rimo I, unsuccessfully, but making first ascents of several smaller peaks. Elsewhere in the Himalaya, he has made first ascents of Kishtwar-Shivling and Panch Chuli V and put up new routes on Kusum Kanguru and Everest. He has written six books, including the Banff prizewinner *Himalaya Alpine Style*; his most recent, *A Slender Thread*, is published in the U.S. by Balliett and Fitzgerald, along with *Everest: Alone at the Summit*. Most of his climbing these days tends to be snatched days of pleasure while traveling to meetings of the Polartec Challenge advisory board, which he chairs, or doing film and television work. However, he hopes to get his teeth back into something Himalayan before too long.



Stephen Venables. MIKE BANKS