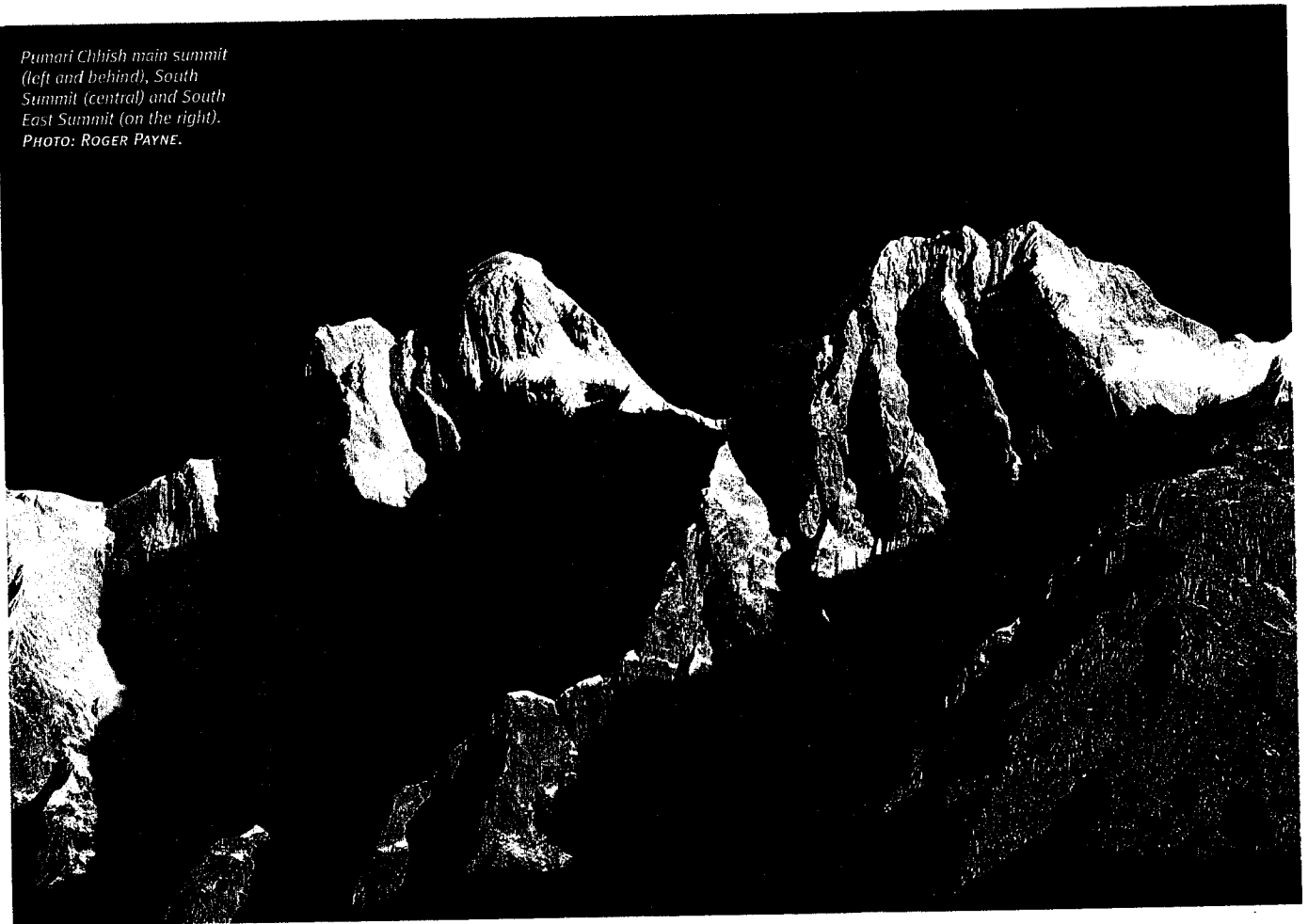


Pumari Chhish

Expedition

1999

*Pumari Chhish main summit (left and behind), South Summit (central) and South East Summit (on the right).
PHOTO: ROGER PAYNE.*



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EXPEDITION MEMBERS

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Julbo
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Petzl
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Other Support

PIA
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TIME CHART

August	19	Depart Manchester
	20	Arrive Islamabad 4am. Briefing at Ministry. Start road journey midday - arrive Besham 8pm
	21	Besham - Gilgit - Alalibad - Karrimabad (Hunza Valley)
	22	Karrimabad - arrange porters, food etc
	23	Karrimabad - Hispar (by jeep). Start walk-in to Falolingkish 3500m
	24	Falolingkish - Dachingan 3900m
	25	Dachingan - Jutmal - Yutmaru Glacier. Establish BC c.4300m
	26	BC - sort out kit
	27	BC - ABC c.4600m
	28	ABC - recce of upper glacier c.4700m
September	29	ABC - recce start of route to c.5100m - return to BC
	30	BC rest day
	31	BC - pack gear for attempt on route
	01	BC - ABC (bad weather)
	02	ABC - BC (bad weather)
	03	BC - stuck in bad weather
	04	BC - ABC
	05	Start route - ascent to c.5400m
	06	Stuck at first camp in bad weather
	07	c.5400 and ascent to c.5900m and open bivouac - snow
	08	c.5900m and ascent to c.6200m - heavy snow
	09	c.6200 - snow and avalanches
10	Descent back to c.5400m	
11	Descent back to BC	
12	BC	
13	BC	
14	Start walk-out to Bitanmal	
15	Bitanmal - Hispar Village - Karrimabad	
16	Karrimabad - Besham	
17	Besham - Islamabad	
18	Islamabad - debriefing at Ministry	
19	Depart Islamabad 8am	
20	Arrive UK	

Introduction

Despite lying close to the Hispar-Biafo Glacier trekking route the Pumari Chhish group has seen little attention from climbers. The group has three summits, with the main North summit (7492m) being the only one to have had an ascent. This was made by the Hokkaido Alpine Association expedition of 1997 taking a route from the Yazghil Glacier and ascending the North Ridge and using some 2,300 metres of fixed rope. The South Summit (7350m) and South East Summit (6850m) are unclimbed, and it was the aim of this expedition to make the first ascent of the South Summit via the South Face which rises from the Yutmaru Glacier - a side branch of the Hispar Glacier.

A large format photograph of the Pumari Chhish group appears in 'The Karakoram' (plate 45) by Shiro Shirahata and also in 'On The Edge' magazine (issue 78). Although there appear to be many potential lines on the face, there is high objective danger from high bands of seracs. A striking mixed spur drops from the left of the South summit, and it was a line on this feature that seemed the safest objective.

Getting to the Mountain

The original idea to apply for a permit for Pumari Chhish only came after an earlier application for a peak in India had been rejected. The lateness of our application, and the tense political situation between Pakistan and India made it seem unlikely that we would be successful. However, with the help of Nazir Sabir Expeditions and the Ministry of Tourism in Islamabad, we obtained a permit within a month and were able to leave the UK in mid-August.

Having employed an agent, most of the preparations for the expedition had been made before our departure. This made it possible to arrive in Islamabad, have a briefing at the Ministry of Tourism, and start the journey up the Karakoram Highway with our Liaison Officer and Cook on the same day. An air-conditioned van was provided for the journey, and Karrimabad (the capital of Hunza), was reached on the evening of only our second day in Pakistan. One day was spent in this town while negotiations over porter rates were undertaken with the local magistrate. The expedition then travelled by jeep up to Hispar village where porters were hired.

The walk-in to base camp took only two and a half days (23-25 August). There was some confusion with the porters about our intended destination, which led to a last minute re-negotiation of fees en route, but this was resolved fairly quickly. The confusion arose because while we had explained that we wanted to go to Pumari Chhish (the mountain), they had understood the Pumari Chhish Glacier (from which you can see the mountain). There is an established base camp on this glacier, but while the summit of the mountain is visible, you cannot easily gain access it. To climb on the south face, it is necessary to travel up the Yutmaru Glacier, the next glacier system to the east. This resulted in us agreeing to pay for an extra stage. The entire walk-in followed the established route of the Hispar-Biafo trek, and it was only the final kilometre along the Yutmaru glacier which deviated from this. The porters were wary of travelling any distance along the glacier and so base camp was established lower than would have been ideal, at c.4300m. Any future expeditions would be advised to employ porters for an additional day and place base camp higher, although this would probably mean providing additional porter equipment. Payment for porters was calculated at 7 stages to base camp at 330 R/s per stage, plus 200 R/s for equipment.

Reconnaissance and Acclimatisation

The first trip out of base camp on the 28th was to do a reconnaissance up to the head of the Yutmaru Glacier. The main glacier splits into three large branches, with many interesting and difficult objectives being apparent. Pumari Chhish lies in the West branch which, as well as many other un-named and impressive peaks, also has the East Face of Kunyang Chhish at its head. It

was hoped that it would be possible to acclimatise on an easier peak from which to get a good view of the South Face of Pumari Chhish, but all of the peaks in this glacial basin either have difficult approaches, or routes that are severely threatened by huge bands of seracs. Acclimatisation was also made difficult because of the level nature of the glacier system. The journey from base camp to the advance base camp site was over 6-7km in distance, but with a height gain of only 300m in altitude. An ABC site was put in the centre of the glacier at c.4600, and a first excursion from this point was to the top of the glacier to beneath the East Face of Kunyang Chhish making it possible to look at the different aspects of the South face of Pumari Chhish. The main part of the face sits very high, above a central snow basin. There is unfortunately a lot of distance and height to gain in order to get established in a position from which to start the technical climbing, and working out the best line took some time.

The base of the South Face is split by a large rock buttress. Above this is a snow and then mixed arete which runs up and into the side of the main feature of the face - a huge mixed buttress which drops down from the left of the summit. It seemed that a first camp on a col in the snow arete would be both safe and a good altitude for acclimatisation. The lower rock buttress is very steep and broken in places, and to save time it was decided to try and climb to either side to get to the first camp site. To the right of the buttress is the most direct route, but this takes the form of a steep and very broken icefall which leads up to a snow basin beneath the face. Sitting above this approach are two major bands of seracs. To the left of the rock buttress are easier angled snow slopes, but which are also threatened by two serac bands. After observing the face for some time it was decided to approach from the left as this would be the faster option.

On the 29th we left advance base camp at around 4am and within an hour were at the foot of the mountain. As we approached a massive avalanche released from the seracs on the East Face of Kunyang Chhish. This became airborne and travelled nearly 2 kilometres, enveloping us and the lower slopes of Pumari Chhish in the high-speed blast of ice particles. Such avalanches were to be a fairly frequent phenomenon. There were no such problems from the left-hand serac bands on Pumari Chhish however, and by keeping as close to the rock buttress as possible we found a fairly good line to the start of the technical climbing. In order to reach the snow col it was necessary to climb through short bands of granite slabs and then an ice slope above. We made a start on the slabs, until it was possible to see that the route above was fairly apparent, and then it was decided to descend so we could return across the lower slopes before the heat of the afternoon.

That reconnaissance had decided the approach, and it seemed that a route could be made by following the arete to the main mixed buttress. We descended back to base camp immediately to prepare for the summit attempt.

Summit Attempt

Time and logistics indicated that it was probably only possible to have one good attempt on the mountain. We estimated that we would need possibly 6 days to reach the summit and then another 2 days for the descent, so we headed back up to advance base camp on the 1st September. Unfortunately it snowed heavily all afternoon and night, and late into the next morning. With all the slopes being freshly loaded it was decided to head back to base camp. Another day was spent there waiting for the snow to settle, and then we returned to advance base camp on the 4th September.

On the 5th we left advance base camp (c.4600m) at 2am and retraced the route we had taken on the previous trip. The lower slabs gave very interesting climbing, with the most difficult sections at about HVS standard. The ice slope above was of very variable consistency and gave some worrying moments, particularly when it started to snow in the afternoon. We exited off the ice slope higher up than intended, so establishing a tent site entailed a couple of hours chopping out a ledge. This was a safe site though (c.5400m). We were stuck there throughout the next day as it continued to snow.

On the 7th it dawned clear again and we set off at first light. We started on the first of the rock steps on the arete, but it soon became apparent that this was rather broken, with descents which would be very time consuming. Keen to get to the main part of the face we decided to partly retrace our steps and traverse right into the central snow basin and then to climb out of this onto a hanging ice field (The Shroud). We were in the full heat of the sun by the time we got into the snow basin and there followed a couple of trying hours, ploughing through deep snow and avalanche debris with serac avalanches on the right of the face. Eventually we reached the bergschrund and above this the conditions leading to the Shroud were excellent on 50° to 60° ice slopes. By 4pm we were at c.5900m and looking for another camp site. Unfortunately there seemed to be nowhere for a tent, so the night was spent sitting on a small ledge chopped out of the ice. It snowed again, and it proved impossible to cook or drink as cascades of spindrift poured over us intermittently throughout the night.

It was not a good night and it was snowing heavily the next morning (8th) so we examined our options. Staying in the same place without shelter was not feasible, and going down seemed the most sensible course of action. However, just at the point when we had packed up all the gear and threaded the ropes for the first abseil, the sun came out and the sky was suddenly an unbroken blue. Optimism reasserted itself and we decided to press on a bit further. After only another four pitches however it was snowing again, and our position was rather precarious. Fortunately we managed to find a tiny snow arete on top of a rock wall and after another couple of hours had managed to chop a level platform large enough to get about two thirds of the tent on. The tent pointed out from the face on the small arete and hung over on both sides, however by tying ourselves to a safety line we managed to fashion a reasonable shelter for the night. This was our high point at c.6200m, and as a campsite it would not be recommended for future attempts. As the snow continued through the night, avalanches started passing to the left and the right of the tent. As the snow continued into the next day, the avalanches got bigger and were eventually passing over the roof of the tent.

On the morning of the 10th we woke to a break in the weather and decided it was time to go down. By keeping to the avalanche runnels on the right side of the Shroud it was possible to abseil on reasonably safe ground, but the slopes out to the left were heavily loaded and it was a nerve wracking descent. We reached the safe snow col again in mid-afternoon and stopped there for the night and considered the potential for another fast attempt. It snowed yet again in the evening, and again the following day. We cleared the mountain and descended back to base camp.

End of the Expedition

During the summit attempt a considerable amount of snow had fallen lower down. Having returned to base camp and summoned the porters the last 2 days at base and the 2 days of the walk-out to Hispar, the weather was perfect. Looking at the line attempted, the route still seems technically feasible, but a different approach with camp sites would make another attempt easier (base camp could be situated higher on the Yutmaru Glacier). A very fast approach would be needed in order to climb the whole of the Shroud in one push so that a camp could be taken at the foot of the main buttress which would minimise the risk of avalanche conditions. From the high buttress the climbing looks considerably harder, but with much less danger from avalanches.

Accounts

Expenditure	Airfares & insurance	1460	Income	MEF	1000
	Equipment	780		BMC	2300
	Permit fees	1670		Personal	4062
	LO costs	367			
	Agent & pollution fee	360			
	Rations & fuel	501			
	Transport	374			
	Accommodation	342			
	Porters & cook	1425			
	First aid	83			
	TOTAL	7632		TOTAL	7362

Map of Hispar Glacier and Peaks

(From 'Karakoram Orographical Sketch Map – Sheet 1'. Published by the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research)

