

## **1993 Scottish Aling Glacier Expedition**

**Members:** Neil Wilson      Andy Forsyth  
16 Caird Drive      The Mount Veterinary Practice  
Partickhill      Malton  
Glasgow      North Yorkshire

## Expedition Report

The original objectives of our expedition were either a) several rock peaks on the south side of the Charakusa Glacier, SSE of K7 Base Camp or b) mixed/ice routes and general exploration in the upper Aling Glacier. As both these areas are approached from the roadhead at the village of Hushe, we had considerable flexibility in choosing which objective to go for.

Having spent the previous month taking a commercial trekking party up various of the Hushe valleys, I arrived back in Skardu on Thursday, 20th August. Andy arrived from Islamabad by plane on the morning of Monday the 24th, by which time I had sorted supplies for the expedition into porter loads and arranged the hire of a jeep. As the previous four weeks of weather had been very unsettled, we decided to set up base camp in the Aling rather than the Charakusa Glacier. The rationale behind this decision was that whilst the bad weather was equally likely to stop us climbing in either area, the Aling glacier offered more opportunities for general exploration. Also, rumour had it that a 25 member UIAA meet was heading for the Charakusa and we had not travelled to the Karakoram to be camped amongst crowds.

We travelled by jeep to Hushe on the 25th, a journey of six hours and best done in the cool of the morning. The jeep we hired from Mr. Aga Abbas of Skardu, a very reliable local contact who will also look after such tasks as fixing flights to Islamabad, buying food in the bazaar and storing surplus gear. The first of these services was to prove particularly useful on our return.

In Hushe we met up with our sirdar, as previously arranged, and walked into our base camp at 4100 metres on the east bank of the Aling Glacier, roughly level with where the upper east and west glaciers fork. Hushe has become increasingly busy and commercialised in the last few years, with occasional attendant porter problems. If you hire a good local sirdar with written references, you should have no difficulties. We reached base camp without incident, only the atrocious walking on the rubble of the glacier being worthy of note.

The walk-in and the first four days at base camp saw the best weather of the summer. However, as Andy had to acclimatise, we were unable to take advantage of this. After several exploratory day trips, we set off up the Upper East Aling Glacier with four days of food, intending to attempt the peak to the north of Hunchback Peak (see RAF Expedition 1961). Unfortunately, bad weather thwarted us. We were able to ascertain two things. Firstly, the icefall which the RAF team went up in 1961 in their approach to Hunchback Peak is now virtually impassable, even the apparently easy ground below the steep section being dangerously crevassed. Secondly, the peaks the RAF named Portcullis I and II are far more complex and difficult than their report would imply.

We returned to base camp after three days and waited for the weather to improve. It did not, but we set off up the Upper West Aling Glacier anyway, this time with five days food planning to attempt the southern most of the peaks of the Portcullis chain. Again the weather was very unsettled and we climbed nothing, though we got high enough to see that the west ridge of our objective was possible. Ching Kang (named

thus apparently by Andrea Stimson, though known to the locals as something sounding like Bell Peak) looked like a fine peak as well, but the only plausible line was a steep arete with serac barriers and the summit itself was a huge cornice.

We abandoned base camp on the 18th of September, with the weather turning noticeably colder and deteriorating rapidly. The trip home was uneventful. We spent a pleasant two days in Hushe watching the harvest being carried in, before getting a jeep to Skardu. Once in Skardu, Abbas fixed us up with much sought after places on the plane to Islamabad, and from there we flew back to the UK on the 27th.

## **Cost**

The total cost is difficult to estimate as Andy flew in from the UK to Islamabad and on to Skardu paying his own costs, whilst my flights were paid for by the trekking company I had worked for. Land costs from Skardu were roughly £1000.00, this being composed of £550.00 for porters, £120.00 for jeep hire, £130.00 for food, £100.00 for hotel bills and £100.00 miscellaneous. This figure was perhaps artificially low as I was able to buy left-over food from the commercial trek very cheaply, and we were organised enough to spend very little time in Skardu. To this figure needs to be added the cost of hotel rooms and food in Rawalpindi/Islamabad, plus £240.00 for insurance and £120.00 for medical kit.

## **Environmental Impact**

The environmental impact of our trip was minimal. However the general trend in the Karakoram, and especially in the Hushe valley following the opening of the Gondokoro La as an access route to the Upper Baltoro, is that in the last few years there has been an exponential increase in the number of visitors. Whilst bringing money to poor mountain villages, this trend is having detrimental effects. Intrusive litter is becoming a problem in some areas. Women tending livestock on high summer pastures are unhappy about increased traffic past their dwellings. And the Hushe villagers are complaining of strangers arriving from as far afield as Rawalpindi, scrounging food from locals and attempting to work as porters.

Inevitably any rich Western tourist adds to these problems. I for one am unhappy at what I see happening in Hushe, and feel uncomfortable with my having played a part in these changes. I can only hope that visitors to the area are sensitive to their impact both on the environment and, equally importantly, on the local culture. I think that the days of the Hushe Valleys being the perfect playground for Alpinists disgruntled with crowded European hills may be numbered. The UIAA meet was a perfect symptom of the increasing crowds being drawn to the Hushe area. When we left there were rumours in Skardu that the government was going to make the Hushe Valleys a restricted area, as the Baltoro already is. These rumours may prove to be unfounded this time around, but I think restrictions are eventually inevitable and perhaps justified.

## Conclusion

Having spent two months in the Karakoram in the summer of 1990 and having spoken this summer to various Karakoram veterans, the general consensus seems to be that the weather in the summer of 1993 was unusually bad. Whilst there were occasional good days, the weather never settled into the normal pattern of long good spells interspersed with short bad spells. We were by no means alone in climbing nothing last summer in the Karakoram. Nevertheless we had an enjoyable time, and I would recommend the Aling Glacier for anyone tempted to try a few unclimbed peaks of circa 6000m. There are two points to note. Firstly, having set my altimeter to 3050m in Hushe, the generally accepted altitude of the village, I found the estimate of previous expeditions (particularly the RAF trip) to be inaccurate. As a rule of thumb, subtract 300m from previous reports. Having used my altimeter for the previous month in the better known of the Hushe valleys, I have few doubts to its accuracy. Secondly, the walking on the rubble of the Aling Glacier, whilst bad, is not unbearable and certainly gets easier on the ice higher up.

Neil Wilson February 1994