

TREK HIGH

That may be what most mountaineers

will advise, but when you are

distracted by the majestic, looming

beauty of the world's tallest peaks,

the temptation to sleep as close to the

sky as possible becomes irresistible

SLEEP LOW

The team makes its way up the
ice highway of Vigne Glacier
towards Gondokoro La



Above: In geographic terms, the mountains of the Karakoram are young, hence their dramatic, jagged character. Here is a selection of views from Paiju just before sunset

Below: The ancient 500-year-old spire of Shigar mosque pierces the deep blue of a typical Baltistan sky

If your dream involves adventure in remote places, offering magnificent scenery, personal interaction with exotic cultures and a physical challenge that is actually attainable by motivated mortals within a manageable time frame, then read on.

In August 1992 my wife Julie and I undertook a journey of discovery and adventure that commenced in a bustling city called Rawalpindi in Northern Pakistan, from which we traced the Karakoram Highway, known



as the KKH, all the way to the Khunjerab Pass, lying on the border between Pakistan and China.

To reach any place along or near the KKH requires some effort and perseverance, but if you enjoy true, raw adventure, this is best found on foot, far from the road and all its comforts and safety nets.

It took years to fulfil the dream of reaching the top of the 5,600m Gondokoro La; under a beautiful full moon, I gazed back to K2, the base camp, once more. The difference this time was that I had just been to K2 base camp, even spending a night there. That blend of exhilaration, tranquillity, satisfaction and wonder that keeps drawing me back to the high mountains was coursing through my heart once again and I knew all the effort and tradeoffs needed to get there had been worth it.

My entire journey had taken only 24 days and, although only 17 of them had actually been on the trail, nearly every day added something to my adventure. It all started and concluded in Rawalpindi. Here I met Ibrahim, my guide, as a total stranger and, three weeks later, embraced him as a friend at the airport before my departure from Pakistan. Together we attended the fiasco masquerading as

an official expedition briefing, acquired trekking provisions, and travelled the 22-hour bus journey to Skardu (after our one-hour flight was cancelled due to unstable weather). By the time we reached Skardu in a rather exhausted, dishevelled state, we had established good rapport.

Our first deviation from plan happened on day two when I found it physically impossible to cross the 5,087m Skoro Pass. Although fit enough, I'd simply ascended far too quickly for my body to acclimatise. I'm well acquainted with the effects of high altitude, but hoping to make up for time lost earlier en route to Skardu, I'd fooled myself into believing that all would be well if I 'trekked high and slept low'.

Having shaken a headache after sleeping the first night at 3,400m, I set off optimistically to cross the pass and then descend again quickly to 3,500m on the far side. By the time I reached 4,400m on the ascent however, still with 700 vertical metres of climbing to go, my

pounding head informed me in no uncertain terms that to proceed further would be foolhardy.

As a result of ascending too quickly, water was collecting in my brain. I could feel the veins of my temples bulging and the possibility of coma and even death became all too real. I decided to descend to 4,000m, camp the night, and hope that my headache would again subside. The team took it in their stride, constructing me a shelf just large enough to accommodate my tent on the steep hillside.

Next morning my head still throbbed, confirming that I'd need to take the long

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From very close up, as K2 is seen here from above Base Camp at about 5,300m, it becomes deceptively foreshortened





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Above: Typical 'below 3,500m' terrain on the approach to Paiju, below the Baltoro Glacier. The trail follows the Shigar River through a barren, parched landscape, always bounded by soaring valley walls

Below: As the sun sets, the team prepares for a night crossing of the Gondokhoro La, hoping to be the first trekking party to do so all the way from Concordia in a single day

way, by jeep track, to Thungol (2,850m), which is the normal starting point for trekkers bound for Concordia or K2 Base Camp.

This additional delay concerned me, but the jolting jeep ride round to Thungol was unforgettable nevertheless. Following the Shigar River, we bashed our way across parched rubble and dust, often sandwiched between yawning chasms and sheer cliffs.

After nightfall, as we neared Thungol, a tributary stream swollen by glacier-melt during the heat of the day



had become a raging torrent, washing away the bridge and barring our way. In horror, I leapt from the cab when I realised that our driver actually had sufficient faith in the Toyota's four-wheel drive technology to attempt fording the gushing waters. My reward for doubting him was a bone-chilling stumble on foot to the other side, aided by a concerned Hussain, one of my porters.

My concern for the delays we'd suffered also turned out to be unnecessary, as in the next five days the team moved steadily up the Shigar valley, up on to the gray rubble of the Baltoro glacier and on to Concordia. Blessed with crystal-clear weather and a small, mobile, flexible team, we covered in five days what the larger parties normally cover in eight to 10 days.

Below 4,000m, the sun's heat was a brutal assault after 11am, and not just for living beings. On the first day,

after trudging across a vast plain and then tackling an unexpectedly challenging rock descent, the soles of my boots began parting company with their leather uppers. Given the ruggedness of the terrain, this could have spelt disaster for me. But luck was on my side. As I struggled down the almost sheer rock face, I caught up with an older trekker who was finding the going very tough. He was a big man, a Canadian in his 50s, named Gerry Weathers.

At the bottom, after congratulating one another for reaching terra firma in one piece, I asked by chance if he was carrying any glue for boot repairs. The good fortune in it was that Gerry indeed was carrying glue — industrial strength epoxy resin no less — I had no further trouble with my boots.

Four days later, on the only cloudy day of the trek, we reached Concordia (4,650m). This is a focal point for most trekkers in Baltistan, being where the first unimpeded sighting of K2 comes dramatically into view. At 8,611m, its summit is the second-highest place on Earth, standing as a natural wonder of the world about 10 horizontal and (a daunting) four vertical kilometres up the Godwin Austin glacier, which collides with the Baltoro glacier at Concordia.

After sunset that evening, heavy snow sagged the

A little later on the same beautiful morning, K2 looms up beyond the Godwin Austen glacier. In the foreground, huge 'ice loaves' appear to balloon out of the glacial rubble where the Godwin Austen and Baltoro Glaciers collide at Concordia



walls of my little tent. K2 was nowhere to be seen next morning, but by mid-afternoon, relentless ultraviolet rays had burnt many of the clouds away. K2 revealed a little more of itself, seeming to gain confidence. Its frighteningly steep south-east ridge appeared for the first time and understanding dawned on why it is such a killer of climbers.

It was an uncanny feeling as we advanced up the

FACTS ABOUT BALTISTAN

GEOGRAPHY A mountainous region of some 15,177sqkm (115sqkm were split off in the Indo/Pak war of 1971).

Home to many of the world's highest peaks (including K2, at 8,611m, the second-highest) and longest glaciers.

K2 is so named because, a geographical survey conducted by the British in 1800s incorrectly calculated that it was the second tallest peak in the Karakoram range, hence it was christened 'K2'. The Baltis also know K2 as Chogori, chogo meaning great, and ri meaning mountain.

Geographically young and still rising as the earth's Indian and Eurasian plates continue their collision, resulting in dramatically sheer and jagged peaks, rock slides and avalanches.

Spectacularly diverse scenery ranging from the arid valleys below 3,000m, to lush meadows and forests up to around 4,000m, to vertical lands of rock, snow and ice amongst the vast array of high peaks, to the flat expanse of the Deosai plateau.

Temperatures ranging from 44°C in the heat of the day in the valleys, to -30°C in the mountains in the depths of winter (Nov - Mar).

A path for several of the world's great rivers to cut through, including the mighty Indus.

PEOPLE The population is approaching 600,000, made up of people of both Mongol (Tibetan) and Arian descent.

The main language is Balti, but Shina and Kashmiri are also spoken.

Prior to the 15th century, Buddhism was the main religion, which has since been replaced by (Shia) Islam.

Being agriculture-based, most Baltis live in the 230 villages situated in the huge network of river valleys. The largest town is Skardu, housing some 40,000. Balti cuisine has assimilated many dishes from the south like dhal, roti, and gravy-based curries, but it still features many Tibetan dishes made from grains, such as Tsampa from barley. Meat is an important part of Balti cuisine, just as it is further south.

ECONOMY Virtually all industry occurs outside the snow-bound winter months, when activities are confined indoors.

Agriculture forms the basis, mostly for local consumption. Fruit and potatoes are exported from Baltistan, as are some woollen products and precious stones.

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries and a key source of foreign exchange. It is widely supported by the Balti people as an opportunity to improve their standard of living.

TECHNOLOGY Until mountaineering became popular in the '50s, remote Baltistan had very little contact with the outside world and the Baltis essentially lived as they had for centuries. Only when an air link to Skardu began in the '60s did regular outside contact begin. Tourism has only been significant since 1986 when the KKH was opened to tourists.

Now the main towns have electricity and small hydro projects will soon bring electricity to smaller villages like Hushe. The power supply is 220 volts, 50 cycles AC.

Telephones are STD in the main towns and C.B. radios in the rural areas. Mobiles are not yet operable. No one is yet on the Internet.



Seen from K2 base Camp, far back down Godwin Austin Glacier, beyond Concordia, a three-quarter moon rises over Sia Kangri

Godwin Austin glacier. Apart from their otherworldly, ice and rubble-covered surfaces, glaciers are dynamic, shifting and changing constantly. Occasionally, a strange sensation permeated my consciousness: a barely perceptible tremor, accompanied by a sound resembling a gigantic, high tensile, steel cable snapping when maximum tension has been exceeded. I realised that this was the glacier cracking and it was rather unnerving.

Then we reached the Gilkey Memorial, silently perched above K2 Base Camp and surrounded by a soberingly large number of other memorials to those who've perished on K2 over the years. Almost every nationality seemed to be represented. It occurred then to me that I was indeed privileged to be in a world not meant for human habitation. An unpredictable world of ice and rock of monolithic proportions. As if to confirm this, less than a week after we left K2 Base Camp, six Japanese climbers were tragically killed in their sleeping bags while camped at base camp by an avalanche.

Early next morning, Ibrahim and I roped up before setting off further up Godwin Austin glacier in the direction of China. We eventually reached a yawning crevasse at about 5,700m that barred our way forward. Huge séracs

jutted up all about us in a maze-like world of bizarre, tortured ice. Behind and high above us, an ominous rumbling sound intensified as K2 released another avalanche of snow and ice. My head pounded again, convincing me that it was time to go. The adventurer in me felt satisfied.

But our adventures weren't over. Next day was our most exhausting and, in a way, most notable because, according to Ibrahim and several other guides, we became the first trekking group ever to trek from Concordia over Gondokhoro La to Gondokhoro high



camp in a single day. I'm not surprised, as it took us an exhausting 10 and a half hours on the trail, and we wouldn't have even chosen to undertake the challenge at all, had there been fewer trekking groups in the area.

Despite the remoteness of Concordia, many groups now trek there each season and the numbers are escalating. When confronted with a snow-clad, technically

TRAVEL TIPS

WHEN TO GO Between June and August is summer time. This is when the weather is most stable, offering blue skies and warmer temperatures much of the time.

WHAT TO BRING Your trekking agent/guide can source virtually everything you need for you, but I recommend that you bring your own essentials — basic medical supplies, boots, alpine clothing, visas and sleeping bag, flashlight and spare batteries, permits, backpack (with detachable daypack), camera gear and film, effective sunglasses and sunblock.

VISA AND PERMITS Unlike Malaysian and Indonesian passport holders, Singaporean passport holders do not need an entry visa to Pakistan. All trekkers, whatever nationality, need a trekking permit for each restricted trekking area you intend to visit in Pakistan. Your trekking agent can arrange this for you prior to arrival if you send photocopies of your passport, Pakistan visa, and several passport-sized photos of each member of your party.

MEDICAL CONSIDERATIONS You need cholera, Hepatitis A & B, Japanese B and Meningococcal Meningitis vaccinations. It is advisable to take a course of general purpose antibiotics that treat respiratory and digestive tract infections. Purify all water before drinking. Respect the dangers of high altitude by ascending at the recommended rate to permit effective acclimatisation.

HOW TO ORGANISE YOUR TREK If you intend trekking for more than a few days and in restricted areas, there is much to organise. It's possible to do this yourself, but I strongly recommend that you hire a trekking agent to do it for you. The best position is to have a personal recommendation on a trekking agent. In this I can unreservedly recommend Mountain Travels Pakistan, which I've now used twice. Their contact details are: Ghulam Ahmad, 507 Poonch House Complex, Adamjee Road, Rawalpindi, PO Box 622, Pakistan. Fax: 92 (51) 528 596, Tel: 92 (51) 528 595.

TRICKS FOR NEW PLAYERS Internal flights into the Karakoram are notoriously unreliable. Within your itinerary, allow for the possibility of travelling by road if your flights are cancelled. Always carry your passport, as there are many police check posts in the northern areas. If you are visiting restricted areas, get your trekking agency to confirm in advance the time of your 'official briefing', as sometimes the official will not give briefings on Fridays or public holidays, which can result in precious days wasted. Bring suitable (modest) clothing to wear in cities and villages. Photographers bring spare batteries and an easily portable dust-proof camera case.

Under a full moon, the team takes a break, having reached Gondokhoro La at 10pm. K2, Broad peak and Gasherbrum can be seen from this panoramic vantage point



challenging, high altitude pass like Gondokhoro La, this can result in serious congestion and safety hazards.

As we watched more and more trekkers and porters arrive at Mexis Camp at the base of the north side of the pass, Ibrahim suggested to me that we make a night ascent "to avoid the crowds". It was to be a full moon and the weather was magnificent. I rather pensively agreed.

So, at 7pm, as the moon peered from behind Vigne Peak, we made our way silently, roped together in single file, across the Vigne glacier. The silvery moon light was so bright that we hardly needed our flash lights. Our crampons bit reassuringly into the rapidly refreezing snow as we commenced our ascent up the 600m, 50° snow slope.

The climb only took two and half hours, but was exhausting at that altitude. My porters patiently climbed at my pace as I gulped in as much oxygen as I could. I could only marvel at their strength and stamina once again.

We reached the pass at 10pm and, after regaining my composure, I turned back, not to swirling clouds and fog like it had been five years before, but to a perfectly clear panorama bathed in a magical silver light — K2 and its other 8,000m sisters, Broad Peak and Gasherbrum, plus a multitude of others over 7,000m all lay before us.

Several minutes passed before I realised that a chill wind had started blowing from the direction of K2. I also felt a deep tiredness enveloping me, akin to that of a driver who can't keep his eyes open, yet has hours of driving still between him and his bed. It was time to commence the precarious descent on loose rocks to Gondokhoro High Camp. But at least I was back on familiar ground with the warm feeling of satisfaction at accomplishing a five-year dream. ▲