



AAC Publications

Khunyang Chhish East

The First Ascent of a Karakoram Giant

A long line stood at the visa checkpoint in the Islamabad airport. Sleepy faces waited for the next person to inch forward. It was silent except at the front of the line, where five men with matching T-shirts were digging in their bags. A group of Romanians. The backs of their shirts said something like “Nanga Parbat Expedition,” surrounded by sponsor logos.

Finally, Simon and I got through the checkpoint with the necessary stamps in our passports. We exchanged only a few words with the Romanians before our duffel bags slid down the baggage carousel. One of the guys was talking about the Rupal Face. In the arrival hall, Iqbal Asko from our trekking agency greeted us with a quick handshake. Soon Simon and I were sitting in a taxi amid the early morning chaos on the streets of Islamabad. We thought nothing more of the Romanians.

Crampons, ice axes, mountain boots, and heavy backpacks. This was the gear that shaped my life as a young climber. Although I started sport climbing at the age of 12, my first love was mountaineering. I was happiest coming home after a long day and feeling pain over my whole body and not just my fingertips. I did many classic mixed routes in the Alps, and I will never forget sitting on the summits and shaking hands with my brother Matthias. Which summits? This is not that important, and we stood on too many to list them.

I first got excited about pursuing sport climbing six years after my earliest climbs, mainly because I wanted to explore harder alpine terrain, but my rock climbing level didn't allow me to do so. For many years I tried to push my limits on rock, freed many hard multi-pitch routes, and made all those crazy **free solos**. [Editor's note: Most famously, the author free-soloed Via Attraverso il Pesce (The Fish Route, 850m, 7b+) on the Marmolada in Italy in 2007, at age 22]. I couldn't find the motivation to pick up my ice tools.

But over the last few years, I've rediscovered my old love. I still like the playing field of overhangs, tufas, and pumped forearms. But especially in the winter months, I enjoy doing ridge traverses, ice climbing, and winter mountaineering in general.

Simon Anthamatten and I became friends in Yosemite Valley in 2009. We spoke about doing a big trip together, but until 2013 we never found the right moment. When we finally began planning an expedition, Simon and I chose Khunyang Chhish East as our objective. An ambitious goal. I felt so happy when my brother Matthias agreed to join us. With three we would be much stronger.

Khunyang Chhish East (ca 7,400 meters) is a sub-peak of Khunyang Chhish in the Hispar Muztagh. The main summit, at 7,852 meters, is the 21st-highest peak in the world, and was first ascended by a Polish team led by Andrzej Zawada in 1971 (AAJ 1972). However, despite several attempts, the east peak remained unclimbed. The best attempt was by the American duo Vince Anderson and Steve House, who climbed to the top of the 2,700-meter southwest face in 2006 but were turned back by a steep rock step on the ridgeline, just 300 meters short of the summit.

Our expedition did not start according to plan. Initially we had problems with getting a permit, which delayed the expedition by a few days. Then, when Simon called from Bern to tell me that his passport

issues had been resolved, Matthias called five minutes later with bad news. He was on his way to the hospital because he had severely injured his thumb. I sat down and tried to calm myself. We had invested so much time in this project, researching and training. It felt like a balloon had burst. But obstacles are part of life's tapestry, and Simon and I decided to go ahead. Matthias would come to Pakistan later, as long as his thumb healed well.

We first saw the mountain from a green terrace on the moraine of the Hispar Glacier, where the Pumari Chhish Glacier flows out from the base of Khunyang Chhish. I was in awe of its dimensions. I whispered to Simon, "I can't believe it. It's a monster!" The big amphitheater formed by the south, main, and east summits was one of the wildest places I'd ever seen. As we trekked toward base camp, Simon suddenly stopped. The clouds were lifting, and now we could see the whole southwest face leading up to the summit pyramid. We stared at each other, realizing that we had only seen half of Khunyang Chhish East earlier that day.

We began to acclimatize by climbing some ridges and little faces near base camp. As a final step we summited Ice Cake Peak, a summit along the south ridge of Khunyang Chhish, and slept on top at 6,400 meters. Serac danger and technical climbing made our life harder than expected during the first weeks of the expedition.

We learned about the tragedy at Nanga Parbat base camp during a weather check with Karl Gabl, back in Austria. Although we didn't know all the details, the news shocked us. Immediately we thought of the Romanians we'd met at the airport. Were they all dead? It seemed impossible that a massacre had just taken place so close to us. Simon and I were just finishing our final preparations for the southwest face, and we tried to push the entire situation out of our minds, vowing to dedicate any success to the victims of the Nanga Parbat massacre.

Meanwhile, Matthias had arrived at base camp, but with his injury and lack of acclimatization, it was not possible for him to join us, even for our ascent of Ice Cake Peak. That hit him hard, but there was no choice.

On June 25 Simon and I set off for our first attempt. Both of us felt really strong. In three days of climbing, we reached a small bivy site at 7,000 meters. The weather was starting to change and the wind was getting stronger. It was only 2 p.m., but the conditions wouldn't allow us to keep climbing. That night we just hoped we wouldn't be blown from that exposed bivy into the darkness of the Karakoram. The next morning it was even worse. Snow pressed through the zipper and into our tent. Normally I'm really good at suppressing my emotions during hard situations in the mountains. But at 8 a.m. I suddenly concluded that if we didn't react right away, the mountain would determine our fate. We packed and fought our way down. After 14 hours, cold, shattered, and emotionless, we reached the base of the wall. Matthias was happy to see us alive and helped carry our backpacks to base camp.

Four days later we made another try, but tons of fresh snow and many avalanches forced us to retreat at 5,600 meters. We had started too early to catch the forecast weather window. We were angry, but in the high mountains everything has to be perfect. The difference between failure and success is minute.

Although we had three more weeks in base camp, it was becoming clear that Simon and I had only one more attempt in us. The failures wear you out. We would need Matthias' enthusiasm for another go at the southwest face, but he was still not acclimatized adequately. Climbing alone, he could only reach 5,500 meters. Simon offered to go back up Ice Cake Peak with Matthias, and the two of them set off for a two-day climb while I chilled in base camp.

For the first time on any big climbing trip, I wrote very little in my diary. The mental stress was much greater than I'd ever experienced, and my mind was just too busy and full to be poetic. The weather was still perfect, and I wondered if Simon and I had blown our only chance with our second attempt.

Would we have been successful if we'd started just one day later? There were strong winds on top, which maybe would have stopped us again, but the fact that we didn't get the chance to try was making me crazy.

For 10 days there wasn't much to do about it. Bad weather, high winds on top, and snowfall down to base camp tried our patience. But there was one positive: Matthias was now acclimatized and ready to join us on a potential third attempt, and that had us smiling again.

On the evening of July 13, Gabl gave us a promising forecast. Not the perfect window, but at least we would have clear, cold nights. Matthias was ready to go. On July 14 at 4 a.m., the team complete, we commenced the final try. The first two days went smoothly. After a spectacular bivy on a tiny snow mushroom, we climbed without problems up to 6,600 meters on the second day. Only some wind and spindrift on the last mixed pitches made the climbing uncomfortable. That night our little tent nearly collapsed from the weight of the spindrift. The morning was cold and gray. We tried to climb, but the conditions were too difficult. After only 200 meters, we found a little crevasse with a tunnel leading inside: a perfect shelter, where no wind or spindrift penetrated. Here we waited two days for the storm to subside.

Crammed into our tiny tent, we fought to suppress the rising feeling of futility and to keep the dim spark of determination glowing. Only rarely did one of us find the motivation to check the weather outside. As each hour passed we noticed how the altitude was draining our remaining strength. We had to make a decision. We couldn't wait any longer.

On the morning of July 18, the winds calmed and the clouds cleared. It seemed we would have our last chance. At 6 a.m., as the sun rose, we set off. The mixed climbing above our bivy was hard, our toes and fingers were freezing, and the long traverse out to the ridge on bare ice was exhausting. At 7,000 meters we took a small break and then aimed for the ridge, higher than the Americans had, and discovered that we could avoid the rock step that had stopped House and Anderson. The conditions worsened as we climbed the ridge, but we knew we would soon be on top. At 12:30 p.m. we stood on the summit, looking over a sea of fog, with only the highest peaks of the Karakoram poking through.

It was very windy and we only stayed at the summit for a short time. We climbed back along the ridge and then rappelled to the shoulder at 7,000 meters. After six more rappels we arrived at our tent, at 6,800 meters, just before nightfall. We immediately crawled into our sleeping bags. We had no food, but we were too tired to eat anyway. We dreamed of burgers, Coke, and potato chips. After a short night in our tunnel bivy, we started rappelling again under a starry night sky. The last hours of the descent, in the afternoon sun, were very dangerous. Rocks, ice blocks, and wet snow tumbled alongside us. But we had recognized the rhythm of the avalanches, and we used the short windows between slides to rappel, before hiding again behind rock buttresses. After 12 hours we crossed the bergschrund and literally sprinted over the remains of a fresh avalanche, down to the Pumari Chhish Glacier.

A few days later we were in Gilgit, waiting for a flight to Islamabad. No mountaineer wanted to travel the Karakoram Highway after the tragedy at Nanga Parbat. A tragedy that had cost many lives. What had happened to the Romanians? We had no idea. I was lost in thought when Simon's voice suddenly penetrated the silence. "There they are!" We could hardly believe it as the Romanians fell into our arms. Their faces looked gaunt—they were exhausted. Not only because they had climbed the Rupal Face, but also because the view down the other side of the mountain, into the empty Diamir base camp, had been etched into their minds forever. I was so happy to see them. It seemed to me that their successful ascent of Nanga Parbat had honored the spirit of those lost climbers in the best possible way.

Summary

First ascent of Khunyang Chhish East (7,400m), by the ca 2,700m southwest face, by Simon

Anthamatten (Switzerland), Hansjörg Auer, and Matthias Auer (both Austria), July 14–19, 2013.

About the Author

Born in 1984, Hansjörg Auer lives in the Oetztal Valley, west of Innsbruck, Austria, and works as a professional climber and guide.

Parts of this story were translated from German by Simone Sturm.

Images



The team spent five nights on the face, with three at high camp.



The author on a traverse at 5,600m.



Mixed terrain at 6,500m.



Summit day.



Hansjörg Auer, above 7,000m, traversing toward the summit.



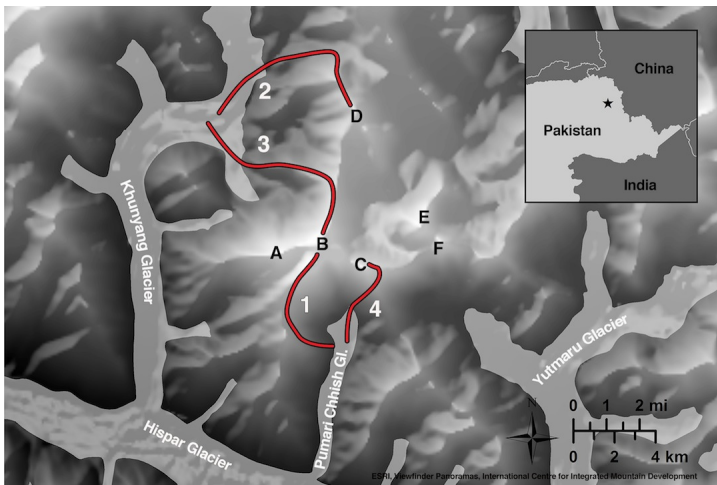
Final steps toward the summit of Khunyang Chhish East.



Big avalanche off the southwest face of Khunyang Chhish East.



Summit ridge cornice.



Khunyang Chhish and its satellite peaks have seen many attempts but only four ascents. (A) West peak (7,350m, unclimbed). (B) Khunyang Chhish (7,852m). (C) East peak (7,400m). (D) North peak (7,108m). (E) Pumari Chhish (7,492m). (F) Pumari Chhish South (7,350m). (1) South face to south ridge (Polish, 1971). (2) Khunyang Chhish North (Japanese, 1979). (3) North-west spur to north ridge

(U.K., 1988). (4) Khunyang Chhish East (Austrian-Swiss, 2013).

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