



## AAC Publications

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### **Uli Biaho Tower (6,109m), south pillar, Speck**

Pakistan, Karakoram, Baltoro Muztagh

On July 21, Italians Matteo Della Bordella and Luca Schiera, and Swiss Silvan Schupbach, completed a 40-year-old project by making the first ascent of the south pillar of Uli Biaho Tower. This spectacular granite column, west of the Trango Group, has captivated climbers ever since its photograph appeared in Eric Shipton's classic book of Karakoram exploration *Blank on the Map*. Subsequently, the remarkably few attempts, and even fewer ascents, have been misleading due to confused compass points.

The tower was not attempted until 1974, the year the Baltoro region reopened after being off-limits since 1961. Three young French made a spirited attempt, approaching via steep snow and ice couloirs to reach the south pillar (they referred to it as northwest), which would give the shortest route to the summit. Pierre Béghin, Jean Frèhel, and Dominique Marquis climbed the pillar until hit by a fierce storm. At this point they estimated only 30m of aid separated them from moderate snow and mixed terrain rising ca 150m to the summit.

To make the tower's first ascent in 1979, Americans Bill Forrest, Ron Kauk, Jon Roskelley, and Kim Schmitz accessed the east pillar directly via a ca 800m, objectively dangerous couloir, overhung by large seracs and subject to the ever-present threat of rockfall. In 1988, Italians Maurizio Giordani, Rosanna Manfrini, Maurizio Venzo, and Kurt Walde climbed a far safer couloir, south of the American approach, from farther down the Trango Glacier. Traversing to the foot of the south face, they climbed the southeast buttress, right of the French attempt, to create a 600m route at 6b+ and A3. At the time, this was almost certainly the hardest technical route in the Karakoram-Himalaya put up by a woman. Also notable is that this line has been consistently marked incorrectly on nearly all subsequent photo-diagrams of Uli Biaho. It was climbed again the following year by New Zealanders Guy Cotter, Nick Craddock, and Paul Rogers.

In 2005 Jonathan Clearwater (NZ) and Jeremy Frimer (Can) discovered the safer Italian approach (which they thought new at the time), and followed it to the col at the foot of the south pillar. They fixed two pitches in an attempt to make the first free ascent of the tower, but were then hit by a storm that pinned them in an uncomfortable bivouac on the col for three days. Once it cleared they retrieved the ropes and abandoned their attempt.

Della Bordella, Schiera and Schupbach also used the 1988 Italian approach, hoping to attempt a new big-wall line between the existing Italian and American routes. They found this approach long and complex, with some technical terrain (a 200m icy traverse of 60–75°), but devoid of objective danger. However, the section of the tower they wished to climb did not sport any logical crack systems, the rock did not seem high quality, and the difficulty of the approach would have made it hard to bring up heavy loads and portaledges. Instead, they opted to complete the French line, which they estimate to be 500m high, with the last 150m or so over snow and mixed ground. Although steep, it is well featured with flakes and cracks.

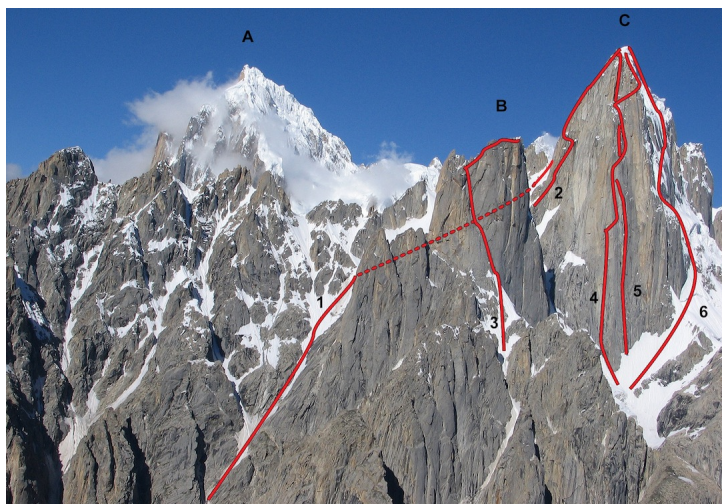
The route began from the small col 100m to 150m up and left of the southeast buttress, and the initial three pitches (6a/6b, then easier) trended right. The next 150m were direct, following a logical system of cracks and flakes (6a/6b). Above, they climbed an 80m chimney of 5+. To this point they had followed a series of ancient pegs, but once they traversed left to a 30m crack (A0 due to running water), all trace of previous passage disappeared. Higher, they traversed right to a small notch where

they joined the 1988 route. Twenty meters down on the far side of the notch was a poor bivouac ledge, onto which all three squeezed for the night. Next day they followed the 1988 route for two pitches, then headed right to climb a short vertical section of ice around a hanging boulder, before following 50° snow slopes to the summit (a total of six pitches from the bivouac site, including several short pitches along the narrow summit ridge). A further day was necessary to descend. Despite the tricky approach and complex climbing on the pillar, the 17-pitch route, named Speck (500m, 6b A0 70°), is probably the easiest way to summit Uli Biaho Tower.

Later, from July 28–30, Schiera and Schupbach climbed the Slovenian route on Trango Tower at 7b, then on August 1 climbed Great Trango Tower by its normal route, thus becoming the first team to climb all three towers (and in one season). Prior to these three climbs, the same pair made the first ascent of a small summit they named Submarine Peak (4,700m), by the 670m Via Andre (7a). See report below.

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## Images



Seen from Great Trango Tower: (A) Pajju (6,610m); (B) Uli Biaho Great Spire (5,594m); (C) Uli Biaho Tower (6,109m). (1) Approach to south face. (2) Southeast Buttress. (3) Grmovsek-Karo. (4) Russian Roulette. (5) East Pillar-American Route. (6) North Face-Drastissima.



The steep snow/ice traverse on the approach to the south face of Uli Biaho Tower.



Matteo Della Bordella on the first pitch of the south pillar, with Masherbrum in the background.



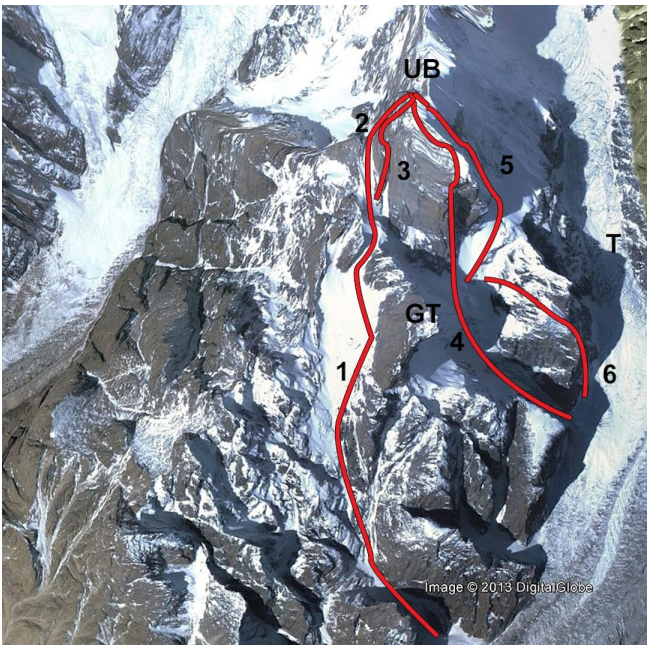
Schubbach leading and Della Bordella at the belay on the second pitch of the south pillar.



The bivouac six pitches below the summit of Uli Biaho Tower: Luca Schiera in red (left) and Matteo Della Bordella in green. Directly above Schiera is the summit of Uli Biaho Great Spire, with the Trango Glacier below, flowing into the Baltoro Glacier (top of picture). The almost hidden couloir to the left of the Great Spire is the approach to the east and north faces of Uli Biaho Tower. The broad couloir used by the Italians lies right of the Great Spire, and their camp was placed close to the large patch of boulders below the steep (and unclimbed) face of Great Spire.



Luca Schiera (left) and Matteo Della Bordella on the summit of Uli Biaho Tower. (A) Great Trango (to its right and behind Schiera are the Baltoro Cathedrals). (B) K2 (behind Muztagh Tower). (C) Broad Peak. (D) Gasherbrum IV, with other Gasherbrums in cloud to the right. (E) Baltoro Glacier.



(UB) Uli Biaho Tower. (GT) Uli Biaho Great Spire. (T) Trango Glacier. The picture is oriented so west is at the top. (1) Approach to south face. (2) South Pillar–Italian-Swiss Route. (3) Southeast Buttress–Italian Route. (4) East Pillar–American Route. (5) North Face–Slovak Route. (6) Belgian Route on lower buttress.



Uli Biaho from the south. (1) The new Italian-Swiss route. (2) The 1988 Italian route.

## Article Details

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