



AAC Publications

Denbor Brakk, South Ridge to South Tower

Asia, Pakistan, Nangma Valley

“Not even the American ambassador to Pakistan is getting past these gates. Closed means closed!” These are the words that welcomed us to the Kondus Valley of Pakistan...or just short of it. Months earlier, Matt Hepp and I had applied for a “special permit” to explore unclimbed granite towers within this disputed territory of northern Pakistan. With the help of our local contact, Zafar Iqbal, and due to a humanitarian component of our expedition, we acquired clearances from all the necessary agencies. But even with official documents in hand and a local parliamentarian at our backs, a newly appointed brigade commander pulled the finely woven carpet out from under us.

During the week of our permit dispute, Zafar guided us to a number of mountain villages in need of basic services. Thanks to a Zack Martin Breaking Barriers Grant from the American Alpine Club, plus the help of the generous community in Ouray County, Colorado, we were able to teach villagers in Hushe and Kande how to quickly construct sturdy, heatable post-earthquake and landslide shelters out of simple materials. The warm reception, helpful hands, and willingness to learn in these remote villages never ceased to surprise us.

With the Kondus Valley gates closed, and a limited amount of time at our disposal, we made the decision to trek into the not-so-seldom-seen Nangma Valley. The snowy fall season had already closed in on peaks above 5,500m, putting them off-limits for our bare-handed, sticky rubber, shirt on our backs approach. So, we lowered our sights to three 4,600m to 4,800m peaks with promising lines.

The first and most striking route we would attempt was on the Green Tower (4,600m). Not knowing any of the tower’s history, we chose a nice-looking line: direct, aesthetic, and, unfortunately, north-facing. We began our frost-nipped and short-lived journey in a left-facing corner system at the top of a snow ramp. Not long into the Chia pet-choked cracks, we found a pin and some tat tucked nicely into a hidden corner. Lacking the motivation for self-torture without pleasure or gain, we bailed. After returning to the U.S., we learned that we had started up one of two known routes on the Green Tower: Inshallah Mi Primo (850m, 5.10b A3).

Feeling winter closing in on us, we decided to scope only sunny, south-facing options. The obvious south ridge of Denbor Brakk (4,800m) seemed like an attainable objective. We began up a series of chimneys and wide cracks. A couple of pitches up, we encountered a lovely six-inch roof crack that rounded over into a grass-packed fist crack. This would set the tone for the next two days of climbing. Many offwidths and ledges later, we blanked out against a prominent gendarme. Luckily, we were able to rap off the east shoulder of the peak into a high gully. Leaving our ropes fixed, we spent the night on the ground, recharging on pakora and dhal.

The next morning, we ascended our ropes, flailed around the gendarme via yet another series of grass-choked wide cracks, and encountered about 50 feet of pleasantly garden-free hand jamming. The last pitches were wide, hard, and especially exhausting at nearly 4,800m. Matt led the final eight-inch-wide, meandering crack to the top of the south tower. The towers to the north were higher, but reaching the highest point would have involved a brutal amount of rappelling, traversing, climbing, more rappelling, and more steep, dirty, wide cracks. So, late in the day, we rappelled off the east shoulder and headed back to the comforts of camp.

We called the route Good From Zafar, But Zafar From Good (5.10 A1 G3, or “steep gardening”), named

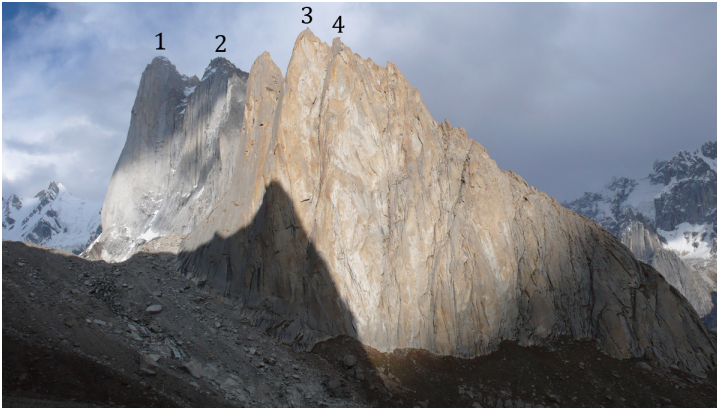
after our friend Zafar Iqbal. No bolts were placed. I can't in good conscience recommend the route, as it was one of the nastiest, most unenjoyable climbs ever. It was good adventure, though.

After a couple of rest days, recharging on our good cook Karim's food, Matt and I moved to an advanced camp at the base of the dramatic Zang Brakk (4,800m). We started up a chimney system at the very tip of the apron below the south face. At the top of the first pitch, a two-bolt belay greeted us. Since we only had a handful of days left in the valley and blue skies above, we decided to see where the route led. We continued up a series of wide cracks (5.10 plus-ish) to a ledge below a 75-meter pitch of blank face climbing with one bolt for protection. The pitch ended at a single-knifblade belay. With darkness drawing near, we placed a bolt and rappelled 1,000 feet to the ground.

The next day, we climbed as fast as we could to regain our high point. No signs of previous ascent were evident past the pin. Our route blanked out at the top of a nice hand crack. I made two attempts to link crack systems through a section of hard face climbing, but fear set in and I was unable to complete the moves. We then chose a less appealing wide option to the right. After a couple more pitches, a timely snowstorm blew in and gave us an excuse to retreat. As the temperature plummeted, we began to rap from our 1,300-foot high point. Nearly 1,000 feet of climbing remained. This route, I would recommend.

Editor's note: Estes and Hepp climbed the first 1,000 feet of Hasta La Vista David (Colnago-Davila-Lazzarini-Stucchi, 2004) on Zang Brakk before exploring variations on the upper wall.

Images



(1) Amin Brakk, 5,850m; (2) Nawaz Brakk, ca 5,700m; (3) Denbor Brakk, 4,800m; and (4) south tower of Denbor Brakk. Clint Estes and Matt Hepp climbed the south ridge (right skyline) to the south tower.



Demonstration emergency shelter built near Kande village with funding from the Zack Martin Breaking Barriers' Grant.



Matt Hepp climbs yet another wide crack near the top of the south ridge of Denbor Brakk.

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