



AAC Publications

Kunzang Valley, Exploration And First Ascents

India, East Karakoram

Standing on the summit of Odgsal I during the 2013 Indian Air Force Rongdo expedition (AAJ 2014), our attention was captured by a huge glaciated valley to the east: the Kunzang. Locals told us this had never been traversed. In 2015 we planned to explore this valley, climb new peaks, and open a route across the col at its head to the Rongdo Valley.

The Kunzang River flows from the northwest and empties into the Shyok at the 63km milestone along the road that runs from Shyok to Daulat Beg Oldie (3,828m, 34°21'57.2"N, 78°17'31.4"E). We arrived in very early summer, as later the Shyok swells and floods frequently. At this time the Kunzang River was also frozen for large sections and made movement up the valley easy. We were a 12-member expedition: Sqn. Ldr. Kevin Nishant, Sqn. Ldr. Vivek Dwivedi, Sqn. Ldr. Rohit Gupta, Sgt. Ganesh Pokhariya, Cpl. R.K. Rabiya, Cpl. Ravinder, Cpl. Mukul Chaturvedi, Cpl. Tara Singh, Cpl. Jayvir Singh, LAC D. Gonmei, NC(E) Gulsad Ali, and me as leader. We were accompanied on the climbs by six Sherpas.

Seventeen kilometers inside the valley is a prominent stream flowing into the Kunzang on its true right (south) side. A steep valley was visible, and at its head was an irregular peak with a prominent rock face. We named this peak Tak Jaal ("Rocky Face" in Ladakhi). We went up the Tak Jaal Lungpa (valley) to a glacier nearly 1km wide and 10km long. This glacier, which we named Dhing Srehen ("Floating Clouds"), was at a height of more than 5,480m, ran in an east-west direction, and was hedged by high peaks. We set up advanced base on the lateral moraine, and from there, on May 11, climbed Tak Jaal (6,123m, 34°23'19.1"N, 78° 11'44.9"E) via the north ridge, using fixed rope on an exposed rock face on the last section to the summit. The following day we climbed the neighboring Khemtses ("The Neighbor," 6,083m, 34°23.179'N, 78°10.985'E), less than 2km west of Tak Jaal, via its northeast flank.

Bad weather forced us to return to the main valley and move our base camp farther up it to grazing meadows on its true left (north) side. Between the main Kunzang Valley and the Dhing Srehen Glacier to the north is a central massif of high and technically challenging peaks. We went up the Goskap Lungpa ("Valley of Opportunities"), which bisects the massif, to attempt three peaks at the eastern end, but bad weather thwarted our plans. Near the head of the main valley is the large lake of Kunzong Tso (34°27.26'N, 78°08.72'E). We crossed the frozen lake and ascended a gully at its northeastern end. After a two-hour climb we arrived at a large glacial field, which we named Stan Urkaan Glacier ("Flying Carpet"). To the west were half a dozen peaks of more than 6,000m, begging to be climbed. However, we were only able to climb one, due to the prevailing adverse weather. This peak, Jaksang ("Opportune Time," 6,152m), was just across the glacier from our camp. One hour's walk under a hazy moon on May 23 brought us to its base, and from there we followed the northeast ridge to the summit (40–60°), fixing rope on two sections.

After this ascent we crossed the main glacier to the northwest and camped below Kunzang Col at 5,446m. Next day we crossed the col (ca 5,800m, 34°27'55.58"N, 78°3'33.42"E). It took nearly three hours, as almost 80cm of snow had fallen the previous night. We rappelled to the glacier on the far side, descended below Island Peak, and trudged down easily to the Shanlungpa Glacier, which we had explored in 2013. Another half day's walk across treacherous moraine brought us to the hot springs in upper Rongdo Valley.

We were successful in exploring the whole Kunzang Valley. If weather had permitted, we would have climbed as many as eight more peaks, but something has to be left for future expeditions.

Gp. Capt. V.K. Sashindran, Indian Air Force

Images



Tak Jaal (6,123m) seen on the approach from the northeast. The route of ascent lay behind the right skyline ridge.



The Stan Urkann Glacier and a collection of unclimbed 6,000m peaks.



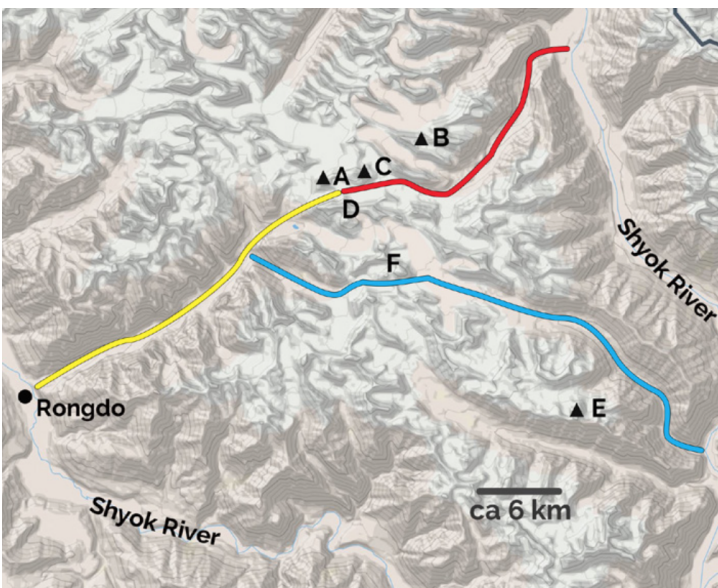
Unclimbed peaks on the northwest side of the Stan Urkaan Glacier.



Close to the top of Khemtsees with a view southeast toward the Shyok River, down the next valley (Shukpa Lungpa) south of the Kunzang.



Another unclimbed high peak in the Kunzang Valley.



In 2015, three expeditions explored various valleys inside the great bend of the Shyok River, east of Rongdo. Yellow line: British climbers attempted (A) Pyramid Peak via the Rongdo Valley. Red line: An Indian expedition climbed (B) Peak 6,195m and (C) Peak 6,305m via the Ryong Kharu Valley. After

these climbs, this team crossed (D) Sagtogpa Col and exited the mountains via the Rongdo Valley. Blue line: An Indian Air Force team explored the Kunzang Valley, climbing (E) Tak Jaal and other peaks. The military climbers crossed (F) Kunzang Col and exited via the Rongdo Valley.

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