



AAC Publications

Surle Puh Valley, Sgurr A Mhadaidh Fuar (L5), East Face

India, Zaskar

In August, Struan Chisholm, Sam Newmark, Calum McLellan, and I arrived in Leh and headed to a maze of unclimbed peaks brought to light by the 2009 Kyoto Zaskar expedition (AAJ 2012). We arrived with 10kg of homemade flapjacks, some iced-tea powder, five ice axes, and one pan between us. We first reached Raru (3,400m) on the Tsarap River to find that onward travel to our proposed valley was blocked: All bridges and the continuation road to Char, connecting the Tsarap villages, had been annihilated by floods two months earlier and may take several years to repair.

We were forced to walk southeast for 15km on a rocky track high above the river. This was uneventful until the route exploded in front of us. No warning signs, just an Indian Army dynamite team working its loud magic to clear landslide debris from the path. We had to rope up and belay some sections of this loose, exposed path perched above the river, although the locals were quite happy to charge across without such precautions. We reached the village of Surle after two days and then proceeded south up the Surle Puh Valley to base camp. This section was only 8km but rose continuously to 5,200m, so took us nearly three days. At one point a yak attacked our camp and was fended off only by the efforts of a brave dog that then proceeded to accompany us. Our base camp was dug out of the moraine, not far from a stream flowing off the ice of L5, high above. [This nomenclature is from Kimikazu Sakamoto, leader of the 2009 expedition. L stands for Lenak. See sketch map in AAJ 2012.] Wind and snow seemed to funnel straight down the glacier and into our tent.

Toward the end of August we wound south through moraine and passed beneath the hanging glacier of L5 (5,897m). Progress was slow in the dark, and there were treacherous snow bridges and ice sections near rivers that were best avoided. Left of the glacier zone we ascended scree and ice patches (45°) for 500m on the east face. Once the ice was behind us, rocky terrain continued at a decreasing angle until we arrived on the summit plateau to meet a view stretching as far as Pakistan. We named the peak Sgurr a Mhadaidh Fuar ("Hill of the Cold Hound" in Scottish Gaelic; 33°09'27"N, 77°04'20"E Google Earth) as a tribute to the fifth member of our team. He came along on a whim and climbed hard and with great agility up to the summit without so much as a pair of socks. His English was limited, his personal hygiene questionable, and his continuous shouting during the night was disruptive. But he made it to the top like a true pioneer. We didn't see him after the ascent.

The most prominent peak to the south was L4 at the head of the glacier. We attempted it following the same route as on L5, moving left (south) near the top of the scree to gain the long west ridge of L4. Clouds had drifted in from the south, and we judged we would not be able to reach the top and descend before nightfall, or before the clouds descended on the summit. The mountain remains for the taking, but if attempting it again we would make an advanced base farther up-valley (above the glacier) to shorten the approach over moraine. We are grateful for the support of the Alpine Club, Mount Everest Foundation, and BMC.

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Images



Unclimbed L4 (ca 6,000m) seen from base camp to the north. An attempt on the right skyline ridge was abandoned due to cloudy weather and lack of time.



Sgurr a Mhadaidh Fuar (a.k.a. L5) from the north during the approach up the Surle Puh Valley. The main summit lies much further back and was climbed by the east face.



Unclimbed L4 seen from Sgurr a Mhadaidh Fuar to the northwest.

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