



AAC Publications

Mulung Tokpo: Aari Dont, Northwest Ridge; Chilh Point, East Face

India, Zaskar

I first went to Zaskar in 2013, inspired by an article by Harish Kapadia in the *Himalayan Journal*. Our team explored the glaciated regions of the Pensilungpa (AAJ 2014), and like many others I was instantly fascinated by the wealth of unclimbed peaks and the broad opportunities for further exploration.

Following a second visit, in 2015, to the Korlomshe Tokpo (AAJ 2016), I was tempted back in 2018. This time we chose the Mulung Tokpo after reading articles by Kimikazu Sakamoto, in which he catalogued and photographed many of the prominent peaks bordering the valley (see AAJ 2017). After some deliberation we eventually selected Peak 5,871m, defined as M15 by Sakamoto, as our primary target. This mountain lies at the junction of the south and west arms of the extensive Mulung Glacier. It looked both approachable and well suited to the capabilities of our team.

Our expedition lasted from August 30–September 29. Drew Cook, Mike Fletcher, Adele Long, Gus Morton, Tony Westcott, and I flew via Delhi to Leh before making the two-day drive to Ating in the Zaskar Valley. From Ating we trekked for two days up the Mulung Tokpo (valley) with our support team before establishing base camp on September 7 at the junction with the Nabil Tokpo, close to the snout of the Mulung Glacier, at 4,188m.

Over the next few days we explored potential routes onto the glacier, before finally selecting the true right lateral moraine as the lesser of several evils. Using this approach, we subsequently established an advanced base on the moraine at 4,525m. This camp afforded relatively straightforward access to the intermediate plateau leading to M15, but extended periods of poor weather precluded a full evaluation of approach routes to the face itself. A collective decision was therefore made to attempt one or more of the peaks on the southern rim of the South Mulung Glacier, since these offered more straightforward access.

Looking into the south branch of the Mulung Glacier from advanced base camp. (A) Peak 5,631m. (B) Aari Dont (5,557m). (C) M12 (5,652m). Photo by Derek Buckle

With new target(s) identified, a high camp was established on the 17th, on the glacier at 5,085m. From this camp, two days later, Drew, Mike, and I attempted the north face of Peak 5,631m (height estimated from Google Earth and terrestrial maps, but possibly a little higher). However, by this time, deep new snow had made the route arduous and potentially avalanche prone on the steep upper ground. We aborted the climb some 300–400m short of the corniced summit. Gus and Tony had better success, making the first ascent of what we subsequently called Aari Dont Col (Hindi for “Saw Tooth,” 5,480m, 33°27.856’N, 76°32.968’E) via its north face, before Gus continued to make the first ascent of Aari Dont itself via the northwest ridge (5,557m, 33°27.875’N, 76°33.060’E, PD).

On the 20th, Drew, Mike, Adele, and I made the second ascent of Aari Dont by the same route, before Mike and I climbed the mixed face leading to what we subsequently called Chilh Point (Hindi for “Eagle Point,” 5,537m, 33°27.844’N, 76°32.940’E, AD). On the descent we made two 25m rappels to easy ground and returned via the col to high camp.

The next day, after 10 nights at higher camps, the team returned directly to base to recuperate. All the higher camps were cleared the day after. This was a fortuitous decision, as heavy snow set in while

our support staff was descending and continued overnight. Some 40–50cm of new snow fell during this period, and three base camp tents were destroyed.

With more snow forecast, we and our support staff made the collective decision to abandon camp and return to the valley while we still could. Taking only essential items, we endured an arduous 13- to 16-hour descent over 25km in deep snow to reach Ating, where we spent the remainder of the night.

The following day we managed to arrange transport to Padum, only to find that a vast area had been affected by the unseasonal conditions, and many trekking parties were trapped, requiring rescue. Moreover, local police informed us that the Pensi La was closed, so there was no way to return to Leh. The road from Manali to Kullu was similarly affected by deep snow, so we were not alone in our plight.

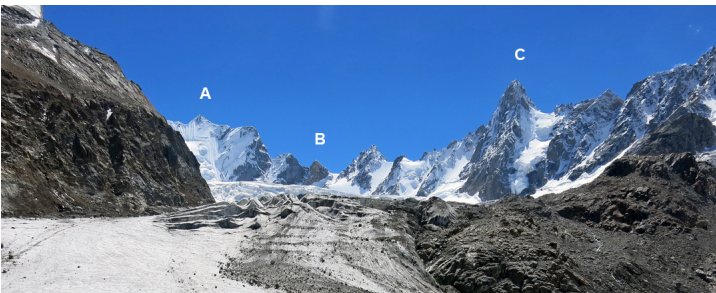
Two days later, the road over the Pensi La was cleared and we were able to continue our journey, arriving in Leh in time to catch our return flight to Delhi and thence home. Our equipment was not so lucky. We left our agent with the task of trying to repatriate it as soon as practicable, but before our support team was able to return to base camp, hungry bears beat them to it. They ravished the camp, destroying several tents and shredding duffle bags in search of food. What was salvageable was returned to us in the U.K.

– Derek Buckle, Alpine Club, U.K.

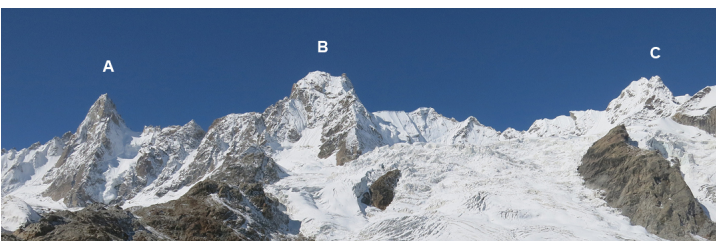
Images



Mike Fletcher approaching the summit of Aari Dont (5,557m). Aari Dont Col and the east face of Chilh Point are immediately behind him. The peaks in the background lie to the west-southwest of the Umasi La and are on the Kishtwar side of the main divide.



Looking into the south branch of the Mulung Glacier from advanced base camp. (A) Peak 5,631m. (B) Aari Dont (5,557m). (C) M12 (5,652m).



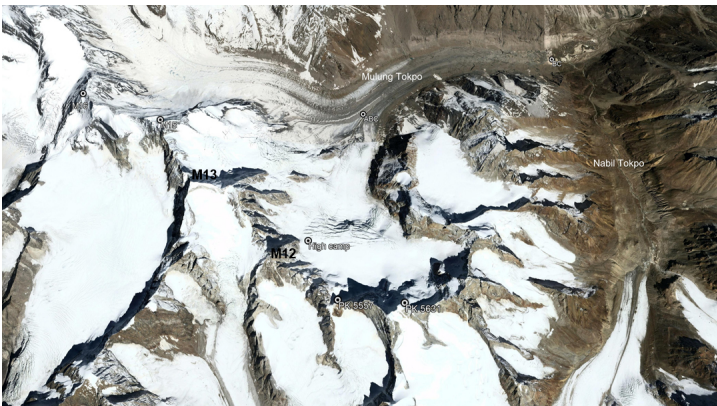
The northeastern aspects of (A) M12 (5,652m), (B) M13 (5,902m on Sakamoto map but more likely 5,702m), and (C) M15 (5,871m).



The southern rim of the South Mulung Glacier with Peak 5,631m and Aari Dont (5,557m). The peak on the left appears to be unnamed; its south-southeast ridge descends to the Umasi La.



Derek Buckle at the top of the first pitch on the east face of Chilh Point. The peak in the background lies immediately west of the Umasi La and at the end of the south ridge of Peak 5,631m.



Map showing camps and peaks above the South Mulung Glacier.

Outline of Mulung Tokpo - Haptal Tokpo
 River
 Village
 Mountain
 Drawn by Kimikazu Sakamoto



Sketch map produced by Kimikazu Sakamoto; see AAJ 2017 for photos of other peaks in the Mulung Tokpo.

Article Details

| | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Author | Derek Buckle |
| Publication | AAJ |
| Volume | 61 |
| Issue | 93 |
| Page | 0 |
| Copyright Date | 2019 |
| Article Type | Climbs and expeditions |