



Rongdo Valley, Phokto Scheyok (Black Pyramid), South Face

India, East Karakoram

In far northern India, a number of steep-sided granite valleys are enclosed by the “Great Bend” of the Shyok River. Their mountaineering potential was first recognized by Chewang Motup of Rimo Expeditions, and his company has supported all approved expeditions to the Rongdo Valley. In 2005 an Indo-American group entered via the Koyak Glacier, to the north, and descended through the Rongdo Valley, but did not climb there (AAJ 2006). In 2012 a Canadian-American team ascended four peaks over 6,000m from the Rongdo (AAJ 2013), and various teams have climbed or attempted mountains in the valley nearly every year since, sometimes mistakenly thinking they were making first ascents (see editor’s note below).

Our team in 2018 consisted of three climbers: Ralph Eberle (Germany), Tsewang Gyalson (Ladakhi and our sirdar), and me, a British national living in Germany. We were accompanied by liaison officer Abhinav Pandey, a cook and cook’s helper, and two horsemen with seven horses. We took three days to trek from Rongdo village to our base camp at 5,375m, covering 25km and ascending 1,895m. Tsewang had visited Rongdo before and suggested positioning our base camp higher than previous expeditions, which turned out to be good advice. The weather was changeable, with snow, fog, hail, sunshine, and rain each day. Regular rockfalls on one of our objectives, Peak 6,064m, made us focus on the pyramid-shaped peak north of the head of the Rongdo Valley. An India expedition (AAJ 2014) and a British one (AAJ 2016) had previously attempted this peak but turned back due to poor weather and snow conditions.

On July 21 we ascended the side arm of the Sagtogpa Glacier and sited our advanced base at 5,820m below the south face of the pyramidal peak. At 2:30 a.m. on the 22nd there was very strong wind, snowfall, and poor visibility, but by 5 a.m. it was better and we left half an hour later, with the temperature around -10°C. We climbed a very loose rocky rib that was covered with a few centimeters of new snow. This proved heavy going, so we roped up and traversed left into an open snow and ice gully. We reached the left rocky ridge of the gully and climbed along it unroped, then continued for several hours up the snow and ice slopes above.

At around 9:50 a.m. we arrived on the southwest top. The eastern summit was clearly higher, so we traversed snowfields and reached the highest point at 10:45 a.m. Visibility was relatively good, a summit panorama video was shot, prayer flags were installed, and a small cairn built. GPS established the height as 6,235m and location at 34°31.873”N, 78°00.492”E (Google Earth: 34°31'50.56"N, 78°0'28.54"E).

We initially started down the southeast ridge, but unstable snow slabs made us turn down a gully on the south face. After three 60m rappels, strong sunshine increased the risk of rockfall, so we downclimbed the rocky rib, which formed the eastern edge of the couloir, over extremely loose blocks. We arrived at advanced base at 4:30 p.m.

Our Rongdo horseman said the mountain’s local name is Phokto Scheyok, which emphasizes its color (Scheyok is Ladakhi for black) and form (Phokto for pyramid or dome). This name has been registered with the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF).

Rongdo offers many unclimbed 6,000m peaks, including an interesting one near Fatha to the north and the prominent peak of Yonchab Kangri to the south, clearly visible from the shepherds’ huts at

Doksa. However, both have challenging access. The rock climbing possibilities are endless; from the middle of the Rongdo Valley we observed approximately 10km of 500m-plus rock walls. This apparently solid granite has no existing routes. The only caveats are that the quality of the granite decreases in the upper valley, and some rock walls are sacred to Buddhists and so should be avoided.

– Keith Goffin, Germany

CORRECTION – HISTORICAL ASCENTS OF TWO RONGDO PEAKS

In AAJ 2016 we reported the apparent first ascent of Sagtogpa Kangri (6,305m, 34°32'12.66"N, 78°1'44.46"E) by an Indian expedition in August 2015, via a route from the Sagtogpa Glacier to the south, eventually finishing up the southeast ridge. In fact, this was the second ascent, albeit by a new route. In August 2014, Graham Rowbotham and Joie Seagram, part of a Canadian expedition (documented in AAJ 2015), climbed this same peak via the north ridge (AD, 45° ice), approaching from the west. They named the mountain Tara, and their GPS recorded 6,248m on the summit.

One day before climbing Tara, Rowbotham climbed another peak, solo, via the south face and southwest ridge (PD). He called this 6,167m peak Mariushri. The same mountain was climbed in 2017 by another Indian expedition during a long exploratory traverse (**AAJ 2018**). They also followed the south face and southwest ridge and, believing they had done the first ascent, called the mountain Nga Kangri (cited at 6,165m, 34°33'24.27"N, 78°1'35.59"E).

Images



Extensive untouched granite in the lower Rongdo Valley. In the background, and visible from the shepherds' huts at Doksa, lies the unclimbed peak of Yonchap Kangri (around 6,050m, summit hidden) at $34^{\circ}24'3.59''\text{N}$, $77^{\circ}52'47.98''\text{E}$.



Diamond-shaped slabs at $34^{\circ}25'48.11''\text{N}$, $77^{\circ}52'29.87''\text{E}$ in the Rongdo Valley. These start at about 4,200m and rise to a peak of about 5,000m.



Looking up the south face of Phokto Scheyok and the ascent route, with much shattered granite

visible.



Phokto Scheyok seen from low on the southeast ridge. The route of ascent on the south face is marked. Part of the side arm of the Sagtogpa Glacier is visible at left. The drier peak behind is Sa'i Lhamo (6,030m).



Phokto Scheyok from the southwest—a view leading to its name, which translates as Black Pyramid.



Looking up the Rongdo Valley from a point at approximately $34^{\circ}25'42.75''\text{N}$, $77^{\circ}51'14.28''\text{E}$ between Thipti and Doksa. Diamond-shaped slabs are visible in the center of the picture. The summits of the granite peaks lie between 5,200m and 5,800m, with walls up to 600m high.



Base camp in the upper Rongdo at 5,375m. The north face of Peak 6,064m (left of center at $34^{\circ}29'22.40''\text{N}$, $77^{\circ}59'6.55''\text{E}$) was prone to constant rockfall.

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