



AAC Publications

Gus Zrakun Sar, South Ridge

Pakistan, Karakoram, Hispar Muztagh

Alik Berg and I left Calgary on June 30. On July 14, after many flights, jeep drives, and three days of trekking with porters, we arrived at our 4,500m base camp on the Yutmaru Glacier. As often happens on expeditions, neither the final team nor the final objective were what we had originally planned. At the start, four of us had hoped to explore the largely untouched peaks of the Kondus Valley, but over the winter two team members pulled out and then, just a couple of months before departure, military authorities refused us a permit for our primary objective, unclimbed K13 (6,666m). We scrambled to find another goal and settled on unclimbed Pumari Chhish East (6,850m Polish map; 6,836m Soviet map) in the Hispar. I was familiar with this peak, having attempted it previously (AAJ 2010)—I knew it to be both a difficult and inspiring objective.

After arrival at base camp we spent the ensuing three weeks systematically acclimatizing, starting with day trips and culminating with an ascent of Rasool Sar (5,980m GPS; 5,890m Soviet map). This lies on the north side of the East Yatmaru Glacier, at the end of the long ridge running west-southwest from Khani Basa Sar (6,441m). It was first climbed in 2009 by Eammon Walsh, Ian Welsted, and me. Alik and I repeated the same route, a steep snow slope on the south flank to reach the east-northeast ridge, and then easy mixed ground and a corniced crest to the summit. We spent two nights on top to complete our acclimatization.

We now turned to the south face of our main objective, Pumari Chhish East. The shattered glacier below looked impassible, but we were able to find an alternative approach by climbing over a rock spur. From its crest we got our first close look at the face. The upper half still looked in good mixed climbing shape. However, it was now late summer, and the snow and ice fields on the lower half had degenerated into wet rock slabs strafed by rockfall. It was difficult to let go of our ambitions, but in current conditions we had to discount the south face as simply too dangerous.

We next examined the eastern aspect of the mountain for an alternative route, but found it guarded by batteries of seracs. With just over a week remaining of our scheduled stay at base camp, we cast around for other options and settled on an unclimbed and unnamed peak of 5,980m (GPS) across the Yutmaru Glacier from base camp. [This summit lies north-northwest of Emily Peak; the Russian map gives it an altitude of 5,936m.]

There was an obvious snow and ice rib on the northeast face leading directly to the summit, but this had severe serac hazard. Instead we moved much farther left, to where a long snow gully rises to the upper south ridge of Emily Peak. We scrambled up rock to the left of the gully, turned right, and continued up the ridge to the summit of Emily Peak, where we bivouacked at around 5,700m. Next day we spent 16 hours negotiating the complex ridge to and from Peak 5,980m, arriving back at our bivouac at midnight. We slept in the following morning before descending south to the Hispar Glacier and walking back around the mountain to base camp. We decided to call the peak Gus Zrakun Sar, after the donkeys that did most of the hard work to get us to base camp (gus zrakun is donkey in the local Burushashki dialect).

Two days later, in cold rain, we left the meadow where we had spent half the summer. We did not come back successful, but we came back safe and came back friends. Thanks to the John Lauchlan Memorial Award and MEC Expedition Support Grant for their financial assistance.

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Images



Looking north up the Yutmaru Glacier with the three summits of Pumari Chhish to the left. From left to right: Main (north, 7,492m, first ascent via north ridge in 1979 by Takao Sazaki's Japanese expedition); Central (7,350m, first ascent via south face in 2007 by Yannick Graziani and Christian Trommsdorff); and East (6,850m, unclimbed).



Alik Berg bypassing a shattered icefall on the approach to the south face of Pumari Chhish East by climbing over an adjacent rock spur.



Alik Berg descending the east-northeast ridge of Rasool Sar after spending two nights on the summit for acclimatization. The pointed summit far right is Lunda Sar (ca 6,300m), almost climbed in 2009 by Raphael Slawinski, Jon Walsh, and Ian Welsted, while the flat-topped summit further back to the left is Khani Basa Sar (6,441m), climbed the same year by Slawinski and Welsted. The high summit far left is Kanjut Sar (7,760m).



Alik Berg enjoying some "fine mixed climbing" on the south ridge of Gus Zrakun Sar.



Alik Berg on the upper section of the south ridge of Gus Zrakun Sar. The summit is up to his left, while the snow pyramid far left is unclimbed and 6,239m. Through the gap are the peaks of Pumari Chhish (main summit 7,492m). On the far right is 7,760m Kanjut Sar (7,790m Soviet map).



Alik Berg plugging up the south face of Rasool Sar.



Alik Berg traversing the east flank of the south ridge of Gus Zrakun Sar, en route to making the first ascent. Kanjut Sar (7,760m) is behind.



Peaks on the north side of the East Yutmaru Glacier. On the left is Rasool Sar. The route of ascent in both 2009 and 2018 climbed the sunlit slope left of the clean granite pillar and then followed the mixed ridge back left to the summit. The high peak on the right is Lunda Sar (ca 6,300m). In 2009, Jon Walsh, Ian Welsted, and Raphael Slawinski climbed the mixed face left of the big snow slope to exit onto the left skyline ridge below the summit. They descended from that point (see AAJ 2010 for route

line).



Looking west across the Yutmaru Glacier from the summit of Rasool Sar. The rounded peak above the gendarme is Gus Zrakun Sar (5,980m GPS). The route of ascent started well left, climbing broken rock left of the obvious long, narrow couloir. The ridge was then followed up right to a small pointed summit—Emily Peak (climbed twice previously from the far side)—and a bivouac was made here both on the ascent and descent. The complex ridge was followed up and right to the summit of Gus Zrakun Sar. The big snow peak on the opposite side of the Hispar Glacier is the highest summit of the Haigutum Group (6,041m on Soviet map).



Looking approximately north-northwest from the summit of Emily Peak in 2008. The pyramid peak in sunlight is Peak 6,178m (Russian map), while the nearer summit (right) is Peak 5,936m, climbed in 2018 via an ascending traverse from Emily Peak.

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