



Lachit Valley: Baba Hussein; Chhota Bhai, South Ridge; Changi II, South Face and West Ridge

Pakistan, Karakoram, Tagas Mountains

Nelson Neirinck (Belgium), Jess Roskelley, and I (both USA) spent 25 days exploring the Lachit Valley, from July 22 to August 15. The Lachit is a subvalley of the greater Kondus Valley, a region that until recently has been closed to non-military activities due to the continuing border conflict between Pakistan and India. The permitting process seemed difficult, though the drive from Skardu to the entrance of the valley was a relatively fast seven hours, slowed only by four or five military checkpoints.

Hiring 30 porters, we hiked one and a half days to an elevated grassy area, speckled with edelweiss flowers, at the confluence of the east and west Lachit glaciers. Here, we established base camp at 4,500m. After two days acclimatizing, we hiked up the East Lachit Glacier to scope peaks in the higher cirque, then established an advanced base at 5,000m with easy access to the surrounding mountains.

On July 30 we climbed a 5,800m spire above camp as part of our acclimatization. This involved a long, steep snow climb culminating in two pitches of M6 and a final M7 boulder problem that took us to the summit. We dubbed the tower Baba Hussein after our assistant cook, a small, tough man in his 60s who could be heard singing into the night.

We rested two days at base camp while waiting for rainy weather to pass, then returned to advanced base, and on August 3 headed for the higher of our two main objectives. After negotiating some steep, complex glaciated terrain, we were forced to stop and camp, as temperatures were too high to climb the sloughing icefields above with safety.

Early next morning we climbed a long AI3 icefield to the south ridge, where we encountered steep mixed climbing for which we were not prepared, having carried only a minimal rock rack of one set of nuts and a few pins. We climbed down and sideways across the icefield for several rope lengths until we met a gully that allowed us to skirt the more difficult rock. Exhausted, we rested and brewed for two hours on the ridge before continuing. The climbing involved two pitches of traversing rock with interspersed snow patches, two pitches of WI4 ice, the fixing of a line to descend past a gendarme on the summit crest, and a final stretch of corniced ridge to the top.

We called our route Naps & Noms, and due to the ominous presence of the adjacent K6, named the 6,321m peak Chhota Bhai (assuming another name does not already exist), which means "little brother" in Urdu. [This summit, at 35°23'25.50"N, 76°33'56.30"E, lies just south of 6,500m Changi Tower, see AAJ 2016.]

Once we felt rested at base camp, we knew we had energy for another climb. We returned to advanced base on August 9 to attempt an aesthetic peak that had attracted all of us, even though we considered it fairly improbable. We moved camp closer to the base of the south face and then launched the following day.

A surprisingly easy icy gully gave us a welcome boost. Then began more difficult climbing, with a

handful of mixed pitches bringing us to easier ground where we spent our first night. With only light bivouac sacks, we were grateful that some looming storm clouds brought no more than light snowfall—the nearby mountains were clearly being hammered by heavy precipitation.

We had intended to ascend a straight, thin, ice line that led directly to the summit, but with the rising heat, the steep line was now more of a slushy waterfall. Regrettably, the following morning we descended with several rappels to reach a massive ice gully that had survived the increasingly hotter days. We quickly pitched out the calf-melting terrain for hundreds of meters, weaved our way through some interesting mixed terrain, brewed up, and then returned to exhausting AI3 climbing until reaching a short summit ridge. The incredible diving board that formed the summit block was a breathtaking reward. We took turns climbing onto this narrow spire and viewing our shadow overlaid onto the steep north face.

As the sun fell, we descended, deciding to follow a different route than that climbed. This turned out to be more difficult than expected. Many easy rappels from Abalakov anchors started things off well, but loose rock on subsequent rappels damaged our ropes in several places. With the shortened ropes and uncertainty about route-finding in the darkness, we opted to sit for a long and disheartening open bivouac. The cold—and the moderately wet bags from our first night out—woke us early next morning. Many 20m rappels eventually put us back on the glacier. We named the route Hard Tellin' Not Knowin', and as far as we know we made the first ascent of this 6,250m peak, which locals referred to as Changi II (35°21'29.42"N, 76°35'29.78"E).

The area around the Lachit Valley is beautiful, and due to lack of tourism it remains relatively pristine and clean of trash. It is a place for all alpine climbers to find interesting first ascents.

– Kurt Ross, AAC

Images



Jess Roskelley on steep mixed ground during the first ascent of Changi II.



Jess Roskelley heading toward the summit of Chhota Bhai.



Kurt Ross traversing toward mixed ground low on the first ascent of Changi II.



Kurt Ross belayed by Nelson Neirinck on the first ascent of Changi II.



Changi II (6,250m) from the southwest. The upper section of Hard Tellin' Not Knowin', the route of the first ascent, is marked.



Chhota Bhai (6,321m) and the route of ascent along the south ridge. The rock spire behind is Changi Tower (6,500m).



Jess Roskelley at the summit block of Baba Hussein, a 5,800m tower climbed during acclimatization for higher objectives. On the left, a high, unnamed spire partially conceals distant Karmading Brakk (6,100m).



Seen from Changi II: (A) K6, (B) Chhota Bhai, (C) Changi Tower, and (D) the Changi cirque and upper East Lachit Glacier. x

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