



The Great Game: A Difficult New Route up Koyo Zom, 51 Years After the First Ascent

Pakistan, Hindu Raj, Yarkhun Valley

Koyo Zom (6,877 meters) from the Yarkhun Valley. The northwest face is near the right skyline, with a steep icefield leading to a difficult mixed headwall and the long summit ridge. The upper northeast ridge is along the left skyline. Tom Livingstone Collection

Ally Swinton and I sat in an empty hotel restaurant in Gilgit, Pakistan; the morning's silence lingered peacefully. Vaulted ceilings towered overhead. Empty tables and half-tucked chairs littered the room. The space felt overwhelming, like stepping into a cathedral, and I shifted in my seat. It reminded me of the long, cold bivies of the days before.

Just yesterday, we'd been surreally teleported to safety from one of my most intense alpine climbing experiences. Ally and I had quested up a new route, delicately pulling on flakes of rock as we picked our way through mixed ground. "Get some!" I'd shouted as we climbed overhanging granite in rock shoes, the loose stones I threw falling free for hundreds of meters. On the fifth day, bent double with heaving lungs, we slogged to the summit. The raw, pure existence of high-altitude alpinism had taken everything from us.

The day after we summited, we walked down a glacier toward base camp. On the home straight, I thought. Tonight we'll be back with the rest of the lads. But then: an accident, a helicopter rescue, and now...a hotel restaurant? Civilization was a shock: eight days in the mountains and suddenly warmth, food, water. It felt alien. The last 28 hours had been spent spooning Ally as the blood on his head dried, and I could still smell it on my clothes. Now we floated in a sea of empty restaurant tables. I thought back to where it all began.

Will Sim had "rediscovered" the Hindu Raj. Years of political instability and tension had closed big parts of this mountainous and remote area in northwestern Pakistan, immediately south of Afghanistan, to foreigners. Less than a decade earlier, the Taliban had occupied the nearby Swat Valley, just to the south. The Hindu Raj—especially the Yarkhun Valley on the north side of the range—remained submerged in mystery. [Will Sim's brief history of climbing in this area, plus a map of the valley, can be found by [clicking here](#).] But Will's curiosity and research secured a permit for the autumn, and he invited John Crook, Uisdean Hawthorn, Ally Swinton, and me to join.

Our objective was the impressive Koyo Zom (6,877 meters), the highest peak in the range. Like a medieval fortress in the wilds of Asia, its bulk looks toward the plains of Afghanistan, China, and Tajikistan. An enormous, square north face is capped by seracs, and a snowy summit pyramid sits like a crown. The seracs look terrifying, and you can immediately see why the only prior ascents have climbed the easier east face. In 1968, a team of Austrians made the first ascent; British climbers repeated this route in 1974. Since then, the mountain—and much of the range—had remained dormant.

Arriving in the heat and hustle of Islamabad on September 1, our team of five Brits was joined by four Pakistanis, who organized the logistics, cooking, and life in base camp. Imran Shigri of Jasmine Tours, along with Mohsin, Nabeem, and Eshaan, were as excited as we were to explore another region of Pakistan—most of their work was in the Karakoram.

We reached base camp on our sixth day of driving from Islamabad, two days out from the town of Chitral. From a footbridge across the Yarkhun River, it was only a 90-minute walk up a side valley to base camp at 3,500 meters. Lying on the warm, scraggy grass, surrounded by porters' loads, it was easy to forget the previous dusty, bumpy days of riding in Jeeps. As we journeyed further into the mountains, villages faded into isolated hamlets. Great fields of crops became small, precious strips of arable land. We waved to everyone and shouted the Islamic greeting salaam alaikum! ("peace be upon you"). Intense stares instantly cracked into friendly smiles, handshakes offered in return. Every evening we arrived at a local guesthouse. We stretched aching bodies in the sun, but when it suddenly dipped behind a ridgeline, the light and warmth were snuffed like a candle between a finger and a thumb. The hush of dusk rushed up the valley. Stars began to pinprick the sky; the moon, clear and bright, grew fatter every night. It had been a sliver when we arrived in Islamabad, and now it had swelled, glowing like a pockmarked disc.

On our final day of driving, we turned toward the east in the remote Yarkhun Valley, parallel to the border with Afghanistan's slender Wakhan Corridor. At last, we saw our mountain, instantly recognizable: Koyo Zom. We jabbered and whooped at the reality after months of anticipation. We all agreed the most attractive option was the right-hand skyline, the northwest face, which rose into a vast, pale-yellow headwall.

At sunset, as the face melted from blood-orange to gold, we knew we'd found a worthy mountain. It looked "nails for breakfast": bowing walls nearly a mile high, and that headwall glowing, alluring, daring. We couldn't stop pointing. "Maybe left from the icefield...then up and right, following a ramp line...?" It was intimidating to think of the summit being over 3,300 meters higher than our base camp. We ducked into our tents as the waxing moon shimmered over the summit. I can think of few more exciting, addictive, and dangerous things than questing onto an intimidating mountain. Koyo Zom looked just the poison.

During acclimatization, three team members bivouacked at 5,880 meters atop the sunlit icefield on Koyo Zom's northwest face.

Acclimatization is a painful necessity in alpinism. If we tried to climb straight to the summit, we'd simply grind to a halt. We had to let our bodies adapt to higher altitudes repeatedly, like a yo-yo, and we spent several days lying in tents with headaches—sudoku, chess, and the occasional meal broke the monotony. Ideally, you want to sleep 1,000 meters lower than your objective's summit. Since Koyo Zom was 6,877 meters and the nearby mountains reached only 5,500 meters, we decided to "crag" the start of our planned route on the northwest face. We'd sleep at the necessary altitude, get a good idea of the initial icefield, and take a closer look at the headwall.

John, Ally, and I spent a cold night at the top of the icefield, breathing heavily at 5,880 meters. We had created a ledge of snow using a purpose-built hammock to catch debris beneath us, since we quickly hit hard ice and rock. The full moon shone like a comforting beacon, and it was so bright we woke early, thinking it was dawn. Unfortunately, Will and Uisdean were ill and had stayed in base camp. It was almost inevitable that some of our team would get sick, but still we felt for them—it was unfortunate to miss out on crucial acclimatization.

After several nights away, we gorged on the luxurious, simple life of base camp. The sun warmed our stiff muscles as we stretched on mattresses, passing the intervals between food. Mohsin cooked delicious dishes of curry, dhal, vegetables, chicken, and goat. We played cricket until we lost all the balls.

The weather remained mostly settled—these were some of the best conditions I'd ever experienced on a big mountain trip. But as the leaves on stunted trees began to turn fiery red, we knew cold temperatures and autumn snows were approaching. We could now see the moon during the day, faintly arcing through the sky over Koyo Zom.

On expeditions you reach a terrible moment when you know it's time to climb. In the months before

a trip, the actual climb is far in the future. During acclimatization, you're still learning the mountain's moods: You watch how clouds boil around the peak; you see where snow sticks to the face; and you stare as sunshine and shadow reveal new features. Climbing is ignored because so much can happen before then—the team, weather, and conditions all need to align. But eventually the moment arrives.

At breakfast on Sunday, September 22, a weather forecast flashed on the Garmin InReach Mini: sunshine and good weather continues. The carefree atmosphere slipped out the door, and long-buried thoughts of climbing surfaced. Ally and I were motivated for the northwest face, on the right. The climbing looked hard, and I reckoned a team had a 50 percent chance of climbing this line. At least the headwall looked relatively safe from objective hazards. The left-hand skyline appeared to have more moderate climbing along a complex ridge. Will, John, and Uisdean chose this line, the northeast ridge: It looked fantastic, and hopefully it would be easier—it also might be more suitable for their acclimatization. A mix of psyche and anxiety begin to bubble.

Base camp resembled a garage sale as we all packed, micro-debating the gear for hours. We clutched scraps of paper full of scribbled lists, and by evening Ally and I had two enormous rucksacks ready. I cursed the weight of our double rack of cams, set and a half of wires, set of pegs, a pair of rock shoes, double sleeping bag, a single-skin tent, food, gas stove, and fuel that might be stretched to eight days, but we couldn't trim anything more.

On Monday we all shouldered our packs and walked to advanced base camp, 1,000 meters higher. We drifted apart, lost in anticipation. Would the weather hold? What would the climbing be like? The crux of many alpine routes seems to be in the mind, and this is often the hardest part to control.

The following morning, after a hurried predawn "good luck!" to the others as they rushed toward the left-hand line, Ally and I slogged up the glacier to the right. We spent several painful hours kicking and punching up the icefield to our previous high point. It had been a monstrous 1,300 meters of altitude gain from ABC, but with some potential bad weather forecast at the weekend, we wanted to gain a day, and this was the only way. At the bivy, our snow ledge had retained its undercut sofa-shape from our acclimatization night. We wrapped the bivy hammock around it again and snuggled into the double sleeping bag.

On the second day, Ally led several brilliant mixed pitches up a chimney and gully system. Piece by piece, pitch by pitch, we answered more of our questions, filling in the blanks we'd noted when glassing the face. Everything climbed differently from how we'd expected—a continuing theme. Ally thrutched up granite corners, then hauled the bags, which scraped in protest and caught on every nubbin of rock. We each followed the other's leads; we carried no jumars. Although Ally and I had never climbed together before, we seemed to have an easy, relaxed partnership, based on the necessity of up.

Ally Swinton leads one of the "breakfast pitches" on day three, entering the headwall on Koyo Zom's northwest face. Photo by Tom Livingstone

Around noon I took over, aiming for a snow ridge that divides the northwest face. I unpeeled my down jacket and synthetic trousers to climb frozen-in spikes and flakes of rock. "It's like dry-tooling with your hands!" I shouted down. An icy tongue brought us to the ridge. As the sun melted into the horizon, we pitched our tent on the narrow spine, and I snapped photos of Ally in a true Greater Ranges setting. It felt like we were the only people on Earth, and in the distance, jagged 7,000-meter mountains jutted up like wonky teeth. Although I was concerned that we'd finished late and might burn out, I was too pleased with the bivy and too tired to care.

Ally took the breakfast pitches again, frontpoints screeching against the rock as we chimneyed higher. Then we bumped into the headwall's most impressive and intimidating feature: a 90-meter stretch of vertical and overhanging rock, dotted with roofs and protruding fins. Ally had dubbed it the Cathedral. It reminded me of the north face of Mt. Alberta, which I'd climbed with Uisdean a few years back. Like a fox caught in headlights, we froze. We hung on a creaking belay and craned our necks.

Without aid climbing gear or a portaledge, we'd be here all week unless we could find a way easier than this appeared. Ally urged us onward, and I was happy to have a look but doubtful it'd go. I'd only aided a couple of moves before, so several pitches of it seemed daunting. But once I'd fringed up a crack to the first belay, my confidence returned. As Ally arrived, I eagerly changed into rock shoes. I could see a line of holds leading out right, toward a groove cutting through the top of the headwall. "I think it'll go!" I shouted.

This felt like climbing at Gogarth's Main Cliff, in North Wales, a place I loved, and I began to relish our wild—yet somehow familiar—position. The sun washed over us now, and I tiptoed and smeared in my shoes—this was far better than double boots and crampons! I ripped off my gloves, crimping and pinching and bridging between giant fins, reveling at the thought of steep rock climbing at 6,200 meters. Before long, however, I was resting on a cam, breathing heavily, and trying to shake some warmth back into my hands and feet—my body remembered exactly where we were!

Photo by Ally Swinton

At the final belay of this difficult passage, with easier ground in sight, I whooped in delight. This was alpine climbing at its finest: I hadn't expected us to make it through the headwall, but we'd been granted a subtle and joyful passage to the upper mountain. A few hours later, we'd chopped a small snow ledge and begun to spoon as dusk overtook day. It was another long, cold night with no tent, but the stars and moon kept spinning around us, eventually fading into another day.

Ally led off and soon we popped out from the headwall. We enjoyed the easier ground, but we were still a long way from the true summit, which was well back from the subpeak we'd seen from base camp. We both checked into our altitude pain caves. A lying-down bivy in the tent (only our second so far) passed in a fatigued haze, but I remember getting up in the night to see incredible flashes of lightning from a distant storm. It was as if the sky were tearing itself apart, huge white explosions illuminating thunderheads and boiling clouds. Fortunately it didn't come our way. I watched the moon and the storm until sleep welcomed me back.

On the summit slopes, we embraced a bitter cold, cocooned in all our jackets. Hoping to see the tracks of Will, Uisdean, and John, we pushed on, but eventually figured they must've turned back. [See report here.] Ally and I were completely alone. Sucking in all the air we could manage—and hyperventilating when we couldn't—we finally reached the summit around 1 p.m. on September 28. Our "woo-hoo!" shouts were lost to the mountains in the distance. We abseiled and down-climbed the mountain's east face, the line of the first ascent, that afternoon, finally slumping into our tent on the Pechus Glacier.

The following day we walked down the broad glacier, planning to hit the moraine and then continue downward until we could contour around on grassy slopes to base camp. Sleep-deprived, stomachs grumbling, but with all the climbing behind us and the end virtually in sight, we stomped through the snow. About 20 meters of rope separated us. I began to weave around gaping crevasses, occasionally crawling over sagging snow-bridges, reminiscent of a minefield. The snow hadn't frozen overnight. I held my breath in nervous expectation; the crevasses looked like monstrous, soulless depths.

Our zigzagging route made it difficult to keep the rope taut between us, and while checking an alternative way across a crevasse—in an unlucky instant—Ally plunged through the snow and vanished. A bridge had broken. The soft snow helped me hold the fall after 15 or 20 meters—or maybe Ally had clattered to a stop. My heart nearly beat out of my chest. I could barely move, let alone pull Ally up hand over hand, and was terrified of being dragged in after him. Unable to find ice, I set up an anchor from a buried axe and began to haul Ally using a 3:1 system. Each time I crawled back to the axe, I eyed it dubiously, praying it would hold.

For some reason, I expected Ally to be fine when he slumped over the lip of the crevasse. First came his helmet—it fell into three pieces. Then I registered the blood from his head, the grimace on his face,

and the limp in his leg. I quickly put our only bandage on his head and sliced open his trousers, hoping my fingers wouldn't meet sharp bone and soft, wet flesh. Thankfully, the leg was only badly bruised.

I tried to think clearly. The only photo I'd seen of our descent route showed a long, gnarly glacier still below us—it would take all day to travel if we were fit and lucky. Ally was in shock, shivering, and bleeding from his head. We were out of gas and food, save for a few bars and nuts. I knew Ally needed more medical attention than a single bandage and painkillers. After a few minutes, I pressed the SOS button on our InReach.

I did what anyone would do in the ensuing day and a half, and cared for Ally as I'm sure he would for me. I was glad he remained conscious throughout, but in the first afternoon he seemed very faint and cold. I was really concerned, fearing the worst. Throughout the night, I spooned Ally to keep him warm, listening to his breathing, already irregular from the altitude and now perhaps his injuries. When his breath paused for seconds...and seconds...and—I'd give him a nudge, holding my own breath, waiting for his next.

At some point in the night, Ally suggested we called our new route the Great Game. This was the nickname for the rivalry and power plays between the British and Russian empires in Central Asia during the 1800s. We'd read about this history and the region during our journey into the mountains, and the name sounded fitting.

By noon the next day, Ally's condition had improved, and he even tried to hobble a few meters. As he returned to the tent, I heard the distinct chopchopchop of helicopter rotors—what a beautiful sound!

Back in Islamabad, a few days later, the whole team had regrouped. We shared wild stories of helicopters, hospitals, Will and John waiting in a nearby airbase for our rescue, and Uisdean packing up base camp and driving through the night. After our breakfast in the empty hotel restaurant in Gilgit, Ally and I had been driven to Islamabad. He was well on his way to recovery. We enjoyed a final meal with our Pakistani assistants and friends. As we spilled onto the street, the moon shone a bright sliver over the city, a full lunar cycle complete after a month in the mountains.

Summary: First ascent of the northwest face of Koyo Zom (6,877m): The Great Game (1,500m, ED+). Ally Swinton and Tom Livingstone started up the face on September 24, summited on September 28, and descended to the Pechus Glacier, east of the mountain. After a crevasse fall the next day, a helicopter rescue was required. This was only the third ascent of Koyo Zom and the second summit route.

About the Author: Born in 1990, Tom Livingstone wrote about a new route on Latok I (second ascent of the peak) in AAJ 2019. A different version of this article appeared at UKClimbing.com. Livingstone spoke about this expedition in episode 24 of the AAJ's Cutting Edge podcast (below).

The Cutting Edge · Tom Livingstone: Koyo Zom and the Great Game

Images



Koyo Zom (6,877 meters) from the Yarkhun Valley. The northwest face is near the right skyline, with a steep icefield leading to a difficult mixed headwall and the long summit ridge. The upper northeast ridge is along the left skyline.



Pakistan vs. the U.K. at base camp. A great diversion until the cricket balls were lost.



During acclimatization, three team members bivouacked at 5,880 meters atop the sunlit icefield on Koyo Zom's northwest face.



Only two of the four bivouac sites on the face allowed the climbers to pitch their tent. Night two had a memorable setting.



Ally Swinton leads a "breakfast pitch," day three.



Tom Livingstone leading one of the steep rock pitches on the upper headweall: "This felt like climbing at Gogarth's Main Cliff, in North Wales, a place I loved...but at 6,200 meters."



Looking west from the Darkot Glacier to Koyo Zom (6,877m, the highest peak in the Hindu Raj). The east ridge, the route of the first ascent (1968), faces the camera. This route was descended to the Pechus Glacier (hidden) by the 2019 team that climbed the northwest face.



Ally Swinton in the hospital following his rescue from Koyo Zom after a crevasse fall.



Crossing the Yarkhun River near the entrance to the Koyo Valley.



Steep climbing on the headwall of the northwest face of Koyo Zom.



Ally Swinton following very steep rock at around 6,200 meters on day three. The climbers did not carry ascenders and each followed the other's leads.



Descending the Pelchus Glacier before the crevasse fall.



Ally Swinton (left) and Tom Livingstone on the summit of Koyo Zom, day five of their climb via the northwest face.

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