



AAC Publications

Exploring the Yarkhun

A Brief History of the Northernmost Hindu Raj in Pakistan

The Yarkhun Valley runs parallel to the Wakhan Corridor, just to the north in Afghanistan. The labeled glaciers are: (1) Madit, (2) Risht, (3) Shetor, (4) Ponarilio, (5) Kotalkash, (6) Koyo, (7) Pechus, (8) Chhatiboi, (9) Chikzar, (10) Chiantar, and (11) Chatiboi. A 2019 French ski loop also is shown. Map by Anna Riling

The Yarkhun Valley forms the northern border of the Hindu Raj mountains, which rise in northwestern Pakistan between the Afghan Hindu Kush and the western end of the Karakoram. The valley drains southwest toward Chitral, capital of the Chitral district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, and famous for its world champion polo team and a colorful British colonial history. At the Yarkhun's northeastern end is Boroghil Pass, one of the very few drivable passes over the Afghan border north of the Khyber Pass.

In 1992–93, a mostly motorable road was built all the way up the valley, giving access from the Boroghil to Chitral in a 15- to 20-hour jeep ride rather than weeks of riding and walking. The people of the Yarkhun Valley are mostly Wakhi, originating from the neighboring Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan. In Pakistan they are referred to as Gujali; they speak the Wakhi language and are Ismaili Muslims. They mostly follow the classic mountain-farming formula of goat and sheep herding and small-scale agriculture on irrigated terraces.

The ridge formed by the Yarkhun's northern wall forms the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the mountains that create the southern and eastern walls of the valley are the largest of the Hindu Raj, including Koyo Zom (6,877m), Karol Zom (a.k.a. Thui I, 6,660m), and Thui II (6,523m). Impressive steep faces, up to 1,500m high, on numerous aspects, make these appealing as technical alpine climbing objectives. However, until 2019, the Yarkhun side of these mountains had seen no climbing activity for many decades.

The first person to visit the Hindu Raj with an eye for mountains was probably Tom Longstaff (U.K.) in 1916–17. He wrote up his findings in the *Alpine Journal* and gave a lecture in 1920, raising awareness of the Hindu Raj among climbers. A handful of German, Austrian, and Japanese expeditions visited the range through the 1960s, mostly approaching via the Yasin and Darkot valleys, by way of Gilgit.

It wasn't until 1967, when the Austrian Gerald Gruber and his team made a recce of the Yarkhun Valley as far as Boroghil, that the notion of climbing the great peaks of the Hindu Raj from the upper Yarkhun Valley was considered. This led to perhaps the most important expedition to the Yarkhun, that of Albert Stamm and his Austrian team in 1968. After getting an overview of the peaks from 5,600-meter Korum Zom on the north side of the valley, they made the first ascent of Koyo Zom and several other 6,000ers above the high plateaus of the Pechus and Chatiboi glaciers. Other expeditions followed suit, mainly Brits and Japanese approaching the Thui peaks via the Kotalkash, Ponarilio, and Shetor glaciers. The southern side of the range also saw activity from European and Japanese teams during the 1970s, and it could be said that the '70s were the exploratory heyday of the Hindu Raj.

Much less activity was recorded through the next 30 years. Japanese teams visited and climbed Shahan Dok (6,320m) in 1987 and '88. In 1999, a large international expedition organized by the UIAA brought strong young climbers from all over the world to the south side of the main divide. Approaching from Gilgit, they made many first ascents of varying significance, mostly around the area of the Borum Bar Glacier. French and Dutch teams in 2007 and 2018, respectively, climbed a number

of peaks in the Dasbar Valley, south of Koyo Zom, including the striking pyramid of Kachqiant. Since 1997, numerous Italian expeditions have explored the mountains around the upper Chiantar Glacier, which feeds the Yarkhun River, approaching this huge glacier basin via passes from the north or south. However, the main peaks and faces on the Yarkhun side of the watershed went untouched.

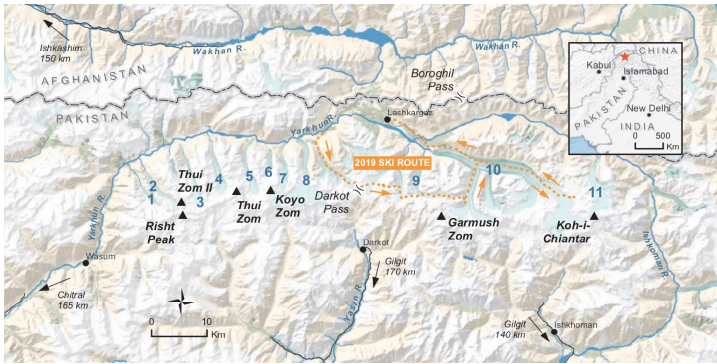
The relatively low volume of expeditions is due to a mix of political and practical reasons. First, the proximity of the Hindu Raj, and particularly the Yarkhun Valley, to Afghanistan means the area has been on the fringe of conflicts numerous times over the last 40 years, making climbing permits in this strategic area difficult to attain. Secondly, there are a lot of mountains in Pakistan! Climbers looking for adventurous objectives have been spoiled for choice ever since the Baltoro opened up to climbers. Thirdly, there was a time in the 1960s and '70s when a lot of European expeditions would drive to Pakistan and the Himalaya. As one of the farthest west areas of the Greater Ranges, the Hindu Raj must have felt that bit closer in the period before air travel became a more practical mode of transport.

When I asked Asghar Ali Porik of Jasmine Tours to acquire a permit for our September trip to the Yarkhun, he seemed pessimistic. Unlike that of Gilgit-Baltistan, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa tourism office is not used to handling peak permits, and especially not for an area where none had been granted in many years. So it was with great elation and surprise that I received an email to say that he was driving back from Peshawar with the permit for Koyo Zom in his hands!

It's hard to know whether our expedition and others were able to climb in the Yarkhun Valley in 2019 as a result of sheer luck. But it is certainly the case that the current political administration in Pakistan is doing its best to make tourism more open. It is also true that the north-western border with Afghanistan has been relatively peaceful and stable of late, compared with Pakistan's northeastern frontier with India. Hopefully, climbers will continue to have access to these remarkable mountains.

Will Sim planned the 2019 British expedition that climbed the northwest face of Koyo Zom and attempted the northeast buttress.

Images



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