



AAC Publications

Falak Sar, North Ridge Via New Start From Northwest

Pakistan, Swat-Kohistan Mountains

The north ridge of Falak Sar in profile, see from the approach to the west. Photo by Ahmed Mujtaba

A Pakistani team made one of the few successful ascents in the country during 2020 when they climbed a significant new approach to the north ridge of Falak Sar (5,918m), the highest peak of Swat. The team was from Lahore—Hamza Anees, expedition leader Ahmed Mujtaba, and Adnan Saleem—and is an example of a growing trend of Pakistani alpinists from the “lower regions” taking on more technical climbs.

The team chose to reach the crest of the north ridge, which was first climbed as early as 1965 and possibly earlier, by pioneering an approach from the northwest rather than following the established route along the northeast spur. The advantages of the northwest approach are a much higher base camp and a more direct route to the summit, avoiding some of the difficulties of the lower north ridge. However, it is steeper and more crevassed.

The three walked east from Beigabad in the Ushu Valley, following the usual approach to the north side of the mountain and its northeast spur. However, before reaching the glacier, they moved south and entered a parallel valley rising more steeply west toward the north ridge.

After spending three nights at base camp (4,223m), they moved without porters to an advanced base at 4,750m. This involved negotiating an icefall and crevassed glacier. Next day they followed a primarily rocky route—relatively short and safe—to Camp 1 at 5,072m, some distance below the rocky section of the lower north ridge. From here they slanted up right on snow slopes, and an easy four-hour day took them to Camp 2 at 5,430m, where they spent 90 minutes flattening a tent platform just below the crest of the ridge at a bergschrund wall.

On August 16 they left for a summit push. The snow was in perfect condition but became steeper around 5,700m. They moved slowly and at around 6 p.m. discovered a small snow cave where they decided to spend the night. The altitude was 5,808m and the temperature -18°C. Although they began climbing at 10 the following morning, August 17, they did not arrive on the summit until 4:45 p.m., by which time it was cloudy with strong wind. A phone altimeter read 5,957m. The descent to the snow cave, which they reached at 8 p.m. was difficult, and the next day it took eight hours to reach Camp 2. Here, they rested through the following day and night before heading straight for base camp.

Descending from the crest of the northeast spur, which leads up right to the start of the north ridge of Falak Sar (behind). The photo was taken during an unsuccessful attempt on the mountain in 2014. Photo by Ahmed Mujtaba

This was Mujtaba’s third attempt on the mountain. In 2014, following the standard approach via the northeast spur, he reached 5,330m, and in 2019, via the new approach from the northwest, he reached only 5,072m.

The history of climbing on Falak Sar (“Road to Heaven”) has some uncertainties. In the summer of 1957, New Zealanders Berry and Tyndale-Biscoe reported the first ascent of Falak Sar, approaching from Beigabad to the west. On their second attempt, they made a camp at around 4,580m, and

although their route description is far from detailed, it appears they climbed onto the upper northwest spur from the glacier bay to the north, and then continued up the north ridge to the summit, passing a bergschrund with a steep ice wall at half height. They reported they left the 4,580m camp at 5:30 a.m., reached the top by 3 p.m., and were back at camp at 11 p.m. They described the summit as a plateau big enough to play a game of rugby.

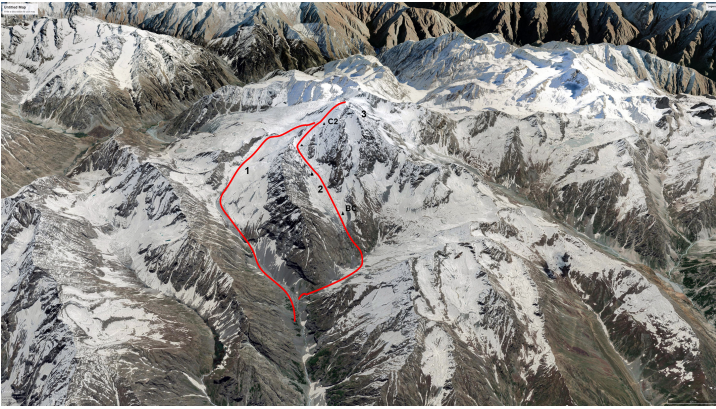
In July 1965, after driving from Germany, a four-man expedition led by Stefan Rausch made the second ascent, though at the time they had been “reliably” told the mountain was unclimbed. Approaching from the west, they reached the crest of the northeast spur and followed it back right to a plateau below the north ridge, where they placed a high camp at 5,100m. They found that the initial section of the ridge sported a series of fragile rock towers, which with some difficulty they outflanked on the west side. The ridge above was corniced and, again, they were frequently forced onto the west flank. The crux was just a couple of hundred meters below the summit, where they struggled to climb a vertical, unconsolidated snow wall several meters high. They reached the summit after eight hours and only just regained their high camp by nightfall. The Germans were later amazed to read the first ascensionists’ account. Conspicuous features like the rock towers were not mentioned, and they had to crowd onto a little summit dome. Rausch, writing in the *Alpine Journal*, remarked that nobody who stood on that little dome could support the assertion that it was big enough for a game of rugby.

In 1967, a small team led by Wolfgang Stefan more or less repeated this route, using the same high camp at 5,100m, reached via the northeast spur. The following years would see several more ascents of the north ridge by Japanese teams, but Swat began to develop a reputation for theft and hostility toward outsiders, and for the majority of foreign climbers it became to be seen (perhaps unjustly) as a “no go” area.

In July 1990, Hermann Warth (second ascent of Lhotse and ascents of other 8,000ers, including Everest), a German who at the time was living in the area and working with a Swiss-sponsored development project, made the first traverse of the mountain via a new route on the south face. With Ang Choppal Sherpa from Nepal, Warth climbed around 25 pitches of 40–50° up the south face to reach the west ridge, then followed this to the summit. The elevation gain of their route was around 1,100m. They had a tough time downclimbing the icy north ridge and spent a third night on the mountain, where the northeast spur bends to the right. Next day they descended this spur to “the pleasures of sunny and fragrant pastures.” Warth noted that the northeast and northwest faces of the mountain posed significant challenges. To date they remain unclimbed.

– Information provided by **Ahmed Mujtaba**, Pakistan

Images



Falak Sar from the northwest. (1) The route taken by early ascensionists, following the northeast spur. (2) The new 2020 Pakistani route, with camps marked. (3) The west ridge, the upper section of which was climbed in 1990, reached via the south face.



The north ridge of Falak Sar in profile, see from the approach to the west.



The north ridge of Falak Sar seen in 2014 from the rock gendarmes near its base.



The view north from the summit of Falak Sar.



The unclimbed northwest face and (left) the north ridge, seen from the 2020 approach.



Climbing the north ridge of Falak Sar above Camp 2 (visible as one blue tent down and left of the crest, below the bergschrund wall). Toward its base, the ridge crosses a rocky section and then splits, the northwest spur falling to the left as a rocky crest, while the northeast spur, falling to the right in shadow, is entirely snowy.



Traversing to Camp 2, which was placed close to the crest of the ridge below the highest bergschrund above the climbers.



Descending from the crest of the northeast spur, which leads up right to the start of the north ridge of Falak Sar (behind). The photo was taken during an unsuccessful attempt on the mountain in 2014.



The icefall leading to the upper névé below the north ridge of Falak Sar.

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