



AAC Publications

Nubra Valley Ice Climbs

India, East Karakoram

Tsewang Namgyal leading the first pitch of Whiskey Shadow (WI4+/5) in 2021. The ice had been considerably thicker during the first ascent in 2020. Photo by Vishal Rautela

In December 2019, I asked Indian climber Karn Kowshik if I could join him and his friends later in the winter for some ice climbing exploration in India. I had met Karn at the February 2018 Michigan Ice Fest and learned of his tremendous enthusiasm for creating an active ice climbing scene in his home mountains of northern India. In January 2019, a small group of American climbers accompanied Karn to the Spiti region of India to participate in the ice festival that he and some friends had organized (see AAJ 2020). I was intrigued by the possibility of another ice climbing venture to northern India.

Karn responded positively, and after consulting with his two climbing partners, Tsewang Namgyal and Rigzin Tsewang, two mountain guides from Ladakh, they welcomed me to join their exploration of the Nubra Valley in March 2020. Waters flowing south out of the Siachen Glacier in northernmost India travel through the Nubra on their way to joining the Shyok River near Diskit village. The Shyok then continues northwest, into Baltistan in northern Pakistan, before dumping into the mighty Indus River and turning back to the south. Many harrowing drives up and down the Indus River's famed Karakoram Highway had firmly cemented the region in my consciousness. We set dates for climbing during the first three weeks of March. With this in mind, I purchased my airfare and made plans for a month's trip.

Karn and I met again at the Ouray and Michigan ice festivals in early 2020 to firm up our plans. We left local planning to his friends; they knew the area well and had spent years guiding Western as well as Indian groups in the mountains of India. The news of COVID-19's spread had begun to taint the travel landscape by mid-February. However, I decided to persevere with our plans. On February 29, the day the first U.S. COVID-19 death was announced in Kirkland, Washington, I caught a flight from Calgary to Seattle, the first of four flights to Leh in Ladakh, which I reached on March 2. Headed into a remote mountain area, Karn and I presumed our destination was as good a safe haven from COVID-19 as one could find anywhere—at least for a time.

Leh, the nearest city to the Nubra Valley, is located at approximately 3,400m. To the north, the 5,359-meter Khardung La separates the city from the Nubra. Fortunately, it is now kept open year-round by the Indian military's desire to maintain a link with outposts along the Indian-Pakistan border in the Siachen area. For the first two days, we stayed in town to acclimatize, but on March 4 my friends and I stretched our legs on a moderate local ice crag up-valley called Gangnes, about 500m above Leh's elevation. An irrigation canal leaks over a 25m cliff, creating a convenient winter ice flow to introduce people to the sport. Several eye-catching, 10m ice towers were nearby. Interestingly, these were manmade creations, designed to conserve water flows through the spring as water becomes scarce.

The 4WD we had hoped to rent in Leh for our trip over the Khardung La turned out to be wishful thinking, but Rigzin, who lives in the Nubra Valley, made calls to his connections and found a solution: A friend had a Maruti pickup and was willing to lend us his vehicle while we scouted and climbed in the area. We descended into the Nubra as light waned in the late afternoon. Stopping at Rigzin's sister's house up the valley, she welcomed us for a delicious meal. An hour further up the road, our spirits were high as we arrived at the government guest house in Panamik Hot Sulphur Springs on the evening of March 5.

The next morning, we decided to climb on a very nearby waterfall in the Podong Valley that Rigzin and Tsewang had explored earlier in the winter. The 15m step of near-vertical ice, called Podong Cake, was only a 30-minute hike from the guesthouse, south of the village. We spent the afternoon reawakening our ice technique and reviewing our systems. The Podong introduced me to the nature of the “hidden gems” of ice climbs in this extremely dry environment. While there was absolutely no green vegetation anywhere in March, many of the side valleys were fed by creeks that drained the vast terrain above. If one of these creeks flowed over a cliff, we invariably had an ice climbing venue. Nowhere could I see the kind of porous rock that enabled aquifers to dribble water over a cliff—the only climbs were in the canyons or below a hanging valley.

We returned to the guesthouse with anticipation of making our way to Murgi village, on the west side of the Nubra River, and to the impressive falls nearby. Rigzin and Tsewang had tried Murgi’s ice earlier in the winter, getting partway up the 70m first pitch. This steep waterfall was a continuous and stellar WI4+, among the best pitches of this grade I’ve climbed. Above this, the ice-filled gully rose through the deep cleft at about a grade 3 level. Tsewang led us to a belay stance in a small recess on the right side of the gully, about 30m up. We had dodged a bullet.

Karn led the next 35m, continuing up the gully on beautiful grade 3 ice, as it curved around right and out of view. In all, the upper section through the cleft provided a stunning 70m of beautiful moderate climbing before leveling out in an almost flat, frozen creek. We were thrilled at the quality of the route. The men named it Whiskey Shadow (140m, WI4+/5).

Carlos Buhler forcing the line through the rock barrier on the route that became Ladakhi Scouts. The gently rising, frozen creek continued up the canyon, and we tied off the ropes and hustled up the creek for 200m. Sure enough, we found an additional step of about 15m, but the ice was sopping wet and it was getting late. Two rope-stretching 70m rappels brought us to the ground, where some villagers had been observing our progress. Our spirits were elated. It felt good to accomplish the defining route of the village, if not the valley.

We rested the following day by taking part in a Buddhist ceremony in nearby Taksha village. There was no social distancing on this day, as we crowded into a small room and sat cross-legged on the floor with 50 others, eating a delicious lunch served from an unknown kitchen and listened to the monks’ chanting.

On March 9, we traveled to another climb that Tsewang and Rigzin had explored earlier in the winter; they had been unable to pass a 15m, difficult-to-protect rock step. We drove about 30 minutes south of the guesthouse on the west side of the valley to a small hamlet called Youlkhram, where an obvious drainage extends to the west.

The approach took about 45 minutes into the canyon. After an initial 10m WI3 ice ramp, the frozen creek led into a steep-sided canyon for about 300m until it became blocked by the rock step. Unfortunately, the rock was now running with water and coated in algae. This unappetizing step blocked access to an attractive 25m column of vertical ice visible about 50m beyond. While it appeared that one might be able to leave the gully and scramble up and around the step, I thought it would be more aesthetic to climb directly. Resigned to my idealistic conclusion, I spent the next hour climbing this difficult little step and bringing Rigzin up to the creekbed above. Meanwhile, Tsewang and Karn had discovered they could scramble around this step to the right and rappel back into the creek from the side.

Fortunately, the 25m ice column appeared worth the trouble. It was steep and well-formed, and reminded me of one of the vertical steps of The Professor Falls back home in Alberta. We took turns leading the WI5- pitch and then, with everyone satiated, we rappelled the rock step and descended the right-hand creek bank back to our car. They named the route Ladakhi Scouts.

The next day, March 10, was spent exploring the Nubra area to the south, as well as visiting the

magnificent Diskit Monastery, the 14th-century gumpa that is the oldest and largest Buddhist monastery in the Nubra, perched above a deep cleft. The following day we explored a potential side canyon up the Shyok River near the monastery. It turned out, unfortunately, that the frozen waterfall Rigzin had spotted earlier had received too much sunlight and was no longer in condition. This route is one they'll have to return to in another season.

We spent that afternoon driving 75km north along the west side of the Nubra River to the small but very impressive Yarma Gumpa, near the mouth of the Siachen Glacier. The single monk who lived there offered us a delightful tour. On the way, we discovered two potential ice climbs that would be worth a return visit. Additionally, there were miles of beautiful granite buttresses that will no doubt provide rock climbing playgrounds. We had picked some of the low-hanging fruit in the area. There will be much exploration in coming seasons.

— **Carlos Buhler, Canada**

Editor's Note: The first Nubra Ice Climbing Festival, with 28 participants, was held in January 2021. In addition, Rigzin Tsewang, as president of the Nubra Mountaineering Association, organized the Nubra Valley Women's Ice Climbing Festival in the first week of March 2021, with 46 participants. Despite ice conditions that were not as good as those in 2020, many new routes have been climbed. As of March 2021, there were at least 16 ice routes in the valley.

Images



Carlos Buhler forcing the line through the rock barrier on the route that became Ladakhi Scouts.



Tsewang Namgyal leading the first pitch of Whiskey Shadow (WI4+/5) in 2021. The ice was considerably thicker during the first ascent in 2020.



Climbing the upper pillar on Ladakhi Scouts.



Participants in the first Nubra Ice Climbing Festival, held in January 2021.



Rigzin Tsewang leading Luxury, a new route from 2021 at Nubra Adventure Club Crag.

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