



AAC Publications

Sumayar Valley, Historical First Ascents and Peak Names

Pakistan, Karakoram, Rakaposhi Mountains

Looking up (A) the Sumayar Glacier from the 1984 base camp. (B) Daranishi La. (C) Daranishi Chhish. (D) Seemurgh. (E) Chatan Sar. (F) Silkiang Peak. From Silkiang Peak, the Silkiang Glacier flows over the visible icefall to the Sumayar. The tiny 1984 expedition made the first ascents of peaks C, D, E, and F, as well as two other summits. Photo by Lindsay Griffin.

History records the tenure of General Zia-ul-Huk, the sixth president of Pakistan, as a mixed blessing. However, in the early 1980s he greatly benefited climbers by allowing foreign tourists in open areas to “trek up to 6,000m” without a permit. In 1984, on our first visit to the Karakoram, the meaning of this simple phrase was still unclear: All of our climbing equipment remained well-concealed as Jan Solov (U.K.) and I left the village of Sumayar (Sumaiyer) in the Hunza Valley. Two days later, on July 30, we reached the moraines of the Sumayar Glacier, said goodbye to our few porters, and the following day moved everything up to a base camp (ca 4,400m) on a snow-covered shelf below the east ridge of what is today known as Pheker.

We were not the first in this valley. Our visit had been prompted by a couple of photos and a recommendation from an old friend, Stephen Venables, who had visited in 1979. However, way back in 1892, Sir Martin Conway and his guide Mathias Zurbriggen, who later that season would explore the Baltoro together, trekked up the Sumayar Glacier to the col at its head overlooking the Bualter Glacier. Conway named this Daranishi La.

If we had a specific goal, it was the 5,465m peak directly behind our tent door, with an attractive east ridge clearly visible from Sumayar village. I set out alone just before dawn on August 2 and quickly faced my first experience of Karakoram granite. The lower section of the ridge was steep and completely rotten. I crept past blocks and crumbling ledges until, in a rather exposed position on the left flank of the crest, I met a steep, 8–10m slab that I couldn't avoid. Flicking a rope around the most stable-looking block, I scurried up accommodating edges in newly acquired Koflach plastic boots. At the top I expected to find an obvious belay for my return. There was none, but I put this out of my mind for later, reached a fine névé arête above, and continued for what seemed like miles to the summit. There, I enjoyed magnificent views in a southern arc from Spantik to Rakaposhi, and northward across the Batura Wall.

I remember little of the descent except for the slab—there was indeed no belay, and it took me three attempts and a lot talking to myself before I got down. Twelve hours after leaving, I was back at the tent. At the time there appeared to be no known name for this summit, and as it was clearly visible from the village, I named it Sumayar Peak. Current maps call it Pheker.

After a rest day, Jan and I took a journey up the Sumayar Glacier. On the 5th we reached Daranishi La, turned south, then west, to follow a long but straightforward snow ridge to Peak 5,540m, which we felt should logically be called Daranishi Chhish.

The north face of Silkiang Peak from the Silkiang Glacier. Red marks the route of the first ascent. The descent (blue) followed the west ridge before descending to the south and walking back round the mountain. Photo by Lindsay Griffin.

After returning to base camp, our next plan was to reach a higher glacier basin that flowed north through a large icefall to the Sumayar. At the back of this stood Peak 5,598m. This had been climbed in June 1958 from the upper Minapin Glacier to the south by Trevor Braham and Dennis Kemp, part of

an expedition attempting to make the first ascent of Diran. They called it Snow Dome, though I also saw it named Braham's Peak. Today's maps call it, confusingly, Sumayar Peak (it is not visible from the village or from Karimabad opposite). Our target was the higher peak to the east, clearly visible from base camp. It looked so much higher than anything else nearby, we overestimated its altitude, which is around 5,750m.

From a camp below the icefall, it took most of a day to find a route through the left side onto the upper glacier, which we named Silkiang. Leaving in the middle of the night of August 9–10, we made a steady climb until just after dawn, when the sky was filled with ominous cloud (until then the weather had been perfect). We retreated, but after an hour the sky cleared to a beautiful blue, forcing us to reconsider and trudge back up to the foot of the north face. Here we made a very stupid mistake. Already late, and assuming we would reverse the route, we left our packs (including headlamps) at the base. The face, including a 60° narrows between seracs above half-height, was in perfect condition and we arrived on the summit with less than two hours before darkness. The view of the north ridge of Diran, directly opposite, was stunning.

There was no time to reverse the route, so taking a gamble we first headed down the west ridge, then the south face, to reach the glacier below Sumayar Peak (Snow Dome). Cramponing down the 35–40° south face on perfect frozen névé, yet below 5,500m and exposed to full afternoon sun, I decided that the Karakoram had to be the place to climb. Sadly, I never found remotely similar conditions on any subsequent trip.

With a long deviation now needed to collect our packs, we realized we could never reach them before dark, and therefore possibly fail to locate them. Instead, we headed downhill toward the tent, hoping we would spot its bulkier shape in the dark. We regained it an hour after nightfall and, exhausted, spent the next day, almost foodless, nervously looking at suboptimal weather before heading back up for the packs and chocolate bars on the morning of the 11th. That evening we were back at base camp, having named our summit Silkiang Peak (36°9'56.89"N, 74°41'46.10"E).

On the 16th, I made the first ascent of Mirshikar (5,445m), which I had seen from Pheker. The previous day I descended partway down the Sumayar Glacier snout, then made a rising traverse across snow and rock ribs on the east flank of the Pheker-Mirshikar ridge, stopping at a protected bivouac site. Next day I climbed a couloir to the southeast ridge and headed up it a short way to the summit.

We made two more ascents. On the 19th, from a camp on the Sumayar Glacier, we climbed two peaks on the long northwest ridge of Daranishi Chhish. After a dozen or so pitches up a north-facing slope of bare blue ice we reached the ridge, from where it was an easy ascent up to Seemurgh (ca 5,200m) on our left. Returning to the exit point, I then headed in the opposite direction for around 500m on a long broad snow ridge to Chatan Sar (ca 5,100m).

We were prepared for a long downclimb through the night (this was pre-Abalakov era), but fortunately the sun had now softened the ice, making front-pointing straightforward. With unaccustomed efficiency, we were almost off the face by dusk.

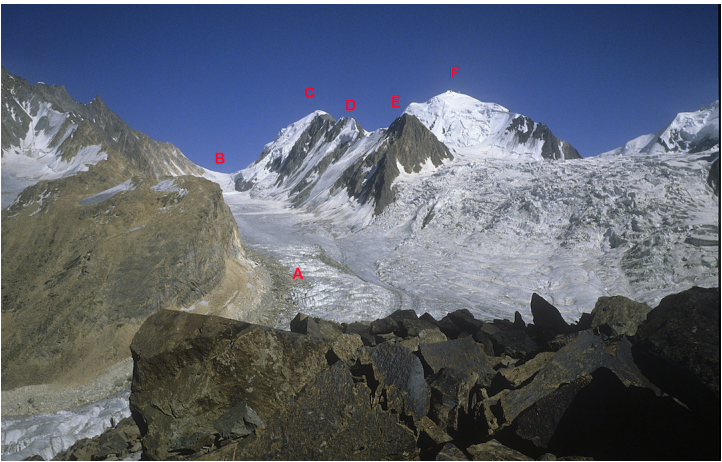
Compared with today's weather patterns in the Karakoram, it seems amazing that there were only a couple of rainy afternoons during our three-week stay in the mountains in August, and it froze almost every night in base camp.

— Lindsay Griffin, U.K.

Images



A snowy, early 2022 photo of Pheker from the east. (B) is the August 1984 base camp. The 1984 ascent of Pheker followed the ca 950m ridge above, which was all rock until above half-height.



Looking up (A) the Sumayar Glacier from the 1984 base camp. (B) Daranishi La. (C) Daranishi Chhish. (D) Seemurgh. (E) Chatan Sar. (F) Silkiang Peak. From Silkiang Peak, the Silkiang Glacier flows over the visible icefall to the Sumayar. On the right is part of Sumayar Peak (Snow Dome), while on the far left of the photo is the southern flank of Dawson Peak.



The north face of Silkiang Peak from the Silkiang Glacier. Red marks the route of ascent. The descent (blue) followed the west ridge before descending to the south and walking back round the mountain.



Pheker (center) and Mirshikar to the right from the Sumayar Glacier. The 1984 base camp was situated below the east ridge of Pheker, a little to the right of the small snow patch.



Jan Solov on the north face of Silkiang Peak.



Jan Solov on the north face of Seemurgh with the Sumayar Glacier below.

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