An Elusive Summit: The First Ascent of Pumari Chhish East

Pakistan, Karakoram, Hispar Muztagh

"Look, Jérôme," Mathieu Maynadier said, pointing at a map as he and Jéro me Sullivan drank coffee at Mathieu's home back in 2021. "Pumari Chhish East is like Latok, but without any previous ascents." At the time, Mathieu and Tom Livingstone had already planned an expedition to Pumari, so it wasn't an option for Jéro me. Instead, he, Victor Saucède, and two other friends set off for Dansam, toward the other end of the Karakoram (see "Choose Laughter: A Well-Timed Ascent of the North Face of Dansam West," by Martin Elías, AAJ 2022). One person's misfortune makes for another one's happiness: Despite a good effort from Mathieu and Tom, Pumari Chhish East remained unclimbed at the end of 2021. Thus, Jéro me and Victor could plan their own expedition to the mountain in 2022, with the financial support of the American Alpine Club's Cutting Edge Grant.

Pumari Chhish East (ca 6,850m) is part of a group of steep mountains north of the huge Hispar Glacier in Pakistan's Gilgit- Baltistan region. The main summit in the massif, Pumari Chhish (7,492m), has only been climbed once, in 1979, by a Japanese team that tackled the north ridge. Over the past 15 years, half a dozen expeditions had hoped to climb Pumari Chhish East via its south side, because of its beauty and also because it suits well the rules of the modern alpine game.

In February 2022, I sat next to Jéro me on the plane home to Europe from El Chaltén, Argentina. We'd had an amazing trip, with good attempts on both Torre Egger's south face and The Moonwalk Traverse, but when Jérôme asked me to join him and Victor on Pumari Chhish East, I declined. I was feeling exhausted from Patagonia, and anyway I had used up all my holiday time from my Ph.D. studies in Zu rich.

In April, I was riding my bike to work, like every morning, when Jéro me and Victor called me. This time they were slightly more insistent. They damn well know me and had prepared solid arguments to convince me to come to Pakistan. They are my two best climbing partners, and I didn't want to miss this opportunity. Somewhat surprisingly, my higher-ups approved my request for an eight-week vacation, and after a particularly chaotic start, dealing with postponed visas and delayed gear shipments, we landed in Islamabad in mid-May.

There we hooked up with Hassan, Suliman, and Mussa, our local agency contacts, whom Jéro me and Victor knew from their expedition the previous year. They had arranged transport, groceries, and other logistics, and Mussa and Suliman were to stay with us at base camp as cooks—they were excellent company all along. After four days of strenuous negotiations with the porters at Hispar village, on May 25 we started the three- day hike toward Pumari Chhish base camp, at about 4,500 meters, our relationship with the porters warming as we went.

The south face of Pumari Chhish East is a mighty 1,600-meter-high structure consisting of four soaring rock pillars crowned by snow mushrooms, with hanging seracs on the sides. We wanted to climb a direct line up this wall, not only because of its aesthetic appeal but also to avoid hazardous snow on the ridges (a well-known peril in the Karakoram) and dangerous snow-loading in the large couloir systems. As we studied the face from base camp, our best option looked to be a beeline up the biggest snowfield, then the rightmost of the two massive rock pillars directly above the snow—the middle-left of the four pillars—ending at a snowy shoulder just right of a huge serac. It was one of the

steepest but also safest lines, we felt, offering protection from debris falling from the mushrooms. From the shoulder, only a couple of hundred meters of easy terrain would gain the top.

We had decided to go earlier than previous expeditions to this massif, tackling the approach and acclimatization in May. This would set us up to be climbing in June, when we predicted the best conditions—with the alpine terrain still frozen and with snow cover on the glaciers—rather than later in summer, when rockfall and thawing snow mushrooms would present greater risk.

The trade-off for our early arrival at base camp seemed to be more snowfall. The Karakoram climate is driven mostly by the westerly weather system rather than the monsoon coming off the Indian Ocean, which hits the mountains in Nepal, but in the last century, the shift of the westerly jet stream and the increasing use of irrigation in China have led to an increase in regional air moisture. The resulting precipitation is amplified by the Karakoram's particularly strong mountain relief, which lifts air masses and condenses moisture in the alpine valleys. This partly explains why the Karakoram's glaciers are among the few in the world that have not experienced dramatic retreat—a remarkable phenomenon called the "Karakoram Anomaly." Moreover, there seemed to be very little wind in the area to move clouds and storms through—a mixed blessing, to be sure. During our 27-day wait at base camp, we had 26 days of snowfall, ranging from light showers to dumping events. This made us question our early season strategy, for sure.

Every morning, a local bird named the gumma by the Balti would wake us at exactly 7 a.m. To pass the hours, we made tea, ate delicious meals prepared by Mussa and Suliman, and played chess and apush (a base camp–simplified version of cricket). Eventually, a cloud-free day allowed us to acclimatize for a night on top of Rasool Sar (5,980m), an elegant summit above base camp, after completing the first ascent of its west ridge. [This peak was first climbed in 2009 by the south face and the eastern ridge.] The climb ended up being harder than anticipated, partly because 95 percent of our gear was already cached at the foot of Pumari Chhish East. A truly lightweight ascent!

After climbing Rasool Sar we felt acclimatized, but were still doubtful about the weather. To our surprise, Karl Gabl, our forecaster back in Europe, announced a seven-day weather window via satellite phone! We let one day of clear weather pass so the wall could purge itself of all the recent snow. Conditions still looked far from optimal—the kind that would turn you around in your home range. Snow had plastered almost all the crack systems, even on the overhanging sections, and the snowfield below was avalanching constantly during the warmest hours of the day. Still, we figured we'd at least have a look.

We left advanced base camp (5,300m; 7km from base camp) at midnight on June 25. It was a moonless night, and the steep wall was invisible in the darkness. We found our way up the snowfield by headlamp. Because of the avalanche hazard, we'd agreed on climbing and descending this 700-meter stretch of snow only by night or early morning. Due to soft snow conditions at the bergschrund, we reached the top of the snowfield in late morning—slightly later than we'd hoped. Above us reared the 700-meter rock pillar.

Two days later...

"Did he say, 'Off belay'?" I asked.

"I think so," Jéro me replied.

I freed the two lead ropes from my belay device and loaded our three backpacks on the tagline.

"Guys, what the hell is happening on the tagline?!" Victor yelled from far above. "I am climbing!!!"

Oops... Later that day, confusion at the belay saw Jéro me drop his warm gloves down the wall to join the pair he'd lost on our first climbing day (at least he still had his fleece liners). I believe we were tired.

Aside from a handful of easy mixed pitches, the rock pillar had involved steep, sustained climbing. We often used aid to overcome the overhangs or to clean snow blobs, ranging from microwave- to fridge-sized, that were plastered in the cracks. At a certain point, we became expert at distinguishing the two main types of blobs: the light ones that fell off in a single piece (those were nice) and the heavy, dense ones (those were dangerous). We made slow but constant progress using big-wall techniques: free climbing what we could and resorting to aid when the going became too difficult or too obstructed by snow; the two seconds jugged while the leader hauled. In general, the leader would climb two pitches before losing efficiency, at which point we'd swap leads. On a few pitches, the ropes hanging from above didn't even touch the wall.

Frequently encountering blank terrain and having no clue where we would sleep next, we could have bailed after every pitch. But we kept going because the weather was holding and the chemistry between us was excellent. We each knew we should keep any doubts to ourselves to maintain high motivation—if any one of us were to voice his fears, it might topple our fragile equilibrium.

The fourth climbing day was key to our success. At that point, we'd endured three uncomfortable bivouacs. For the first night, hard against the foot of the rock pillar, we dug small, individual platforms in the snow, but constant spindrift forced us to hide deep in our sleeping bags in awkward positions. For the second bivy, which we reached long after sunset, I sat on an icy ledge with Victor, while Jéro me found a dubious hanging snow mushroom ten meters below us and draped himself over it. For the third, we pitched our two-person tent by excavating a platform in a snow spine just big enough for the tent's exact footprint. This bivy was the most stunning. The wall fell away below the paper-thin rib, leaving a fathomless void filled by the last golden rays of the sun.

That night I lost a game of rock- paper-scissors and so took what I felt was the worst spot, slightly hanging off the edge. (A rule of thumb when sharing a small tent in alpine ground: Your teammates are always better off.) After another miserable night, I declared myself incapable of leading that day. Although Jéro me is known to be optimistic in tricky situations, he's also very slow to get up in the morning. So Victor saved us from bailing by making breakfast, after which he promptly kicked Jéro me and me out of the tent (one of his own specialties) to get on with the climbing.

Later that day, Jéro me put on our one-pair-for-three-people rock shoes and committed to the last unknown of the wall: two dead-vertical rock pitches at 6,600 meters. On one overhanging passage, he suddenly cut his feet loose and screamed, "Ha-ha, look at these jugs! It's like climbing at Riglos!" [Riglos is a massif of very steep conglomerate rock towers in Spain.] I gazed behind me at the thousands of peaks in the fading, late-afternoon light. K2 and Nanga Parbat had slowly emerged over the horizon as we climbed. Jéro me's pitch did not look much like Riglos, but I did feel my friend's excitement for realizing the lead of a lifetime. The last problem had been unlocked. That night we slept at the shoulder atop the pillar, a flat spot below easy terrain leading to the top.

On the fifth and last climbing day, we found our way through the summit mushroom via its the north side and were on top at 10 a.m. We couldn't believe it. There was no wind, no clouds. How could such a dramatic landscape, born from massive tectonic collisions, be so silent? Would I dare use a single word to describe what we felt? Infinity, in space and time. And love. And gratitude...oops, make that three words. Yet it was already time to go down. Back at our last bivy, we waited until shadow fell over the wall to minimize the risk of falling objects, then started rappelling in midafternoon. We reached the snowfield by nightfall, and at midnight we crawled into advanced base camp. It was June 30. We were supposed to meet our porters from Hispar that afternoon and then fly home four days later.

It felt good to see the porters again. I'm not sure they cared much about our success, but we still shared with them the afterglow and feelings of brotherhood sparked by our adventure. On the second day of our hike out, we stopped at a shepherd's hut a few hours from Hispar where we'd also paused over a month earlier on the way in. Four walls made out of stone and an iron stove in the middle—that was it. A circular hole in the roof let in a ray of sun, brightening the weathered faces of the Burushaski people who gathered there. We shared yak-milk tea with the old shepherd. He'd once served in the Pakistani army and spoke broken English.

"Success summit?" he asked.

"Yes, success!" I answered.

"Dangerous?"

"...A bit."

At these words, he took me carefully in his arms and laid his head on my chest like a child, dropping a tear on my heart. Later in the evening, we reached Hispar in the vanishing summer light. We simultaneously felt deep exhaustion, brutal happiness, kinship, and nostalgia (already) over leaving this special place. It was obvious to all three of us that we'd just had one of the most memorable experiences of our lives.

SUMMARY: First ascent of Pumari Chhish East (ca 6,850m) via the south face and upper west ridge, June 25–29, 2022, by Christophe Ogier, Victor Saucède, and Jéro me Sullivan, all from France. Their route is called The Crystal Ship (1,600m, 6b A2 M7); they descended the route by rappel. During acclimatization, the trio climbed a new route up Rasool Sar (5,980m), via the west ridge.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Christophe Ogier, age 30, is a mountain guide pursuing a Ph.D. in glaciology at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zu rich.

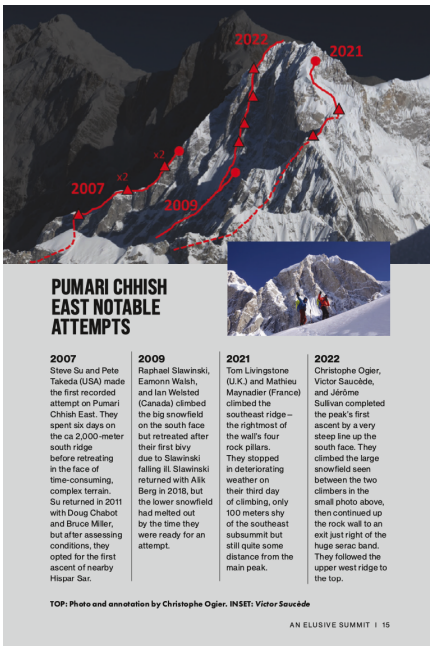
Images

Porters carrying loads toward base camp with Pumari Chhish East in back, center left.

Porters en route to base camp on the Yutmaru Glacier.

Mussa, Jérôme, Christophe, Suliman, and Victor (left to right), with Pumari Chhish South (left) and Pumari Chhish East in back.

A magnificent view of Pumari Chhish East from the southeast. Only the upper half of the 1,600-meter south face is visible.



Approximate locations of previous attempts on Pumari Chhish East. Inset photo by Victor Saucède.

Christophe Ogier nearing the first bivouac, above the huge snowfield on the south face. The route

followed through the headwall above is shown (in this foreshortened view), with bivouacs marked.

Twenty-six days of snowfall shortly before the ascent left huge and hazardous snow blobs plastered to the rock. Here, Jérôme Sullivan slips past a menacing blob on day three of the climb.

The morning after the third bivouac with a spectacular view to the southeast toward (A) K2, (B) Kanjut Sar II, (C) Latok I and the Ogre, (D) Rasool Sar, (E) Hispar Sar, (F) base camp by the Yutmaru Glacier, and (G) Hispar Glacier.

Victor Saucède leading on day two aboard The Crystal Ship.

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