



## Fly and Climb: Paragliding to Karakoram Ascents Points to Many Possibilities

Photo by Jake Holland

**Mountains and clouds are intrinsically connected: Steep mountain faces create thermals of rising air, and thermals create clouds.** For the alpine climber engulfed in ethereal whiteness, rapidly forming clouds may bring moments of beauty or terror. For the paraglider, rising currents of air provide opportunities. Bridging the two worlds is what compelled me to climb Cerro Torre with a paraglider in my pack.

It was February 7, 2020. The sun was rising and the valley was still dark, but I could see the silhouette of the Chaltén group through the morning gloom. I'd summited Cerro Torre only about 15 minutes before with Raphaëla Haug and Laura Tiefenthaler. A quick gauge of the wind conditions and I was ready for the biggest flight of my life—and that's an understatement. With only about 50 flights under my belt since I'd started paragliding at the end of 2018, I was an absolute beginner.

I concentrated and started running, praying the ground would be steep enough to get airborne without too many problems. Despite my wing coming up sideways, fewer than five seconds later I was flying. I let out a scream of joy, barely believing I had launched from the summit of this majestic mountain. Fifteen minutes later, down on the glacier and knowing the others still had over a day of descent ahead of them, the advantages of paragliding were more abundantly clear to me than ever. From that moment onward, my motivation to become a better pilot has only grown.

More than that, though, I soon began thinking about other possibilities. I wasn't satisfied with just going down. There was unplumbed potential in the synergy of paragliding and alpinism: The possibility of approaching hard-to-reach peaks, with climbing gear on board, was tantalizing.

This was a new, still barely tested idea. In 2017, Antoine Girard and Julien Dusserre of France used paragliders on a two-hour flight that shortened the approach to Nepal's Langtang Valley by about three days. They then paraglided to 5,800 meters on the southwest face of Shalbachum (6,707 meters), aiming to climb the mountain and then fly off. Though they were foiled by weather and unable to get much higher on the peak, they were on to something. "Given the right weather conditions, it is certain that paragliding will make it possible to discover new routes that were hitherto deemed inaccessible," Antoine wrote in the 2018 AAJ.

In 2018, Antoine and Damien Lacaze attempted to climb Spantik (7,027m) in Pakistan in a similar fashion. After flying to the mountain from Karimabad, they were pinned down for two nights in a storm, not only preventing them from summiting but also (temporarily) from flying back—underscoring a potential pitfall of fly-and-climb missions. The following year, Markus Anders and Nicolas Manthos from Germany made a multi-day attempt to reach Menthosa (6,443 meters) in India by paraglider; they, too, were ultimately prevented from climbing by weather conditions, but they did cover hundreds of kilometers in their cross-country round trip, carrying all of their gear and supplies.

My flight off Cerro Torre, by comparison, was just an extension of what others had already been doing with paragliders for the past half century. Especially in France, descending from peaks with

paragliders has been practiced widely since the era of Jean Marc Boivin and Christophe Profit, particularly during enchainments of classic Alpine north faces. In “Paragliders and Modern Alpinism,” an article in the 1988 *American Alpine Journal* about the then new trend of combining alpinism and paragliding, American climber John Bouchard wrote, “Just as new ice tools opened countless possibilities for more new exploits, paragliding is redefining the limits of what is possible in the mountains.”

Oh, if Bouchard could only have dreamed back then of the flights possible with the tools we have today. In the 35 years since his essay, there have been quantum leaps in paraglider technology: The wings are that much lighter and more stable. The lightest wing available today (which would only be suitable for descending from a summit) is the Dudek Run&Fly, which tips the scale at just 986 grams (just over two pounds) but can carry loads of up to 108 kilograms (238 pounds). To cover long distances, there are wings like the 2.9-kilogram Zeolite, from Ozone; it is arguably the easiest-to-use and most high-performance wing on the market. Using the Zeolite, I can carry virtually all of my gear to climb a mountain or go skiing. (The manufacturer’s recommended weight limit for my wing is 85 kilograms, but with strong enough thermals, one can carry much more.) Climbing gear obviously has gotten much lighter, too: Compared with alpinists of the 1980s, we carry barely anything.

Still, flying to a mountain versus off it—that was something beyond my skill set as I hiked out from Cerro Torre in 2020. I needed to become a good enough paraglider to take off in any conditions, to be able to read the mountain air like a sailor reads the winds on the high seas. So I dove deep into theory and practice, devoting the next two years to learning everything I could.

**The basic principles of flying a paraglider are as follows, and becoming adept at this process is critical:** For a pilot to fly any horizontal distance with a wing, he must descend. Therefore, to fly further, a pilot must climb higher. One does so with the help of thermals, or vertical masses of air that, when heated to temperatures approximately 3°C above the surrounding air, begin to rise. The air cools as it rises, eventually causing the water molecules in it to condense and form clouds. The higher the bottom of the clouds—or cloud base—the higher a pilot can fly. A pilot usually does not want to enter the clouds themselves, because of the dangers of low visibility and uncontrollable lift.

The potential pitfalls of fly-and-climb alpinism, perhaps unsurprisingly, are many. A constant elephant in the room is the possibility of flying to an extremely isolated mountainside and then being unable to take off again. Additionally, partners can get separated in flight by many miles—valleys even—and may be unable to communicate or find themselves with only half the required gear, whether for climbing or even simply camping.

Theory only gets you so far: I committed myself to amassing endless hours in the sky to get better at cross-country flying, something that would allow me to fly greater distances and land almost anywhere. I flew nearly 700 hours each year in 2020 and 2021, going out virtually every flyable day. I was still far from a top-level pilot, but I soon attained a level where I could start to imagine lots of cool things in the mountains; executing them didn’t feel like such a mad idea anymore with my new fluency of the winds.

In the Alps, I started to explore using the paraglider as an approach tool for skiing—basically heliskiing without the helicopter—one facet of a discipline called *combo*, which entails using your wing in tandem with any other sport. In spring 2022, in the Massif des Ecrins in the French Alps, I used my paraglider to ski three different faces in a single day with my friend Loris Bouniol. We took off next to the car, thermaled up, landed on the summit, and then did 1,000 meters of really good skiing. Next we traversed the valley by paraglider, landed on another mountain, and skied that. And then another.

One vision in particular obsessed me: I wanted to use a paraglider somewhere in the Greater Ranges to access a mountain directly from a town, climb a route, and then fly back to civilization. Alpinism in the bigger ranges usually has some very unpleasant sides to it, with the walking to base camp, humping loads to advanced base, and sitting idly for weeks while waiting for minuscule weather

windows. I hoped to have my cake and eat it, too—to skip over all of the tedium but still get to climb.

**In late spring 2021, I joined** Sébastien Brugalla, Julien Dusserre, Antoine Girard, Alexandre Jofresa, Guillaume Omont, and François Ragolski—all expert pilots—in Pakistan for a paragliding expedition in the Karakoram. We spent a month based in Karimabad pursuing combo objectives, and then another 20 days flying around the Baltoro Glacier. I did no climbing, but instead focused on improving as a pilot among the giant peaks.

Antoine, meanwhile, upped the ante on his and Julien's 2018 Spantik fly-and-climb attempt: On June 8, at 11:30 a.m., he took off from a launch site at around 2,800 meters near Karimabad, flew about 40 kilometers to the southeast, and landed on the southwest ridge of Spantik at an elevation of 6,400 meters. He started climbing and reached the summit at 5:15 p.m., hiked back to his wing, and took back to the sky at 6:30 p.m. He was back in Karimabad around 7:30 p.m.

Antoine's Spantik climb was the best proof-of-concept yet. When I returned to Europe, it was time to find a partner to attempt a fly-and-climb mission in Pakistan for myself. The British alpinist Will Sim seemed like the perfect match. Though we had never actually flown or climbed together, our paths had crossed often and I knew Will was a badass alpinist. Furthermore, he has a similar relationship with paragliding. He began flying only a few months after me, and was learning in the positive environment for pilots in Chamonix. In early 2022, he got close several times to the magical goal of flying a 200-kilometer triangle—a feather in any cross-country pilot's cap. He too had realized that paragliding was not just about getting back down to the pub faster after a climb. As I was, Will was becoming a true student of paragliding, working to become the best pilot he could be.

Will and I departed for the Karakoram in late May 2022, along with Aaron Durogatti and Jake Holland. Aaron is an Italian skier and paraglider who does a lot of combo in the Dolomites, while Jake is a British alpinist, paraglider, and filmmaker.

On May 27, we arrived in Karimabad, the capital of the Hunza District and the perfect city for our goals: It has all the amenities of a normal town, but with the mind-blowing mountain objectives of the Batura Muztagh range all around. It is like Chamonix on steroids: Ultar Sar (7,388m) is eight kilometers away, while Shispare (7,611m) and Bublomotin (6,000m, a.k.a. Ladyfinger Peak) are 12 kilometers and seven kilometers away, respectively. On a normal expedition, any of these would require days of approaching and a big base camp. Could they be approached by paraglider instead? We hoped to find out. With paragliders, we would have the advantage of deciding to go out only if there was a good weather window. Living in a real town instead of a base camp, you feel stronger and more rested; when it's go time, you know you will be at the top of your game.

We mainly planned to pursue **combo** objectives on the trip. In the Alps, the snow is usually bad when the thermals are good, because the thermals are better in the warmer temperatures of spring and summer. However, in Pakistan, there is always good snow if you are willing to go high enough, especially after a thunderstorm. On our **combo** missions, I mostly paired up with Aaron. On one mind-blowing day, we skied on Ultar Sar and then flew to the other side of the valley to ski on Barbara Peak (5,520m).

Early in the trip, Will and I scoped a mountain called Gulmit Tower (5,810m), ten kilometers northeast of Karimabad. The summit looked very reachable—at least from what we could see from the air—and we knew it was unclimbed. Gulmit Tower was attempted back in September 1988—coincidentally by Will's girlfriend's father, Emmanuel Schmutz, and Gerard Decorps. Since then, at least four other expeditions had tried. Most teams started from Gulmit village, approaching from the northeast. Only one had tried to climb from the Gurpi Glacier on the south side; a likely reason is that the four- to five-day approach on foot is steep and too dangerous for porters carrying heavy loads. But by flying into the Gurpi Glacier, Will and I reasoned, we could avoid all of that.

**For the next month, we flew and skied, keeping Gulmit Tower in the back of our minds.** We were able to do something almost every day, even with marginal conditions. On days when weather systems overdeveloped early, with thunderstorms and strong winds, we were still able to launch later, thanks to Will having found an alternative takeoff to the one the French team and I used the year before. Finally, in our last week, we took a closer look at Gulmit and decided to try it during our last good weather window. In four days we needed to catch our ride back to Islamabad to start our journey home.

On June 26, Will, Jake, and I had a nice and relaxed breakfast of eggs, paratha, and chana, and then, around 10:30 a.m., Manzoor, a cabbie, drove us up above town. We then lugged our crazy-heavy bags another 300 meters higher to the Eagle's Nest takeoff. In our bags we had all of our climbing equipment, a small tent, our sleeping gear, a stove, three gas canisters, and food for three days. Excluding the weight of the paraglider and our skis, each of us flew with about 35 kilograms (77 pounds) of gear.

Will took off first and caught a good thermal cycle, flying straight to cloud base at around 6,500 meters. Jake and I had more trouble once we launched. The valley wind had come in, disrupting the thermals and making it more difficult to gain altitude. We had to scratch the rocks—i.e. stay near the cliffs to use the slightest bits of rising air beside them—for nearly an hour to climb out of the stability. For much of this time, it seemed unlikely we would make it up to Will's altitude; our Gulmit plans might be stymied before we'd even left Karimabad. But I kept fighting to get up. It was our last chance on this trip, and without me, Will couldn't go on alone. I had the stove and the climbing gear.

By the time Jake and I clawed our way up to cloud base, Will was out of sight. I radioed to tell him we were back on track, and that we'd meet him at Gulmit.

Will radioed back with his own concerning news. He had just glided into the Gurpi Valley and noticed that the south side of the valley showed signs of wet avalanches, while the north side was threatened by seracs. Nonetheless, he found a safe landing spot amid this chaos, touching down at around 5,000 meters, right near the base of Gulmit's south side. Two hours after we took off, Jake and I landed in the same place and we got to work setting up camp for the night. (Without the difficulties, I expect the flight could have been as short as 35 minutes.)

We woke at 2 a.m. on June 27. After forcing down breakfast, we started to ascend the opening 450-meter couloir. It was about 50° and quite icy in parts, with stretches of firm névé and snow. A few hours later, around sunrise, we arrived at a col and looked at our options. A névé line on the southwest side connected with a beautiful corner system on the west face, and we simul-soloed this delightful névé, keeping the rope in the pack until we reached the steeper granite corners. Previous parties on Gulmit had reported loose and insecure climbing, and the rock above looked difficult. But the mountain gods smiled on us: We found perfect stone and good enough conditions to climb the mixed ground efficiently. Each time we were unsure whether to go left or right, we somehow managed to choose the correct option. The whole climb—which we agreed would be a classic in the Chamonix valley—had 800 meters of vertical gain. By lunchtime we were already on the summit...of an unclimbed mountain... which we had flown to the day before! We had to pinch ourselves.

There was only one thing that could make the day better: getting back to the hotel in time for a curry dinner.

We rappelled the upper 350 meters. Arriving back at the col in the day's heat, we were wary of rockfall and wet slides in the couloir below. In the end, we risked it, opting to downclimb and reasoning the couloir had already been shedding for over 48 hours.

Upon arriving back at our camp, we cooked up some ramen and then carried all of our gear to a spot about 100 meters higher. In the blazing sun, this was the most exhausting part of the whole mission.

We readied for takeoff, and Will went first. I followed an hour later, finally getting airborne after several unsuccessful tries. Thirty minutes later, I landed in the bottom of the Hunza Valley, at our normal spot in Karimabad. Will had touched down ten kilometers away on the side of the Karakoram Highway, and had called Manzoor, the taxi driver, for a pick-up. When we rendezvoused back in the civilization and security of Karimabad around 6 p.m., it was a surreal feeling—hiking out would have taken three days.

Over curry that evening, we replayed what had happened. It was still hard to believe we had pulled off the first ascent of Gulmit Tower door-to-door from Karimabad in a 36-hour window.

I remain a firm believer that the most badass and challenging mountains will be climbed in a traditional style, approaching by foot and not with a wing. But for certain objectives, the paraglider could be a game changer. In Nepal, there are innumerable mountains within 50 kilometers of end-of-the-road villages; climbers using paragliders could approach these peaks in hours rather than days. Similarly, beyond Karimabad, Pakistan holds more fly-and-climb potential: Everything in the Charakusa Valley and even the Baltoro Valley (assuming climbers receive permission to fly in the Baltoro) is arguably accessible by paraglider.

Of course, using a paraglider just because you *can* doesn't mean you should. It is not a fitting style for every mountain. For example, it would be very contrived to spend extensive time and resources to establish a remote base camp and then fly up to the mountain with a paraglider, as if by helicopter. But if a wing makes things easier and allows one to focus more fully on the climb, then it might make sense.

What direction this new hybrid form of alpinism will take remains to be seen, but for the few of us who have experienced its magic in the big mountains, it's clear it has a future. Back on top of Cerro Torre in 2020, running across the rime ice to take flight, I had no idea where that wing would take me in the coming years. I still don't—but the possibilities seem endless.

**SUMMARY:** First ascent of Gulmit Tower (5,810m), via the south and west faces, in the Batura Muztagh of Pakistan, by Fabian Buhl (Germany) and Will Sim (U.K.), on June 27, 2022. They approached and departed the mountain via paraglider, starting from the town of Karimabad. They declined to assign a difficulty rating for their 800m route.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Fabian Buhl was born in 1990 in southern Germany. He started out as a boulderer, then moved to sport climbing and multi-pitch climbing, and eventually found alpinism. He now lives in southern France.

**CUTTING EDGE PODCAST:** Fabian Buhl and Will Sim spoke about paragliding and this climb on episode 51 of the AAJ's Cutting Edge podcast:

The Cutting Edge · Fabian Buhl and Will Sim: New Frontiers of Paragliding and Alpinism  
The Cutting Edge · Fabian Buhl and Will Sim: New Frontiers of Paragliding and Alpinism

## Images



Climbing to a launch site near Karimabad with a stunning backdrop: Bublimotin (left) and Hunza Peak (6,270m).



Fabian Buhl's view while descending from the summit of Cerro Torre in 2020.



Flying near Spantik (7,027m). In 2021, Antoine Girard flew to the plateau at right, climbed to the summit, descended to his wing, and flew back to Karimabad, all in the same day.



Fabian Buhl flying along the flanks of Ulutar Sar (7,388m) during a recon of the route to Gulmit Tower, a few days prior to the first ascent.



Fabian Buhl (center) and Will Sim planning for a fly-and-climb mission.




The upper west side of Gulmit Tower (5,810m), showing the line climbed in 2022.



Will Sim climbing during the first ascent of Gulmit Tower. “There was only one thing that could make the day better: getting back to the hotel in time for a curry dinner.”

**PARAGLIDING AND ALPINISM**  
NOTABLE EVENTS



1965 • NASA consultant David Barish (above) begins flying the Silwing, a single-surface airfoil, from ski slopes.

1964, Donna Jalbert, a Canadian-American inventor, patents the Parafol, a multi-celled, ram-air parachute with gliding capability. These designs evolve into the modern paraglider.

1978 • Paragliding debuts in France, with the first school opening in 1979.

1982 • Roger Fillon flies from the summit of Mont Blanc.

1985 • Alain Estève flies off Aconcagua (6,961m), highest peak in the Western Hemisphere.

1985 • Pierre Gaveaux flies from Gasherbrum II (8,035m).

1986 • Jean-Marc Bolvin enchains the north faces of the Aiguille Verte, Droltes, Courtes, and Grandes Jorasses, flying from the tops by paraglider or pre-placed hang gliders.

1987 • Christophe Proff and Eric Escoffier race for the first solo enchainement of the north faces of the Grandes Jorasses, Matterhorn, and Eiger. Proff succeeds in 42 hours, using a paraglider for descent from the Grandes Jorasses (and a helicopter for transport between mountains).

• Michel Fauquet flies off Trango Tower in Pakistan after climbing a hard new route with three partners; he reaches base camp in 11 minutes, while his teammates take two days to descend.

1988 • Jean-Marc Bolvin paraglides from Everest.

• Michael and Matthias Pinn fly off Chaltén (Fitz Roy) in Patagonia after climbing the Supercanaléto route.

1990 • Takeyasu Minamiura solos a new route on Trango Tower and attempts to paraglide off the summit but crashes 50m below the top. He is stranded for six days before a rescue.

2002 • Hansish Robertson flies from Mt. St. Elias in Alaska, descending 18,000 vertical feet and 21 miles to land by the sea.

2011 • Sano Babu Sunuwar and Lakpa Tsheri Sherpa climb Everest, make a tandem flight off the summit, and subsequently kayak the Ganges River to the ocean.

2016 • Antoine Girard flies over Broad Peak, reaching 8,157 meters.

2017 • Antoine Girard and Julien Dusserre make first known attempt to approach a Himalayan climb by paraglider, flying to Shalbachum (8,707m) for an unsuccessful ascent.

2019 • Markus Anders and Nicolas Manthos make multi-day fly-and-climb attempt on Manthos (6,443m) in India, flying hundreds of kilometers and top-landing smaller peaks. Conditions prevent Manthos attempt.

2020 • Fabien Buhl is first to climb Cerro Torre and fly off; two previous parties had paraglided after being dropped on top by helicopter.

2021 • Antoine Girard flies from Karimabad, Pakistan, to a shoulder of Spantik (7,627m), climbs to the summit, and flies back to town in a single day.

2022 • Benjamin Widrines climbs Broad Peak from the glacier to the summit in 7 hours 20 minutes and then paraglides off the top.

72 | THE AMERICAN ALPINE JOURNAL 2023

Timeline of notable developments in the history of paragliding and alpinism.





Fabian Buhl leading steep mixed on the upper face of Gulmit Tower.

## Article Details

|                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Author         | Fabian Buhl     |
| Publication    | AAJ             |
| Volume         | 65              |
| Issue          | 97              |
| Page           | 66              |
| Copyright Date | 2023            |
| Article Type   | Feature article |