



## AAC Publications

---

### **Korean Direct**

The First Ascent Of Gasherbrum V

**Insignificant against the blinding white backdrop of Gasherbrum V's south face, we stood like silhouettes atop a moraine, the wall before us in full view. The complex glacier leading up to the face reminded me of scaly dragon's tail. We had spotted a snaking line that would lead us to the jagged bergschrund at the foot of the wall. Once on the face, we would have to keep left to avoid a menacing serac, then move right in the upper mixed section before finishing with a direct line to the top.**

Seong Nak-jong and I had never really considered a route on the south side of unclimbed Gasherbrum V until we were denied passage up the northeast face. We had started our first attempt on the 7,147-meter peak from Camp 1 on the South Gasherbrum Glacier, along the normal routes to Gasherbrums I and II. We trudged through thigh-deep snow to reach the northeast face, which was covered in loose ice and snow, and was nearly impossible to protect. Falling ice and spindrift poured down from above. We finally had no choice but to evacuate from our high point of 6,400 meters.

This unsuccessful attempt quashed our desire to climb. As the leader of our small team, the quandaries of a second attempt weighed heavily on my mind. Not only were we physically weakened and our confidence shot, it was already mid-July and more snow was laying siege to the camps. We had been away from home for more than a month. The hard work and extra time required to relocate our base camp seemed less than appealing.

Wrestling with what to do, I finally understood that the summit counted for much less than I'd imagined. What really mattered was giving our absolute best effort. Only then could we prevail over our initial failure. When I shared these thoughts with Nak-jong and Choi Hyeong-woo, our base camp manager, they agreed to another attempt, this time from the south. We spent a long day moving camp down to 4,770 meters on the Baltoro Glacier, directly below the snaking glacier leading to the south face.

Unlocking the intricacies of the 3.5-kilometer approach up this glacier would be critical to saving strength for the actual climb. To minimize time and conserve energy, we decided to gamble and not rope up for this glacial approach. On July 23 we left base camp at 5 a.m. Our strategy paid off, and though the glacier was more difficult than we had anticipated, we reached the flat basin below the south face two hours quicker than planned and made it to the bergschrund (5,720m) about 10 a.m.

Chunks of avalanched snow filled the area around the bergschrund. We sheltered beneath a rock and took a short rest. After tying into our two 7mm ropes I started climbing, with Nak-jong following behind me. Surrounded by the steep walls of the enormous cirque, it felt like we were battling in an ancient coliseum, parrying and dodging with our axes. Hot sun bounced off the crusty snow and scorched our faces. Every step required two or three hard swings to set our picks. Avalanches boomed from the broken midsection of the face, and we pressed ourselves against the wall as wet snow showered around us. We kept moving left to get out from under the 300-meter-wide serac looming above.

My calves and thighs began to scream, and I resorted to sidestepping to relieve the fatigue. We had hoped to reach our bivy site by 5 p.m., but as evening approached we were only two-thirds of the way there. By dusk our water bottles were dry. Dehydration quickly took its toll, and around 10 p.m.,

still far from the ice cave where we planned to sleep, we rested briefly to melt snow and drink some water. Our bodies warmed and came back to life, and finally we reached the bivouac site, at 6,560 meters, at midnight.

The bivy site was worse than expected, with irregular formations of soft snow and ice, and miniature crevasses everywhere. Our thirst had to remain unquenched as we cut away at the ice floor to flatten a platform. The left corner of our tiny tent sagged into the open air of a gaping hole. We desperately needed water and crouched inside the small tent, diligently melting ice to stave off the cold and relax our hypothermic shivers. Too exhausted and parched to chew solid food, we added bits of porridge to our hot drinks. We had been on the move for 19 hours and had gained roughly 1,800 meters. We tied back into the rope before finally bedding down. Our cramped and tired bodies lay still, unaffected by the deep, cracking groans of the mountainside as the temperatures dropped through the night.

The next day, July 24, we began climbing again, but the avalanche danger and our deep fatigue prompted us to turn around and rest at our bivy site. That afternoon, while we were sipping tea, a palm-size stone crashed through the tent wall and landed on a mattress. I shrieked as a smaller stone penetrated the tent and badly bruised my knee. We moved our tent to a safer spot and tried to relax and regain our strength. At 3 o'clock the next morning we headed out again.

In the cold of the night the wall was silent and climbing conditions were prime. We advanced along the slanting, gash-like edge of the serac band until we could traverse above it roughly 200 meters, straight to the right, just below a wide, seemingly uncrossable bergschrund. Finally we discovered an ice column, no thicker than one's waist, that would lead us onto the upper wall and then the technical crux of the climb: a 300- to 400-meter section of chossy rock. The rockfall encountered here made us speechless. With just the slightest tug, rocks pulled free from the face, forcing us to search hard for mediocre protection. It took great effort and care to avoid dropping rocks on the belayer.

Though we were relieved to escape the mixed terrain, the final section of steep snow brought a new set of challenges. There were no rock outcrops for anchors, and the crusty snow lacked any integrity. We lost our footing repeatedly, both while climbing and standing at belays, and my heart raced over the avalanche danger.

Gasherbrum VI's summit finally came into view to the southeast, above the sub-peaks forming the cirque wall. I knew we were close, but dark, gloomy clouds were filling the western skies. Mist rose toward the summit and I prayed for the good weather to persist just a little longer. Step after tedious step, we pushed up the final slopes until finally we reached the top at 7:20 p.m. The summit consisted of a series of precarious cornices. We stood as high as we could safely go. To the north and east we glimpsed Gasherbrums I and II, veiled in clouds. Feeling the urgency, we quickly snapped photos and started downclimbing.

We retraced our footsteps toward the chossy rock section and then decided to rappel directly down the face, avoiding the awkward diagonal route we'd followed on the way up. Once committed to this route, we'd be unable to change our minds, especially in our wasted condition. Despite making numerous V-threads, our rack quickly diminished. We could see no sign of our ascent route through the surrounding darkness. We were completely lost, and I felt a sense of fear and harsh reality that I had never experienced so deeply in the mountains. The farther we descended, the more the surrounding walls seemed to press against us. We had only a snow picket and ice screw left for anchors—I cannot recall exactly. Then, at midnight, Nak-jong shouted from below: "I've spotted our footprints! Above the seracs!"

We returned to our ripped, collapsing tent at around 4 a.m., more than 24 hours after leaving. We hadn't had any water since late afternoon, and very little fuel remained in the canister, so we melted only enough ice to share one drink. After melting just a little more, we lay down and sleep took over.

The next morning we stayed tied in until the final snow wall, then down-soloed the final 300 meters to the bergschrund. By evening we were safely at the foot of the glacier. I found myself wondering how we might repair our ripped tent—how happy I was to worry about such a trivial matter! The sun slid into the night, and base camp came to life with the relief of laughter.

**Summary:** First ascent of Gasherbrum V (7,147m) by Ahn Chi-young and Seong Nak-jong, via the south face, July 23–26, 2014: Korean Direct (1,450m above the bergschrund, WI4/5 M4). The pair reached the summit on July 25. The mountain had been attempted several times: a Japanese attempt from the east in 1978 that reached the 7,006-meter East III sub-peak; a French attempt in 1980 that reached 6,700 meters on the south face, to the right of the 2014 Korean line; a Korean attempt that reached 6,550 meters from the west in 2010; and a French attempt that reached 6,700 meters on the south face and southwest ridge in 2012.

**About the Author:** Born in 1977, Ahn Chi-young is a climbing guide and instructor. His alpine-style first ascent of Himjung (7,092m) in Nepal, with Kim Chang-ho, was featured in AAJ 2013.

Translated from Korean by Peter Jensen-Choi.

## Images



The line of Korean Direct on the 1,450-meter south face of Gasherbrum V, with the midway camp marked. The red dot marks the approximate high point (ca 6,700m) of the 2012 French attempt on the south face and southwest ridge, to the left of the Korean line. Another French party attempted the south face to the right of the Korean route in 1980, also reaching 6,700 meters.



Ahn Chi-young at about 6,000 meters on the south face.

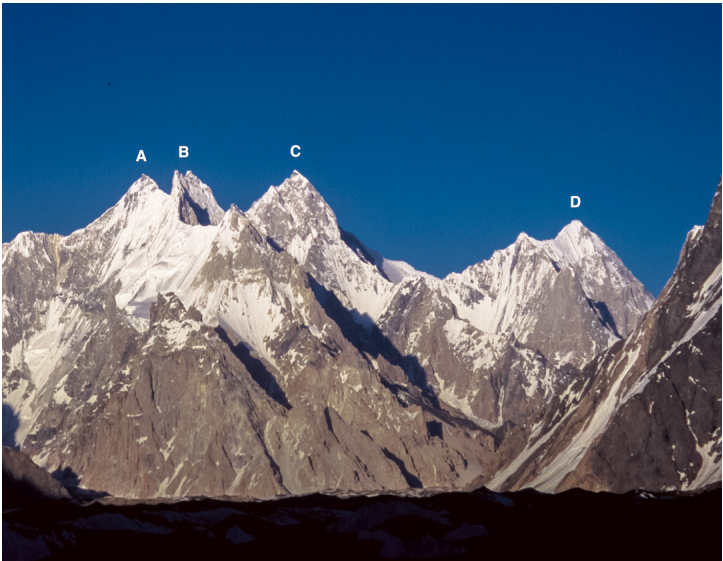




The 6,560-meter camp on Gasherbrum V's south face. The climbers spent two nights here during the ascent and one night on the way down. Behind: the northeast shoulder of Gasherbrum VI.



The crux rock band above 6,600 meters.



Although dwarfed by neighboring Gasherbrum IV (just out of photo to the left) and by several nearby

8,000ers, the 7,000ers of the Gasherbrum group are impressive peaks, mostly unclimbed. Seen here from the west: (A) Gasherbrum VII (6,955m, unclimbed). (B) Gasherbrum Twins (6,882m, unclimbed). (C) Gasherbrum V (7,147m), first ascent in 2014 by the shadowed face hidden at right. (D) Gasherbrum VI (7,003m, claimed in 1986 but disputed).



Seong Nak-jong (left) and Ahn Chi-young on the summit.

## Article Details

Author	Ahn Chi-young
Publication	AAJ
Volume	57
Issue	89
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Feature article