



AAC Publications

Shispare: The Long Quest for an Elusive Summit

Pakistan, Karakoram, Batura Muztagh

THE QUEST, BY KAZUYA HIRAIDE

Shispare was always there, living in the back of my head. A mountain worth spending my life upon.

In 2002, I went to Pakistan alone with a map of the Karakoram on which I had marked routes ascended by previous parties. The objective was to find out what treasures—mountains without ascents, unclimbed routes—I could find in the blank spots on the map. In one of those places, I met with Shispare. I remember it as if it were yesterday: falling in love with this pyramid-shaped, 7,611-meter mountain, with its grand, unclimbed northeast face. However, I also realized I did not have the experience to attempt Shispare anytime soon.

Gradually building up my skills and waiting for a chance, I finally made an attempt five years later, in 2007, with Yuka Komatsu. The intent was to draw a new line up the middle of the northeast face. Unfortunately, we retreated at 6,000 meters due to unstable snow conditions. I thought afterward, “There’s no mountain I couldn’t climb if only I would throw everything at it.” My young and immature self couldn’t accept defeat as defeat.

My climbing from then on had good moments and bad moments. On the plus side, I won many prizes in the alpine community. On the negative, one of our expeditions ended in the death of people who came to rescue us. [During a rescue attempt on Ama Dablam in 2010, a helicopter crashed and killed the two crew members on board.] During those years, I didn’t give a second go at any mountain I bailed from. But somehow Shispare was different. I wanted to return to the beginning. I had a hunch that this mountain could teach me what I was lacking, both as an alpinist and as a person.

Thus I returned, in 2012, with Takuya Mitoro. This time we attempted the southwest face. It is also a grand unclimbed face, and it too called to me. We were thrown back by bad weather at 5,350 meters. But by then, I had learned to accept defeat a little: “Even if I throw my everything at them, some mountains I may not be able to climb.”

I couldn’t give up the thought of climbing Shispare, though, so I came back the next year with Kei Taniguchi. She was the ultimate partner—I had climbed the southeast face of Kamet in India with her five years earlier (an ascent that won a Piolet d’Or), and I had high hopes of finally standing on Shispare’s summit. We attempted the southwest face again, having seen its promise the year before. However, a serac high on the route terrified us, so we retreated at 5,700m. I was despairing and pretty sure I would not return to Shispare. “Perhaps,” I thought, “it’s alright to have one mountain I can’t climb in my life.”

In 2015, my longtime partner Kei died in a mountaineering accident in Japan. The sudden tragedy made me question my motivation for mountaineering. At the end of much pondering, I decided to continue climbing, with her climbing alongside in spirit. The following year, I partnered up with Kenro Nakajima and we succeeded on the first ascent of the north face of Loinbo Kangri (7,095m) in Tibet in a clean, fast, direct line. But my heart was still restless. I decided that I needed to settle with Shispare. If I could only climb the mountain that started it all, I could forge a new path for myself. Luckily, my new partner understood my relationship with Shispare, and I knew I could rely on him. The stage was

set for the final showdown.

We started preparing for the expedition in January, but back-to-back photography assignments at Everest and Denali saw the summer arriving in a rush. Still, the knowledge that I'd be warmly welcomed in Hunza, which by now had become a second home, allowed me to relax. This year's harvest of Tibetan apricots was plentiful, and meeting old friends brought smiles to our faces. Thus we found ourselves arriving at base camp in high spirits.

A Pakistani expedition aiming for Pasu Peak was also at the base camp. They didn't like the conditions of the glacier and left for home more than a month ahead of schedule. In the suddenly quiet camp, we could finally get down to business. The weather was predominantly bad, as usual, and we ended up spending long stretches in camp. Maintaining motivation was tough.

Once we began climbing, we were constantly threatened by avalanches and covered by spindrift. But one thing was different this time. In the past, during moments of danger and duress, I had sought excuses to quit and, having found one, chose to retreat. This time, every time such a decision was required, even if there was only a one percent chance of success, we would go on. I feel that this was because my old partner Kei had passed away without fulfilling all of her goals, while I was still alive, and, since I had the motivation, the opportunity, and the capability to go on, giving up too easily would be unfair. Making countless decisions of this kind is what led to our success.

I wonder if I will ever find another mountain as fulfilling as Shispare.

THE CLIMB, BY KENRO NAKAJIMA

On July 26, after two days of light trekking, we climb steeply to Patundas, on top of a ridge, and Shispare stands in front of us, with a carpet of wildflowers at our feet. We descend a gentle slope to base camp on the bank of the Pasu Glacier.

Two days later we head to Shispare's east ridge, the first and only prior route up the mountain, to acclimatize and to check out conditions and our descent route. (This long ridgeline, first climbed in 1974, descends generally eastward from the summit, but mostly to the northeast in the section that has been climbed.) The glacier is a complete maze of crevasses. The northern spur used to access the main ridge is difficult to reach; we finally end up ascending snow slopes on the west side of the spur. The next day, we follow the spur to 5,600m, not far below the east ridge. Having checked the descent route to our satisfaction, we return to base camp.

After resting for two days, we leave camp on August 1 to attempt Pasu Peak (7,478m), eight kilometers to the northwest of Shispare. Unfortunately, bad weather shuts us down and we can't summit, but after camping for two nights at 6,400 meters and climbing up to 6,750 meters, we do at least manage to acclimatize.

We intend to climb Shispare in the next weather window, but as the forecast is hideous for multiple days to come, we decide to return to Hunza for a three-day rest before further attempts. Back at base camp, the weather still isn't agreeable, and we pass time in the tent with cloudy skies and snowfall outside.

Nine days after our acclimatization on Pasu Peak, we decide to stretch our legs and give it a go. Perhaps the bad weather won't affect the lower route too much. We leave base camp under overcast skies, and it starts to snow in the afternoon—we can't find our way forward in the whiteout. We camp at 5,000 meters to see if conditions will improve, but with 40 to 50 centimeters of fresh snow, getting on the wall would be a fool's errand. Humbled, we return to base camp again on August 14.

We decide to stay in camp until the snow on the wall stabilizes and it's safer to climb. The waiting is

making us anxious and wearing us down. Even when the forecast calls for clear skies, the summit stays shrouded in clouds.

On the morning of August 17, the sky clears for a few hours and we see Shispare's face gleaming in the sun. On the next day, the weather isn't all that convincing, but we still decide to go for it. The maze of the glacier is familiar by now, and finally we start to climb the northeast face.

We had worried about the seracs hanging over our approach gully, and our worries prove to be well founded. First, a small serac fall causes us to be covered in a bit of snow, but this isn't too much of a problem. Soon, however, we hear a thunderous bang and see a cloud of snow above us—clearly something we can't ignore. In a rush, we scurry out of the fall line, but one of my feet gets stuck in a crevasse, the rope goes tight, and neither of us gets into proper cover. When the avalanche reaches us, we endure a deluge of snow and crushing wind for a full minute. It's difficult to breathe, but luckily neither of us is buried or injured. Paradoxically, enduring such a big serac fall without a scratch boosts our spirits—we pretend there won't be a new one anytime soon. Thus we pass through the gully successfully. Since we had started a bit later than intended, we set up camp earlier than planned by flattening part of a snow ridge at 5,450 meters.

Next morning we cross over a ridge and reach a 60–70° degree ice wall. It has a thin cover of snow, but it's possible to use ice screws for runners. To maintain speed, we simul-climb with one piece of protection between us. My calves start screaming, but that's the price to pay for speed. After finishing up the S-shaped wall of ice and snow, we encounter a rock wall. Traversing to the left for four pitches, we arrive at a gully. The weather turns for the worse and continuous spindrift slides down the wall. We had intended to bivy at the base of the rock, but there are no suitable spots. It's a choice of either climbing in bad weather or returning to our previous bivy site. We steady our resolve and start climbing.

The ice is shallow, but with some difficulty we manage to find screw placements. Occasionally a big snow slide tries to rip us off the wall, but we manage to hold on and clear the rock face in two pitches. Still no sign of a bivy spot. We climb a steep snow wall for three more pitches, up and right, off our intended route, and get onto a snow ridge that should be safe from avalanches. It's narrow, but we manage to cut a ledge at about 6,500 meters, just big enough for both of us to lie down. We've climbed over 1,000 meters that day.

On August 20 we wait until the sun hits the wall in hopes of the snow consolidating a little, then do two rappels to get back onto our intended route. After traversing steep snow and ice for a further three pitches, we reach the second rock band. The rock isn't too steep, only 60°, but it's a slab without a covering of solid snow or ice. I leave my pack with Hiraide and head up.

For the first half of the pitch, I can get ice screws halfway in, but they feel really suspect. Then the ice and snow disappear and there's no protection whatsoever on the smooth slab. My legs and arms feel like they're approaching the limit, so there's no time to waste. I commit to climbing without pro. Suddenly both feet come off, but an axe catches on something solid higher up. For the first time ever at an altitude like this, I let out a victory yell. I manage to get in another half screw and feel a bit better. Then one of my tools slips at the next move and I fall. I imagine all the runners zippering out below me, but by some miracle they hold. Shaken but determined, I finish the pitch to the top of the rock band.

Above, we simulclimb ice for three pitches. Then it starts snowing again and we are attacked by spindrift, so we start belaying. We cut a campsite on the ridge at the top of the ice wall at about 6,860 meters.

During the night, the snowfall continues and our tent is assaulted by spindrift. In the morning, the tent is more than half buried. The visibility is bad. We stay in the tent for the whole day. It's above our acclimatization altitude, and I'm feeling it. I've lost my appetite.

The next day, August 22, we wake early, hoping to reach the summit. However, it keeps snowing so we stay in the tent for a while. Around 6 a.m. the visibility improves and we pack up and leave. In all the new snow, we are faced with arduous post-holing. We try to keep motivation high. Forcing a way through the deep snow is reminiscent of winter mountaineering back in Japan. However, at this altitude the body refuses to perform, and it feels like it's taking forever. After a pitch of steep snow, a three-pitch traverse to the right brings us to a snow ridge that we follow for another four pitches, finally reaching the east ridge at about 7,200 meters.

It's already past 11 a.m. We manage to get a signal on the satellite phone and make a call to Japan for a weather update. It seems we should be standing under clear skies, which is a bit hard to believe with the blizzard raging around us. The weather for the next day is supposed to be similar. It's hard to know what to think. The visibility isn't terrible, though, despite the snowfall, so we cache everything we can and hurry toward the summit, about 400 meters above us, with one rope, a minimal set of pro, and a bit of food.

The wind is strong, but we see glimpses of Rakaposhi to the south between the clouds. Then we are completely engulfed by clouds, and we take care to note the way back as we proceed, crossing over countless false summits. At 2 p.m. we suddenly find ourselves on the real summit. There's no view, and we're worried about the way down. Hiraide's frozen beard makes him look like Santa Claus. We make a quick phone call, and he scrapes a hole in the snow and places a photo of Kei Taniguchi inside it, and then we start down right away.

Our path has already mostly disappeared, so we use a compass to navigate and somehow reach our cache just before dark. We would have liked to descend further, but there is no visibility, so we cut a ledge and bivy. During the night, snow showers assault our tent again.

We wake up to a blizzard. Rather than being happy about having summited, we are worried about getting down alive. We had chosen the east ridge for our descent due to fewer dangers from avalanches and seracs, but in no way is it an easy route. The plateau is broad and it is necessary to climb over three minor peaks along the way. Finding the way down in zero visibility would be impossible. We wait in the tent, praying for the weather to improve.

At around 6:30 a.m. the visibility is ever so slightly better, though the wind is as strong as ever. We catch a glimpse of the route toward the northern spur and head that way, but our scouting had only covered the lower part of the descent, and this area is unknown to us. We end up having to traverse around some big seracs, rappelling off the tops of others. But gradually the visibility improves and the wind quiets. When we finally reach the high point of our scouting climb, we stop for a final night on the mountain. For the first time in six days, we sleep at a safe, flat spot without snow sliding onto us.

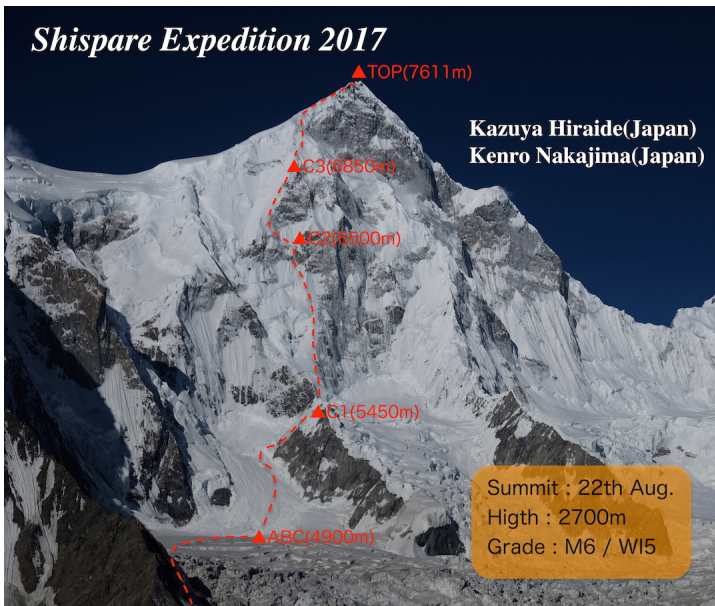
Arriving at base camp the next day is much, much more emotional than reaching the summit had been. We are off the mountain—alive.

Summary: First alpine-style ascent of Shispare (7,611m) in the Batura Muztagh of Pakistan via the first ascent of the northeast face (2,700m, WI5 M6), by Kazuya Hiraide and Kenro Nakajima from Japan, August 18–24, 2017. The climbers descended the east ridge and north spur. They called their route Shukriya ("Thanks" in Urdu). Shispare had been climbed only twice before, by a Polish-German expedition in 1974 and a Japanese team in 1994. Both previous ascents followed the east ridge and climbed expedition-style, using fixed ropes.

About the Authors: Kazuya Hiraide, 38, lives in Yokohama, Japan. He is a professional mountaineer and mountain cameraman. Kenro Nakajima, 33, is self-employed and lives in Kawasaki, Japan.

Translated from Japanese by Heikki Ruuska.

Images



The line of the first route up the northeast face of Shispare, showing bivouac sites.



Kazuya Hiraide (left) and Kenro Nakajima.



Starting the second day of the climb, with more than 2,000 meters of the northeast face still looming overhead. Camp 2 would be found amid the rocks in upper left.



Between camp 2 and 3.



Day three: Kenro Nakajima traverses steep ice toward the route's crux at about 6,500 meters: a 60° wall of thin ice and mixed that gave access to the upper ice slopes.



Kenro Nakajima nearing Camp 1 on the northeast face of Shispare.



Hiraide prepares to leave a photo of Kei Taniguchi on the summit of Shispare. The two were favorite partners and had attempted Shispare in 2013. She died in a climbing accident in Japan in 2015.



The northeast face of Shispare (7,611 meters) and the line of Shukriya ("Thanks"). Hiraide and Nakajima bivied four times on the face, including two nights at the highest camp shown, plus two more nights during the descent. The mountain had only been climbed twice before, both times by the eastern ridge (left), which is the route the 2017 climbers descended.

Article Details

Author	Kazuya Hiraide and Kenro Nakajima
Publication	AAJ
Volume	60
Issue	92
Page	30
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Feature article