



AAC Publications

Virtual Unknowns

Two weekend warriors' yearlong sabbatical culminates in the first ascent of K6 Central in Pakistan

The sun was setting behind distant Nanga Parbat as Jeff and I ascended the seemingly endless ice face on the western flank of K6, searching for a bivouac spot in the fading alpenglow. It was October 5, very late in the season to be climbing a 7,000-meter peak in the Karakoram, and we wanted to be warm in our tent when the temperatures plummeted with nightfall. I had led four long simul-climbing pitches on the steep face, placing a screw every 30 meters, and now Jeff, my husband and climbing partner, took over for the last hundred meters to the shoulder of K6's southwest ridge. This 900-meter face presented the most direct line up to the ridge but with no flat spots to rest along the way. Our calves were burning from kicking our crampon frontpoints directly into a skim of névé over hard blue ice.

We were holding on to hope for the luxurious bivouac that we expected to greet us at the top of the face, as promised by Graham Zimmerman in his article describing the first ascent of K6 West's southwest ridge (AAJ 2016). I looked up into the dark as Jeff disappeared around the ridgeline. Finally, I heard him give a joyful shout as he reached a grand flat spot. We gratefully set up our tent at 6,600 meters around midnight. I warmed Jeff's feet on my stomach, and we huddled close through the frigid night. It was one of the hardest days of our climbing careers.

Jeff and I had been alpine climbing for only seven years, and this was our first expedition to the Greater Ranges. Certainly no one expected us to make the first ascent of K6 Central, a 7,155-meter peak, with such slim résumés. (The *Rock and Ice* news story about our eventual success labeled us "virtual unknowns.") K6 was to be the literal high point of an extended climbing sabbatical, using our saved earnings to live and climb abroad for a full year. We had carefully researched and planned every destination, starting with Patagonia, then the Alps, followed by the Karakoram, and finally recovering with some sunny sport climbing in Southeast Asia. We could not have anticipated a global pandemic.

In December 2019, Jeff put his aerospace engineering job at Boeing on hold, and I left behind my software development position in Seattle. We flew to Argentina in early January, arriving in Patagonia for the austral summer season. It was our fourth visit to El Chaltén. In February 2019 we had summited Fitz Roy, and we had attempted Cerro Torre in 2016. On this trip, after climbing Aguja Poincenot and a couple of other peaks in Patagonia's typically awful weather, a perfect window arrived and we joined a crowd on Cerro Torre's west ridge (Via dei Ragni), finally reaching the summit of this dream peak. With several parties behind us waiting to summit as the sun was about to set, urgency compelled us to accept a top-rope for the final pitch on the summit mushroom.

At the beginning of March, we arrived in France with grand aspirations. COVID-19 was in the news, but even at this point, we still had no premonition that normal life in Europe soon would come to a complete halt. Chamonix was still lively, and travel was unrestricted. On March 18, at the tail end of winter, we squeezed in an ascent of the 1938 Heckmair route on the Eiger's north face, just as France began enforcing a nationwide lockdown.

For weeks we watched out the windows of our rented apartment as beautiful weather rolled through Chamonix. Our goal had been to climb the "six great north faces of the Alps" described by Gaston Rébuffat in his 1954 book *Étoiles et Tempêtes* ("Starlight and Storm"). France's lockdown lifted on May 11, and soon we were able to climb the Allain-Leininger Route on the Petit Dru. Having lost eight weeks of our precious year, we worried that we would run out of time and weather to complete

our goal.

Jeff and I had a lot of experience with the waiting and watching game. Before our sabbatical, we would optimize our limited vacation time by using a “smash and grab” style, watching the weather and conditions from Seattle and then traveling at the last minute to grab a summit in quick alpine style. In this way, we had climbed Fitz Roy and Denali’s Cassin Ridge. In Chamonix, we used the same tactics for the remaining four of the six classics: the Matterhorn, Grandes Jorasses, Cima Grande di Lavaredo, and Piz Badile. In a way, COVID-19 worked in our favor: Because Pakistan, our next destination, remained closed to foreign tourists throughout the summer, we could extend our stay in Europe. We summited Piz Badile on July 21, completing the six classic north faces in a single season.

However, we had still another, bigger goal. Each of our climbs had successively prepared us for the ultimate challenge of summiting an unclimbed 7,000-meter peak.

K6 from advanced base camp on the East Nangmah Glacier. (A) K6 West. (B) K6 Central. K6 Central doesn’t appear on most lists of unclimbed peaks due to its prominence of only 200 meters, but when viewed from the south or north, this central nub is striking amid the broad massif of K6. The K6 group is located in the Masherbrum Range of northern Pakistan, in Gilgit-Baltistan, flanked by several major glaciers: the Charakusa to the north, Nangmah to the south, Lachit to the southeast, and Kondus to the east. The mountain’s three main summits run along a two-kilometer ridge. K6 Main (7,281m) was first climbed in 1970 by an Austrian expedition led by Eduard Koblmüller. We got in touch with one of the original members of the young team, Fred Pressl, who graciously shared pictures and stories from a half-century ago. The mountain had already been attempted by three expeditions, including a 1969 Italian team, led by Luigi Barbúscia, which attempted the west side of the south face of the massif, with hopes of completing the high traverse to K6 Main. We found some old gear, likely from a reconnaissance by this 1969 expedition, along the southwest ridge.

In 2013, Canadians Raphael Slawinski and Ian Welsted made the first ascent of K6 West via a highly technical route from the Charakusa side, for which they won a Piolet d’Or. In 2015, Scott Bennett and Graham Zimmerman from the United States completed the second ascent of K6 West, starting from the Nangmah Glacier to the south. They too had hoped to traverse the ridgeline, but an impending storm forced them to retreat before starting toward K6 Central. It remained unclimbed.

Expeditions to Pakistan’s highest peaks usually start no later than midsummer, and we had planned to arrive in July. However, in 2020, Pakistan didn’t reopen its borders until late August. Jeff and I were convinced we could still have a productive adventure in September and October, and we both still felt passionately about embarking on the expedition, despite the delay.

We had been discussing our Karakoram plans with Colin Haley, our Seattle pro-climber hero and friend of several years, since January when we were all in Patagonia. Shortly before we were to depart for Islamabad, he decided to join our expedition to attempt some solo objectives. We were glad to have his massive amount of experience (this would be his seventh Karakoram expedition) and his great company at base camp.

We dusted off the visas we’d obtained in December, bought plane tickets, and got the COVID tests required for entry. Our expectations for a smooth arrival in Pakistan were low. However, when we got to Islamabad on August 23, we were able to fly to Skardu within hours, without even leaving the airport. We were practically the only tourists in the country, and we were getting the royal treatment. Ali Saltero (our tour operator from Alpine Adventure Guides) navigated our caravan from Skardu to Kandy, smoothly getting us through two military checkpoints, where officers checked our COVID test results, visas, and climbing permits. The same day that we reached the trail head, we hiked into the Nangmah Valley to choose a suitable base camp location. The following morning, 49 porters dropped their 25kg loads at our home for the next two months. We set up camp, and it poured rain

for three days straight, immediately flooding our tents.

At first, we simply acclimatized to the altitude of base camp (about 4,000 meters), admiring Ishaq and Azhar, our cooks, who were running around gathering firewood, making food, and playing sports, while we just rested and created red blood cells. When the weather improved, Colin introduced everyone, including Ishaq and Azhar, to Japanese calisthenics, which we performed as a group in the mornings. We played chess, learned some Urdu, practiced our chapati making, paraglided from slopes above base camp, and watched movies at night, settling in like the family we would be for the next two months. Ishaq and Azhar's cooking was superb, and they impressed me with their repertoire of recipes, working around Jeff and my vegetarian diet, and Colin's dairy- and gluten-free diet.

After a week at camp, we started moving higher to acclimatize and scout out the area. Heading up the West Nangmah Glacier, we bivied at 5,600m on Kapura Peak, where we got a good view of the west face of the K6 group. Colin, Jeff, and I identified three potential alternatives to Graham and Scott's southwest ridge route, avoiding the hardest mixed climbing on their line. We bailed on a summit attempt on Kapura when I fell ill, but after descending we moved our ABC to the East Nangmah Glacier before returning to base camp.

During the next weather window, we explored two variations on the west face of K6 in order to acclimatize, identify potential bivouac sites, and choose the most efficient route for our final assault. On this venture into the mountains, we slept for five nights above 5,700 meters and climbed up to 6,200 meters. We found only one poor bivouac option, situated on a precarious corniced ridge.

Jeff and I then received an inReach message from Colin down at ABC. He had fallen ill and made an excruciating descent to base camp. We hurried back to see how we could help. As it turned out, there was not much we could do, except to bring his gear down from ABC.

On October 1, we all sadly bid farewell to Colin as he departed for home after a week of high-altitude diarrhea. In spite of our fear of the daily dropping temperatures, Jeff and I were determined to stay and make a summit attempt on K6 Central.

We headed back up to ABC on October 2, a 10-hour trek that climbs 1,200 meters over moraine and loose scree. We were completely self-supported above base camp during the expedition, and as we hiked up the valley, we were very glad to have put in the effort to stock an advanced base. This meant that we could climb until the very end of good weather and hunker down at ABC if the weather turned poor. On the off chance that weather and conditions would allow us to complete a full traverse from K6 West, over the unclimbed central summit, and on to K6 Main, we packed a rack of rock gear, even though we knew we'd only need it after summiting Central. It was a heavy gamble just for the small chance of continuing on toward K6 Main.

Our route started from the East Nangmah Glacier on a prominent ramp up the southwest flank of the peak, following 45-degree snow and ice for about 600 meters. In this way, we avoided the icefalls of the lower west face. We crossed over the southwest ridge to reach a broad campsite we dubbed "Sunny Knob" at 5,700 meters. Newly fallen snow had wiped out our previous steps, and we waded through waist-deep snow. The next day was dedicated to plowing a path over to the crux of our route: the direct line up the ice face (55° snow and ice), the same line Graham and Scott had rappelled in 2015, using 19 V-thread anchors, during their descent from K6 West. This direct line would bypass our reconnaissance routes and the only bivouac option on the face.

On October 5, we committed to the unrelenting line up the west face, climbing into the night and setting our tent up at 11 p.m. atop the southwest ridge in the crushing cold. The next morning, exhausted from our big effort on the west face, we followed the southwest ridge to the upper slopes of K6 West, postholing and wallowing through deep snow along the upward traverse. Progress was slow, and we made two more bivouacs between our 6,600-meter camp and the summit ridge at

7,000 meters. Miraculously, the good weather continued, although our forecaster had warned us we would encounter the jet stream near the summit, with sustained winds of 45 km/h (28 mph). He was absolutely correct.

When we reached the summit ridge, on October 8, we were greeted with high wind blowing incessantly from the southeast. Setting up a tent in that wind would have been impossible, so we scouted for a cozy crevasse. Once a suitable site was secured for our Camp 5, we left our backpacks and headed toward the summit of K6 West, at 7,140 meters.

The wind raged around us, whipping a few scattered clouds through the dark blue sky and blasting the cold into our summit puffies, ski masks, and giant mittens that felt like boxing gloves. We crested two snowy mounds that each revealed another, taller one behind it before we reached the true top of K6 West at 4:20 p.m. on October 8, completing the third recorded ascent. Beyond, K6 Central reared up, so close it dispelled all doubt in my mind: We had to try for it. But it was nearly sunset, so we descended back down to our homey crevasse and set up the tent for a very cold and windy night.

We awoke to a frost-covered sleeping bag, with huge gusts of wind blowing spindrift into the gaps in the tent door and windows. We huddled under clumps of wet feathers, wearing every piece of clothing we had. When the sun hit the tent, we roused ourselves and packed our gear, leaving the tent in place. By this point, we had abandoned thoughts of the complete traverse to K6 Main. It was too cold, too windy, too far, too late.

We reascended K6 West against crippling cold and whipping wind. Could we climb the technical terrain of K6 Central's final slopes in these conditions? "Let's just go take a look at it," Jeff said. "Just go to the base." After traversing the ridge to the foot of K6 Central, we stopped and looked up. The face appeared to be in great condition: a concave, wave-shaped wall, gently sloping at first, then steep and icy, and finally capped with a cornice.

We dropped our packs, and Jeff led across a tall bergschrund, which luckily had good ice at its lip. The slope gently increased in angle, and protection was sparse in the loose snow, but Jeff managed to place a stubby ice screw halfway into a small patch of ice before burrowing into the cornice, the last crux before the summit. At 3:45 p.m. on October 9, Jeff stopped at a rocky outcropping on the summit of K6 Central and anchored us in. Reaching the top, I sat straddling the rock, with one leg over the Lachit Valley and one leg hanging over the sheer vertical drop to the Charakusa. We gazed around the incredible panoramic view: 7,000- and 8,000-meter peaks spread around us, the four 8,000ers of the Baltoro Glacier visible only 20 miles to our north, poking into the thin atmosphere, while the sun set directly behind Nanga Parbat, on the horizon over 100 miles away. We felt so isolated and blessed to be amid these lonely, giant peaks.

The heights of K6 West and Central have never been officially surveyed, but estimated to be 7,040m and 7,100m, respectively. After crossing the broad saddle between the two peaks and ascending the west face of K6 Central, we observed that we were approximately level with the summit of K6 West. Some years ago, Eberhard Jurgalski of 8000ers.com used SRTM data (from the Shuttle Radar Topography Mission of 2000) to more accurately estimate K6 West at 7,140m and K6 Central at 7,155m. His findings aligned with our GPS data and our observations.

We still had one more windy night to endure in our high-altitude crevasse home. The following two days were spent retracing our steps to ABC, first rappelling back down the west face (counting the exact same number of rappels that Graham and Scott had made). We then traversed back up and over the southwest ridge and soloed down to ABC, wearily arriving around 10 p.m.

The next morning we relayed our success to Ali by InReach and told him we would be back for dinner at base camp that evening. As we made our way back down the grotesque moraines, I heard a familiar whistle. I shouted and heard it again: It was the same whistle that woke us every morning

at base camp for break- fast. From around the corner, Ishaq and Azhar appeared: our cooks, our friends! They had hiked all the way up to the valley and waited for hours with hot tea, cheese, and crackers.

We had been away from base camp for 10 nights, but it felt like eons. That night we sang and danced by a bonfire, sharing songs, banter, and a congratulatory cake. (I still don't understand what magic makes baking possible in base camp.) I was filled with joy, not to mention with Ishaq and Azhar's amazing cooking.

A couple of days later, we packed up camp and headed down to Kanday and civilization. The whirlwind of people, places, and sudden attention for a couple of "virtual unknowns" was overwhelming. After 52 days without access to the internet, we returned to Skardu, back to distractions, back to routines, back to Earth from the Heavens.

Summary: First ascent of K6 Central (7,155 meters GPS) from the west by Jeff and Priti Wright (USA), October 3–11, 2020. The two climbed the southwest face of K6 West, making the third documented ascent of that summit on October 8, then traversed to K6 Central on October 9. The route gained about 2,000 meters from the East Nangmah Glacier. The pair reversed their route of ascent. An interview with the Wrights was featured in episode 35 of the Cutting Edge podcast (see player below).

About the Author: Born in 1988, Priti Wright grew up in Florida, where she met her husband, Jeff. They became alpine climbers after moving to Seattle in 2013; weekend trips into the Cascades led up to bigger successes in further ranges. The 2020 sabbatical marked a breakthrough in their climbing careers, and they hope to take a similar break in a few years.

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The Cutting Edge · Priti and Jeff Wright's Big Year: Cerro Torre, The Alps and K6 Central

Images



A 900-meter day up the west face of K6 gained Camp 2 on the upper southwest ridge and then snow slopes leading first to K6 West and then K6 Central. In all, the climbers spent six nights at or above Camp 2 (6,600 meters) in frigid October weather. K6 Main is at far right.



Returning to the Sunny Knob camp after laying a track for an early start on the west face.



Jeff Wright still smiling on the 900-meter slope leading to Camp 2 on the west face of K6.



A high camp on K6.



Traversing to K6 Central's summit fin, which was climbed directly up the snowy face.



Priti (left) and Jeff Wright atop K6 Central, with K6 Main's summit tower behind.



K6 from advanced base camp on the East Nangmah Glacier. The mixed southwest ridge on the left was climbed to (A) K6 West in 2015. The 2020 route followed the same long snow slope, then

traversed farther west to ascend directly to the upper ridge, before traversing over the west peak to (B) K6 Central.



Jeff and Priti Wright atop Cima Grande in northern Italy after climbing the Comici Route on the north face.



Jeff and Priti Wright on top of Cerro Torre in Patagonia, displaying the banner for the Live Your Dream grant from the AAC that helped fund their trip.

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