



AAC Publications

Choose Laughter: A Well-Timed Ascent of the North Face of Dansam West

Pakistan, Karakoram, Western Saltoro Mountains

We have been sitting in a cab for more than 12 hours, and we still have another 12 to go before we reach Islamabad. It's been three hours since darkness fell, hiding from view the gaping abyss to the side of the road. On the dash is a sticker that reads *Inshallah*—"God willing." The clock below the sticker reads 11 p.m. Our driver is showing signs of fatigue. He rubs his eyes incessantly, and his head drops forward in a weightless way. I try to put on my seatbelt, but there is no seatbelt. It has been removed, presumably to make something more useful. Jéro me must notice the driver's state of exhaustion too, because he also reaches for his seatbelt—also gone. With tenderness, I touch Jéro me's leg and tell him: "Mon chéri, we are about to endure the most dangerous moment of our Pakistani adventure." And yet the climb is already behind us. It's been four blurry days since we crested the West Summit of Dansam. We can barely stay awake, but we're far too scared to fall asleep.

Let me go back to the beginning.

It's February 2021. The middle of the COVID crisis. Political hostilities between France and Pakistan are at a peak. Our work as mountain guides has slowed to a trickle, our income reduced by 60 percent. It is precisely at this moment, in the heart of global chaos, that my phone rings.

Jéro me Sullivan, a dear friend with whom I have shared unfathomable quantities of vino tinto and mate in the wilds of Argentine Patagonia, encourages me to open my email and look at a photo he has sent. It shows the upper third of a mountain. The shot is taken from so far away that it is impossible to zoom in without transforming the features of the peak into a meaningless jumble of boxy pixels. These kinds of vague photos are my favorite because they leave so much to the imagination. Jéro me knows this about me, and I suspect the low-res image is an intentional maneuver.

The photo was taken by American alpinist Steve Swenson, from the top of Link Sar, looking toward 6,666-meter Dansam—a.k.a. K13—a mountain believed to have never been climbed. The image shows the northern aspect of the Dansam massif, which is comprised of three summits: the highest central one and two others to the west and east, only 50 or so meters lower. The massif has been closed to tourism since the 1980s due to the war between Pakistan and India—the highest war in the world, at 5,000-plus meters—which takes place on the Siachen Glacier, only a few kilometers to the northeast from the Dansam peaks.

Many climbing teams have unsuccessfully applied for a permit to attempt Dansam. But during the last couple of years of ceasefire, the Kondus Valley, of which the Dansam group forms the southernmost rim, has been opened to foreign expeditions, and we manage to get the coveted permit. I am the last to join the team—Jéro me having already recruited Victor Saucède and Jeremy Stagnetto. Never in history, since my favorite Argentinian band, The Luthiers, got together, has such a team existed! As the famous French alpinist Yannick Seigneur, said, "You should always have a Pyrenean on your team." We will have two.

After scrambling to fulfill vaccine requirements, taking and failing multiple COVID tests, two flight cancelations, and long weeks of battling with airlines, we manage to take off from Paris on May 28. Two days later, under the blazing sun of Skardu and with the chant of the muezzin accompanying our

preparations, we excitedly pack the yellow Hushe village bus to the brim and set out for the wild mountains of the Kondus Valley.

It's Victor's first time in Pakistan, and by the time we reach the village of Khor Kondus at the end of a long dusty road, the window is all greased up from having his face squashed against it, trying to glimpse the tops of the towering rock monoliths. As we drive past the first houses, at dusk, the inhabitants are waiting for us. They are excited to see visitors, as it has been many years since foreigners have come to their village. It is a sign that times are changing—and tourism is a good source of income. First the children come to meet us, running behind the vehicle, snotty-nosed and muddy, screaming wildly the few words of English they know. As we set up camp, curious adults come to see who we are. We are delighted and share gestures, smiles, and hugs. Very soon we are surrounded by half of the village. Everyone laughs and gesticulates, telling us stories in Balti we do not understand. But it doesn't matter—communication is somehow fluid, no matter the language difference.

Among those who welcome us that evening are the porters who will help carry our gear to base camp, just four hours above Khor Kondus, located at around 4,000 meters at a place called Minguli by the locals. It is a summer grazing area for the yaks, and its sparsely grassed pastures are a luxury compared with the arid and rocky surroundings.

Once base camp is installed, we begin to explore further up the valley. Finally, the awaited moment arrives, and we begin to put a tangible form to the imaginary world we had created from Steve's photograph. Our mountain of vapor morphs into cold brute mineral. For hours we've talked strategy, looked at maps and satellite images, conversed on the phone about our hopes and beliefs concerning the rock quality, the steepness. Now, below the formidable barrier and its three summits, we are ecstatic. Fractured hanging glaciers of a dark, healthy blue are split by massive pillars of granite. Paper-thin ridgelines are crowned with precarious snow mushrooms hanging dangerously over the edge. We watch in awe as falling ice triggers a massive avalanche, shaking the narrow valley and filling it with a cloud of snow and our souls with fear and excitement.

The main summit, our initial objective, seems too exposed to falling ice, so we decide to climb the pillar that leads directly to the western summit. [See p.273 for a report about an attempt on the main summit later in the summer of 2021.] A compact, north-facing granite prow, 1,600 meters high, scarred with a bone-white ice smear that dead-ends in a steep headwall. It is the line of my dreams: a logical route in the middle of a seemingly impossible wall.

We return to base camp only to be pinned down for ten days by multiple storms. The only possibilities for acclimatization have been placing a simple advanced base camp at the foot of our planned route and spending a night there, at 5,000 meters, along with short forays up snow gullies near camp, also to about 5,000 meters.

The long wait is difficult to bear, as our time is running thin. The thought of leaving without even attempting this masterpiece of alpinism is depressing, but there is reason for optimism. The 24th of June will bring a full moon. The farmers in my Spanish homeland of La Rioja often associate the change of the moon with a change in the weather regime, and sure enough, our weather forecaster's latest update seems to confirm the age-old wisdom. The team members quite like this Spanish remedy, and they joke that we should combine this lunar event with sacrifices to the yak god. On the 24th, with faith that our strategy will pay off, we depart from base camp in a flurry of snowflakes.

In the morning, we leave advanced base for what will be a six-day round trip. After climbing 400 meters of zigzagging snow ramps and wading through terrible and inconsistent snow, we finally set up camp on a snow rib dubbed "les pentes à Djamel," Djamel being Jeremy's nickname. Here, we wait out the snowstorm for the next 24 hours—it seems the yak gods did not believe in our intentions for sacrifices. Our line of ascent is a gully, and it channels the falling snow. Although our tent is not directly exposed, the snow aerosolized by the frequent avalanches shakes it violently.

On the 27th, we climb the central gully system under heavy spindrift. The ice quality is great. Between shouts of "Spindrift!" and "Hoods on!" we make good progress. Some pitches are quite steep and physical, and others more moderate and harder on the calves. The ice gully leads us to another snow rib we call "le Linceul" ("the Shroud"). We arrive quite late in the night and dig out a poor bivy site. The night is short, and at first light we are awake and ready for a big day.

Here we face the biggest question mark of our line: Above, 400 meters of abrupt compact rock guard the summit slopes. We make slow but unrelenting progress, discovering ephemeral ice smears on every pitch. Blots of ice allow us to keep a good pace in otherwise unclimbable terrain. Victor leads the most memorable pitch— an improbable ice smear pasted on an overhanging dihedral. We declare that, sadly, at only 26 years old, Victor has nothing left to look forward to, having just climbed what could be the best pitch of his life! We can thank the bad weather of the past weeks for the ice that has formed. As we will soon discover while descending the route, these good ice conditions are quite short-lived.

As night comes, we find a campsite on a ridge at around 6,000 meters. The main difficulties are behind us, and we crash into our sleeping bags. We have high hopes of reaching the summit the next day.

On the 29th we wake early to a starry night. Fatigue is showing, and it is difficult to get started. We leave our tents and depart for the summit. Behind us, far to the north, sunlit K2 drips pale golden light upon the blue canvas of the horizon. Our progress is slow. We had supposed the lower-angle terrain would be more easily overcome, but the bullet-hard ice hidden beneath 10 centimeters of powder snow is sketchy and time-consuming. We repeatedly build anchors, pitching out the 60-degree slope, and it takes a good part of the day to approach the summit.

The closer we get, the heavier our breathing becomes. I am leading up the summit pyramid when I am hit with an unexpected surprise. I blink my eyes and shake my head. A fixed rope in tatters runs down from the rocky pinnacle, shredded by the winds and time. A mixture of confusing thoughts runs through my head. I am stuck between laughter and frustration. This summit was supposed to be unclimbed! Error 404! Hypoxia and fatigue do not help with my confusion. Finally, I choose laughter, and with a smile I turn to my companions and tell them to hurry up.

Gathered at the foot of the small tower that separates us from the summit, we stare at the remains of what we later learn to be the Japanese expedition of 1981, which reached the summit of Dansam West by climbing the long western ridge. We joke about our situation: We are like dogs pissing on a lamp post, always wanting to be the first. And yet, we are satisfied with our climb. The yak gods have granted us good weather, and we've climbed an amazing line. To the east, the main summit looks temptingly in reach, via a snowy ridgeline, paper thin and fragile. But with all our bivy gear below and bad weather coming, reason calls us back.

The great Karakoram surrounds us, and striking Saltoro Kangri, 7,742 meters high, rises to the north, beckoning us to return to the Kondus Valley. Yet for now it is forbidden due to the damned war. I start humming John Lennon's tune "Imagine" as we turn our backs to the easy descent on Dansam's south side, also prohibited, and plunge back into the shadows of the steep north face.

We spend the next 36 hours descending our route. After a short night at our 6,000-meter camp, we start to rappel at first light for better protection from the heat and falling debris. The temperature is rising and we descend quickly, rappelling off V-threads and rock spikes. As the day goes by, we witness the line of thin ice we've just climbed slowly disintegrate.

We walk back into base camp at 10 p.m. on the last day of June, hungry, exhausted, and with no food left. We are immensely satisfied that we've managed to climb this ephemeral line. The next day, at 6 a.m., it's time to pack up base camp. Our plane is due to depart in 48 hours.

We have a taxi to catch.

Summary: First ascent of the north face of Dansam West (6,600 meters) by Martín Elías (Spain), Victor Saucède (France), Jeremy Stagnetto (France), and Jérôme Sullivan (French-American), June 25–30, 2021. Their route is called Harvest Moon (1,600m, M6/7 90°). This was the second known ascent of Dansam West; the main peak is still unclimbed.

About the Author: Martín Elías was born in La Rioja, Spain, and shaped in the Pyrénées. Today he lives in Chamonix, France, where he works as a passionate mountain guide. This story is adapted from an original piece of writing by Elías, with the assistance of Jérôme Sullivan.

Images



The line of Harvest Moon on the north face of Dansam West (6,600m). The climbers descended approximately the same way.



Climbers and expedition staff at Dansam West base camp.



Looking south from base camp toward snowy Dansam East and the huge rocky monoliths hiding the main and west peaks.



Approaching the north face of Dansam West. Most of the pillar is visible just left of center.



Jeremy Stagnetto on day one of the six-day climb.



Mixed climbing on the north face of Dansam West.



Victor Saucède starts one of the crux pitches of the north face of Dansam West.



Victor Saucède leads a steep, improbable, and short-lived ice smear at nearly 6,000 meters.



High on the north face of Dansam West.



Surprise! The discovery of an anchor and fixed rope just below the summit brought the realization that Dansam West had been climbed before. A Japanese university team made the first ascent of the peak, via the west ridge, in 1981.



Climbing along the upper ridge of Dansam West.



Victor Saucède soaks in the view, looking to the north during the last day of the climb of Dansam West.

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