



Saraghrar: A Rare Expedition to the Hindu Kush Finds Great Success

Pakistan, Hindu Kush

As a prologue, it should be noted that all three of us—Baqar Gelashvili, Giorgi Tepnadze, and I—feel grateful to have lived this adventure. The whole escapade felt like a return to a romantic era of mountaineering, yet in a natural, ecological style, with a small circle of friends, dishing out a powerful test of our capabilities.

When I first saw a photo of Saraghrar (7,340 meters), the king of the Rosh Gol valley, I felt enchanted. The 2,300-meter fortress wall of the northwest face was a natural wonder, with no routes nor any previous attempts. Saraghrar's main summit was first climbed from the east, in 1959, by an Italian expedition, and two teams had climbed routes from the Rosh Gol to other tops around Saraghrar's broad summit basin. But 7,300-meter Saraghrar Northwest remained unclimbed.

Catalan climbers had tried to reach this point three times via the southwest pillar—three huge efforts, starting in 1975. In 1982, three members of a large Catalan team completed the pillar and got to a point they called Saraghrar Northwest II, about 120 meters below the desired summit.

We chose a late-season attempt for the northwest face, believing a frozen wall would be safer; it was impossible to predict exactly what conditions we'd meet, as there had been no previous climbs or attempts in this area in autumn. It seemed likely there would be big temperature differences between day and night, and that the sun would light the face only for the last five hours of a relatively short day. We did not even know exactly what the face looked like, not to mention the quality of rock and other important details that a climber seeks to know nowadays before organizing a major expedition. Steep faces, isolation, undescribed areas, and neither an easy way up nor down—it felt almost like going to our home mountains in Georgia!

We decided to stay positive and prepare as if nothing was in our way, even when the situation did not give much grounds for hope: We faced short deadlines for raising funds, and apart from that, the Talibs were taking over Afghanistan, immediately to the west and north of Saraghrar, and we had to wait impatiently for a permit in this border zone. It was a strange and stressful time to organize an expedition, but we gave it a proper try and it worked: The permit was issued, the training went quite well, we raised the bare minimum of funding a couple of days before departure, and off we went.

We arrived at base camp at 4,204 meters in the Rosh Gol valley on August 20, five days after our arrival in Pakistan. From there we stared straight up at the southwest buttress climbed by the Catalans—a very nice place to be. Before attempting Saraghrar, our plan was to climb Languta-e- Barfi (6,833 meters GPS) at the head of the valley. This summit was first reached in 1963 but had never been climbed from Pakistan, although Pat Deavoll and Chris Todd came close in 2014— they climbed the left side of the south face and started up the summit ridge before retreating a couple of hundred meters below the top.

It took us two days to reach the foot of the south face over endless moraine and huge boulders. We started up on August 24, without pre-acclimatization. Giorgi and Baqar had done a couple of ascents earlier in the month, reaching 5,000 to 5,200 meters in our home mountains, but I hadn't been able to join them because of the pre-expedition frenzy.

Accompanied by a full moon, we crossed the bergschrund on the right side of the face and soloed up ice that gradually increased to 60° in the upper half. We gained 1,400 meters that day, and it was unexpectedly hot. Above a step of 70° broken rock, we cut a small ledge for a bivouac at 6,400 meters on the east ridge.

The next day we followed the ridge toward the top, overcoming a few very steep and unprotected snowy passages, with the right foot in Afghanistan and the left in Pakistan. On top it was very windy and cold. An amazing panorama opened before us, including Saraghrar and its northwest face, which was not well known to us before that moment. The view provided crucial information for our upcoming climb, especially of the terrain above 7,000 meters—its complexity was a revelation.

We descended the same day, parallel to our line, and after more than three dozen rappels and much downclimbing in bright moonlight, we found ourselves at the foot of the mountain, already celebrating Giorgi's birthday. Later that same evening we raised our cups for him in base camp.

Even though it was still August, it was already getting very cold at base camp. In the constant breeze, one couldn't stay outside the tent long. After a couple of days of proper rest and preparation, we set out for our main objective.

The route up the lower northwest face was obvious: a huge couloir leading more than 1,000 meters up the face. Above this was a rock headwall, and there appeared to be several options. We would decide which line to choose when we got there. We brought no special equipment: two ice tools each, light aiders, ascenders, a more or less standard rack, including pins and Pecker-style pitons, and a tiny bivouac tent. We were happy to pack mostly Georgian food—one week of rations.

We started up the face early on September 3 from around 5,000 meters. After ascending a steep icefall, we entered the couloir. A huge distance had to be covered, so we moved simultaneously all day. The ancient ice made the climbing a struggle, and the slope was approaching 60° when we entered the upper couloir. Inside the narrowing walls, it felt like stepping into the gates of a mythical castle. A bit earlier than planned, we started to dig a bivouac site in ice. We all felt the joy of being here. But at 6,200 meters it was obvious that, from now on, the cold would penetrate the last warm spot under the sky—our tent—and that the bivy sites would be even tighter. A big-wall sufferfest was about to begin.

We woke at dawn and resumed simul-climbing up the ice. At the start of an obviously climb-able section of rock on the left, we gathered together. We had noted this place as one option to start up the rock wall, and it seemed more fun than continuing up the narrowing couloir.

I clipped a trad rack on my harness, and with axes but no crampons, started up the rock. I managed to free climb two hard mixed pitches of poor granite in this way, protectable but still with the possibility of a big fall. Giorgi took the lead with about six hours of daylight left, and right there, on the third pitch, we faced one of those tough leads where dry-tooling, scary rock climbing, and hard aid combine. This short pitch soaked up the rest of the day, and at the top of it, we found a ledge only big enough for one person to sit. An open sitting bivouac at 6,400 meters—what a perfect way to spend our first night on the rock wall!

The area around us was so steep and snow-free that we could melt only a liter of water. Tired, without eating anything, we tried to get some brief shut-eye, with half of our bodies hanging in the air. Some moments in the cold night were so hard that I just wanted to stand up and scream, to frighten away the cold, but every move I made threatened to dislodge the stone on which two of us were sitting, and this thought somehow calmed me down.

In the morning, it took a while to recover from the torturous night and get moving. The air, which was drier than I have ever experienced at this altitude, caused throat problems that became an everyday

struggle for Baqar and me. Plus, Baqar was suffering from a facial nerve inflammation that intensified soon after we started the climb. This would be manageable only as long as our tiny first-aid kit lasted.

As Giorgi climbed a very attractive and steep crack system, we waited eagerly for the sun to appear. Then for some hours we forgot the cold, and eventually we overcame the first rock wall, reaching a position high above the couloir. We could see the potential line ahead and a summit ridge far above, yet the way above constantly hid surprises from our eyes.

Starting our fourth day on the route as soon as the cold at 6,600 meters would allow, I completed two moderate leads and another hard mixed pitch. Although I tried to completely free the last one, a vertical stretch found me loading my protection. Following the leader on jumars, especially on pendulums or traverses, was exceptionally hard here; frequently the seconds had to climb as well, protected by their ascenders. The darkness and cold started to set in. After a false start and some downclimbing, Giorgi went off again and this time found a sharp ridge where we could create a relatively peaceful bivouac at about 6,750 meters. It was becoming obvious that our food, batteries, and gas were going to have to last longer than we had planned.

On the fifth morning I curiously opened the zipper and.... "Woah! We are starting the upper headwall today!" In the darkness the night before, we hadn't realized that a 250-meter wall of vertical granite was right there above us.

The way ahead was everything but obvious—we just had to choose a line and climb whatever was in our way, as everything appeared equally bold and difficult. "Then let's just try the center," someone said. As I followed the third pitch that day, I remember wondering how Giorgi passed through the last 20 or 30 meters. I found almost no protection as I cleaned. Many times on the headwall, the leader would have to back-clean pieces to place them higher up, and here Giorgi had left us with a big pendulum swing around a corner. Baqar went last and burned his bridges by removing the only nut placed for horizontal speed control, making for a desperate start to this maneuver.

During the next pitch, a scary traverse above a huge drop, darkness fell again. Then another crack dead-ended, and Giorgi had to leave a precious piece of gear to lower off. Already we'd left two cams stuck in the cracks, and some titanium pitons had broken or deformed. Their absence was really felt in our small rack.

The rock above appeared simply unclimbable. Giorgi returned to the anchor at 6,850 meters, and we spent another three hours bending hard ice into a bivy site. I remember thinking that night that we could no longer afford the luxury of false starts. The days seemed to feel shorter and shorter, and gaining 100 to 150 vertical meters a day on a 2,300-meter line was not calming, especially when speeding up seemed to be beyond logic. With part of the tent waving in the air, as usual, our team had another tea-conversation: "We have to break through tomorrow, no matter what. There shouldn't be much rock left anyway!"

In the morning, our sixth on the face, a jaw-dropping sight appeared: A single crack split an otherwise blank wall. It was clear that another dead-end crack would finish our efforts, so close to our goal. The very hard first pitch took many hours, but on the plus side, we were able to dry the sleeping bags for the first time. After a hanging belay, we watched Giorgi lead an amazing, overhanging pitch (the 18th of the wall), climbing for seven hours as he struggled to gain ground at almost 7,000 meters. For Baqar and me, the only joy was to watch it snowing upward the whole day, as updrafts blew flakes past the belay! It would have looked very funny if anyone could have seen us climbing this vertical wall in our thick high-altitude clothes. Some birds watched us from a distance, so we had to act boldly and stay cool.

When Giorgi finally finished his lead, Baqar and I happily yelled up to him and tried to get information about the ground above, hoping it would now be easier, as a reward for our struggles. But it was hard

to make sense of Giorgi's replies. It became dark and we followed, spinning in space as we jumared. Our power of unity had been going through various tests; still, everybody kept up their spirits.

The pitch above looked horribly difficult, an overhanging wave-like rock, but our wall days appeared to be ending soon. Up Giorgi went. There were several hours of silence, and the rope barely moved. Baqar decided to follow and disappeared into the darkness for another silent hour. The weather had started to worsen, and soon I was covered with spindrift. The boys above shouted something too complex to understand. I started up, jumaring some of the time but mostly self-belaying with my ascenders. I found the rope stuck in a crack and understood why Giorgi had been unable to belay us. After another moment I stood up, alone in the darkness, and felt a mysterious sensation—the whole rock wall was below me. There was no celebration, just silence. I coiled the ropes slowly and then soloed up steep snow to help the others prepare a bivouac. Only at 3 a.m. did we get to crawl into the bags. We remained clipped in but finally slept without a helmet.

The seventh morning's warm-up session started by sharpening 78 points on our totally worn-out crampons and tools. Snow and wind gusts ruled the outside world. We packed half of our rack, one sleeping bag, the tent, and everything chewable that remained: a good bite of chocolate, a handful of dry fruits and nuts, and one delicious packet of soup I'd had in Tbilisi for a couple of years. We hoped to climb the remaining 300 meters in one day, but we were prepared for a bivouac if it took longer or if we had to descend another side of the mountain.

We soloed up high-angle ice and strangely deep snow to the ridge crest. From here, for the first time, we could see Saraghrar's main and central summits; our desired summit, the northwest peak, stood apart like a rock tooth.

The sharp ridge was loaded with unconsolidated and unprotectable snow, cornices on the left and a void on both sides. The only option to save a falling friend would be to jump off the opposite side. It looked terrifying. But this ridge was the only way to the summit! Step by step we started, over the first near-vertical snow wall, and then a second.... I heard snow collapsing behind me, the rope dragged, and I looked back so as not to jump in the wrong direction. Baqar was already some meters down on the north side, his tools biting into the snow—he waved with one hand, and a moment later we continued.

Before dusk—and without gaining much altitude—we had left the ridge and extreme tension behind us. The headwind increased as a moderate slope brought us to a point somewhere between 7,150 and 7,180 meters, where we finally could look down the southwest face. "Look, our base camp!" We called out in three voices, hoping the echoes would reach our friends at camp far below. Irshad and Hayat started blinking a lamp! A moment of laughter and joy. And we knew that they were happy too.

The people of Zondangram, the closest village, have kept alive the memory of all the expeditions that have visited the Rosh Gol. People like Karim Baig, father of Irshad, and his old friend, the father of our cook Hayat, had trekked with other alpinists or worked as mail runners for expeditions. "I have looked at the northwest wall—it looks possible to climb!" Karim had told us. We knew that no team so small had ever summited any of the Rosh Gol giants, but our new friends kept the faith, strongly believing in our chances.

Right after these torchlight greetings, we spotted the top of the Catalan route, very nearby. We stopped to bivouac, and after a cold night sharing our single sleeping bag, we snoozed the alarm a few times before preparing to move again. Symbolically, we ate our last meal on the mountain, but saved the remaining gas for that evening.

By midday Saraghrar's high summit basin, a kilometer long and wide, was all in view, and the answers to all the riddles about the various summits were now crystal clear. Clouds passed above us at high

speed. We lay down to rest on flat snow, enjoying a moment of not worrying about falling—we could have danced here, but catching a breath would be a task.

The last lead up the summit pinnacle was moderate mixed, fun to climb. Slow like a fat lizard, I neared the top. On the eighth day of the climb, September 10, we celebrated the summit together. We could see Languta-e-Barfi in its full beauty. I called home to tell my dear family we were OK, and we all laughed and smiled, forgetting the difficulties for a moment. Then, within half an hour, we abseiled from the summit and landed back in reality.

After many discussions about descent lines, it was quite obvious now: We would return to the same face we'd come up. Before dark, we downclimbed the whole ridge that had taken us the previous two days to climb and stopped again at our bivouac above the wall. The next day we'd start a complete descent of the northwest face, dropping all 2,000 meters.

The ninth day was about dedicating all of our skills to completing what we'd started, despite the exhaustion we felt. The morning did not bring good weather, and communication and visibility were very poor. After just three rappels, we left familiar ground and continued straight down the wall toward the top of the couloir. The rappels continued all day and through the long night.

Somewhere in the night, we dropped two of the rappel devices, and all but one of our headlamps died. Only Giorgi, leading the rappels, had a good working light. Baqar had a small knife with a tiny light, and we'd use it to check our setup before each rappel—everything else happened in total darkness. At this strange stage of the climb, the wind calmed and it became totally silent. The contours of the walls and the couloir were barely visible. And the thirst! With no chance to drink anything, I felt my lungs greedily trying to absorb water from the cold, dry air. And—a happy discovery—it really seemed as if I could taste some water in the air, and this was my only satisfaction during the long night. I do not know how many rappels we did, but finally we stood at the bottom of the face—the beginning and the end.

In the morning light we found a way through the glacial labyrinth and to water. We had left half a pack of macaroni, some Georgian salt, and a bit of gas at our camp in the moraine, and Baqar made a meal of this that we happily ate. The sun thawed our bodies, and we all slept out on the rocks, under a chilly breeze, careless for a few hours.

Giorgi had some minor frostbite, and the walk down to base camp would not be easy for him. I, too, could barely walk. "Maybe I'll follow you guys tomorrow?" I joked in frustration. I had to remove the liners from my boots to fit my feet into them. We expected hours of struggle, and the long moraine and our numb legs did not disappoint us. That evening, though, we entered base camp, loudly singing, and reunited with Irshad and Hayat.

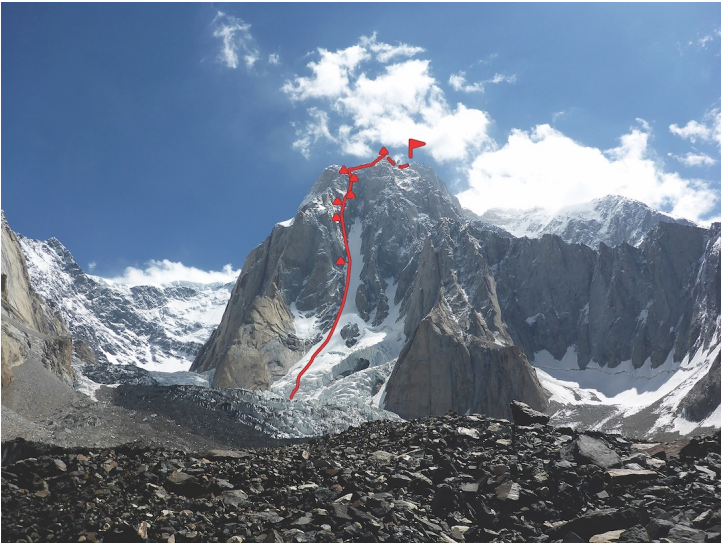
We decided to stay at base camp for several days to show gratitude to the surrounding nature and leave the valley calmly. All that remained to do was to think back on what had just happened. I have to admit, the most important insights and emotions, the grace of nature during all this, are beyond my words to express.

Summary: First ascent of the south face and east ridge of Languta-e-Barfi (6,833m GPS) in the Pakistani Hindu Kush, by Archil Badriashvili, Baqar Gelashvili, and Giorgi Tepnadze (all from Georgia), August 24–25, 2021. The route gained about 1,800 meters and was rated TD (5A Caucasian), with 60° ice and 75° snow; the trio descended the same way. The same three then made the first ascent of Saraghrar Northwest (ca 7,300m) by the northwest face (2,300m, ED2 or 6B Caucasian), from September 3 to 10. They descended the northwest face until late into the night on September 11.

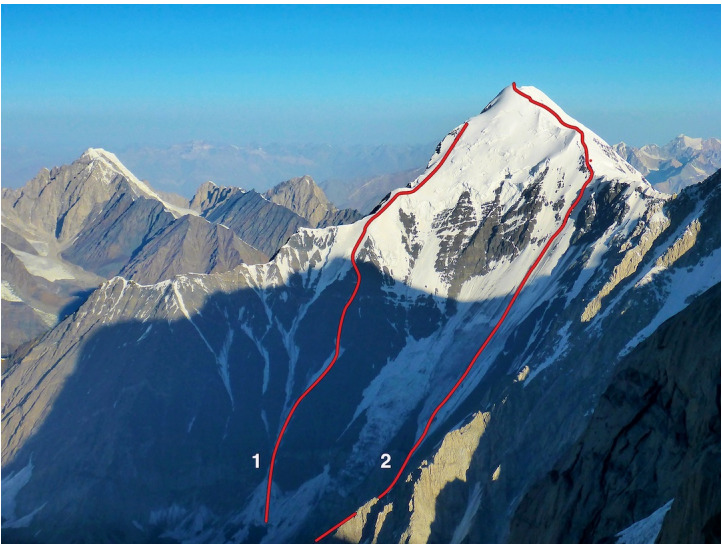
About the Author: Archil Badriashvili lives in Tbilisi, Georgia, and trains and climbs in the Caucasus mountains. He spoke about the 2021 Hindu Kush expedition for episode 45 of the Cutting Edge podcast

(see below).

Images



The northwest face of Saraghrar Northwest (ca 7,300m). The round-trip on the 2,300-meter route took nine days. The Catalan route climbed from the right to a high point near the final marked bivy.



The south face of Languta-e-Barfi (6,833m GPS), showing (1) Deavoll-Todd attempt (2014) and (2) Georgian Route (2021), with a bivouac at about 6,400 meters on the east ridge.



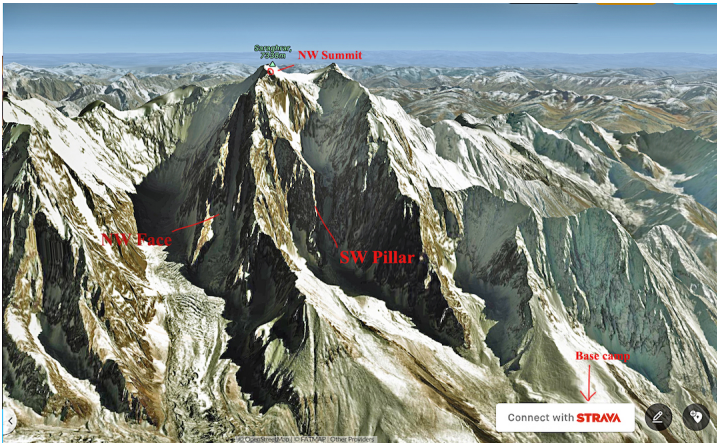
Koh-e-Langar (7,070m) in center and Saraghrar at far right, as seen from high on Languta-e-Barfi.



The view from Languta-e-Barfi, showing (A) Saraghrar Main and (B) Saraghrar Northwest. The upper northwest face is in center, with the Catalan buttress falling to the right.



The upper northwest face of Saraghrar Northwest, from about 6,200 meters to the top.



A view of the Saraghrar group, showing the northwest face on the left and the southwest pillar, climbed by Catalans to the summit ridge.



Belay stance high on the northwest face of Saraghrar Northwest.



Climbing into the night at 6,370 meters.



Looking down the northwest face of Saraghrar Northwest from about 6,500 meters.



Very steep climbing at about 6,450 meters following an open bivouac at 6,400 meters.



A great bowl of steep granite rises above the third bivouac, at 6,600 meters, on the northwest face of Saraghrar Northwest.



Day six on the route, pushing for the top of the headwall on Saraghrar Northwest.



Climbing the snow ridge above the headwall, at about 7,100 meters, en route to the summit of Saraghrar Northwest (center).



It took two full days to traverse the ridge line to the summit of Saraghrar Northwest and return to the bivouac above the northwest face, and then a long day and night to descend the face.



Badriashvili and Gelashvili relax on the summit. Languta- e-Barfi is behind on the right.



Expedition members with staff and friends from Zondangram, the closest village to the Rosh Gol.

Article Details

Author	Archil Badriashvili
Publication	AAJ
Volume	64
Issue	96
Page	24
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Feature article