



The Secret Line: Climbing the Enigmatic North Face of Tirich Mir

Pakistan, Hindu Kush

With an elevation of 7,708 meters, Tirich Mir is the highest peak of the Hindu Kush mountains, which straddle Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan. Although the peak was first climbed in 1950 and was relatively popular among mountaineers in the 1960s and '70s, officials in Pakistan had not permitted mountaineering or tourism in the area since September 11, 2001, due to its proximity to the Afghan border. A French party got permission to climb the mountain in 2016, but after that it was closed again.

In 2019, a local agent informed Kazuya Hiraide and me that tourists could re-enter the area, leading us to head to Pakistan. Unfortunately, we did not get permission to attempt Tirich Mir that year, and we ended up climbing Rakaposhi instead (see [AAJ 2020](#)). We left some gear in Pakistan with the intention of returning for Tirich Mir the following summer, but the coronavirus pandemic intervened. Only in the summer of 2023 could we finally head to the mountain.

Tirich Mir is visible from the large foothills town of Chitral, just 30 kilometers to the south. The locals, appreciating the resources flowing down from the mountain, have many legends about it. One tells that there is a castle of fairies on the top. They are guarded by a huge frog that lives in the crevasses of the glacier and eats all who try to climb the mountain. This story is told with tongue in cheek, but it illustrates the deep connection between the mountain and the lives of the townspeople.

It was hard to believe there was still unexplored territory on such a famous mountain, but the north face, our objective, had never even been attempted. During a 2002 solo trip in Pakistan, Hiraide had seen the mountain from Chitral. After returning home, he did some research and found the north face to be a *carte blanche*. At the time, he felt himself too inexperienced to attempt such unknown terrain, but he stashed Tirich Mir's north face into a corner of his mind for the future.

The reason the north face remained unexplored is simple: The access is anything but easy. The Lower Tirich Glacier, directly below the face, is ringed by a horseshoe of steep-walled 6,000- and 7,000-meter peaks, like the walls of a mighty castle. Although the glacier presents a gate into this castle, it is nearly impossible to pass, blocked by a dangerous icefall almost 1,000 meters high. A Czech party had been through the gate in 1967, but they did not get onto the north face; instead, they followed the Upper Tirich Glacier to access the mountain from the northwest, completing what became the normal route up the mountain. There is no record of anyone passing through the Lower Tirich icefall ever since. We were stoked about the prospect of genuinely unexplored territory in this day and age. There was nothing to do but go see what was hiding in there.

On June 22, we landed in Chitral, fortunate that conditions had been good for the once-a-week direct flight from Islamabad in a propeller plane. The flight takes only about an hour, a vast improvement over eight hours in a truck on Pakistani roads. Meeting us at the airport was our old friend and local guide Sahib Alam, who had joined us on the Rakaposhi expedition in 2019—we were very happy to see him again after so many years.

Chitral lies at 1,500 meters, but under the harsh sun it feels as hot as Islamabad during the day. The local men wear the Afghan pakol hat and subsist on naan bread. The closest big city is Jalalabad in Afghanistan, causing strong cultural influence. What made us especially happy about this was access to delicious Afghan barbecue for dirt cheap. There would be little chance of eating fresh meat—fresh

anything, really—after reaching base camp, so we made sure to fill our stomachs here. After gathering and packing supplies in 25-kilogram loads for the porters, we started our acclimatization by hiring a 4WD to drive us to Zani An (Zani Pass, 3,840 meters), where we spent two nights and hiked above the pass to 4,300 meters. Then we hiked down to the valley at Shagrom, where the trek to base camp would begin.

On the 30th of June, the 27 porters and their leader assembled in the early morning light. In these parts, there are no full-time porters; instead, load carrying offers an enticing occasional source of income for local people, who were assisted early in our walk by donkeys and children. We followed the Tirich Gol (valley) to the west on a pleasant trek and reached Sherniak in five hours. This would be the last campsite with trees. Next to the raging campfire, our cook made us a delicious curry from a sheep the locals had sacrificed earlier in a ritual for our safety and success.

The next day saw us arrive at the edge of the Lower Tirich Glacier, on which we and the porters alike maneuvered around crevasses in trekking shoes without difficulty. When the crevasses became more frequent, we moved to the right-hand bank, arriving after five and a half hours at Shoghor Biasun.

From our camp, we could finally see the dreaded Lower Tirich icefall. Though the debris from countless broken seracs seemed like it might form a possible path, I had never seen an icefall with that much widespread destruction. Great boulders of ice, shining blue and white in the sun, were everywhere. The two of us discussed the matter and determined that ascending the icefall was a no-go. It would be the fastest route to Tirich Mir's north face, but the risks were too great. Thus, we decided on plan B. As the saying goes, "When you're in a rush, go around."

The complex route to reach the north face of Tirich Mir. From Camp 1 on the Upper Tirich Glacier, the climbers gained a 6,200-meter col and descended to Camp 2 at 5,500 meters on the Lower Tirich Glacier. Three bivouacs on the north face (Camp 3 is hidden) brought them to the col between Tirich Mir West and the main peak. After summiting, they descended the 1967 route to the west and returned to base camp by the Upper Tirich Glacier. Photo scanned from Himalaya, No. 287, courtesy of Ishii Sports.

On the 2nd of July, we trekked along the gentle moraine to the right of the Upper Tirich Glacier, which parallels the Lower Tirich to the north. In three and a half hours, we reached the base camp for Istor-o-Nal (7,403m, first climbed in 1955 by an American expedition), and in another hour and a half we arrived at the so-called Lower Babu Camp, at 4,600 meters. The site was narrow but sheltered and would be fine for our little party. In the whole Hindu Kush that season, there were only two other climbing parties: a Hungarian team on Istor-o-Nal and a Spanish one on Saraghrar.

From base camp, the north side of Tirich Mir was still mostly hidden by the long row of high peaks in front. [These mountains form a line defining the north side of the Lower Tirich Glacier, ranging from Barun-Gul Zom (6,164m) at the east end, past Baipash Zom, to a high point at Tirich Mir North (6,732 meters).] Most of the north face remained shrouded in mystery. Still, even seeing the top of our planned route got our spirits up.

Our next step was to acclimatize and do some reconnaissance. Using satellite imagery, we had come up with a plan to circle around to the west side of the mountains surrounding our objective and climb to the lowest col between Tirich Mir North and the towering massif of Tirich Mir West. From there, we hoped to descend to the glacier on the far side. This would be our back gate to the Lower Tirich Glacier. We didn't expect it to be trivial to cross this 6,200-meter col. No one had ever been there, so there was no information and no pictures.

From the great bend in the Upper Tirich Glacier, we moved between glacier and moraines until we reached the highest moraine and found a good site for Camp 1 at 5,400 meters. The next day, we climbed up the steep valley leading toward the col. Near the top was a wall of hard-packed snow, where falling was not an option. Finally we reached the col and at last could see the whole north face. We were relieved and very happy to see that the face looked just as we had imagined from the satellite imagery. A cornice blocked our view of the route down the far side of the col, but one thing

was clear: The descent would be even steeper than the approach had been.

We left for our second acclimatization trip on July 10, aiming to do a recon of the far side of the col, and also to figure out our route back to base camp after summiting. Although our acclimatization was proceeding, we moved slowly up the steep valley to the col, carrying the extra weight of ropes for fixing. We hadn't ever used fixed ropes on our recent expeditions—we hadn't even brought any to base camp—but this time we had come prepared for the potential rappel approach. Our plan was to leave some ropes in place in case we couldn't finish the north face of Tirich Mir and we had to return the way we'd come, back over the col.

As we crossed into the mountain fortress and ventured down toward the Lower Tirich Glacier for the first time, we noticed it was a lot warmer, due to the lack of wind. The snow was wet and water was flowing. With a lot of loose rock everywhere, we took care to protect the ropes. The descent from the col to the glacier would total several hundred meters, and we had only four 50-meter ropes to fix, but we verified that this approach should work.

Next, we needed to scout our descent route along the normal route and the Upper Tirich Glacier. Although there are no technical difficulties on this route below 6,600 meters, the glacier has many hidden crevasses and we expected to be completely exhausted after summiting. So, to mitigate the risk, we thoroughly recorded the descent route on a GPS, enabling a blind descent if necessary. We camped at 6,300 meters on the upper glacier, watching the sun set on the dry mountains in Afghanistan. It was our first camp at this altitude, and we felt surprisingly good. The rest of our acclimatization would need to happen during the climb.

On July 13 we returned to base camp to prepare for the climb. Using an inReach, we were receiving one-week forecasts from Japan. The Hindu Kush tends to have better summer weather than other mountains in Pakistan, and we hadn't had any bad weather so far. It was warm, however, and under the strong sunshine we could see the glaciers melting. Crevasses we had been able to step across would widen, and on the next crossing we would need to jump, and then would be unable to cross at all. Now we got a forecast for heavy snowfall. We had intended to rest during these days anyway, but we worried our departure would be delayed.

It started raining before dawn on the 16th, and the weather remained icky the whole day. Around midnight, people at camp were woken by the sound of a river—the river that was supposed to be ten minutes away. Suddenly some of the tents were afloat, as the campsite had become the site of a new stream. Although the rain had stopped by now, dike digging and moving of tents commenced in the middle of the night. My own tent was 30 meters higher than the main campsite, and I slept like a baby through all the commotion.

In the end, fortunately, there was no big snowstorm, and we were able to keep to our planned departure after four days of rest. After supper on the last rest day, however, I had sudden stomach pain. I shivered through the night and had a sore throat. In the morning, the fever had come down, but my throat was still hurting. We departed regardless on the 18th of July, hoping the illness would pass during the two days of approach to reach the north face.

We moved back up the Tirich Glacier to Camp 1, being careful not to be eaten by the great frog protecting the mountain fairies. That night, nasal congestion made it difficult for me to breathe, and even worse, my snoring prevented Hiraide awake from getting much sleep. In the morning it was -6°C—about 7° warmer than the last time we'd been at Camp 1—which made us worry about the conditions for our traverse of the col.

Looking down from the col during our recon, Hiraide had said this would be “the crux before the climb.” Now it was midmorning and the gully below the col was running with slush and meltwater. As I rappelled, a rope length below Hiraide, I thought about filling my water bottle in the stream. At that moment, dull rumbling reverberated above, accompanied by a scream of “Rock!” I looked up and a

mass of ice and rock filled my vision, seeming to fall in slow motion.

The barrage continued for more than 30 seconds. I clung to a rock overhang, but there was no way to avoid all the debris. Luckily, I was only hit by a small rock on my shin, and the ropes weren't cut. We gave up on quenching our thirst, even though my sore throat could have used it, and moved as quickly as we could to safer terrain.

After eight rappels and scrambling, we stood at the western end of the Lower Tirich Glacier, a place no one had ever been. From here, the safest way home would be to climb to the summit of Tirich Mir and descend the other side. We melted snow, had a drink, and started toward the north face. Inside the fortress, there was no wind, and the only sound was us post-holing through unbroken snow. We pitched our tent near the bottom of the wall, at 5,500 meters, and prepared to start up the face.

On July 20, the sound of thunder woke us before dawn. It was not close, but the roaring reverberated through the valley. Possibly the ground had warmed during these past few days, causing the atmospheric conditions to become unstable. Engulfed by clouds, we began the ascent of the north face. At first, we made quick progress by simul-climbing up the ice and snow wall, but as the wall steepened, we switched to leading and jumaring. Since this is a north face, we were expecting to find hard blue ice, but it seemed like this was a north face hit by the sun during the day. Our tools penetrated the ice nicely, without bouncing back.

After three hours, we hit a rock band. Going straight up would be very steep and time-consuming, so we traversed to the right, looking for a way around. The visibility was very bad, making it hard to estimate where we were on the wall. The first attempt led to a dead-end cliff. Going back, we followed the next most promising route, traversing a band to the right across a stony ridge, and found a line connecting to a gully. There, we started ascending ice and snow again, and in three hours, we reached our planned bivy site, at 6,150 meters, near some seracs where the wall was a little less steep.

As we dug a platform into the snow, we soon struck ice, as expected, which meant we finally got to use our new weapon: the ice hammock. Hanging the lightweight hammock from two ice screws and filling it with snow, we created a wonderful terrace in 30 minutes. If we had cut ice for a ledge, it would have taken two and a half hours, and even then a third of the tent would have hung free. A sitting bivy would, of course, have been an option, but getting decent rest feels more important the older you get. I had an altitude headache and my throat pain still hadn't gone away. Hiraide was kept up by my snoring again.

We started up again on a beautiful morning, the fourth of our climb, on top of a sea of clouds. N ev  led us into a rocky gully. Directly above, the way was steep and protection sparse, so we traversed right and hit a snow face. After a bit, we got to a second gully, and this one had ice in it. Soon it started snowing. We climbed up and right, hitting a small ridge. The top of the ridge, at 6,750 meters, had a flatter spot that, when enhanced with the ice hammock, provided a luxurious site for our tent, so we called it a day at 2 p.m. The sun setting over Afghanistan was beautiful, seeming to promise good weather for the next day.

A sea of clouds dispersed quickly the next morning, and we basked in the sun. This would be the day to pass through a large serac band near the top of the face that we had worried about but hadn't been able to see properly. If we could clear that obstacle, we knew we'd be able to summit. On the other hand, if we didn't, we would have a long, long exit back the way we'd come.

We traversed to the edge of the glacier and looked up. Though steep, it looked like there was a continuous icy couloir between the rock and the seracs. The shaded ice there was cold and hard but took bomber ice screws. Relieved, we carefully climbed to the plateau on top of the seracs.

Only a final rock headwall remained, but it was too late in the day to try to summit. Also, since we were already above 7,000 meters, we didn't want to sleep much higher. Since it was still before noon, we decided to head for the col between Tirich Mir and Tirich Mir West, where we would join the normal route. At around 7,200 meters, in the windy col, we built a wall with snow blocks to protect the tent. We went to sleep with the sun rendering the summit crimson red.

We woke at 4:15 a.m. as usual. At -18°C, it was the coldest day so far, but it still felt warm compared with our previous expeditions at this altitude. My sore head and throat had hindered my sleep once again, but my altitude symptoms were better than before. We left the campsite in sunshine. Through deep snow, we traversed toward a gully leading right to the summit. There seem to be many ways to reach the top from high camp, and though we believe we were on the normal route, we didn't see any old pitons or ropes. A steep mixed wall took good pro, making for a pleasant 60-meter pitch. The ice wall above was also steep, but with our light packs, we were able to simul-climb to the summit ridge.

We had expected to encounter multiple false summits, but after climbing to the first top, we realized we had reached the highest peak of the Hindu Kush, at 9:35 in the morning; the second- and third-highest peaks, Noshaq and Istor-o-Nal, were in clear view. To the south, we could see all the way to the town of Chitral. Our objective of the last five years had finally been accomplished. We took pictures and radioed base camp, and for the next 40 minutes the time flew by.

On descent, we rappelled the two steep pitches and traversed back to our high camp. We had summited quickly, and it was only noon. Since we were feeling strong, we decided to descend as far as possible. We entered the rocky couloir of the normal route, finding discarded ropes and pitons here and there, testifying to the difficulty of the climbing. After roughly six rappels, we finally stood on the Upper Tirich Glacier. Continuing down as far as we could, we made it to the 6,300-meter camp we had used for acclimatization.

As we had already scouted the glacier, we had no problems with the 1,700 meters of descent the next day. (Unfortunately, there was no practical way to retrieve the four ropes we'd left below the 6,200-meter col.) We reached base camp at noon.

We weren't sure how the local people had found out, but the trek back to Shagrom was a day filled with celebration. We had so many congratulatory necklaces hung on us that we couldn't move our heads.

The most delightful event of this day was at the local orphanage. We pointed back at Tirich Mir and showed a picture from the summit, telling the kids we had climbed it. They hadn't even thought of their local mountain as something people would climb, but after seeing the picture and the two of us with our sunburns, they seemed to accept it. One boy raised his hand and said, "I want to climb that mountain as well!" This made us very happy. At the end of our visit, the head of the orphanage asked us a question: "Were there fairies at the summit?"

SUMMARY: First ascent of the north face of Tirich Mir (The Secret Line, 2,200 meters from the Lower Tirich Glacier to the summit), July 18–24, 2023, by Kazuya Hiraide and Kenro Nakajima from Japan. The pair spent two days approaching the Lower Tirich Glacier from base camp and bivouacked three nights during the climb and once more during the descent to the west along the 1967 (normal) route.

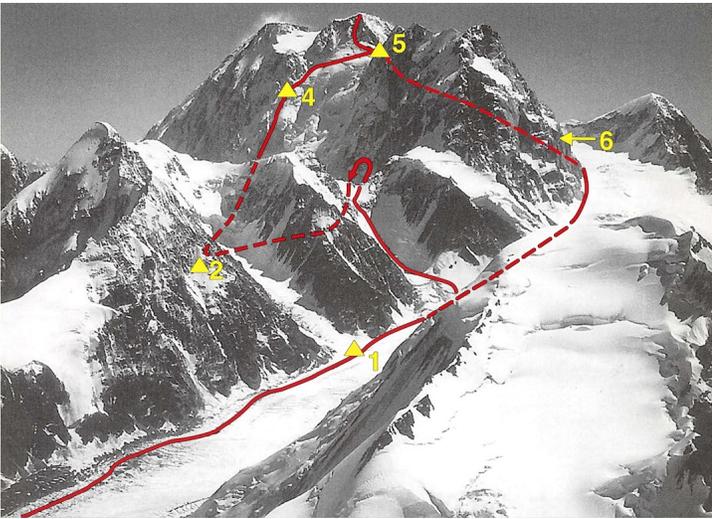
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kenro Nakajima, age 38 at the time of the Tirich Mir ascent, is a professional climber and mountain cameraman, and also works with outdoor retailer ICI Ishii Sports. He lives in Chiba, Japan. His story about the first ascent of the northeast face of Shispare, also climbed with Hiraide, appeared in the 2018 AAJ. Hiraide and Nakajima discussed the climb of Tirich Mir on episode 61 of the Cutting Edge podcast.

This article was translated from Japanese by Heikki Ruuska, with additional assistance provided by Kaoru Wada.

Images



Tirich Mir, in back, rises above a stronghold of 6,500-meter peaks guarding the north face.



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From Camp 2 on the Lower Tirich Glacier, the north face route gained about 2,200 meters to the summit.

Article Details

Author	Kenro Nakajima
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	98
Page	24
Copyright Date	2024
Article Type	Feature article