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Kharut II, First Ascent, via West-Northwest Ridge

Pakistan, Karakoram, Baltoro Muztagh

Part of the Kharut Group seen from K2 base camp to the southwest. (A) Kharut I. (B) Kharut II. (C) Peak 6,455m. (D) Sella Pass. (E) Kharut Pyramid. (1) is the 2023 route of ascent and (2) the descent route.

Photo by Koldo Zubimendi.

Vicente Bárcena and I reached K2 base camp in early July and acclimatized on Pastora Peak (a.k.a. Khalkhal East, 6,206m), reaching a height of 5,800m. We then established an advanced base camp at 5,500m, below the west flank of Kharut II (6,824m). There were many crevasses, which we fell into on several occasions, fortunately without major consequences. Indeed, our biggest difficulty was finding a route along the ten kilometers of glacier.

Having deposited gear, food, tents, and gas, we returned to base camp, where we rested for two days during bad weather. Despite no improvement on the third day, we went back up to advanced base and spent the night.

The next day, July 18, we started up the west face. Not long after leaving camp, at around 5,600m, Vincent realized he had no strength and decided to go down. It was a difficult moment, but at no time did we discuss the possibility of me going down with him. I continued up with a small tent and sleeping bag but no rope or climbing gear.

Near the top of the initial 500m snow slope, I crossed the west-northwest ridge to my left, reached its north flank, and continued up mixed terrain. The angle increased to 65°, but the snow was in good condition and I could climb safely. As the day progressed, the sun reached the west face and the snow began to soften.

At 6,300m, I decided to leave my backpack and attempt the summit that same day. After melting snow to make a liter of water, I continued ascending. The next snow section was 65° at the start, then steepened to a “wave” that I surmounted on the left (north) to reach gentler slopes (30°–35°), where the snow seemed quite unstable but fortunately did not slide at all.

Above this section, the angle increased, and it became very difficult to make progress. I moved back right to reach the ridge and climbed it over snow and rock (sections up to M4). Eventually, I had to move left (north) to get below the highest point of Kharut II. I had to clean 30cm of soft snow to get each axe placement, and it took me almost an hour and a half to climb approximately 100m. After this, the angle remained similar (45°–50°), but more rock appeared.

A steep snow couloir led to the summit rock tower. I tried to climb the final ten-meter wall without gloves, but I broke two handholds and gave up. Then, to my right, I saw a small tongue of snow ending at a block close to the top. I secured myself to the block with a sling and, using aid, made a few moves up the wall overlooking the Kharut Glacier.

I hooked the rock on the summit with my axe, pulled up on it until my head was level with the top, and called it good. It was 6 p.m.

Facing in, I downclimbed to 6,300m. Luckily, the shadow cast by K2 helped harden the snow, and at nightfall the temperature dropped, improving conditions further. Unluckily, my gloves froze, and I got

mild frostbite on the thumbs of both hands.

Reunited with my pack, I dug into the snow and bivouacked inside the pack and the tent flysheet. During the night there was a snowstorm, and the next day dawned cloudy. Lower down the mountain, I decided to descend a slope to the south of my ascent route. Although it passed under the big serac high on the west face, it avoided the mixed terrain. I arrived at advanced base at 9 a.m. and hugged Vicente, who was waiting for me with open arms.

– Koldo Zubimendi, Basque Country

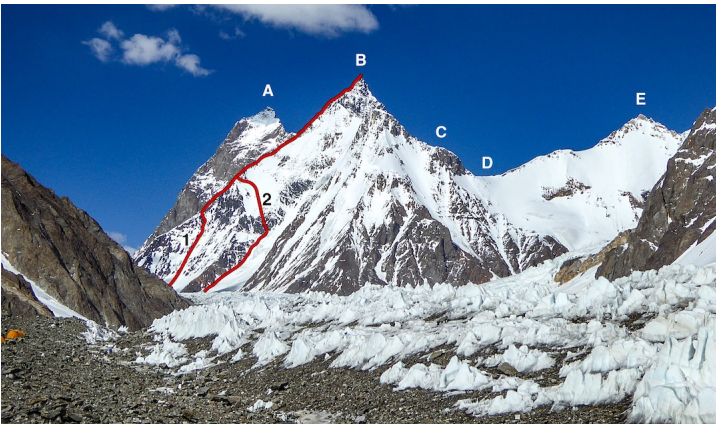
NOTES ON THE KHARUT PEAKS: The Kharut Peaks lie on the border with China, east of K2, between the Godwin-Austen and Kharut glaciers. Kharut I, the central and highest peak, is 6,928m and remains unclimbed. Kharut II (6,824m) is to the south, and Kharut III, the north peak, is 6,785m and was climbed in 1977 by a team from Japan. On the ridge south of Kharut II lies Sella Pass (6,063m), and south of this is an unclimbed 6,420m peak sometimes called Kharut Pyramid.

Several teams have aimed to climb Kharut II. In 1974, Japanese climbers went from Sella Pass as far as a rocky shoulder on the southwest ridge of Kharut II, marked on some maps as a peak of 6,455m. A British commercial expedition in 2005 failed to set foot on the mountain due to snow conditions (AAJ 2006), while an American team, which arrived in June 2023, before the Basque pair, gave up due to high avalanche risk.

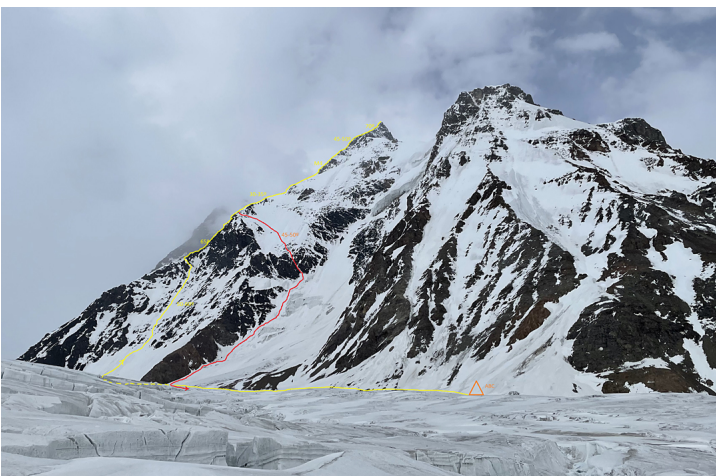
Images



The upper west-northwest ridge of Kharut II.



Part of the Kharut Group seen from K2 base camp to the southwest. (A) Kharut I. (B) Kharut II. (C) Peak 6,455m. (D) Sella Pass. (E) Kharut Pyramid. (1) is the 2023 route of ascent and (2) the descent route.



The yellow line shows the 2023 route of ascent to Kharut II from advanced base camp on the east side of the Godwin Austen Glacier. The red line is the descent.

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