

A Long Climb in the Hindu Kush

by GERRY GOLDSMITH

Do we stay where we are or try to get out? A question I've asked a few times on a mountain. This time we were on the fifth floor of a hotel in 'Pindi and it was on fire! Smoke, thick choking smoke, was billowing through the corridors. The electricity was off and we were cursing the fact that our head torches were with the climbing gear in the basement. No ropes either!

I made a quick exit to David and Phil's room to warn them. They were already awake and preparing to leave. We all made our way downstairs and to the outside clutching our valuables (not approved fire procedure, but wise in Pakistan!) to watch. No fire brigade, alarms or any of the usual things we are accustomed to, but this is the third world. The fire was more smoke than anything else and we eventually went back in, in time to pack more sedately, breakfast and leave for the briefing at the Ministry of Tourism. The road journey from the airport to the hotel in 'Pindi is supposed to be the most dangerous part of any expedition to Pakistan, we now view hotels as equally dangerous!

A couple of days had been spent in 'Pindi waiting for the rest of the team to arrive, we were seven - 2 Australians, a Canadian and 4 Brits. Our liaison officer (obligatory) also arrived. Naayer, a well-educated army major, fitted in well with the group, which was a relief. We were all probably assessing each other and hoping that we would get on OK living together for 7 weeks.

Most expeditions base themselves in Rawalpindi which is the old town. Islamabad is the new one, a purpose built capital like Brasilia and Canberra; unfortunately, it clearly wasn't designed by Le Corbusier but instead looks like it was dreamed up by a committee of concrete entrepreneurs. 'Pindi, as Rawalpindi is known, is more like the Pakistan you'd expect and there is the normal third world chaos with horse-driven carriages, bicycles galore, old-style Morris Minor taxis and buses stacked full of people. All minibuses and lorries have amazing, brightly coloured decorations and look surprisingly well cared for (the decorations at least). These vehicles and the local bazaars provide a colourful contrast with the Pakistani men who all wear the same drab

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uniform (called a shalwar qamiz), women are rarely seen.

As we rounded a bend on the road to Chitral, just before a town called Dross (is it we wondered?), we got our first glimpse of the mountain we had come to climb. Tirich Mir at 7707m is the highest in the Hindu Kush. It looked enormous even though it was well over 50 miles away. Feelings of smallness and mortality pervaded our senses. The mountain towers over the surrounding countryside and dominates Chitral.

We eventually arrived in Chitral after a 12h drive from Peshawar, some 6 of the 12h by way of a dirt track. The Lovari Pass zigzags its way over a col at 3800m and provides the only road route directly connecting Chitral with the South. It also provides the route for the curious but sensible trade of bringing down blocks of ice and snow from the permanent snow fields to the plains below to chill drinks in an un-refrigerated world. Scores of people hack out blocks of neve and load them onto trucks, cover them with straw and send them off as fast as they will go in a desperate attempt to get to market before they melt. It was cool here, but around 46°C on the plain below.

The walk in would start from a small village called Shagrom, where we would hire the porters. The jeep ride from Chitral to Shagrom provided superb views of changing scenery as we drove round to the N side of the mountain range. Every so often, villages and their cultivated fields made bright green and yellow splashes in a patchwork quilt of colour in an otherwise arid, grey and brown landscape. The irrigation systems which bring water to the fields have existed for centuries. They are fed by conduits which start high up on the glacial streams and run for miles before emptying onto the high pastures well down in the valley. A few lucky villages have small hydro-electricity systems fed by powerful streams in the hills.

The river by which we camped at Shagrom flows from the high glaciers of Tirich Mir, but the mountain itself was not yet visible - it lies 3 days walk away and is surrounded by other, smaller peaks. We spent the remainder of the day making up 25kg loads for the porters. Early next morning, after much haggling, 48 porters were hired to carry one of the loads each. The Japanese expedition which preceded us had set the porter fees rather higher than expected - there are government fixed rates, but these are ignored by porters everywhere in Pakistan. Some negotiation went on, but in the end there was not much option as there is no other source

of porters. Small villages such as Shagrom earn a significant amount from portering for a few expeditions each year and are thus relatively well off, although to westerners their life is still very primitive.

Neil wrote in his diary: *'It was a relief to get walking at last on the final stage of the journey after all of the travel by road. The last part was a 10h jeep journey along dirt tracks barely a jeep's width and with 500m, or more, sheer drop into the foaming mass of water below made black by the huge amounts of basaltic alluvial deposits the river carries. The drive had at times been a heart-in-mouth journey as we looked into the void below. Our peace of mind was not made easier by the knowledge that Islam is a fatalistic religion; Allah has decided your time of leaving this mortal life and so it does not matter how you drive, it is all in the hand of fate! Driving competence has no bearing on the matter. Insh'allah - God willing - is the universal answer to everything.'*

The first day's walk was pleasant, or it would have been if I hadn't been throwing up every couple of hours or so. I crashed out at the overnight camp, a pleasant spot in a coppice. The coppice is used by the people of Shagrom for the wood supply for the winter. It is carefully managed so that it regenerates as much as is cut each year. "Do you have enough firewood in England?" we were asked, a question which said more about the cultural and economic gulf between us than any amount of explanation could convey.'

Many of the porters had taken a donkey to help carry their loads to this point, but the track ceased here because the villagers normally had no need to go beyond the coppices. This was also the tree line and the point at which the glacier became difficult. We now left this green oasis for a rubble strewn world of glacier ice and boulders. Snowy peaks started to appear on both sides as we made our way up the glacial valley towards our base camp. We were gaining altitude quite quickly and the effects were becoming noticeable, even the porters stopped for rests.

Neil staggered into base camp, or at least the proposed site for base camp, on the third day of the walk in. "It has to get better than this," he gasped, struggling for oxygen. It was some time before we could summon the energy to hack out our spot for a tent: a task which would be a matter of half an hour or so at sea level, but here at 4700m, the same height as the top of Mont Blanc, it took a wearying 4 hours. We worked for 2 days to get the camp established with the cooking tent and mess tent set up. Water was provided by

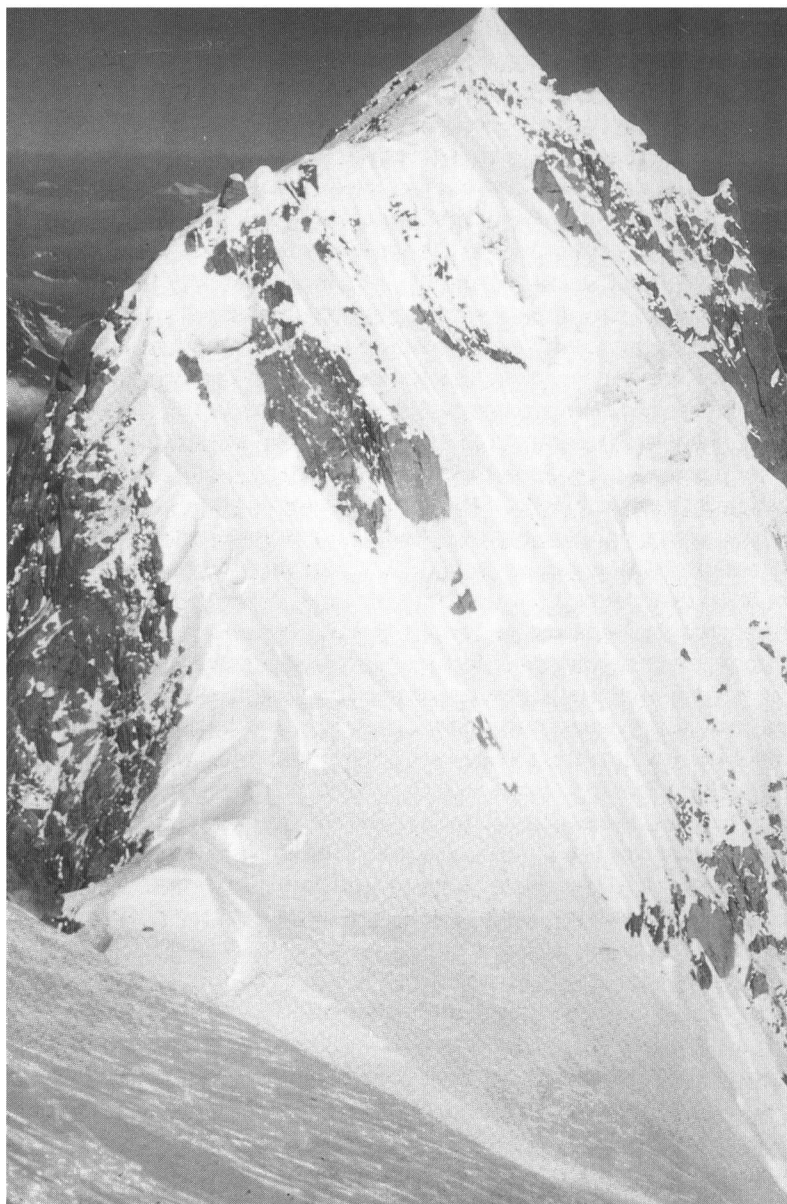
the streams which ran off the melt from the snow fields, though they froze solid at night. It was still early in the season and there was plenty of snow, but we wondered whether we would run out of water later on (we didn't).

Base Camp (BC) sits on the true left bank at the confluence of three huge glaciers flowing from Tirich Mir, Noshaq and their outlying peaks. The effect of glaciers meeting is a slow motion, or freeze frame version, of mountain streams meeting. Streams meet in a boiling mass of water, glaciers create huge ice cliffs. Below Tirich Mir the resulting single glacier is ribbed by three ice escarpments running its length over which we had to cross. These ribs are mainly covered in boulders so that they look like slag heaps. Carrying large rucksacks we set off at 3am from BC in two groups to recce the crossing of the glacier and take gear out to set up Camp 1. Our group took a circular route following the main sweep of the Tirich glacier as it looked easy going, the others chose a more direct line across the main glacier to the Japanese camp which was on the opposite side of the confluence of the glaciers. From our BC the glacier looked easy, but there were lots of hidden moraine and ice ridges and rivers to cross. We eventually chose the direct route because it turned out to be easier (and also the Japanese were very hospitable, providing a welcome tea stop!).

Across the main glacier, once the Tirich glacier had been gained, there was good snow cover and we used our skis. The glacier sloped quite gently, but we were steadily gaining altitude and feeling it. After about 5h fatigue prevented us from progressing any further. We dug a pit, an exhausting effort, to dump the gear in so that it wouldn't blow away, marking the location with a wand. It was great to ski down, how easy it felt. The worst part of the return was crossing the ups and downs of the glacier back to BC in the midday heat.

Our next trip out involved establishing Camp 1 (5400m) and spending a night there. Acclimatising to high altitudes requires gradual ascent and the advice is to climb high, sleep low. So a complex plan was devised where we would work in pairs to establish Camp 2 (6000m) and Camp 3 (6600m), each time returning to the lower camp to sleep. Skis provided a further complication. We had only 5 sets of skis for 7 people, so David worked out a complicated scheme allowing everyone to have use of the skis. Like all complex plans it failed. We did not realise until too late that the logic was flawed. It resulted in Neil and Steve being

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Looking back from 7350m to Camp 4 (on the col) and Tirich West (7487m). Photo: G. Goldsmith

delayed by a day. Each camp would have 2-person tents, stoves, food, karrimats, etc. and each person had to ensure that their sleeping bag was in the right place or arrange to swap with someone else. Fortunately we had radios and the communication was generally good. We were also lucky with the weather, with only a few light snow showers in the afternoons.

Mornings were very cold and as we went higher, our morning starts became later. It was difficult to force oneself out of the snug comfort of the sleeping bag when the alarm went off. We had melted snow the previous evening for our morning brew, but it still seemed to take ages to heat the water. Getting boots on while laces froze even inside the tent was a lengthy, finger-numbing chore. Most of our route lay in the shade for the first few hours and fingers and toes remained cold, but when the sun appeared we quickly fried; total block sun screen was the order of the day! Although we were acclimatising to the altitude, things never got easier, it was a hard plod with frequent stops for a rest. It is the same sensation as doing a short fell race: gasping for breath and wishing it was over, only each time you start to plod on again it feels like running hard uphill. Most of the glacier was at a fairly gentle angle, but it seemed interminable. As we went higher the views changed and peaks that had initially seemed quite high now lay below us. There were superb views of the mountains of Afghanistan including Mir Samir (Eric Newby's objective in *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, written in 1958). It made one think that maybe the hard slog was worth it after all.

The 3 Japanese climbers appeared as Phil and I slogged up the steepening slopes to dump gear for our Camp 3. They were preparing to go to Camp 4 (7200m) and make their bid for the summit. We wished them luck and set off on our skis, all the way down to BC. The skis really made a difference; Phil (a ski instructor) held the record for descending from Camp 2 to Camp 1: 9 minutes! (A 6h walk up.)

We had taken almost 2 weeks to establish 3 camps. We had sited Camp 3 at the start of the difficulties, a couloir with a tricky chimney section. Now a few days rest at BC was called for to regain strength for the next onslaught. We had enjoyed good weather while we were up the mountain, so much of the snow at BC had melted and colourful spring flowers emerged - large purple primulas in the icy stream and sheltering under rocks were clumps of pink and white androsace, tiny yellow draba and others.

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While we were resting at base the Japanese summited Tirich Mir and returned safely a few days later. We visited them to congratulate them and to find out details of the route. They told us it was a long day's climb up the couloir to the col (Camp 4) and that above the route finding was not easy. They had taken 10h from Camp 4 to the summit in good weather and 4h to descend back to Camp 4.

We had found out in 'Pindi that a Korean expedition was going to Tirich Mir a couple of weeks after us. The Koreans duly arrived at BC and set up camp. The next day they set up a washing line, hung flags on it, then stood in front of it whilst their climbing leader harangued them! Later in the day, around 11am, a group set off carrying marker wands and miles of rope. Were they going to fix ropes across the glacier, we wondered? They had employed 3 high altitude porters. These arrived back around 6pm, while the Koreans returned in the dark at around 8pm. They set off again the following day at 3am. The climbing leader stayed at base. At about 8am he was observed strutting around like a prize Bantam, bare chested. The strutting was interspersed with kick-boxing, T'ai Chi and doing press-ups. This display culminated in frog-jumping across the camp, a distance of about 30yds! The following day the Koreans again set off at 3am, without the climbing leader - he was unwell.

We were offered high altitude porters at Shagrom but had been doubtful about their abilities as, although there had been a number of expeditions previously, the area did not have a reputation for high altitude skills and we did not have the clothing and equipment to kit them out. Nor did we, for reasons of personal satisfaction, wish to use any resources other than our own on the mountain.

We had decided that we should spend around 5 days at BC recovering before the final push up the mountain. All such plans depend upon the weather and we were lucky enough with the conditions to allow our plans to go unchanged. David and Grant set off first from BC and the rest of the team followed, spending a night at each camp. We had set up the camps, but there was still personal as well as climbing equipment to be carried, so our sacks were not much lighter. Now that we felt quite well acclimatised, it should have been easier, but it was not. Phil and I had contracted throat infections which didn't help. Everyone had their ups and downs, some days you felt good and on others lousy.

At Camp 1 Neil wrote: *'I woke up several times in the night with a tooth and face ache. I put it down to altitude and hoped it would wear off. We made our way to Camp 2, Steve well in front and me at the rear. I had another night disturbed by pain, this time at Camp 2. It was no good, every time the Paracetamol wore off I experienced severe pain in the upper jaw and face. Facial oedema was creating pressure and pain. There was no alternative but to descend. A descent and short stay of a few hours at Camp 1 did not relieve the pain, so I set off, disconsolate, for BC. I knew that it was unlikely that I would get any higher.'*

Both complaints took a long time to recover and I spent a frustrating 10 days at base playing cards with the liaison officers and the cooks and losing at scrabble. BC food was little better than food on the mountain. It was almost entirely dried stuff and loaded with chilli. David, who had organised the food, had not brought very much in the way of fresh vegetables. Instead, we had vast numbers of tins of ham, which only David seemed to eat, angel delight and choc bars - a really balanced diet! We fantasized about fresh, crisp salads, baked beans and real bread, none of which were available in Pakistan! We had to wait until we arrived back in Manchester before we could satiate our appetites.'

A few days later, David, Grant and Steve climbed the couloir from Camp 3 to set up Camp 4 on the col, ready to attempt the summit. The couloir took them a whole day, fixing ropes on the difficult chimney section and the section leading to it, so it was dark by the time they reached the col. They decided to have a day's rest at Camp 4.

Meanwhile, I was slowly ascending, having spent an extra day resting at Camp 1, playing backgammon with Ron. Ron should have been with me, but he had resolved to stay in bed that morning, a decision brought on by a love of his pit and problems in adjusting to the altitude. I quite enjoyed being alone (the route was very familiar by now) and went at a very steady pace to Camp 2. Next day I was going well until the sun appeared, when I felt drained of energy. I was determined, however, to get to Camp 3 in time to go higher. Phil was waiting at Camp 3 and appeared to be full of energy. Fortunately for me we were forced to have a rest day there while the others attempted the summit. By this time both Phil and I had lost our voices and had bad chesty coughs, so conversation was kept to a minimum.

David, Grant and Steve made their summit bid. Unfortunately,



Above: Base Camp below Tirich Mir. Photo G. Goldsmith
Below: Looking from Camp 3 to Camp 2. Photo: G. Goldsmith



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Steve started to suffer with the altitude and returned to Camp 4. David and Grant carried on together. During their summit attempt we had radio contact every hour and followed their progress although we could not see them. They had good communication with BC which was in direct line of sight, even if it was some 16km away! We listened as they reported good progress initially, then they met a horrible section of deep powder snow which took them 3h, followed by a steep, rocky section with old fixed ropes. David and Grant reached the summit at 2.20pm and descended to spend the night with Steve at Camp 4.

Phil and I set off up the couloir and met the others on their way down, exchanging a few words at the belay below the chimney. So far, the ascent had not been too hard, the snow firm because the couloir was in the shade. Now the chimney loomed steeply, not the sort of chimney you could back-and-foot, it was much wider. With fixed ropes in place it was just a case of jumaring up, not a problem at sea level but extremely tiring at 7000m! The sun greeted us and we started to swelter, it was crucial to have a drink as we'd had nothing all day. We pitched the easier snow and rock which followed, then continued climbing the snow slope to the col. Tiredness showed in my frustration at the soft snow which kept giving way as I tried to kick a decent foothold. Fortunately, the top 150m pitch was firmer and I forced myself to find some more energy from somewhere to follow quickly up it before the sun went down. Suddenly, it became freezing cold and the temptation to photograph the superb sunset was resisted in order to warm up in the tent.

A rest day is good for acclimatising and we probably needed it, but it also allows time for thinking about tired limbs, our bad coughs and the weather, which clouded over in the afternoon. Radio communication became a problem for Phil and myself as we struggled to summon up more than a whisper. This created problems for BC as the only means of communicating with Camps 3 and 2 was via Camp 4. We needed to sort out the timing for getting the porters and for Neil and Abdullah to meet us at Camp 1 to help with clearing the mountain. We had to relay messages in barely audible whispers. A knowledge of Morse code would have been helpful! We managed somehow to pass the information on.

A decent rest and a good dawn put a different perspective on the world, so the next day the lovely dawn encouraged us from our sleeping bags and we set off at a very steady pace, feeling good.

Moving together we reached a snow scoop by the rock at 7350m after a couple of hours and stopped for a rest and the hourly radio call. A superb panorama, including BC far below, called for some photos. Then Phil set off up the slightly steeper slope above but returned shortly, feeling dizzy. The climbing is too difficult to consider soloing up or down, so sadly we decided to descend. Once the decision had been taken we started to think about the relative luxury of BC, but another night at Camp 4 was necessary before the long descent down the couloir.

Next day we packed up Camp 4 and descended precariously and slowly with very heavy packs. The snow became slushy as we retrieved our fixed ropes and crevasses opened up where there had been none before. Hauling the ropes down behind us had taken the last bit of strength. Abseiling down the final bit of fixed rope (belonging to the Koreans) I felt very tired and could not avoid falling through snow bridges, weakened by the sun, into crevasses. We were greeted by David, Grant and Steve who had waited at Camp 3 in case we needed assistance. David kindly cooked us supper (dried curry again, but hopefully the last time!).

Everyone wanted to descend all the way to base, so we loaded ourselves with enormous quantities of gear, tents and ropes. The snow became worse as we went down and care was needed to avoid crevasses. Phil's unsuccessful attempts demonstrated the impossibility of skiing down, so we had to carry our skis as well. How different the glacier was from our previous journeys, its whole atmosphere had changed. It no longer consisted of smooth, snow-covered slopes, instead it had a rough surface with weird ice formations (called 'névés pénitentes') and lakes of melt water.

It was lucky that I left the radio on each hour as it suddenly broke into life at 9am. We had had no contact with the team on the mountain the previous evening or at the 6am call. We had tried on previous days to get their ETA for Camp 1 so that I and Abdullah could go up to strip it. I was relieved and annoyed. 9am is too late to set off; the sun is too hot and the snow too soft, despite this we made good time. I was amazed at how much the route had changed since I had descended. Camp 1 was a soggy wet snow puddle. Phil was first to arrive, looking very weary; then Grant, Gerry and Steve, all of them tottering drunkenly under heavy loads. David appeared some time later, looking the worst of all. Abdullah and I took some of their load, but we all had massive packs.

I led the route back having just come up it. Our footsteps had

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Gerry heavily loaded for the descent.
Photo: N. Goldsmith

melted into a wet mush. Following them back down was not as easy as we thought it would be. Whole sections of the route which were safe on the way up were now revealed to be fragile wet snow bridges. The whole area was far more crevassed than it had appeared on the ascent. I got really frustrated trying to find the way to go or, more often, not to go. Pulling your leg out of yet another crevasse with 30kg on your back is no fun. The snow was very wet and there were now uncrossable, fast flowing rivers all over the glacier. The melt had really set in. Moving up, or down, a mountain with a very heavy sack is something which I find the most unenjoyable part of mountaineering; in these conditions it was purgatory.'

At Camp 1 we were very pleased to see Neil and Abdullah. The camp was now awash, so strong was the sun that all of the surface snow had melted to form a 2" layer of water covering the glacial ice.

Camping here would have been very uncomfortable and very wet! However, even with lighter loads, the going got worse and we seemed to take it in turns to disappear into holes. By the time darkness came we still had the main glacier to cross, so we decided to dump some of the gear and to return for it in daylight. We struggled over the moraines and up the last climb to camp, soup, tea and bed.

The last few days at BC were spent collecting the remaining gear from the other side of the main glacier, tidying the camp-site and packing up. Phil had not only brought yeast to make bread, which he did very successfully, but he had also brought a beer-making kit. The mash had been sitting in a barrel wrapped in a black bin bag for the last 4 weeks enduring extremes of temperature. We were dubious as to the quality, but it turned out to be about par for a homebrew, i.e. don't drink it unless there's nothing else. In Pakistan there's nothing else. So we drank it and got used to it. The remaining whisky was drunk in celebration of our success in putting 2 members on the summit. My voice started to return. Now the job was done, visions of fresh food were calling and we were eager to leave.

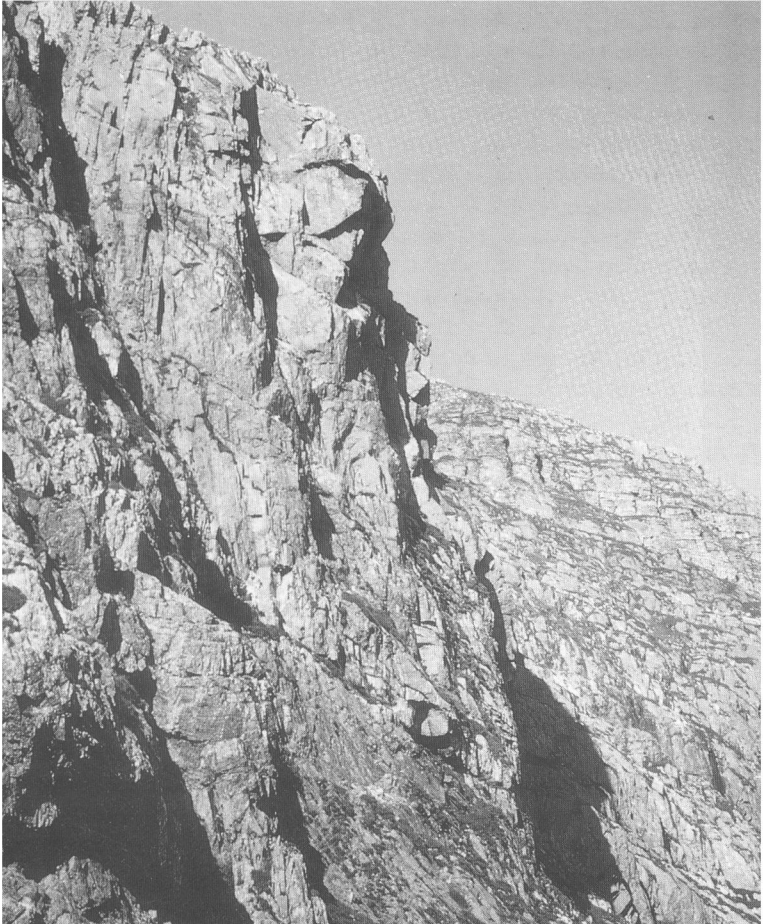
During this time two Koreans reached the summit of Tirich Mir, taking the same route while David provided advice over the radio. The Koreans at base were jubilant and did not appear to be worried by the fact that the pair had summited just before dark and still had the descent to do. Nothing more was heard from the pair on the radio. We ascertained 2 days later that nothing had been seen or heard from them since their call from the summit. The Koreans at base did not intend to go and assist their fellow climbers and said they would get a helicopter, which would take at least a week. We found their attitude hard to believe, we did not really know if they lacked competence or were simply callous. Leaving the two climbers up on the mountain would decide their fate, if not killed in a fall they would almost certainly die of hypothermia.

I found the walk out hard, as I had no energy left, the altitude and effort had taken their toll. I wandered some distance behind the others in a daze, sometimes finding it difficult to put one foot in front of the other. After the interminable rock and snow of the high glaciers and mountains, it was marvellous to reach the cultivated fields above the village, fields now bright green with crops.

The end of the expedition brought with it a confusing set of

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emotions: relief at reaching the road head alive and intact; sadness at not summiting; a sense of achievement at getting two of our group to the summit and reaching a personal high point. Add to this the sudden awareness of the privations, the extreme tiredness and sense of deflation which comes after intense effort, the desire for the things you have missed, like some fresh food, and the desire to get home as quickly as possible. The mountain is a memory not to be spoilt by lingering too long, reflections are for later. Until next time ...



Cynr Las (Llanberis). Photo: P.H. Benson