

A SHORT WALK, AND A LONG CLIMB, IN THE HINDU KUSH

An ascent of Tirich Mir, 1995.

by Grant Dixon



Eric Newby's 1950s "Short Walk in the Hindu Kush" took place in Afghanistan, now a less accessible but no less attractive place to visit. However much of the Hindu Kush range, including its highest peaks, lie across the border in Pakistan. Four peaks top 7000 metres, with the massive Tirich Mir (7708m) the highest.

The ramparts of the Hindu Kush lie in northwest Pakistan, and the range extends further inland across Afghanistan. It is therefore rather removed from the effects of the summer monsoon, as exemplified by the arid landscape and less intensive glaciation compared even with Pakistan's Karakoram Range. It also means the area tends to be graced with long spells of fine weather.

Tirich Mir was first climbed by a Norwegian team, via the south face, in 1950. However the first ascent from the north was not until 1967, by a Czech team. Kurt Diemberger, with a Japanese partner, climbed the peak soon after, one of several ascents he made during an extensive period of exploration of the Hindu Kush. Tirich Mir has been successfully climbed on only 9 or 10 occasions since then; its relative unpopularity probably due to the general mountaineering (and trekking) focus on the Karakoram Range and the proximity of the Afghanistan border.

Whilst there are many advantages to living in a remote continent, ease of international travel is not one of them. It certainly isn't necessary to take a steamer any more, as Bill Tilman routinely did when

exploring Central Asia in the 1940s, or travel overland as did some European expeditions to the Hindu Kush up to the 1970s. However the English contingent for our Tirich Mir expedition could fly directly from Manchester, near their homes, to Islamabad, whereas my long and tedious trip involved plane changes and airport lounges in Melbourne, Perth, Singapore and Karachi.

A torrid day in Rawalpindi started with an early morning evacuation of our hotel (a fire in the kitchen, apparently) - the smoke-filled corridors and dazed and uncoordinated response of the hotel staff almost had Ron and I abseiling out of our third floor window!

It's quite pleasant arriving somewhere like Pakistan knowing that the pre-expedition organising has been ably handled by someone else, in this case David, a Scot, with whom I had previously climbed in Pakistan. Our 7 person multi-national team also comprised 3 English, 2 Australian and a Canadian member. Our first collective task was a briefing at "The Ministry".

The stuffy room, outside heat and sleep deprivation due to my long flight and the early morning hotel fire made it difficult to stay awake during the long and largely uninformative briefing. We escaped from 'Pindi in an air-conditioned bus, only to be hit with the 50^o mid-afternoon heat of Peshawar, capital of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. After helping carry our tonne of gear up to a first floor terrace for safe overnight storage we stretched out under a whirring ceiling fan pouring litres of water down our throats.

The road from Peshawar to the Chitral valley, which parallels the Hindu Kush to the west, crosses two passes. The highest, Lowari Pass, is blocked by snow for half the year, contributing to the area's isolation. The mountain scenery, and cooler temperatures as the road wound upwards, relieved the tedium of the bouncing bus journey, however the extent of deforestation of steep and accessible slopes was rather depressing to observe.



Chitral, the administrative centre for the 350 kilometre-long valley, is set amongst fields beside the Kunar River. It is a pleasant and friendly town, dominated by its mosque and old fort near the river bank. Prior to formally joining Pakistan in the early 1970s, the valley was a separate "mirdom", with a long history of internal and external conflict.

When one of the Mirs died unexpectedly some years ago his many sons apparently despatched each other in a variety of ways during the subsequent decade or so until only one remained to take the throne. Chitral was also the scene of one of the more famous altercations between the British Raj and the local population. In the 1880s a British regiment was trapped in the fort until the siege was

broken by an unexpected attack from the rear by soldiers from the Gilgit garrison, who had crossed the Shandur Pass in winter snow, carrying dismantled artillery pieces on their backs.

Until recently the lower part of the valley had a large Afghan refugee population, however most of the makeshift villages built by these refugees now stand abandoned, their occupants having returned down the valley to Afghanistan (the Kunar River flows into Afghanistan, and becomes the Kabul River, not far downstream).

Tirich Mir draws the eye, whenever it is not hidden by afternoon cloud, a massive snowy peak (the only one visible from the town) some 50km up the valley from Chitral. We travelled further north, before turning onto a “jeep” road dug out of the steep, often unstable, slopes high above the Turikho and then Tirich



Rivers. The splotches of small green and yellow fields on the arid slopes, wherever the location of streams and the terrain allow irrigation, contrasted with the otherwise brown landscape and grey, silt-laden river.

Shagrom, flat-roofed stone houses scattered over more than a kilometre of green irrigated fields and inhabited by perhaps 200 people, is the last village in the valley and end of the road. Few expeditions, or indeed westerners generally, come here. Hence our arrival, setting up camp for the night and sorting of gear into porter loads was instantly the focus of all attention, the men and boys forming a silent circle around camp, and the girls trying to satisfy their curiosity from the shelter of trees 50 or more metres distant.

The village headman acted as a sort of combined “sirdar” and shop-floor steward in our discussions regarding porters, both negotiating the wages and allocating the loads to the various men selected, the arrangements being completed in a much more efficient and agreeable manner than some of my previous experiences in the Karakoram. We then set off on the 3 day march to base camp.

The first day’s walk, under low cloud and misty rain, crossed first green fields, then extensive gravel fans beside the cement-coloured Tirich River. Those porters whose families owned donkeys used them to carry their loads for the first day, a smack on the donkey’s rump sending them homeward at the end of the day. Camp was made in the last copse of small birch and willow trees, the porters singing around their small fires into the night.



Next day dawned fine and clear, and the weather stayed generally stable for the next few weeks, except for some high winds on the peaks and the occasional overnight snowfall. Several hours of scrambling over loose moraine preceded the white ice of the Lower Tirich Glacier,. The undulating surface of the glacier and then lateral moraine were followed for 2 more days to our base camp site, camping en route in the hot and dusty ablation valley. We had climbed to 4800 metres in only 3 days, so it was not surprising that some of the group experienced altitude problems. Both Ron and Phil felt “off” and took a rest day during the walk-in to acclimatise, however they may have been experiencing the beginnings of infections which were to plague them both later in the expedition.

Base camp was established on an initially uninviting, partly snow-covered gravelly slope above a sweeping bend in the Tirich Glacier, where it is joined by its major tributary. However during our month at this site the snow melted, green grass appeared and various coloured wildflowers appeared. These changes seemed even more significant after the absences on the mountain, as I returned from periods amongst only rock and snow to an ever greener and snow-free camp.

The writings of previous Tirich Mir ascensionists had provided little useful information on the route, with opinions on the route ranging from “straightforward” (an American group in 1982) to difficult (a Spanish group in 1973, who took a week to climb the steep ground above the Tirich Glacier, and fixed extensive rope). Hence we transported enough gear for almost anything to base camp, much unnecessary as it turned out. However we were not to confirm this for a couple of weeks, and a major unpacking and sorting exercise was undertaken intermittently during the first days at base camp.

The most useful items during the early forays up the Tirich Glacier were several pairs of skis. Whilst we had already traversed some 17km of the Tirich Glacier to establish base camp, the glacier curved southwards and climbed another 15km to the base of the steep north face of Tirich Mir, and packed winter snow still covered the hard ice, moraine and crevasses. Upward progress was only marginally aided by the skis, as we moved in the freezing hours, partly pre-dawn, before the sun burst over the mountain ridges to the east and turned the snow to porridge. However the skis made the descent something to look forward to, rather than a tedious plod, either schussing down the steeper sections or just standing on the skis and watching the kilometres drift by on flatter areas.

Access to the upper Tirich Glacier from base camp involved first crossing the 1.5km wide glacier below the camp. This unattractive traverse had to be undertaken several times, as loads were ferried up the glacier and camps established. The outward journey was usually done at night, when route finding amongst the moraine slopes, ice cliffs and gravel piles could be difficult. However returning later in the day could result in extensive detours to find a safe crossing of meltwater torrents.

Two weeks after reaching base camp we had established two camps on the Upper Tirich Glacier and carried up most of the gear for higher on the mountain. David and I left base camp in the pre-dawn hours, the others to follow one or two days later. We abandoned the skis above Camp 2, the glacier surface having become icy and uneven, and, with horrendously heavy packs, struggled up to below a small ice cliff above the glacier to establish Camp 3. Excavating a platform for the tents, at 6500m, was slow work however there was plenty to contemplate when taking rests from shovelling snow. The steep granite north face of Tirich Mir reared up above (although the couloir which would provide our route was still hidden), with the bluffs of the West Peak on our other side, and across the glacier we could now see past the 6800 metre dome of Dir Gol Zom to the Afghan part of the Hindu Kush - range upon range becoming bluer with the distant haze.



Once established the camp provided a stunning view of sunset over the Afghan mountains, which could be watched from the comfort of tent and sleeping bag.

A rest day here was considered, but the temptation of a view from Dir Gol Zom was too strong next morning. However after crossing the glacier we were fully exposed to a freezing gale, with gusts almost blowing us off our feet. Long snow plumes screamed off the summit of Tirich Mir high above. We settled for a brief view around the corner at the precipitous southwest face of Tirich Mir, before scuttling back to the tent.

The drawbacks of our Camp 3 site were now becoming apparent. Whilst the site beneath an ice cliff protected us from avalanches, the fact that the cliff itself would eventually collapse was a little unsettling. The cliff and mountain face above sheltered the camp from direct sunlight until mid-

morning, but the camp was then fully exposed for the rest of the day. Hence the site was freezing for part of the day, but became unbearably hot by early afternoon, necessitating placing sleeping bags over the tent for insulation. However the sleeping bags had to be removed by mid-afternoon because of the meltwater pouring off icicles on the ice cliff above the tent.

The following morning we set off with packs heavy with ropes and hardware, intending to fix rope on the lower part of the face above to ease our descent from the summit, and facilitate others in the group who would follow us. This work was initially cold and slow, then hot and exhausting once the sun hit us. We dumped the remaining gear and returned to Camp 3, very tired. However we had seen some of the route above, the crux of the climb, and it did not look too bad - a narrowing snow couloir, a very steep chimney or corner, then another long snow-filled couloir to the skyline ridge where we planned to establish Camp 4.



Stephen had joined us in Camp 3, and the three of us set off, again at first light, intending to have a crack at the summit after establishing Camp 4. As we approached the base of the chimney it became apparent that regular spindrift avalanches were pouring down the chimney from the couloir above.

Dodging these, and skating over patches of hard blue ice, we moved upwards.

I led off up the chimney, more of a wall at the back of a sub-vertical gully really, crampons scraping on ice-covered granite, hood pulled tightly over my helmet against the stream of spindrift from above. I moved slowly and rested often, however after several steep steps, curses alternating with gasps for air, I was there - the top of the chimney after only one pitch! The others followed, with Stephen slipping and smashing into the chimney wall, breaking a gear loop on his harness and dropping one of our lead ropes - and then there was one!

All three of us were tired and, with only one rope, moved slowly up the upper couloir, alternatively in deep snow or on hard ice. The last couple of pitches seemed to take forever. It was dark by now, and a freezing wind had risen, spindrift swirling in the torch beam and blasting full into my face. I shouted down into the gloom, but received little response - neither verbal nor in increased ascent rates for David or Stephen. Everyone was battling the wind and climbing as fast as possible, given the 15 hours of continuous exertion.

One of the small tents was erected and I climbed into it to anchor it in the wind. Stephen arrived sometime later and the three of us huddled in the tent, the stove seeming to take even longer than usual to melt water for our parched throats. It was well after midnight before we collapsed into sleeping bags.

We slept in and the sun was well up when I emerged from the tent for a piss (bright orange, despite my late night drinking) and to take in the view. The position was spectacular - the tents were perched on a narrow col at 7200 metres below the steep pyramid of West Peak, slopes leading up towards the main peak of Tirich Mir opposite. The rugged ridges of the Afghan Hindu Kush stretched to the horizon westwards; to the north reared the steep and much closer ridges of the Pakistani part of the range. We spent the day resting, drinking and eating what we could. The freeze dried mountain food was unpalatable at best of times and tasted positively disgusting up at Camp 4. Chocolate and soups were the order of the day.

The following day dawned fine, clear and still, so the three of us started upwards just after the sun painted our surroundings orange. The first long snow slope felt loaded and unstable. We moved very slowly, but Stephen decided he wasn't getting enough air and turned back after a couple of hours. The steep snow continued, tedious step-plugging, then scrambling over steep broken rock to outflank bottomless snow in a couloir, scraps of fixed rope evidence of previous expeditions. Eventually the slope eased; we crested a broad rocky ridge and looked down the other side, back to the Tirich Glacier now far below. David's altimeter suggested we had barely reached 7600 metres; I was starting to wonder if I could make it? After a brief rest and a chocolate bar we agreed to go on for another hour and plodded slowly upwards, however after only 15 minutes the slope flattened and there was no more up!



The summit of Tirich Mir is a broad snow dome. David and I stood in its centre, took the obligatory photographs of each other and soaked up the clear view. The peaks of the Karakoram marked the far eastern horizon, to the north the high summits of the Pamirs were visible beyond the Hindu Kush's other 7000 metre summits, and below and to the west the many ridges of the Afghan Hindu Kush.

The descent to Camp 4, abseiling many of the steeper rock and snow pitches, took only 3 hours, in contrast to our plodding 10 hour ascent.

The descent to base camp took almost as long as our climb. We waited in Camp 3 while Gerry and Phil made a summit attempt (they did, but turned back below 7400 metres), dragged the now-frozen fixed ropes off the mountain, packed up the camps and staggered back down the Tirich Glacier.



My memories of the descent are not particularly comfortable ones. They are dominated by huge rucksacks festooned with gear. It was decided (it might have even been my silly idea) that we could carry all the gear down to base camp in one go rather than ascend the glacier yet another time. Large

crevasses were now appearing in some areas as the snow cover receded. I recall wondering how I might fare if I fell into one with the 40kg pack on my back, and with skis tied to its sides. We did make base camp in one day, but well after dark and only after dumping half our loads on the far side of the glacier opposite base camp, returning to collect them next day.

It was over now, and we were all impatient to be off, however we had 4 days to wait until the porters were due. During this time we observed the drama of the Korean expedition's summit attempt. The Koreans had arrived during our time on the mountain. They attempted to compensate for their late arrival by long load carries up the Tirich Glacier, exhausting both climbers and the three high altitude porters they had retained. Eventually two climbers reached Camp 4, but the remainder of the Korean team had returned to base camp, too tired or unacclimatised to continue. The Camp 4 pair left for the summit late the following morning, in marginal weather conditions. Intermittent radio contact with their base camp suggested they reached the summit around 7PM. However they were not heard from again, and the remaining Koreans abandoned their base camp, and the missing two climbers, next morning.

This unfortunate episode rather soured my Tirich Mir experience. However it reaffirmed the proximity of limits in high altitude mountaineering. Until then my experience (perfect weather, a route that turned out to be straightforward and no health or altitude problems) had seemed altogether too easy.

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