

# SUFFER WELL

*Thirst and hunger on the Azeem Ridge, Great Trango, Pakistan*

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KELLY CORDES



Porters on the final day of the approach, from Paiju to Trango base camp. On the left is Great Trango Tower, with the upper half of what was to become the Azeem Ridge rising along the left side to the Southwest Summit. The snow-capped peak farther along the ridge to the right is the main summit of Great Trango Tower. The jagged peak to its right is the Trango Castle. Please note: the cover of this Journal is from the Azeem Ridge. *Kelly Cordes*

A faint reminder of words written a couple days earlier crept across my subconscious as our only fuel canister sputtered empty on Great Trango Tower. Josh Wharton and I were over halfway up—the easy half—the 7,400-vertical-foot southwest ridge with two ropes, a basic rack, and a single 28-pound pack. Ice-capped towers looming overhead cast immense shadows onto our base camp 4,000 feet below, as they did two nights before when the weather had cleared and we knew that, come morning, we'd attempt the biggest route of our lives. That

night, with my nerves tingling but my mind strangely calm, I'd closed my journal with a simple note to myself. The words would be our blessing and nearly our curse: "Be mentally strong. Suffer well, it'll be worth it."

The first two days had gone smoothly—except for losing a quarter of our 20 cams on the second pitch when one side of our jury-rigged double gear sling came undone—and we'd made good time. The climbing often was easy enough for the second to climb with the pack rather than jumar, punctuated by a few difficult pitches and the occasional loose pitch (most of the death blocks remained perched on ledges). Toward the end of the second day the climbing steepened, with several 5.10 and 5.11 pitches, as we finished the lower-angle, broken portion of the route. On the last pitch of the day Josh was leading out of my view when I heard him yell:

"Kelly, send up the tape!"

"Huh?" I thought, but I stick to what I learned early on: leader is God. I tied the roll of tape to the tag line and sent it up. A few minutes later Josh yelled:

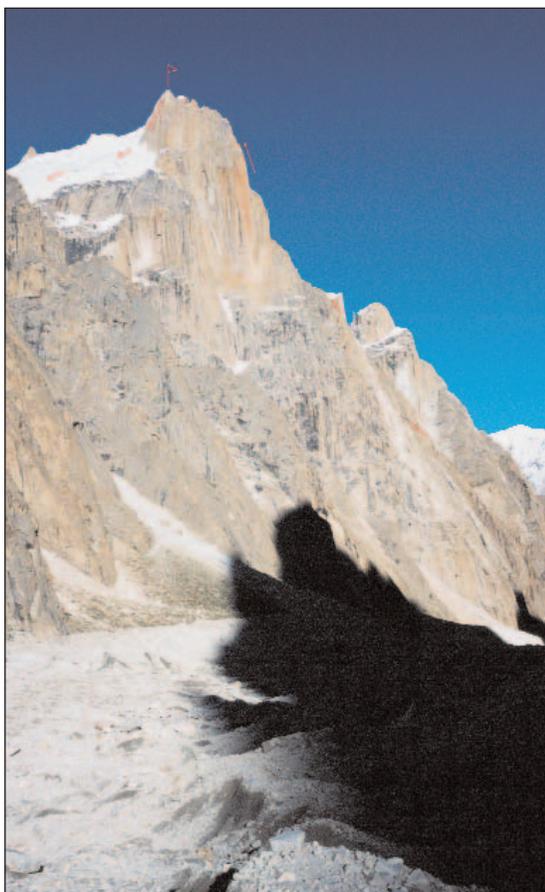
"Pull the tag line tight please!"

I did.

"No, no, not that tight, a little less. Perfect, tie it off please!"

Josh, 30 feet above his last piece of pro, had come to a two-hole threader ladder (holes with threaded sleeves, drilled on some previous attempt). But we had only one hook. He taped the hook to the first hole, had me tension the tag line to help hold it in place, and fired past the "blank" section free at sketchy 5.11.

Our plan was all or nothing: we'd climb as light as possible, as fast as possible, and if things went to hell we'd descend. This spirit fueled my pre-trip training, and it seemed like a good plan—assuming things didn't go to hell too high up. We knew we could retreat from atop the "headwall," about 6,000 feet up, as a team of Spanish climbers had done in 1990, and our American friends Timmy O'Neill and Miles Smart did in 2000. The Spaniards had fixed and sieged for three weeks, while making a movie before retreating, claiming to be only a few easy pitches from the top. (Our Slovenian friend Tomaz put it perfectly at base camp: "Of course.



Azeem Ridge on Great Trango Tower, seen from up-glacier (Trango Glacier). Route begins in lower right and ascends the right skyline to the Southwest Summit (ca 6,250m sometimes called West Summit). Descent is marked. *Kelly Cordes*



spection, openness and warmth that seem too rare in our world. And the climbing, of course it's about style, though I realize that some people couldn't care less. So long as they don't wreck the place and are honest about what they did, then fine—climb however you want. It's every individual's choice.

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In the morning we packed our empty fuel canister and scant gear, and I traversed from our bivy alcove out right into a steep crack, blowing into my hands for warmth to start the third day. After two pitches a rubby ramp led to the base of the headwall. I gazed down at the lake and the specks of tents at base camp, and wondered what our friends Ghafoor, our cook, and Karim, his assistant and little brother, were doing.

Josh took over leading and traversed, with aid and free-climbing, up and into the obvious vertical-to-overhanging crack splitting the headwall. The two-bolt Spanish anchors made the hanging belays easier—especially since many of the cams we lost on the first day were crucial sizes. Josh masterfully pieced it together,

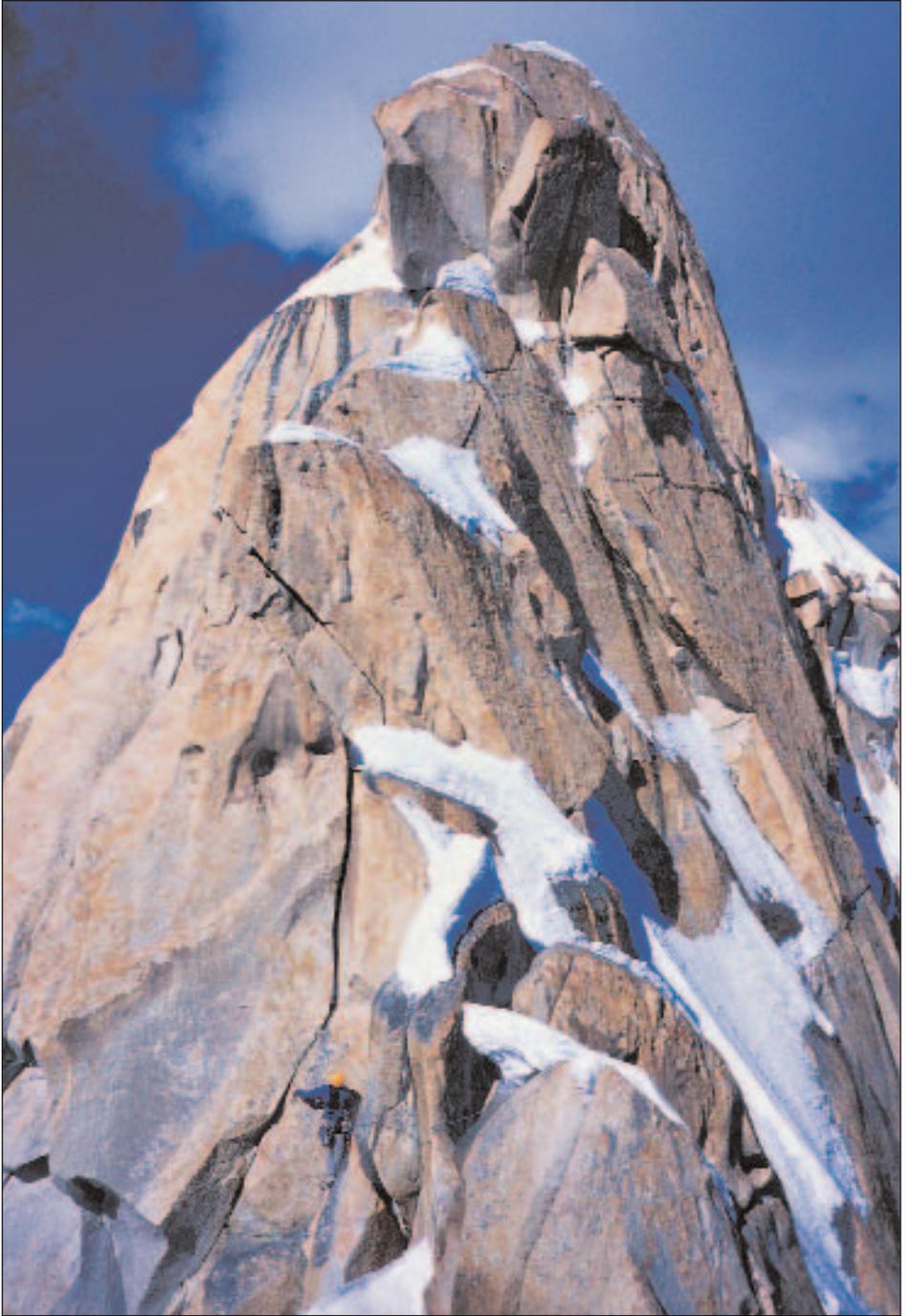
alternately punching 20-foot runouts and aiding off marginal placements in the parallel crack. I jumared for short bursts then collapsed in a loud, gasping heap before continuing. The altitude was kicking my ass, perhaps because we'd only given a weak nod in the direction of acclimatization before the climb. Not surprisingly, Josh didn't seem bothered.

Atop the four-pitch headwall, Josh set an anchor beside a tattered cluster of old Friends, no bolts—surely from the Spaniards' 1990 hasty retreat in a storm. The route had narrowed and the crack systems dwindled, severely limiting routefinding options. For the last day and a half we'd been finding obvious signs of the 1990 team. We'd benefited from clipping their anchors (especially on the headwall) and knowing that retreat, though a horrible hassle—the Spanish had climbed 61 pitches—would still be possible. But when Josh ripped out that old anchor, the final sign of previous attempts, with the tug of one hand, we were definitely alone. And a long ways from the top.

I took over, leading steep cracks with occasional aid, to a small break with a tiny ledge and no obvious line. The sun hung low, and the miniscule ledge would make a miserable bivy.



Josh Wharton on easy terrain relatively low on day three. *Kelly Cordes*



Josh Wharton about to punch it up a 5.10+ off-width at ca 6,200m, with no gear big enough to fit, on day 4. Much to the pair's disappointment, the point above was not yet the summit. *Kelly Cordes*

I tensioned left around a corner and climbed a thin, unprotected face into a wild, wind-sculpted concave roof that jutted horizontally then downward, like a wave carved in stone. Traversing its left side and up a series of crumbly cracks, I reached a ledge of broken boulders as the sun set. We settled in for a cold and sloping bivy. I chipped chunks of ice into a tiny pile beside my head to suck on between fits of restless sleep. The summit had to be near.

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A little over a year before, on a drunken night at the Fairview bar in Talkeetna, Alaska, British hardman Paul Ramsden told me something I've remembered almost every day since. Paul joked about how Americans spend so much time getting gear dialed, fussing about weight, and training. Paul thought we were missing the point: "The bottom line for hard alpinism," he said, "is you have to want to go up more than you want to go down, isn't it?"

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First thing in the morning of our fourth day, Josh went to remove his headlamp. It was a micro LED lamp with a retractable elastic cable, much like a slingshot. It moved like a slingshot when it slipped from his grasp and disappeared. At least we still had the good torch, and the summit had to be close.... We packed, and Josh set off around the corner to the left. Much of the climbing blurs together in my mind, but there were steep cracks, icy cracks, tension traverses, runouts, and sections of snow—some climbed in rock shoes, some in "ice gear" (since it looked easy from below, we'd gone with Gore-Tex sneakers and ultralight aluminum strap-on crampons). The gendarmes seemed endless, and at one belay along the side, while Josh alternately aided and ran out steep rock on the face to regain the ridge, I scraped my fingers into a runnel of snow-ice tucked in a crack and brought the crystals to my mouth. Dabs of red spotted the white from the jam-like blood of my fingertips scraped raw over the past four days.

Smooth, overhanging rock receded from view, down both faces falling from the ridge. It would be suicide to rappel. I looked to the storm clouds brewing far enough to the south, then down at the speck that was base camp, 7,000-feet below, with simple detachment, and sucked on more snow.

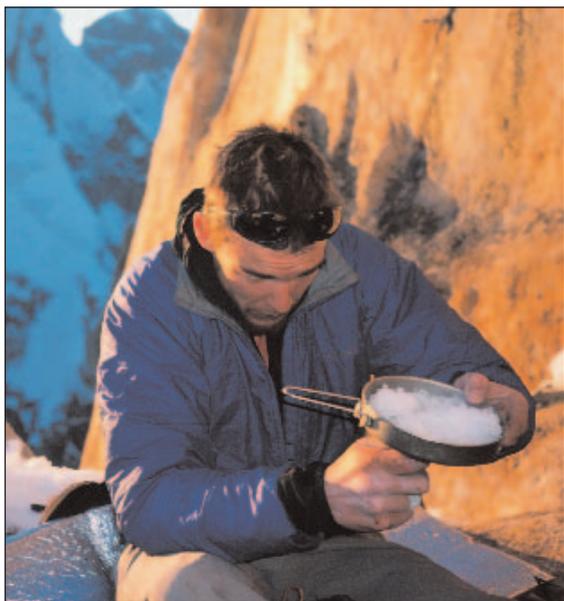
Several hours later I sat, breathless at 20,000 feet, on a mound of sugar snow where we found the first sign of the big-wall teams who'd finished along the upper reaches of our ridge. In 1999 Russian and American teams made heavily-publicized, nearly month-long ascents of the face that dropped like a plumb line below us to the left. Their routes started up the gully from base camp on broken slabs, before tackling the impressive big-wall portion and, finally, the ridge. Josh volunteered to take over leading, and I lowered him to a notch, from where he traversed to the base a steep off-width, too wide for our gear. He placed a tipped-out cam that rattled out as he pulled into a layback and fired 20 feet to a belay ledge. Above, it looked blank and snow mushrooms capped the ridge. I now wonder about our mental states, as our photos make me think we should have gone straight up. No matter, Josh set off leading again, traversing around the corner onto the big-wall face in a mix of free and aid. Far to his left, Josh saw the only feature: a thin vein of ice in a right-facing corner. He connected desperate pendulums, lowers, and hard free traversing, eventually balancing himself below the corner. For his last gear, 35 feet above him and 25 feet to his right, he'd equalized a knifeblade piton and bird beak. He delicately removed his crampons from his harness, strapped the left one to his rock shoe, put his kiddie-toy of an ice axe (a "third tool" with the shaft cut down to save weight) in his left hand, and started climbing. He tapped up thin ice on his left side and smeared invisible dimples and crimped tiny edges on his right. After reaching the level of the dubious gear far to his

right, he ran out another 35 difficult feet to a good ledge.

I swung around the corner and lowered out twice. Then, while I was freeing our stuck tarp line, one of Josh's few pieces blew out. Soon after, I dropped my belay device. The remaining gear was easy to clean: I removed the knifeblade, lowered out on the beak, and jugged cleanly up the vertical big-wall face. Jugging the pitch blew my mind: the most incredible lead I've ever seen. I've since been asked if I think that lead was boldness or stupidity. To me, it's simple: calculated boldness with incredible skill. When I run it out on 5.9, nobody says I'm being stupid. We'd done enough sketchy climbing, tension traverses, and lower-outs already to make retreat improbable, terribly complex at best. Josh's crux lead sealed it. The way out was up and over. Besides, we had no reason to retreat. We contemplated continuing that evening—the hump above had to be the summit—but the spacious ledge was too tempting with nightfall so close.

We strung our eight-ounce emergency tarp close overhead for warmth, and watched the sun set from our room with a perfect view up-glacier to The Flame. Josh and Brian McMahon had made the first ascent of the incredible solitary spire in 2002. Almost everyone thought they were crazy for going that soon after 9/11, but their families and close friends supported them, and in Pakistan they were met with kindness and warmth. On our climb in 2004 Josh lay on the ledge, unable to stop looking at The Flame. They had endured 40 days of continual rain at base camp when finally, with only a week remaining in their trip, the skies cleared, and they were rewarded for their patience. Josh, only 23 at the time, led the final pitch, a 165-foot runout of 5.10+ slab to gain the narrow summit pinnacle.

As night fell, despite our exhaustion and thirst, we were optimistic. Summit: first thing in the morning. I ate an energy bar for dinner and chased it with an icicle. The clouds from the southwest were drawing closer. I cultivated a small pile of ice chips, placed it by my head and lay down for our fourth night.



Josh Wharton employing wishful thinking at the second bivy...their only remaining fuel was inside the lighter in his hand. *Kelly Cordes*

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In the morning I traversed left past an overhanging chimney and onto an unprotectible slab of snow that grew thinner, barely covering the rock. My feet started to skate. I downclimbed, back to the chimney. In the back was a runnel of ice, and I arm-barred with one hand and swung my axe into the ice with the other, chopped through the overhanging cornice, and flopped onto the snow mound above. No summit. Shit. I brought Josh up and he sat in the snow while I sketched, almost fell, and made a hook move on a short steep rock face that led to sugar snow on another mound. Not the summit. I continued for another three pitches, up, down, around, climbing rock and snow, sometimes

straddling the knife-edge like a happy cowboy until I scraped my way up a snowy slab onto the Southwest Summit. Without thinking I climbed over the top and down the other side to set an anchor. I was too exhausted—too focused—to notice our surroundings, what must be one of the grandest views on earth: Masherbrum, Gasherbrum IV, K2, and incredible unnamed, unclimbed spires rising from rubble-strewn glaciers snaking up and down the valleys like the rivers of ice that they are. It was around noon on our fifth day. We didn't even celebrate the top.

We rapped too hastily, too sick of the ridge, and so eager for safety that we nearly missed the hanging glacier that was crucial to our descent. The face below grew smooth, threatening to suck us into the overhanging big-wall abyss wrapping around from the right. We tensioned hard left on every rappel, cleaning ice from cracks and stuffing them with cams for anchors, but, as the wall blanked out, anchors became sparse. One rappel anchor was an RP backed by two shitty knifeblades. After five rappels we hit the hanging glacier. I began pulling our skinny rope, but as the other end rose off the glacier and up the wall, suddenly the ropes wouldn't budge. It was a sinister and challenging prank to remind us we weren't done yet, and the mountains are always in charge. I pulled harder.

"Shit," I said. "They're stuck."

Josh slumped forward and leaned his head against the ice. He mumbled a simple response: "Fuck."

We both pulled with all our remaining strength. Nothing. With the other end unsecured, dancing in the wind, we had no choice. There was 70 feet of our tag line beside us, so we cut it. Two-thousand five-hundred feet of 40- to 60-degree crevasse- and serac-riddled hanging glacier remained to traverse and descend. Below us, the glacier's bottom calved off a cliff for 3,000 feet. Our "disaster-style" "safety fifth!" ice gear and sneakers, with no snow or ice pro, meant one thing only. Before continuing, I stated the obvious: "No mistakes." If we stayed roped-in and one of us fell, barring the improbable one-person save, we'd likely both plummet. With little discussion, we tied in and continued down together.



A couple of tense hours later we collapsed on the terminal end of the glacier and guzzled water like two men who'd been lost in a desert. Suddenly I noticed how horribly I reeked of ammonia, and the pungent chemical-like taste in my mouth. It was our first water in over 48 hours, bubbling from the bottom of the glacier at 17,000 feet. I recalled my physiology, retained from many years ago: the nitrogen component of amino acids is stripped away and excreted as ammonia, so that the carbon skeletons can be metabolized. This happens when the body is forced to consume its own structural tissues for energy.

We soon scrambled—staggered, really—to a ledge atop the Trango Gully. All that remained was a 4,000-foot slog down to base camp. I gazed back up at Great Trango, slowly being engulfed by clouds. The weather window slammed shut like a door hitting us in the ass. Rain and snow would fall in a few hours. I was still in a hyper-focused, trying-to-keep-it-together state when Josh's words of congratulations and our embrace broke my trance. Inside I shifted, feeling a surge of emotion. It seemed fitting that it was only us, no hype, no web reports to send or sat-phone dispatches to make (especially since we didn't have one). There was, however, one spectator. As we stumbled down the loose gully, a lone figure, clad in tattered clothes and sandals, scrambled rapidly up toward us. It was Ghafoor, coming with the biggest smile I've ever seen and a huge hug for us both. I felt tears, like I was crying, but my body spared no moisture. Ghafoor placed glittery ribbons around our necks and grabbed our pack—he refused to let us

take it down, “No, no, Sir, I carry, I carry!” (no matter what we said, he insisted on calling us “Sir”) and set off at high speed, hopping over boulders, to prepare one helluva hot meal. Ghafoor had told us that he’d be watching from camp through our binoculars, though we doubted he’d be able to see us. Once we were high on the ridge, he hustled out to the nearest outpost, bought some Coca-Cola and, somehow, found some cheesy party favors. He and Karim had strung our camp with banners and home-made congratulatory signs, spelled in wonderfully broken English, and built stone-lined walkways from our tents to the cook-tent.



I lay around camp sleeping, resting, eating, drinking, trying to hydrate and recover, though I couldn’t seem to regain my energy. My thoughts were mostly introspective, but I made some notes about our ascent:

We brought two ropes: a 9.1mm lead line and a 7.9mm tag line. We did no fixing. We carried no bolt kit. We started climbing at 9 a.m. on July 24 and summited at noon on July 28. The second jugged with the pack where it was steep, which was probably half of the route. We clipped fixed gear when we saw it—mostly belay bolts, and up to a half-dozen protection bolts—but did not use any of the fixed ropes abandoned from prior attempts. (After our descent we scrambled up and cleaned one that someone had abandoned at the start.) We carried off all of our garbage (empty fuel canister and food wrappers) but left a few protection pieces fixed along with five rap anchors (many cams) and, unfortunately—my only regret of our climb—our ropes that got stuck on our last rappel.

Our route starts on the lower right of the broad southwest buttress, at just under 4,000m, and climbs to the Southwest Summit (sometimes called West, ca 6,237m-6,250m depending on the map) of Great Trango Tower. This was 17 pitches beyond the highest traces we found from previous attempts. Josh led the hardest pitches, including five that were 5.11 (one included M6). My hardest leads were 5.10+ (and M5), and not as serious as Josh’s. With 60m ropes and simul-climbing a handful of pitches on the lower half, we climbed 54 pitches. Twenty-five of the pitches were 5.10 or harder. I led 30 and Josh 24, but Josh was indisputably the ropegun, leading the hardest and most dangerous pitches. We named our route Azeem Ridge and rated it 5.11R/X M6 A2. Azeem is an Urdu word that means “great,” in size or stature, and, more importantly, “great” as a greeting of fondness and respect between people. Azeem accurately summarizes our feelings about the wonderful people we met in the northern areas of Pakistan, people from Pakistan and several European countries. The widespread fear and propaganda at home is absurd and carries an ugliness disturbingly similar to racism in its de facto portrayal of all people in one entire region of the world as “bad.” People need to quit listening to the Fox News and Bush regime drivel and do a little thinking for themselves.



One week later the weather cleared, so we trudged back up the heinous 4,000-foot choss gully to bivy at the col below Trango (a.k.a Nameless) Tower. I grew increasingly angry with a large Korean team—there had been a party of six attempting, unsuccessfully, to siege the Slovenian Route—as I collected their garbage, halfway filling a large plastic bag that, ironically, I found laying in the rubble. We had previously cleaned up much of their garbage (not all of it was theirs, but the frequent Korean lettering was a give-away) when hiking up and down the gully to acclimatize. How were they unable to carry away their trash, when there were six of them going up and down repeatedly for a month? The next day, on the Slovenian Route, we climbed to the Shoulder Camp (a.k.a. Sun Terrace), about one-third up the tower, by early afternoon and bivied. This camp is

disgusting, a mess of garbage, too much for us to carry down. Some impact by climbers is unavoidable, emergencies happen, and safety issues arise. But I can't understand abandoning fixed lines everywhere and leaving piles of garbage. What was their excuse? I've assumed that everyone is drawn to the mountains for the same reasons I am: for their beauty, their magnificence. On Trango I realized that I was wrong.

We retreated early afternoon on the second day. At most belays we had found fresh garbage, with Korean labels, stuffed into cracks. We cleaned most of it, despite not coming to Pakistan to be their maid service. Anyway, according to our topo, we were somewhere near pitch 22, with a few steep pitches remaining—the cracks were icy and the going would be slow—followed by a few moderate ice and mixed pitches to reach the summit. The climbing itself had been beautiful: spectacular granite with great protection, on such an incredible spire. Storm clouds were coming in, but we have no excuses, the clouds were not upon us yet. We would have had to spend the night out if we continued, and we simply didn't want it badly enough, not then.

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On August 16, after saying goodbye to our friends in base camp, we started walking toward Pajju. I couldn't stop turning around to catch another glimpse of Great Trango Tower in its massive and nearly incomprehensible grandeur. Our failure on Trango-Nameless didn't really bother me. Thoughts of Great Trango drifted through my mind, and I couldn't help but close my eyes, feel light, and notice the smile on my face.

I didn't care as much as I might have about the mysterious health funk I'd developed, smelling of ammonia during any physical exertion and having erratic swings in blood sugar. It continued on the trek out, and for months I'd be tired, napping, sleeping late, unable—or maybe just uninterested—in doing anything demanding. Maybe I'm getting old, or maybe I'm just enjoying an excuse to be lazy. Maybe I just can't stop thinking about those days on the Azeem Ridge, days that are blurry, surreal, and crystal clear all at the same time. Those four and a half days when Josh and I wanted to go up more than we wanted to go down.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Pakistan Karakoram,  
Trango Valley

ASCENT: Southwest ridge of Great  
Trango Tower, Azeem Ridge  
(7,400' vertical, 5.11R/X A2 M6).  
Kelly Cordes and Josh Wharton.  
July 24-28, 2004.



#### A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

*Kelly Cordes, 36, is assistant editor of The American Alpine Journal and lives in Estes Park, Colorado.*

Kelly and Josh, near the bottom of the Nameless Gully descent after climbing the Azeem Ridge. Ghafoor, their friend and cook, had been watching them with binoculars from base camp, killed "Sheepy" for their celebration dinner, and hiked up the gully to meet them with refreshments and party favors. *Cordes-Abdul collection*