

THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

Third time's the charm on Pumari Chhish South in Pakistan.

CHRISTIAN TROMMSDORFF



The south face of Pumari Chhish South (7,350m) above the Yutmaru Glacier, as seen from base camp at 4,500 meters. Yannick Graziani and Christian Trommsdorff climbed the face with four bivouacs. Khunyang Chhish East (7,400m, to the left) and the 6,890-meter peak to the right are both unclimbed. *Christian Trommsdorff*

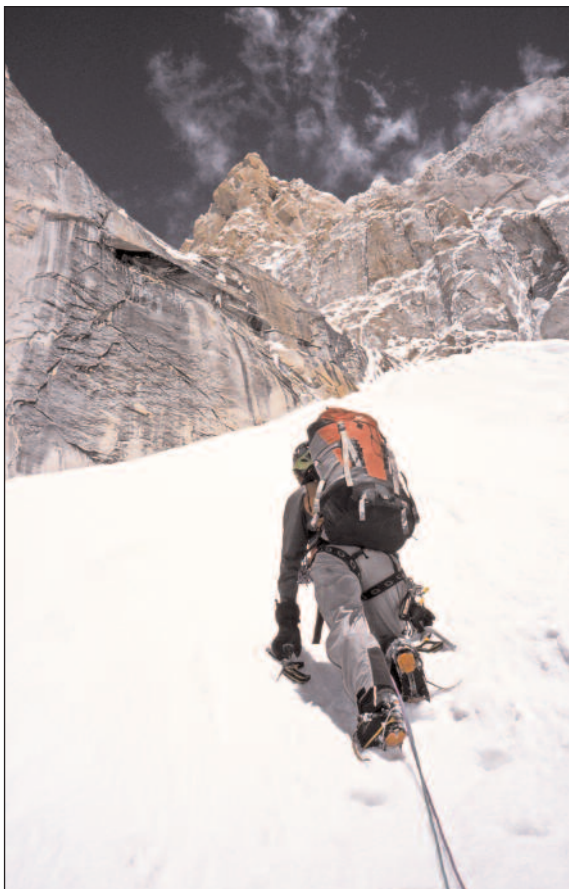
Those who do not believe in God might reconsider their position when scanning through Shiro Shirahata's photographs of the Karakoram, especially if you are a mountain climber. At almost every page of *The Karakoram*, you will be impressed. Is the beauty of these high peaks only the result of pure geological randomness on the surface of our Mother Earth? I am not a follower of religion or of any system of belief, but when spending time in the higher Karakoram ranges I cannot help but feel deeply moved by the total wilderness of the environment. For alpinists who specialize in lightweight, high-altitude climbing, these high peaks are the ultimate on this planet.

Yannick Graziani and I couldn't have dreamt of a nicer reward for our 10th expedition together in 10 years than the successful ascent of what, in my view, was the most beautiful and majestic virgin peak above 7,000 meters in the world: Pumari Chhish South. Just have a look at page 45 of Shirahata's book!

In 2003, after seeing this photo and others of nearby peaks, I suggested to my friends and climbing buddies Yannick Graziani and Patrick Wagnon that we explore some of the glacier basins leading into the huge Hispar Glacier in the western Karakoram. We would hopefully also get a bit of climbing in.

Before that expedition, and despite an attempt to 8,200 meters on the south-southeast spur of K2 and a successful climb of Spantik's easy normal route with six clients, I clearly hadn't understood what climbing in lightweight style on the higher peaks of the Karakoram really meant. (As for Yannick, he had experienced being snowed in for weeks in his tent at the foot of Ultar's Hidden Pillar, without getting the slightest weather window for any attempt.) The nine weeks we spent in the Hispar area from mid-April to mid-June 2003 would put me firmly in my place.

We came early, hoping for better weather than in summer, but it had been an extremely snowy winter, and several times we would experience what that meant on these mountains. During our first exploration in late April, we had to retreat at the junction of the Yutmaru and Hispar glaciers, at around 4,300 meters, after a massive overnight snow dump. During our retreat, we followed the tracks of a snow leopard—even it had decided to flee to lower altitudes.



Four previous attempts on Pumari Chhish South had been plagued by dangerous snow, but snow conditions were excellent during the 2007 climb, allowing rapid progress to the headwall at 6,400 meters. *Yannick Graziani*



We had been impressed by the massive, virgin south faces of Khunyang Chhish's main and east summits, but were also frustrated at not having seen Pumari Chhish's south face. As that first excursion had taken much longer than expected, and not having as much free time as us, Patrick decided to head home.



The upper south face as seen from near the first bivouac at 5,300 meters. From here the route reaches the prominent snow ramp that climbs from right to left, and then ascends a sustained mixed headwall from 6,400 to about 7,000 meters. *Christian Trommsdorff*

equipment. Over a meter of snow covered the Yutmaru, so there was no chance for the lightly equipped porters to make it any farther. Luckily, we had brought skis and hired two strong high-altitude porters and guides, Qudrat and Bari, who had been with me on Spantik. During the following 10 days, while Yannick and I were exploring the neighborhood and trying to acclimatize, they skied back and forth to supply the base camp that we had established at around 4,500 meters, 10 kilometers up the Yutmaru Glacier. From base camp we had stunning views of Khunyang East, Pumari South, Yuxsin Gardan, Kanjut Sar, Hispar Peak, and many unnamed 6,000ers.

After a few days' rest in the marvelous haven of Karimabad village, Yannick and I agreed to go back to explore the hidden treasures of the Yutmaru basin. We hadn't been able to find any account of significant climbs or attempts there. [Editor's note: Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne had made two attempts on Pumari Chhish South, in 1999 and 2000, reaching a high point of about 6,200 meters on the south face in very dangerous snow conditions.] A journalist friend accompanying us was designated expedition leader and sent back to Islamabad to obtain a permit for Khunyang Chhish Main from the Ministry of Tourism. In our minds, that permit would also do for Pumari Chhish South, since they were quite close together, and since the chances of making it above 6,500 meters on any of these peaks were very small (peaks below 6,500 meters were permit-free in Pakistan that year).

With a small team of porters from Hispar and lots of food this time, we made it back to the Yutmaru Glacier, where we had left all our

Over three weeks we made three attempts to climb over 6,000 meters to acclimatize, but snow conditions were hopeless. We triggered several slab avalanches, and we even moved our base camp several hundred meters because huge avalanches were coming quite close, their blast sometimes smothering our mess tent with snow. The weather remained unstable, with regular and sometimes significant snowfalls, so without any chance of climbing higher we decided once again to go back for a rest in Karimabad. But we had fallen in love with the south face of Pumari Chhish South, and had forgotten all about Khunyang Chhish.

When we got back to base camp 10 days later, we declared ourselves sufficiently acclimatized for an attempt on our beloved face, although we guessed this was just wishful thinking. We hoped that since the face was very steep and faced exactly south, we would find better snow conditions.



On June 6, after a day of great weather that we spent watching avalanches purging the faces around us, we started off on our attempt. Given the frequent snowfalls, we couldn't expect to have more than three to four days for our ascent. Speed and therefore little weight in our packs would be the keys to success. The first day we started at 3 a.m. and had great snow conditions up to 5,400 meters. We could "run" up the first 300 meters, which were exposed to seracs sitting 2,000 meters higher.

Above, it was another story. It is hard to describe what it felt like on the huge ramp that crosses the face from right to left—to be stuck in waist-deep snow on a 55- to 60-degree slope with 1,500 meters of void below. Before reaching our first bivy, we took hours just to climb a hundred vertical meters. We had climbed 1,550 meters in 14 hours and were totally wasted. It took us another hour to cut a proper bivy platform on the ridge bordering the left side of the ramp.

The next morning we reached the top of the ramp after two hours, and then we made our way up almost two-thirds of the headwall, climbing well into the night. We couldn't find a proper place to bivy, and it had started snowing. Eventually we found a reasonable boulder—just large enough for two French asses—sticking out of the ice, fixed a net of rope under it for our feet, and sat down. That bivy was the kind you remember all your life. I got repeatedly covered by spindrift, and my chest started to get really cold. Meanwhile Yannick's bilious vomiting guaranteed us a show for most of the night. It was the usual Graziani altitude sickness, and I wasn't too worried because I knew how resilient he was.

The next morning, with all the fresh snow that had fallen, there was only one option: a Napoleonic "retreat from Moscow." After having survived this descent, in spindrift that became more and more like real avalanches as we got lower, the situation was clear for me: "E.T., go back to Karimabad, and then to France to enjoy the cherry season."

However, Yannick managed to convince me to stay for another try. On June 16, on the third day of our second attempt, we got hit with bad weather again. We had climbed a little further up this time, maybe to 6,850 meters, and on a different line in the upper part of the headwall. While rappelling, at around 6,500 meters, we witnessed a massive avalanche not far from us, triggered by a serac at our level. The bottom of our line got blown away, and our treasured approach skis with it. At base camp, four kilometers away from the bottom of our face, Qudrat and Bari experienced a 20-minute blizzard.

At least things were clear to both of us now: E.T.: go home!



In 2007 circumstances would turn out to be much more favorable, even though we hadn't organized a proper expedition. I had already planned a trip to Pakistan in the spring, taking some clients ski-touring in the Shimshal area, and then going to Kashmir to review the results of the emergency relief operation that we had set up following the disastrous earthquake of October 8, 2005. [See "A Note About the Author" for more about this relief operation.] As for Yannick, he had decided to ski some high peaks around Karimabad with his girlfriend, Caroline.

I left Chamonix a week before them, and just before my departure I managed to convince Yannick to go for yet another attempt on Pumari Chhish South. We both knew we wouldn't have the drive to stay for many weeks in the Yutmaru basin this time, and that acclimatizing elsewhere on more moderate peaks would be much easier. We agreed to meet on May 31, acclimatized and ready to give it another brief attempt. We allowed ourselves just two and a half weeks for the round trip from Karimabad.

In the end we actually acclimatized together, in fairly bad weather, spending just one night each on two different 5,800-meter peaks, during a six-day ski-touring trip in the Kunjerab Pass area with our girlfriends. Back in Karimabad, we took three days' rest. After five weeks of typical unstable Karakoram weather, we had almost lost hope. We scaled back any expectations. We would simply go and have a look.

An uneventful six-hour jeep ride brought us to Hispar village, where we hired friendly and efficient porters. We then trekked for three days to base camp, which this time we could set up on a beautiful grass meadow on a moraine, eight kilometers from the bottom of Pumari South (there was no snow this time, even at 4,500 meters). Fresh spring water was available nearby, and at each meal Ali, our favorite cook, treated us to some excellent cuisine.

On June 6 we made ourselves comfortable in base camp. That evening the weather cleared, and the next day was perfect. We got a forecast by satellite phone for at least six days of good weather. We couldn't believe our ears! Our packs were ready the next morning.



With the experience we had gained in 2003, and this longer window of good weather, we knew how to plan our first three climbing days. And things went as expected, except on day two, when we had to wait politely under an overhang at the bottom of the ramp for the wet snow slides to stop.

On day three, above the ramp, we once again climbed the first very hard section of mixed terrain on the face. Yannick led a 60-meter pitch up an overhanging, icy chimney—no place to fall! Then I took my turn on an easier but absolutely magnificent mixed line diagonalling up to the left.

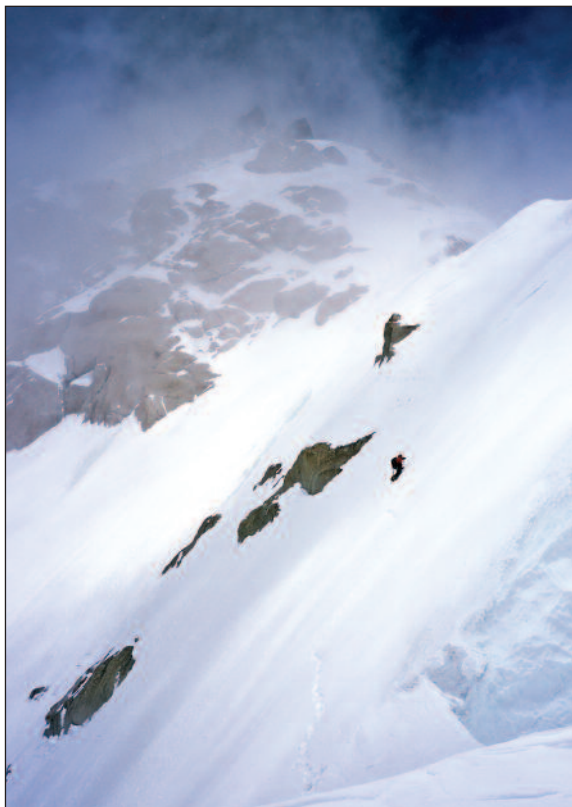
We knew the fourth day would be D-day for our attempt. We would have to find the key passage through the top of the headwall, in unknown territory above the high point of 6,850 meters we had reached in 2003. We also knew we couldn't make it to the top from our third bivy at 6,600 meters, so we would have to climb with heavy sacks, and find a last bivy site above the headwall at around 7,000 meters.

One of the key pitches of the entire 2,700-meter face was just above our third bivy at 6,600 meters. In the late afternoon sun on day three, Yannick made an impressive lead up a slightly overhanging crack and chimney, then fixed it with one of our two 60-meter ropes.

That helped us a lot to get going the next day. We had known this section would be shady and very cold in the morning. Above the chimney, we decided to climb out toward the right side



Yannick Graziani leads beautiful mixed ground at about 6,700 meters during the fourth morning of climbing.
Christian Trommsdorff



Graziani traverses in high winds at about 7,100 meters, heading toward the summit. *Christian Trommsdorff*

of the headwall, a bit like we had done during our second attempt in 2003, but instinctively we took a somewhat different line. We climbed four pitches of superb mixed terrain on beautiful granite, then got stuck beneath the last 50 meters of the headwall.

On the left was another overhanging chimney, which Yannick suggested climbing, but I refused, convinced it would cost us too much energy. After a very tense discussion about a possible pendulum to the left to look around the corner for easier terrain, I again refused, this time thinking it would be too risky. I remembered Doug Scott's accident in a similar situation high on the Ogre.

In the course of our "discussions," I dropped one my ice axes. We had finally agreed that I would do a diagonal rappel first, then Yannick would do his pendulum above me, with the rope held from below. But we managed to get our rope stuck when trying to rappel.

While I was angrily tugging on the rope and trying to flip it around a corner, a loop that had got caught under my axe dislodged it. I eventually had to climb back up a bit until I could pull the rope from a more favorable angle, and then managed to join Yannick 15 meters above.

With all this maneuvering we had lost over an hour, and it was already late afternoon. However, when Yannick finally turned the corner to the left, I heard a cry of elation. It was one of those magic moments. From what we could see now, we knew that if the weather held we would have a real chance of making the top.

After seven or eight more mixed, then ice, then delicate snow pitches, we found a perfect bivy site at 7,000 meters, just 50 meters to the left of our line. It was now dusk and we had reached the edge of the high glacier basin between the Khunyang East, Pumari Main, and Pumari South summits. The slopes and ridges above us were much easier, although still at around 55 degrees. The weather remained excellent; the big uncertainty now was the snow conditions.

The next morning it took us four hours to climb the last 350 meters to the top. The snow got better as we climbed, as the slopes were more exposed to the high-altitude winds. However, when we were halfway up the wind suddenly got stronger, and about 100 meters from the top we were caught in 80 to 100 kph gusts.

Despite being very close to the summit, we began to doubt again. But then, as if by magic, the wind dropped a little. Had it not, we would have failed to make the summit once again!



Looking back at our 10 years of expedition climbing together, Yannick and I can feel a sense of fulfillment. Our passion for the high peaks is still intact, and we realize that the core values of our amateur climbing ethic have become clearer and sustainable over the years; these values are respect, friendship, spirit of discovery, beauty, ambition, progressive experience, high level of commitment, and maximal economy of means. They have led us to live extraordinary adventures that are hard to capture in photos, films, or words.

Four times in 10 expeditions, Yannick and I have failed to reach our objective, but experience and style come first for us. With Chomo Lonzo North and Central, and Pumari Chhish South, we have had the privilege of climbing three very beautiful and technical virgin 7,000-meter peaks. The climbing on Pumari Chhish last year went smoothly. We had been high on the mountain before, and this time we benefited from a great weather window. Still, the uncertainty of the key section of the headwall gave an incredible intensity to our fourth day on the mountain—a magic day we will never forget!

SUMMARY:

AREA: Hispar Muztagh, Karakoram, Pakistan

ASCENT: Alpine-style first ascent of Pumari Chhish South (7,350m) by the south face (2,700m, ABO 5.10 M6 A1), Yannick Graziani and Christian Trommsdorff, June 8–13, 2007. The two men climbed the face with four bivouacs, summiting at noon on June 12; they downclimbed and made approximately 35 rappels along the line of ascent over the next day and a half.

A shorter version of this article appeared previously in *Vertical*.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Born in 1964 in Grenoble, France, Christian Trommsdorff has completed more than 20 international expeditions. After a career as an electrical engineer, he became a UIAGM guide and has been based in Chamonix for the last decade.

After the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, along with Pierre Neyret (UIAGM guide) and François Carrel (journalist), Trommsdorff started a relief operation called *Solidarité Alpes Cachemire* in partnership with the French Alpine Club, and raised more than 150,000 euros that has been spent for emergency relief operations and lately for school reconstruction in four remote villages strongly affected by the quake. Trommsdorff is seeking funds to rebuild more schools with the help of a small, efficient team already in place in Pakistan. Contact: chris_trommsdorff@hotmail.com for details.



Battered by wind, sun, and altitude, Trommsdorff returns to the final bivouac. Yannick Graziani