

A Trip to the Big Hills – 2024

By Scott Trusler



Some of you may recall that in 2006 and 2009 I took extended leave and completed two treks in Nepal. The first was the Annapurna Circuit, a classic route over the Thorong La (a pass at elevation 18,000 feet) and the second was to the summit of Mera Peak (elevation 21,500 feet). Well suffice to say I was much younger then and it was a much different time – you can pretty much drive the entire Annapurna Circuit now; many go by bicycle as well but there is still a walking path. Shortly after the second trip I became quite interested in visiting the Karakoram range – it took many years, but I finally made it in July/August 2024.

I have elected to attempt to reduce words; providing a few highlight paragraphs for various elements of the trip and to use a mini-photo album with extended captions to tell the story, which I hope will be of more interest.

The Place – I would guess if asked to make a list of places you’d like to visit, Pakistan would not be near the top, probably not even on this list. It’s probably not a surprise that most of news we get in the “west” about Pakistan is the “bad stuff” coming out of conflict areas; we never see a story about the many good things. No doubt Pakistan has its challenges as it seeks to find its place on this complicated rock we call Earth, but as a visitor you are just not allowed to go to parts of the country that are dangerous and by applying a little common sense one can enjoy a safe visit to the accessible parts of the country. We respectfully moved about near our hotels in Islamabad and Skardu, the airports, and even the Rawalpindi bazar (the original capital and starting point for historic explorations of the region) without feeling unsafe. If your aim is to visit the Karakoram, you pretty much have to visit Pakistan – so get on with it.

Why This Trip – The obvious reason is to see the famous mountains of the Karakoram range. There are fourteen peaks on Earth whose summits reach beyond elevation 8,000m (26,000 ft); 8 are in Nepal, one in Tibet, and five are in Pakistan – four in the Karakoram: K2, Gasherbrum I & II, and Broad Peak. However, equally important for me was to spend time within and experience a major glacial system and the Baltoro and Goodwin-Austin glaciers with all the side glaciers feeding in certainly delivered.

The Team - There were ten of us – (1) New Zealand, (1) Scotland, (6) England, (2) US – plus our “western guide (Dutch), and our local guide (Yah Yah Khan) plus cooks, porters, horseman and their charges.

The Landscape - After many sober (no alcohol in Pakistan) discussions, our group finally reached consensus on a single word to describe the landscape of our trip – *severe*. The glaciers are anything but flat, covered with debris from sand to boulders the size of houses and the mountains emerge steeply from the ice with no foothills to make their rise into the sky for thousands of feet more gradual. There are no trees, only occasional patches of hearty plants, some birds, and the elusive Ibex. Rock and ice dominate.

The Route - For me it started with two days of airplanes and airports – Denver > Dallas > Doha > Islamabad. Then a morning flight to Skardu and the next day a very early morning departure for the 6+ hour jeep ride to the end of the road in Askole. Then fourteen days walking (112 miles round trip) and camping to reach K2 Basecamp and then returning to Askole and catching our jeep ride back to Skardu (and a long hot shower). Then a flight back to Islamabad the next morning, where we used the trip contingency day to visit Rawalpindi before enjoying our last dinner together, saying goodbye, and heading to airport for early morning flights.

Typical Day - The group was inclined to making early starts so our local staN rattled our tents around 5am and delivered hot tea to sip as we packed our kit, breakfast followed, and we were underway 630-700am. We would walk for 3-4 hours, have lunch, and then walk another 3-4 hours – all with frequent photo stops and water / snack breaks every hour. We would arrive at camp with time to unpack before afternoon tea at 4pm, allowing time for chores, reading, writing, photos, and for some a nap before darkness and dinner at 7pm and lights out 830-9pm. Nights and early morning hours were below freezing with daytime temps above freezing above elevation 12,000 ft and actually quite warm lower down.

Points of Interest – as noted above, my main interests were seeing the mountains made famous in exploration and climbing lore and also the glacier system of the region. I have tried to include a glimpse of all these in the included photos.

Conclusion – Although the trip home was mostly uneventful until a flight delay and eventual cancelation resulted in me having to spend the night in the Dallas airport and arriving back in Denver nearly 12 hours late, the overall trip and experience was simply epic. My travel mates were all grand, the Pakistani people we encountered were wonderful, the food was tasty, and this small slice of our planet Earth is breathtaking.

Photo Album



1. Islamabad from hotel room, a more modern and posh neighborhood home to doctors and other professionals.



2. View from hotel in Skardu – the confluence of the mighty Indus River and the Shigar River.



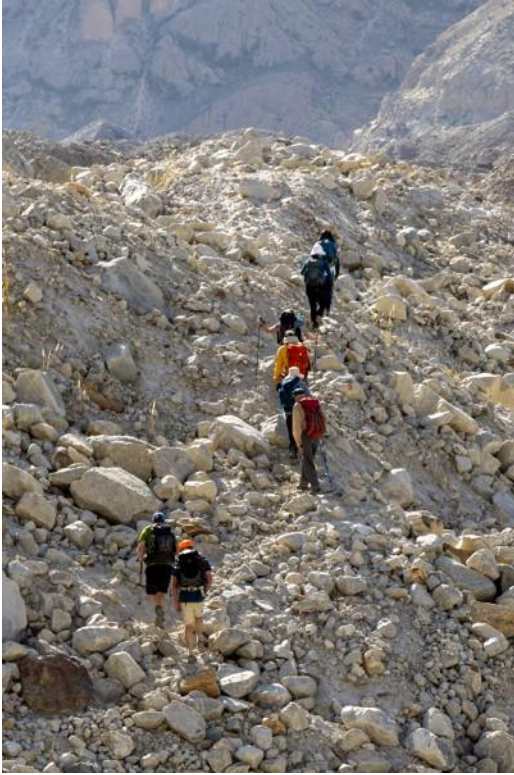
3. End of the road – Askole – and our first night camping. Askole is known for apricot orchards; there are fields of potatoes and buckwheat too.



4. Finally, with boots laced and packs on shoulders we start our walk – K2 Basecamp is just 56 miles and 7,000 ft of elevation gain away.



5. Camp 3 – Acclimatization rest day at Paiju – Elev. 10,000 ft. Coming out, we walked for 4 hours to this camp, had lunch and a 2 hr nap then walked another 4 hours to complete our longest day.



6. Making our way up the snout of the Baltoro glacier. We then crossed on a diagonal, up and down route, dropped into the lateral trough and walked along the moraine as we continued up the valley.



7. Tarango Towers massif; 4 summits, including Tarango Tower (center), Tarango Ri (behind left) and Great Tarango (right).



8. Camp 4 – Urdukas. From here we are on glacier day and night until we return (but not camp) here in 7 days.



9. A proof of life shot of me taken by one of my English mates; the Baltoro glacier – and our route – stretching east in the background.



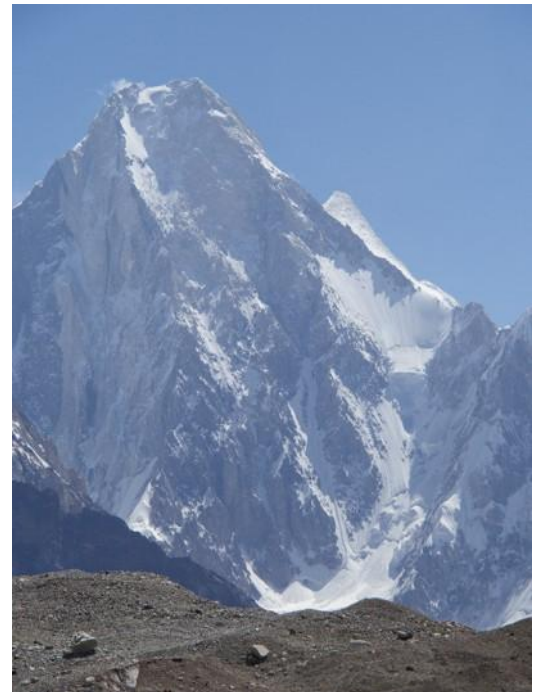
10. Many temporary bridges to cross as we navigate the Baltoro and streams draining from side glaciers.



11. As we move further up the Baltoro, we come into an area where “glacier sails” spring up, rising as much as 100 ft; our route winds around them through this unique landscape.



12. Camp 6, Concordia, is still over the glacial horizon as Broad Peak comes into full view over the glacier sails along the route.



13. Gasherbrum IV and Gasherbrum II (behind) also in full view as we approach Concordia.



14. We awake In Concordia to find K2 bathed in early morning sun while the valley is still in darkness.



15. Looking back at Concordia camp as we make our way toward K2 Basecamp. Mitre Peak in the background and the Baltoro bending off to the right.



16. My photo op at K2 Basecamp – elev. 17,000 ft – with the basecamp village just visible in the background and K2 rising into the clouds hiding the summit over 11,000 ft above. China a few miles over the horizon on the far right.



17. Tea at K2 Basecamp. With the climbers pushing for the summit after 55 days of poor weather, the staff were happy to fire up the burners and host our group to tea and biscuits before we made our way back to Broad Peak Basecamp for the night.



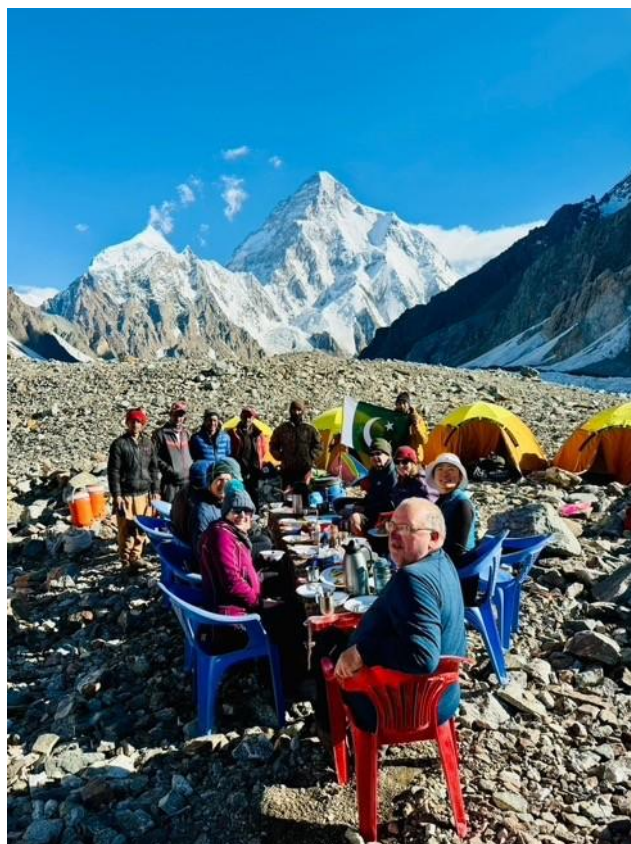
18. Looking NE beyond K2 on the left and into China.



19. Looking south down the Goodwin-Austin glacier toward Concordia. At the time, we were hoping we made it to our highest camp at Broad Peak Basecamp before we lost the days light.



20. Our highest camp at elevation 16,000 ft near Broad Peak Basecamp. You can't find this view from any hotel.



21. Breakfast with giants – K2 with Angle Sar on her left – the team and our Pakistani friends.



22. Our journey down had a few long days, but we were rewarded with this view of Masherbrum - also known as K1 and originally thought to be the highest mountain in the Karakoram – later surveys found it to not be close to K2.



23. and this view of Muztagh Tower that sits on the China border.



24. Another reward – a stunning sunset behind Tarango Towers (left) and Cathedral Peak. A fitting end to our time in the big hills – in less than 2 days we would be back in Skardu.



25. Road washout on the trip out. We unloaded all the gear, scrambled down, crossed a temporary footbridge and then up a ladder to jeeps waiting on the other side. A frequent occurrence that was managed with practiced efficiency.



26. Rawalpindi Bazar



THE END