

Mountains of the imagination

A surreal world of enormous peaks, vast glaciers and soaring towers of rock, Pakistan's Karakoram is arguably the most spectacular – and challenging – mountain landscape on Earth. In an extract from his visually sublime new book, photographer **Colin Prior** describes his 23-year mission to capture them through his camera lens

PHOTOGRAPHY: **COLIN PRIOR**

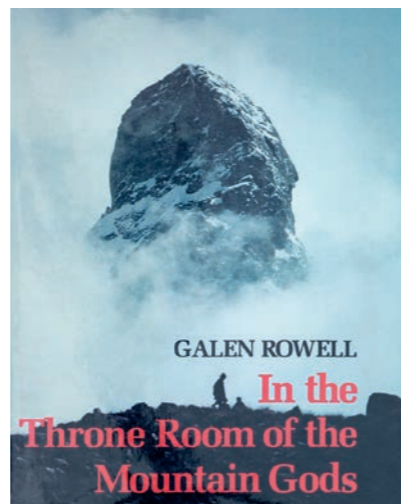
KARAKORAM

MY FASCINATION with the Karakoram Mountains began when I was 23 years old. In the travel section of my local library, I came across a book that was to change the course of my life. Written by the climber and photographer Galen Rowell, *In the Throne Room of the Mountains Gods* (1977) documented the 1975 American expedition to K2. I was familiar with K2, but had never heard of the Karakoram Mountains, and one photograph in particular – of the Trango Towers – captured my imagination like no other photograph ever had. What sort of place, I wondered, gave rise to mountains of this character, one that could transpose the mind to another realm?

From that moment on, I was entranced and knew that my destiny lay there.

The fact that K2 is located not in the Himalayas but in a mountainous region of north-eastern Pakistan is a revelation to many people. The name Karakoram is given to the great range of mountains that runs 400 kilometres (250 miles) north-west of the Himalayas and north of the Indus River, which flows between the two ranges from its source in Tibet. The highest peaks in the Karakoram are all situated in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, and the range contains four of the world's fourteen 8000-metre (26,247ft) peaks, more than sixty peaks above 7000 metres (22,966ft), and hundreds of spectacular rock and ice mountains over 6000 metres (19,685ft) tall. Composed of granites and gneisses and sculpted by wind and ice into monumental spires, towers, cathedrals and pyramids, these rocks are a showcase of natural design and form.

The Karakoram Mountains were first surveyed by Lieutenant Thomas George Montgomerie, a British officer who was seconded to the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India. On 10 September 1856 he climbed Haramukh, a peak 5142 metres (16,870ft) high, now in the Ganderbal district of Jammu and Kashmir, and set up his theodolite. Some 210 kilometres (130 miles) away stood the largely unknown Karakoram range, where he noted two prominent peaks. Having taken bearings, he sketched their profiles in his notebook, naming them K1 and K2 – the 'K' designating Karakoram. The survey endeavoured to find local names for the mountains if they were available; however, ethnic groups living on either side of the great chain were culturally different and, in most cases, the few names that did exist differed on the north and south sides of the same peak. K1 was later renamed



[previous page] TK-29 – Great Trango (6286m) and Nameless Tower (6239m), Baltoro Muztagh (2013) [above] The book by Galen Rowell that first captured Colin Prior's imagination [right] K2 (8611m) and Godwin Austen Glacier from Vigne Glacier, Baltoro Muztagh (2004) [below] Amin Brakk (Great Tower 5800 m), Hushe River delta, Hushe Valley (1996)



Masherbrum, but, because of its remoteness, there was no consensus among the Baltis about an indigenous name for K2. Although there were several attempts to rename the world's second highest mountain, Montgomerie's original designation is the name that prevailed.

SHEER ECSTASY

After first looking at that photograph of the Trango Towers, many years passed before I managed to travel to Pakistan. My first visit was in 1996. As part of a commission for British Airways, I found myself heading north, along the Karakoram Highway towards Skardu and onwards to Hushe, one of the two gateway villages into the Karakoram. The plan was to travel up the Gondogoro Glacier, climb the Gondogoro La and continue on to Gondogoro Peak. However, torrential rain confined us for three days to Hushe, in a damp building with a porous earthen roof. In the evenings we would retire to our sodden tents, where sleep was often interrupted by the noise of colossal rockfalls, which continued for up to fifteen minutes at a time. By the fourth day, the rain had abated, so – although the skies remained overcast – we set off for our first campsite, at Saicho. It soon became evident that this sustained period of precipitation had laid down heavy accumulations of snow on the glacier and that, at the higher altitudes of the Gondogoro La, there would be

[below] Angel Peak (6858m) and K2 (8611m), Godwin Austen Glacier (2013)
[right] Gham Hussain collecting firewood, Uli Biaho Base Camp (2013)



a significant risk of avalanche. I had to accept that any hopes of achieving my objective, within the time frame available to me, were now lost. It was my first lesson in the volatility of the weather in the Karakoram.

As the years went by, my passion for the Karakoram Mountains never faded, and in June 2004 I found myself back in Hushe. On that trip, we climbed the Gondogoro La, a 5585-metre-high (18,323ft) mountain pass. Avalanches had destroyed or buried the fixed ropes necessary to ascend the 50-degree slopes. Accompanied by a porter, our Sirdar, Muhammad Khan, fixed a temporary set of ropes. We then began the strenuous ascent to the top of the pass. Before me stood K2, the monarch of the region, Broad Peak and the Gasherbrum Group, four of the world's fourteen 8000-metre peaks seen together in a single sweep. The moment could not have been more perfect, and I stood in silent contemplation.

After I shot a series of panoramas, it was time to descend the south-western side of the Gondogoro La to Ali Camp. We set off in deep snow down the lope, losing height quickly. With the sunlight now hitting the towering slopes above us, I became increasingly concerned about the potential for further avalanches. For over an hour and a half, we were completely exposed to this risk, but thankfully we reached Ali Camp without incident. Early the next morning, I awoke to a scene of brilliance. Togaed in white, the mountains rose in an amphitheatre around me, into an azure sky. The scene was so hauntingly beautiful that I experienced a feeling of sheer ecstasy and fulfilment.

SUBLIME MOMENT

The Karakoram Mountains continued to haunt my dreams and were never far from my mind. I was conscious that the clock was ticking and that, if I ever hoped to produce a body of work that I felt was worthy of publication, I would need to attract commercial sponsorship. I also recognised that, because of the nature of travel on the glaciers and acclimatisation to altitude, I would need to make at least four further separate expeditions, each one month long, as anything shorter would not be worthwhile.

News of my four-year project reached the film producer Richard Else, who was very interested in making a documentary, which he subsequently proposed to the BBC. By February 2013, we had our wish: the BBC commissioned the documentary, and preparations began in earnest. Owing to the political situation, the Karakoram is considered a restricted area and is therefore closed to the international media. But although initially reticent, the Pakistani Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was persuaded to authorise our trip, and we were extremely grateful to be the first film crew allowed into the area.

One of my priorities on this expedition was to capture the otherworldly nature of the Trango Towers. After all, it was a photograph of this massif that initially sparked my interest in the Karakoram Mountains. At times, the Trango family appears to rise from a mythological past, discovered somewhere in Middle-earth. I knew from experience how challenging the photography would be and that success would ultimately be determined by conditions when we arrived at Urdukas, an elevated campsite high above the Baltoro Glacier. At 04:20 on 28 June, I left the campsite with Hussain and climbed to a point 100 metres (328 ft) above, which offered panoramic views north to the Trango Group and west towards Uli Biaho Tower and the Trango Glacier. A thin veil of cloud hung above the summits, dropping occasionally to obscure the tops of the towers. As the sun rose, the clouds in the eastern sky parted momentarily and the rocks of Great Trango and Nameless Tower glowed like hot embers in a fire – a sublime moment that flashed into my senses.

PRIMEVAL AND PRISTINE

Following on from the success of the 2013 expedition and the subsequent documentary, I returned to Pakistan in the first week of June in 2014. I was eager to visit the Biafo Glacier, to photograph Baintha Brakk (The Ogre) and the Latok Group, and to ascend the Hispar La, at 5128 metres (16,824ft) a high pass that connects the Biafo with the Hispar Glacier. My research suggested that the best photographic opportunities were to be found on the



[above] Hassan (6300m), K6 (7282m) and Fathi Brakk (5560m), Charakusa Glacier (2015) [right] Colin Prior on the Gondogoro La with K2, Broad Peak and the Gasherbrums beyond, Baltoro Muztagh (2004)

Biafo Glacier and that the mountains visible from the descent of the Hispar were not the dramatic towers and spires that are characteristic of the Biafo and Baltoro Glaciers. For that reason, I arranged an itinerary that followed the Biafo Glacier up to the top of the Hispar La and returned by the same route, maximising opportunities to photograph the mountains that rise on both sides of the glacier.

The expedition started badly. On my first night out in Islamabad, I contracted food poisoning, which resulted in my losing so much fluid that I passed out, fracturing the mirrored door of a wardrobe into long shards of glass and hitting my head on the tiled floor. When I regained consciousness, I was in shock, shivering and unable to move my neck, but fortunately uncut. An X-ray and a CT scan revealed that I had herniated a disc in my neck between vertebrae C4 and C5. I was not at my best – but the expedition was a success in the end.

By 2015, I had become addicted to my annual sojourn to the Karakoram Mountains. By the time we left Skardu, the white noise of daily life had faded away and I quickly slipped back into the routine of life on the glaciers, which began at 4.30am and ended at 8pm. I had planned two separate expeditions for



2015: the first to the Charakusa Glacier, which we would access from the Hushe Valley, and the second, after a brief return to Skardu, a further expedition into the Baltoro Glacier to expand on the success of the 2013 expedition.

Having had little time to acclimatise since my arrival in Skardu, I found the ascent over the boulder-strewn surface of the glacier a challenge, and at one point I struggled to put one foot in front of the other. But a couple of days later, on the glacier climb up to K6 base camp, the clouds rolled back like a theatre curtain to reveal an as yet unseen aspect of Fathi Brakk. Puffy white clouds floated above and beyond the peaks, while streamers of cirrus streaked across the dazzling blue sky in celebration. It was a moment of absolute bliss. I stood there in contemplation and felt I was looking for the first time at an embryonic planet – prolific, primeval and pristine.

OVERWHELMING REWARDS

In 2019, as I examined my own photographs of the Panmah Muztagh (the subrange that includes Baintha Brakk and the Latoks) from the 2014 expedition, I felt a sense of incompleteness and of something lacking; I believed that another trip to the Biafo Glacier would be necessary, and I planned to focus my attention on Baintha Brakk, the Latok Group and the towers of the West Biafo Wall.

In my 2019 expedition, on our seventh day, we departed our camp at Nakpogoro on the Biafo's medial moraine. Ahead, the porters had begun the steep ascent to our campsite at Karpogoro and we crossed on to the lateral moraine to access the slopes above. Concentrating carefully on where I placed my feet, I suddenly broke through a snow bridge; had it not been for my rucksack snagging, I would have dropped into oblivion. Hussain quickly helped me back on to my feet. Apart from compressing my knee joint, I was unscathed. But it was a close shave and one that I was not keen to repeat.

The next day, thick cloud meant I had almost written off any further photography, when, at 4pm, there were encouraging signs that the weather was improving, and eventually the sun began to break through. Swathes of thick mist still veiled the ramparts of Baintha Brakk, which rise 2475 metres (8120ft) above the glacier to the summit at 7285 metres (23,900ft). As sunset approached and the light began to warm up, mist on the upper mountain started to thin, creating a window that lasted a few seconds – just long enough for me to capture the summits before the light fizzled out. I was in a state of elation, knowing that in a single day I had captured a new aspect of Baintha Brakk that revealed something more of its essence and also a panorama of the West Biafo Wall.

I had reached the end of my journey. The odyssey had encompassed six expeditions over a period of twenty-three years, during which I had come to consider the Karakoram Mountains not simply as a place but also as a state of imagination. With such a mindset, the hardships and dangers of glacier travel are outstripped by the overwhelming rewards of being in such wild and pristine country surrounded by these almost mythical giants. It has been my

privilege to have witnessed these mountains over the course of more than two decades. My hope is that this book will be a touchstone for those who seek not only dramatic mountain beauty but also mountains of the imagination. 🏔️



This feature is an abridged / edited extract from *The Karakoram: Ice Mountains of Pakistan* by Colin Prior, with an essay by Mick Conefrey (Merrell Publishers, £50: merrellpublishers.com).