

Leading landscape photographer **Colin Prior** talks about his approach to capturing the majesty of mountains near and far, and recalls some of his best moments while in the field

# WHERE SPIRITS SOAR

WORDS & PICTURES COLIN PRIOR

The Trango Towers in the Karakoram

COVER FEATURE

I dream about mountains. There's something about the way that elevation breaks the horizon and sets the spirit soaring and it is this essence that I'm essentially trying to capture in a way that communicates my own elation. Sometimes I succeed, more often I fail, but it is that endless search for unicorn's blood that pushes me onwards and upwards.

Unlike mountaineers' dreams that focus largely on the summit, my dreams differ considerably. I am content to be with the mountain and to explore if it will reveal something of itself which I can capture and take away. It's a process that requires deep patience. The Inuit word 'quinuituq' describes this long wait at a seal hole, waiting for prey to surface or the waiting for a lead of open water out on the ice pack to close – simply put, it's waiting hours for one second or, in my case, waiting years for one second. Not exactly what you'd want to base a business model on but success still has its rewards.

**BEGINNINGS**

My path into photography started not on dry land but beneath the waves. Having created a portfolio of images around Scotland's coastline and in the Red Sea, I entered a photography competition in 1981 and went on to win 'best newcomer to underwater photography' in the Camera Beneath the Waves competition. This produced the catalyst that was to change my life, and I gave up my job as operations manager to embark on a career as a professional photographer.

During the next 10 years I was commissioned by advertising and design agencies for clients in the travel, lifestyle, and leisure sectors, and began to develop my personal work – by 1990 I had begun to shoot panoramas. I first became aware of the panoramic format (6 x 17 is the roll film dimensions in centimetres) in an American photography magazine and its 3:1 aspect ratio lit my imagination like no other. I recognised that this format would be well suited to capturing the landscape of the Scottish Highlands, and would enable me to approach them in a new and visual exciting way. Vertical profiles across a horizontal format – it even *sounds* exciting. So my quest began and I recognised I had a big mountain to climb in more sense than one.

I quickly learnt that in order to shoot the definitive image of a mountain or a mountain range the sun needs to be in the right position, and by that I don't just mean sunrise or sunset – but in what month of the year. As the sun moves between summer and winter solstices there are huge variations on where the sun is rising and setting and on the height of the arc that it follows. Ultimately, there is an optimum point in the year that will create the best potential image at sunrise or sunset. Much of this information is now available in apps but back then it was a slow process of observation and learning and in Scotland I now know from experience where to be and when.

In my first two books, 'Highland Wilderness' and 'Scotland – The Wild Places', the majority of high-level shoots were achieved without high camps; however, as my appetite for more remote mountains grew, camping on or around summits became the most effective way to shoot sunrise. There's something deeply satisfying in putting in the leg work and pushing up 24kg to the viewpoint, setting up my Hilleberg Akto tent, cooking some food and hopefully shooting something at sunset. Then after a comfortable sleep I can awaken, refreshed before dawn. There's always such a sense of deep-rooted excitement as I stand waiting in the twilight, knowing that if events

The author on location in the Karakoram



## COVER FEATURE

K2 photographed  
from Concordia

**“There’s something about the way that elevation breaks the horizon and sets the spirit soaring and it is this essence that I’m essentially trying to capture...”**

unfold in the way I hope, then not only will I be the sole witness to them but will have the opportunity to capture something unique. Fine light is the elixir that is required to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. I have watched as the black gabbro of the Cuillin turn crimson and then orange in a matter of minutes. Over the years, I have been privileged to witness so many of these transformations and, whilst each one is unique, some burn brighter in the memory than others.

### PERFECT MOMENT

Ladhar Bheinn (Larven) is one of Scotland’s iconic mountains and the highest Munro in the Knoydart peninsula. I had tried on several occasions to capture something of the mountain’s character from both north and south shores of Loch Hourn and from Ladhar Bheinn itself, but I felt there was still something missing. So, having studied the maps again, I identified the Corbett of Beinn Bhuidhe at the eastern end of Loch Hourn and planned a high camp during the month of October to take in sunrise on Ladhar Bheinn.

A slow trudge up an excellent stalker’s path brought me to a flat platform just below the summit. I set up camp, cooked some dinner and watched a watery sunset out beyond Ladhar Bheinn. Rising before dawn, I quickly realised that a high level cloud base had established itself overnight and that the image I held in my mind’s eye was likely to remain there for some time longer. My only option was to descend – no shots fired. I never see these attempts as failures but as an intelligence gathering exercise. I’ve used the analogy of a military strike many times and it’s true that reconnaissance work is the key to future successes. The next stage is preparation and is about ensuring everything is packed in both your camera bag and rucksack. Stage three is simply about waiting for a weather window that is most likely to guarantee success.

With this in mind, I still had my eye on Beinn Bhuidhe and eight days later I was back at the foot of the mountain. Having set off late in the day from Glasgow, I didn’t arrive at Kinloch Hourn until 6pm and decided to sleep in the car, setting the alarm for 3am. When I awoke, I couldn’t believe how bright the moonlight was and I set off along the shore of Loch Hourn and quickly found the path. With the moonlight, I never once had to use my headtorch – like Peter Pan, I followed my shadow up the mountain.

Two thirds of the way up, I peered down and Loch Hourn lay below me in the moonlight, its surface reflecting like a pool of mercury. As I continued up the stalker’s path, I passed through herds of red deer and wild goats, their shadowy forms vanishing into the night. Soon I was just below the summit, on familiar ground so to speak and well ahead of sunrise. I set up my tripod in anticipation. It was a classic sunrise – the moon turning crimson as it passed through the Belt of Venus, then mauve as it entered the Earth’s shadow. However, an unexpected surprise awaited me – the sun rose exactly where I anticipated, but it took a further full hour for it to gain sufficient elevation

## COVER FEATURE

Porter Gham Hussain,  
Trango Glacier,  
Karakoram Mountains



**“There was something about the character of these mountains I had never previously seen, which touched me deeply – their spires, towers and cathedrals which rise so vertically that they don’t hold snow.”**

to burn off the shadows on the north-facing slopes of Druim Fada. A winter’s sunrise from the same location – which I had originally visualised – would result in almost complete shadow for most of the day due to the low arc followed by the sun at this time of year. There’s no shortcut for experience.

### THE BIG FREEZE

I vividly recall the extreme winter of 2010, when Arctic conditions gripped the UK for over three weeks which the press christened as ‘The Big Freeze’ – I immediately headed north to Ullapool to capture the Assynt landscape. Due to its proximity to the ocean, Assynt receives little in the way of snow and I was confident that with the conditions which prevailed I could capture an unique moment in time. I headed up Sgurr an Fhithleir in Coigach, which is one of the best viewpoints overlooking Assynt – a fact I had already established from a previous trip. I arrived at the top in good time for sunset, however just as the sun was moving into its final stages of descent it disappeared into a band of cloud sitting above the horizon and it was over.

With not a single image taken, I knew that one day I’d be back, but what I didn’t expect was that it would be just 10 days later. Who would have believed that the Arctic conditions would have prevailed for so long and I headed back up again though much deeper snow to

## The Karakoram Project

### Colin talks about his fascination for Pakistan’s Karakoram Mountains

*My first trip to the Karakoram Mountains in 1996 made such an impression on my mind that they have haunted my dreams ever since. Scarcely does a day pass when I don’t think about being there – in essence they have become a state of imagination. Lying in the north of Pakistan, at the western end of the Himalayan chain, the region is a vast expanse of mountain desert thrust into place by the collision of land masses, bereft of any vegetation and sculpted by eternal winds and snows.*

*The Karakoram contains the greatest concentration of the*

*world’s highest peaks. Four of the 14 8,000m summits are situated around the central Baltoro Glacier; this ice stream, some 36 miles long, includes within its basin 10 of the world’s 30 highest mountains. The Karakoram also contains some of the greatest glacier systems outside of the polar regions: the longest of all is the Saichen, approximately 45 miles, the Hispar is 38 miles, the Biafo, 37 miles and the Batura, like the Baltoro, is some 36 miles in length. It is comparable to the polar regions in this respect, but to no other, for instead of the monotonous horizons of the far*

*north, the landscape of the Karakoram has the richest variety of design, the greatest majesty of form, and an infinite diversity of plane and perspective.*

*This vertical landscape is the ultimate test for the landscape photographer and over the next four years, with the help from my sponsors – Lowepro, Rab and Lee Filters – it is my intention to document this amazing region in a way never previously attempted. It is an exciting prospect to finally have the opportunity to fulfil my life’s dream and to create a body of work which I hope will inspire*

*those who see it and to celebrate what I believe to be the most dramatic landscape on Earth. The project has been running since 2013 and will continue through to 2017/18, with a book and exhibition planned for the autumn of 2018. A great deal of research and planning has already been put in place and I fully expect to make twelve trips to the region during this time.*

*This will, without doubt, be my magnum opus and I would like to thank my sponsors Lowepro, Rab and Lee Filters for their ongoing support who have helped turn a dream to become a reality.”*

COVER FEATURE

Central Karakoram Group, Shyok River flood plain, Pakistan



Sgurr Alasdair and the Inaccessible Pinnacle, Cullin Ridge, Skye



**“There’s something deeply satisfying in putting in the leg work and pushing up 24kg to the viewpoint, setting up my Hilleberg Akto tent, cooking some food and hopefully shooting something at sunset.”**

the summit of Sgurr an Fhithleir. Despite a strong north-easterly wind which blew ferociously, conditions were almost perfect and I knew from my previous visits that I would be protected from this wind direction by the summit rocks – had the wind been blowing northerly or north-westerly, I wouldn’t have been there. The landscape in front of me was even more impressive than it was on my previous attempt; the entire Assynt landscape lay before me under a deep blanket of snow. To the west was Stac Pollaidh, behind which stood the leviathan, Suilven – to its north, Quinag and Canisp and to its east, Cul Mor and Cul Beag, and in the far north-east, Conival and Ben More Assynt – the visual summary of the Assynt landscape.

As I waited for the sun to drop, I found I had eye contact with a golden eagle, some five metres above me as it soared in the wind above the summit – a fleeting moment in an eagle’s world but, for me, a memory forever. As taut as a drum, it rode the wind on an arrow-like trajectory, whizzing passed Stac Pollaidh and vanishing somewhere beyond. Anything now was a bonus and as the sun sank towards the horizon the landscape transitioned through hues of yellow, orange, crimson and finally purple. Deep patience was rewarded and I captured an image of the Assynt landscape under conditions that I don’t believe I’ll see again in my lifetime.

This panorama, along with 199 others, is published in my latest book, ‘Scotland’s Finest Landscapes’. Thirty years in the making, it has finally given me some closure to this chapter in my life – it was time to hunt new game.

**KARAKORAM CALLING**

During the 1990’s, I was commissioned by British Airways to photograph four of their corporate calendars and was privileged to travel to over 40 countries and to photograph their landscapes and cultures. I’m often asked, “What is your favourite country?” and my answer is always Pakistan. People often ask, “Why Pakistan?” The answer is simple. Pakistan is home to the Karakoram Mountains and they inspire me. I didn’t choose the Karakoram – they chose me.

I first became aware of the Karakoram Mountains from a book I discovered in my local library, entitled ‘In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods’ by Galen Rowell. I could see from the log at the front of the book that it had been out only on two previous occasions. However, having found it, I subsequently had it out on almost permanent loan. Galen Rowell, himself a prolific climber, photographer and writer, wrote about his experiences as one of the members of the 1975 American attempt of K2. He broke up the events with a history of the early exploration and climbing expeditions which the region has enjoyed since the mid-19th century, and illustrated it with his amazing photographs of the mountains and the Balti culture. I was captivated. There was something about the

COVER FEATURE



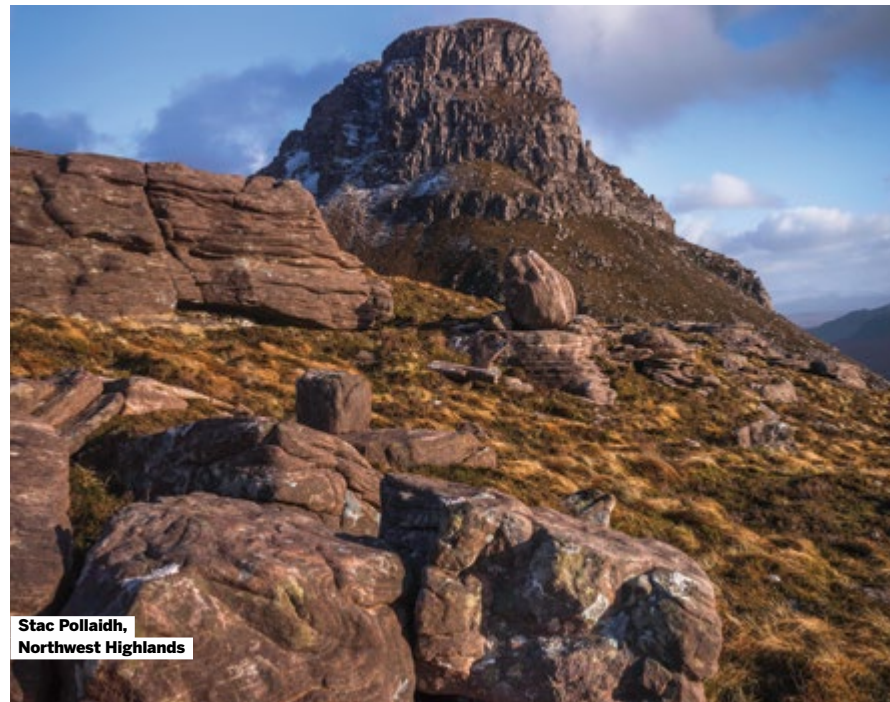
Suilven and Cul Mor and Loch Sionascaig, Assynt (during 'The Big Freeze')



Trango Tower in the moonlight



Porters at a camp fire, Uli Biaho Base Camp, Karakoram Mountains



Stac Pollaidh, Northwest Highlands

**“The vertical landscape of the Karakoram demands a very different photographic approach to that which has worked in the Scottish Highlands...”**

character of these mountains I had never previously seen which touched me deeply – their spires, towers and cathedrals which rise so vertically that they don't hold snow. I knew that one day I would travel there and in 1996, whilst working on the British Airways commission, I managed to travel to the region. I have since been back on three separate occasions and this year I will travel there again for another two months to continue my adventure and to create more material for my book.

I am greatly indebted to my sponsors, Lowepro, Rab and Lee Filters, without whom this project would have remained a dream – they are responsible for investing in my creativity over a four-year period and I am extremely grateful. It is often difficult to express how excited I am to have this opportunity to work in a region amongst four 8,000m peaks – K2, Broad Peak, Gasherbrum I and IV – and to be confronted by some of the world's most impressive spires: the Trangos, Uli Biaho, and the Latoks. Work here is ongoing and it is my intention to create a body of work that is testimony to what I believe to be the most inspiring group of mountains in the world.

The vertical landscape of the Karakoram demands a very different photographic approach to that which has worked in the Scottish Highlands – one that simplifies and distils its essence into the two-dimensional world of photography. Logistically, the approach is also very different than in Scotland; in order to operate there a small team is necessary, which requires a sirdar, a cook, and a team of porters. Everything that is required to survive on the glaciers must be carried in on a porters back and, unlike Nepal, there are no yaks to carry the heavy loads, although mules are often used to transport kerosene and foodstuffs.

One of the most significant differences between my approach in Scotland and in the Karakoram is that by the very nature of the expedition, I need to commit myself for a sustained period to the landscape. In some respects, this has significant benefits and within a short period of time the white noise of waking life dissipates and you begin to flow with the rhythm of the mountains. Whilst there is a certain amount of flexibility within the itinerary, I need to accept the weather that prevails on that day and, unlike Scotland, I

can't just come back next month, so I just need to accept each day as it comes.

In 2013, I found myself at Urdukas where I had come to photograph the Trango Towers. Rising from a Tolkien novel, the granite mass has been chiselled by the elements into a sculpture that assaults the senses in a way that is impossible to verbalise. For two days, I rose before dawn but my efforts to photograph the rock faces were thwarted by low cloud and mist; however, on the third morning the veil was lifted and sunlight flushed the Towers. Two minutes later it has all closed in again and the magic was gone.

I've another three years to do in the Karakoram and by then I should have achieved the depth of work I require to produce what I believe will be the most comprehensive collection of photographs ever created of the Karakoram Mountains. Next year, I plan to travel to the Chinese side of the Karakoram to capture their northerly aspects. A book and exhibition in 2018 is planned.

Closer to home, I have just begun working on a new Scottish project. Inspired by Nan Shepherd's original book, I am about to embark on a four-year project which will explore my own relationship with mountains through images and words. Much of my inspiration is derived from the relationships shared between the elements of the natural world, and what I seek to discover is insight into the mountains' many moods – “to know”, as Nan wrote, “its essential nature with the knowledge that is a process of living.”

I vividly recall an overnight bivouac on the Cuillin Ridge close to the summer solstice. Lying flat out on the gabbro rock, the remnants of a giant magma chamber, I stared into the heavens trying to make sense of what I could see. Stars in galaxies, too distant for the mind to grasp, flickered in the night sky and as I peered out into the void, I experienced a moment when distance and time become one. I felt so infinitesimally small in this Archean space and yet, it is our own consciousness that ignited the plains of space and our senses that shaped this sense of wonder. It is my hope that my photographs capture even the tiniest part of this awe and take us on a journey that seems every bit as distant as the stars. ■ T&M

**Prior knowledge**

**More info on Colin Prior's work**

As well as undertaking commissions and pursuing his own projects, Colin has shared his knowledge over the last six years through a series of photographic workshops, both in Scotland and overseas. His latest book 'Scotland's Finest Landscapes' is available in a collector's edition, with a foreword by Sir Chris Bonington and presented in a large landscape format cloth-covered hardback in a clamshell case. The book showcases the very finest panoramas over his long career and combines them with his greatest new, unpublished images to present a beautifully curated exhibition of work.

More at: [www.colinprior.co.uk](http://www.colinprior.co.uk)

Colin's latest book, 'Scotland's Finest Landscapes'

