

# AN UNCLIMBED MOUNTAIN

Few people know that there are still mountains in the world that are yet to **be** scaled. This summer, a small expedition made the first ascent of one in Ladakh.

BY KEITH GOFFIN

View of the majestic, snow-capped Oma Kangri mountain peak (6037m) from under the prayer flags of our base camp at a height of 5,000 metres.

LADAKH IS HOME TO MANY impressive mountains and I was keen to climb them. I considered going alone but the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF), which administers expeditions, has a rule that any group visiting border mountains in India must include at least two foreigners. I couldn't find another interested climber—active mountaineers of my age (60+) are hard to find! But a (young) Ladakhi friend, Tsewang Gailston, was interested. What's more, he felt we would get permission to climb the mountains further from the border, near his home village of Hunder Dok. Tsewang's friend, Jigmet Phunstong, agreed to join us, too. Now, there would be three of us climbing, which is safer on glaciers. And a plan emerged.

## *The Plan*

The *Himalayan Journal* revealed that most peaks near Hunder Dok had already been climbed. However, using satellite images, we found a side valley that mountaineers had never visited. And this hidden valley had four unclimbed mountains.

Now, we needed to find a way to get to the valley with our climbing and camping equipment. There were no paths to be seen on satellite pictures and we would have to cross a very steep ridge. Villagers told us there was a shepherds' path, used to take sheep to higher pastures in the summer. But, what a Himalayan shepherd calls a "path" can correspond to anything from a stroll to a steep struggle! Plus, we were told that the path had not been used since the 2010 cloudburst. Optimistically, we hoped the

path would be passable with the horses needed to carry our equipment. The plan was to approach Hunder Dok from a northerly direction and then use the shepherds' path to access our hidden valley.

*Not Quite According to Plan*

I reached Leh and spent a few days acclimatising and preparing. The IMF team there were extremely helpful and issued the necessary permits. We were ready to go! However, the Dalai Lama was visiting Ladakh and scheduled to give sermons on three successive days, which happened to clash with our dates. As our horseman wanted to attend the sermons, we had to change our plan and approach Hunder Dok from a southerly direction, via the Lasirmou La pass.

All went well on our approach march. Except for the weather. We climbed in cloud and rain, which changed to sleet as we reached the 5,400-metre-high glacier pass. At that height, we should have been rewarded with stunning views of the Himalayas. Instead, we had 200-metres visibility and a panorama of grey-on-grey. The poor weather continued on subsequent days, and we became used to damp tents and zero possibility of charging camera batteries with solar power. But poor mountain weather is just a matter of patience... we hoped.

After four days descending from the pass, we arrived at Hunder Dok. On checking the shepherds' path, we found that the route up to the ridge was dangerously loose and clearly



*Clockwise from top:* Crossing the rocky glacier on the Lasirmou La pass at 5,300 metres in poor weather conditions; Wildflowers in the pastures near the base camp; A 'porter cousin' carries a heavy load on the way to base camp.



impossible for horses. This led to a search for porters but, of course, everyone was going to the Dalai Lama's meet. Tsewang negotiated with his relatives and three 'porter cousins' saved the day, carrying our equipment up the steep and difficult terrain to base camp (BC). At nearly 5,000 metres, we pitched our BC on a pasture half the size of a cricket field, dotted with wild flowers. As we waited, there was yet more rain. Luckily, the clouds cleared occasionally and we managed a glimpse of the mountains. A few kilometres from our BC was what mountaineers call an 'interesting' peak. Translation: With snow and ice slopes at a 50°+ angle—possible to climb, but not too easy.



*Clockwise from left:*  
The breathtaking, panoramic view of the East Karakoram mountains; Tsewang climbing the upper glacier slopes in perfect weather conditions with 3 cms of fresh snow over ice; Pitching our yellow ABC tent in the middle of the moraine.

### *The Ascent*

Climbing a Himalayan peak requires an ultra-early start because you need to summit and descend before the afternoon sun makes snow slopes prone to an avalanche. We arose at 2:30 am. The weather was perfect:  $-2^{\circ}\text{C}$ , with a slight wind. Leaving our ABC in the pitch dark, we climbed with headtorches over what seemed like never-ending, loose, rocky flanks. By dawn, we reached the glacier and attached crampons (climbing spikes made of metal) to our boots. We climbed up the snow and ice slopes at an incline of  $30^{\circ}$ – $40^{\circ}$  using ice axes, with the altitude making breathing increasingly difficult. Next, we reached a ridge and the angle steepened to  $50^{\circ}$ + with overhanging cornices. For safety, we used ropes to climb the last 250 metres, reaching the summit at 10:30 am.

The summit panorama was breathtaking! On one side were massive, snow-clad mountains of the East Karakoram range. On the other side, adjacent to our peak, was an unclimbed mountain, resembling a fortress and guarded by glacier slopes with crevasses the size of trains! We were truly in awe. Tsewang and Jigmet made piles of rocks, so they could hang prayer flags and chanted *Kiki So So Lhargyalo* (Victory to the Mountain Gods), a Buddhist prayer recited on summits. We congratulated each other but,

Two days later, we woke at 5 am to blue skies and a feeling our patience was about to be rewarded. We packed our climbing equipment, tent, and several days' food, and began climbing higher, looking for a place to set up our advanced base camp (ABC). At 5,300 metres, we dug a platform in the middle of the moraine. The weather was still perfect and Tsewang climbed 200 metres to recon the route for the next day, while two of us cooked. We prepared a freeze-dried camping stew, joking that the bland contents of the package didn't taste as good as the fresh vegetables and spices we had enjoyed at BC. As the temperature quickly dropped to freezing, we went to bed around 8 pm.



*Clockwise from right:*  
The team hung prayer flags on the summit of Oma Kangri, overlooked by the huge crevasses and the unclimbed peak they dubbed 'The Fortress'; Ayak poses for the camera at BC; Tsewang and Keith are all smiles at the summit of Oma Kangri.

as always, summit celebrations are muted as mountaineers are always cautious about the descent (often more dangerous than the ascent).

After recording a 360° angle summit video—needed to provide proof we had reached the summit—Tsewang took a picture of our BC, over 1,000 metres below. "There's something wrong," he said. "Our cooking tent has fallen down!" I checked using the camera zoom. He was right. Our carefully pitched tent was lying flat. But why? Somewhat puzzled, we decided to descend.

*Yak, Yak Attack*

The mystery was immediately solved as we arrived at BC. Two yaks and about 20 cattle were in the valley and had trampled our tent. They had then feasted on all our fresh vegetables, spiced with 1 kg each of garlic and ginger, 10 kg of flour, and a set of boxes of curry powder, garam masala, turmeric, and baking powder. The yaks had clearly enjoyed it but the combined laxative effects of the spices and baking powder were all too obvious from the appearance of the flattened tent! That evening we 'feasted' on plain rice and our last tin of tuna, watched by the (still) hungry yaks.

*Naming the Peak*

As the peak was not officially registered, the tradition is that we, as the first ascensionists,



could name it. The Hunder Dok villagers told us the valley below it is known for providing the best milk. That led to the now registered name, Oma Kangri; Kangri is Ladakhi for snow peak and Oma means milk.

In total, the expedition took us nearly two weeks. And the three of us are delighted to have made a successful first ascent. I personally have a wealth of memories of the hospitality and support I received from the Ladakhi people I met. And I will be back again. ✨

**FLIGHTS**

VISTARA DAILY FLIGHT  
UK601 LEAVES DELHI (DEL)  
AT 0710 AND ARRIVES IN  
LEH (IXL) at 0840.