TOM LIVINGSTONE

The Great Game

Acclimatising under the immense north wall of Koyo Zom (6872m).
(Tom Livingstone)

Ally and I sat in an empty hotel restaurant, the morning silence lingering peacefully under the high-vaulted ceiling. I looked around: empty tables and half-tucked chairs filled the room. The space felt overwhelming, like we'd stepped into a cathedral. I shifted in my seat and thought suddenly of our long, cold bivouacs. The day before we'd been surreally teleported to safety from one of the most intense alpine climbing experiences of my life. Eight days in the mountains, a hard new route and then as we descended to base camp, almost home, a sudden accident. The last 28 hours had been spent caring for Ally as the blood on his head dried. I could still smell it on my clothes. Now, we were floating on a sea of empty restaurant tables. I looked around at the endless space again. How did we get here?

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Pakistan has a bad reputation. Terrorism is rife and there are riots on the streets, or so people assumed when I told them I was returning to the mountains in the far north. I saw their eyebrows rise and the surprise on their faces. 'Is it safe?' they'd ask. It didn't help that I'd be within a few miles of the Afghan border.

Will Sim had 're-discovered' the Hindu Raj region. Years of political instability and tension had closed this mountainous, and remote area to foreigners. Until eight years ago, the Taliban had occupied the nearby Swat valley. The Hindu Raj remained hidden, submerged in mystery and a lack of information. But Will's curiosity and research secured a permit for autumn 2019, and he invited John Crook, Uisdean Hawthorn, Ally Swinton, and me to join.

Our objective was the impressive Koyo Zom (6872m). Like a medieval fortress in the wilds of Asia, its bulk looks towards the plains of Afghanistan, China and Tajikistan. An enormous, square north face is capped by seracs, and a snowy summit pyramid sits like a crown. The seracs look terrifying, and you can immediately see why the only ascents have climbed the easier, east face. In 1968, a team of Austrians made the first ascent; British climbers repeated this route in 1974. Since then, the mountain – and region – had remained dormant.

Arriving in the heat and hustle of Islamabad on 1 September, our team of five Brits was joined by four Pakistanis, who organised the logistics, cooking and life in base camp. Imran, Mohsin, Nabeem and Eshaan were as excited as we were to explore a different region of Pakistan since most of their work was in the Karakoram range.

We reached base camp on our sixth day. Lying on the warm, scraggy grass surrounded by porter loads, it was easy to forget the dusty, bumpy days riding in Jeeps. We'd rumbled up desolate valleys, rattling like bags of bones on the rough track. As we journeyed further into the mountains, villages shrank in size and frequency to isolated hamlets. Great fields of abundant crops became strips of simple subsistence farms. We waved to everyone and offered a *salaam alaikum.* Intense stares instantly cracked into friendly smiles, handshakes offered in return.

Every evening we arrived at a local guesthouse and stretched our aching bodies in the sun. But when it suddenly dipped behind the ridgeline, the light and warmth was snuffed out like a thumb on a candle. Dusk rushed up the valley. Stars began to pinprick the sky. The moon, clear and bright, grew fatter every night. It was a sliver when we arrived in Islamabad. Now it had swelled into a pockmarked disc.

On our final day of driving up the remote Yarkhun valley a few hours from the Afghan border, we passed tin-roofed houses with mud walls from which children and chickens rushed out as our Jeeps roared by. Weathered men simply watched, emotionless, at the ghostly dust clouds swirling in our wake.

At last, we saw our mountain: Koyo Zom. Instantly recognisable, we whooped and then jabbered at the reality after months of anticipation. Seracs loomed over the entire north face, and we all agreed the most attractive option was the right-hand skyline, which rose to a vast, pale yellow headwall.

At sunset, as the face melted from blood-orange to gold, we knew we'd found a worthy mountain. It looked 'nails for breakfast': bowing walls nearly a mile high, and the headwall glowing, daring us on. We couldn't stop

Above: Ally Swinton, Tom Livingstone, Will Sim, John Crook and Uisdean Hawthorn.

Left: A porter from the Yarkhun valley in northern Chitral district carrying gas to base camp. *(Tom Livingstone)*

pointing. 'Wow! Maybe left from the icefield… then up and right, following a ramp-line?' But we were also intimidated at the thought of the summit being over 3,300m higher than our base camp. As the now full moon shimmered over the summit, we ducked into our tents for the night. I can think of few more exciting, addictive and dangerous things than launching yourself onto an intimidating mountain. Koyo Zom looked just the poison.

We spent several days lying in a tent with a headache, but our two groups, Ally and I versus the rest, bantered back and forth. Sudoku, chess and the occasional meal broke the monotony. Ideally, for acclimatisation, you want to sleep 1,000m lower than your objective's summit. Since Koyo Zom was

Bivy on the initial icefield. *(Tom Livingstone)*

6,872m and the nearby mountains only 5,500m, we decided to 'crag' the start of our planned route on the right-hand skyline, the north-west face. We'd sleep at the necessary altitude, get a good idea of the initial icefield and take a closer look at the headwall.

Unfortunately, Will and Uisdean were ill and stayed at base camp. It was almost inevitable that some of our team would get sick, but we still felt for them; it was unfortunate to miss out on crucial acclimatisation. John, Ally and I spent a cold night at the top of the icefield, breathing heavily at 5,880m. Since we quickly hit hard ice and rock, we created a snow ledge using a purpose-built hammock to catch debris beneath us. The moon shone like a comforting beacon, so bright in fact that we woke early, thinking it was dawn.

Returning to base camp after several nights away, we gorged on the comforts of 'home'. The sun warmed our stiff muscles as we stretched out on our mattresses between each meal. Imran changed Ally's name to 'Ally Boom Boom' – best not ask why – and Uisdean became 'Steve' because his name was too hard for Imran to pronounce.

Mohsin cooked delicious dishes of curries, dhal, vegetables, chicken and goat. We played cricket, until we lost all the balls. Uisdean took up speed-sudoku. Will and Ally passed a book back and forth. John fumed at his Kindle having deleted the second half of his story. I began cutting labels out of my jackets. We spent hours playing cards. Somehow I was 'shithead' more often than not.

The weather remained mostly settled; these were some of the best conditions I'd ever experienced on a trip. But as the leaves on stunted trees began to turn fiery red, we knew cold temperatures and autumn snows were approaching. We could now see the moon during the day, too, arcing faintly through the sky over Koyo Zom.

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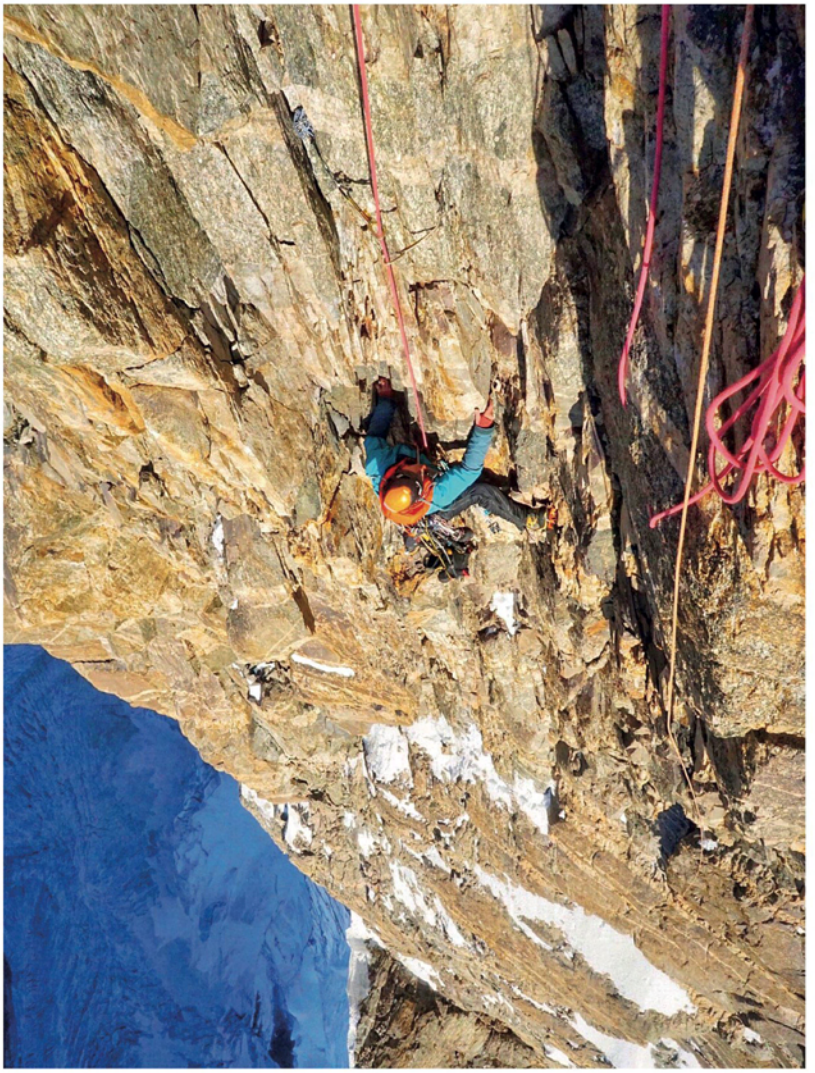

Stupendous rock climbing on the steep headwall above the icefield.
(Tom Livingstone)

On expeditions, you reach a terrible moment when you know it's time to climb. In the months before a trip, the concept of alpine climbing is far in the future. During acclimatisation, you're still learning the mountain's moods: you watch how clouds boil around the peak; you see where snow sticks to the face; and you stare as sunshine and shadow reveal new features. Climbing is ignored because so much can happen between now and then; the team, weather and conditions all need to align. But eventually, the moment arrives.

Livingstone leading up the headwall. *(Ally Swinton)*

All five of us sat down for breakfast on Sunday 22 September, and a weather forecast flashed on the Garmin InReach Mini. 'Sunshine and good weather continues.' The carefree atmosphere quietly slipped out the door on the breeze, and our long-buried thoughts of climbing surfaced: who felt acclimatised, the right-hand line and what alternatives existed. A mix of psyche and anxiety began to bubble. The left-hand skyline of Koyo Zom also shone, appearing to have more moderate climbing along a complex ridge. Ally and I were motivated for the right-hand line but the climbing looked tricky: there was a possibility it was simply too hard, or we would be unlucky. I reckoned we had a 50% chance of climbing this line. At least the headwall looked relatively safe from objective hazards. Will, John and Uisdean chose the left-hand, north-east ridge: it looked fantastic, it would hopefully be easier and it would offer them more time to acclimatise. I shared Will's views about wanting to climb *something.* We'd been on a trip to the Indian Himalaya the year before and not climbed a single pitch.

Base camp resembled a garage sale as we packed, micro-debating for hours what gear to take. We clutched scraps of paper full of scribbled lists and by the evening Ally and I had two enormous rucksacks ready. I cursed the weight of our double rack of cams, set-and-a-half of wires, set of pegs, pair of rock shoes, double sleeping bag, single-skin tent and gas stove, but we couldn't trim anything more.

The following day we shouldered our packs and walked to advance base camp, 1,000m higher. We drifted apart, lost in anticipation. *Would the route go? Would the weather hold? What would the climbing be like?* The crux of

many alpine routes seems to be in the mind and this is often the hardest part to control.

Before dawn next morning, after hurriedly wishing the others good luck as they rushed towards the left-hand line, Ally and I slogged up the glacier to the right. We spent several painful hours kicking and punching up the icefield to our previous highpoint and bivy. It was a monstrous 1,300m of altitude gain from ABC, but it was the only way to gain a day with some potential bad weather forecast for the weekend.

Our backpacks appeared like fat, red snail-shells, but at least we could eat more to lose weight. Although the sun had spilled onto the face, I still gritted my teeth as blood returned to my toes. At the bivy, our snow ledge had retained its large, undercut sofa-shape from our acclimatisation night here. We wrapped the hammock around it again and snuggled into the double sleeping bag.

On the second day, Ally led several brilliant mixed pitches up a chimney-gully system. Piece by piece, pitch by pitch, we answered more of our questions, filling in the blanks we'd noted when scanning the face. Everything climbed differently to how we'd expected. Ally thrutched up granite corners, then hauled the bags, which scraped in protest and caught on every nubbin of rock. Although Ally and I had never climbed together before, we seemed to have an easy, relaxed partnership, based on the necessity of 'up'. His smooth Scottish accent also gave me confidence.

I took over, aiming for a snow ridge. I unpeeled my down jacket and synthetic trousers to climb frozen-in spikes and flakes of rock. 'It's like dry tooling with your hands!' I shouted down. Convenient holds were like ladder rungs, albeit with a lot of 'junk pro', which led to an icy tongue flowing from the ridge.

As the sun melted into the horizon, we pitched our tent on the ridge's narrow spine. I snapped photos of Ally in a truly Greater Ranges setting. It felt like we were the only people on Earth and in the distance, jagged 7,000m mountains jutted up like wonky teeth. Although I was concerned we'd finished late and would burn out, I was too pleased with the bivy and too tired to care.

Ally took the breakfast pitches again, front-points screeching against the rock as we chimneyed higher. Finally, we bumped into the headwall's most impressive and intimidating feature: a 90m section of vertical and overhanging rock dotted with roofs and protruding fins. Ally had dubbed it 'The Cathedral'. It reminded me of Mt Alberta in the Canadian Rockies and I wasn't sure which was worse. Like a fox caught in headlights, we froze, hanging on a creaking belay to crane our necks.

Without aid-climbing gear and a portaledge, we'd be here all week unless we found an easier way. Ally urged us on and I was happy to have a look but also doubtful it would go. I'd only aided a couple of moves before, so a few pitches seemed daunting. But once I'd frigged up a crack to the first belay, my confidence returned and I eagerly changed into rock shoes. I could see a line of holds leading out right, towards a groove cutting through the top

Mixed ground at the top of the headwall. *(Tom Livingstone)*

of the headwall. 'I think it'll go,' we shouted to each other.

It felt like climbing at Gogarth's Main Cliff, a place I'm very fond of, and I began to relish our wild yet somehow familiar position. I chucked the occasional rock over my shoulder, captivated as it spun for seconds before clattering down to the glacier. The sun washed over us now and I tiptoed and smeared in my shoes: this was far better than double boots and crampons. I ripped off my gloves, crimping and pinching and bridging between giant fins, revelling at the thought of rock climbing at 6,200m. Before long, however, I was sitting on a cam and breathing heavily. My body had remembered exactly where we were.

At the final belay, with easier ground in sight, I whooped with delight. This was alpine climbing at its finest. I hadn't expected us to make it through the headwall, but we'd been granted a subtle passage to the upper part of the mountain. It was a pure joy to climb. A few hours later, we'd chopped a small snow ledge and began to spoon as dusk overtook us. It was another long, cold night, but the stars and moon kept spinning around us. eventually fading into another dawn.

Ally led off, and soon we'd popped out above the headwall. We enjoyed the easier ground but were still a long way from the true summit, which was further back from the peak we'd seen from base camp. We both checked into our altitude pain caves. A lying-down bivy, only our second so far, passed in a fatigued haze but I remember getting up in the night to see incredible flashes of lightning from a distant storm. It was as if the sky was tearing itself apart, huge white explosions illuminating thunderheads and boiling clouds. I watched the moon and the storm until sleep welcomed me back.

On the fifth day, we endured a bitter cold on the summit slopes, cocooned in all our jackets. Hoping to see the tracks of Will, Uisdean and John, we pushed on, but figured they must have turned back when we found none. Ally and I were completely alone, a pair that had become a single being.

Sucking in all the air we could manage, and hyperventilating when we couldn't, we finally reached the summit around 1pm. I reflected on what had been one of the best, most enjoyable alpine routes I'd ever climbed. Our shouts of triumph were lost to the mountains in the distance. White-capped fangs rose from dark brown valleys as we looked across Pakistan to China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. We abseiled and down-climbed the mountain's east face that afternoon, slumping onto the Pechus glacier.

The following day, we walked down the broad glacier towards base camp. Sleep-deprived, hungry, but with all the climbing behind us and the end virtually in sight we stomped along through the snow with about 20m of rope separating us. I began to weave around gaping crevasses, occasionally crawling over sagging snow-bridges, like ploughing through a minefield. The snow hadn't frozen overnight. I held my breath in nervous expectation of suddenly falling into a slot; these crevasses looked like monstrous, soulless depths.

Then, whilst exploring an alternative route, Ally plunged through the snow, vanishing completely. A bridge had broken. The rope whipped through

Top: Livingstone and Swinton on the summit. Above: On the final glacial descent, Swinton suffered a head injury following a crevasse fall, necessitating a helicopter rescue. *(Tom Livingstone)*

my gloved hands. The soft snow helped me to hold the fall after 15m or 20m, or else Ally had clattered to a stop. The adrenaline had my heart nearly thumping out of my chest. I could barely move, let alone pull Ally up hand over hand. And I was terrified of being dragged after him. Unable to find any ice, I set up a buried axe belay and began to haul him out using a 3:1 system. Each time I crawled back to the axe, I eyed it dubiously, praying it would hold.

For some reason, I expected Ally to be fine when he slumped over the lip of the crevasse. Then I registered the blood from his head, the grimace on his face, and the limp from his leg. Ally had put his helmet on while he was in the crevasse to protect him from some big icicles raining down on him.

Will Sim, John Crook and Uisdean Hawthorn attempted a long new route via the north-east ridge, reaching 6,000m in four days. *(Uisdean Hawthorn)*

The force of these had broken his helmet into three pieces and he'd used his sleeping mat. I quickly put our only bandage on his head and sliced open his trousers, hoping my fingers wouldn't meet a sharp bone and soft, wet flesh. Thankfully, the leg was only badly bruised.

I tried to think clearly. It was around 10am. We were in a remote region of Pakistan. The only photo I'd seen of our descent route showed it to be a gnarly, long glacier, which would take all day to travel if we were fit and lucky. Ally was in shock, shivering and bleeding from his head. We were out of gas and food, save for a few bars and nuts. I knew Ally needed more medical attention than the single bandage and painkillers I could offer him. After a few minutes' thought, I pressed the SOS button on our Garmin InReach Mini.

Over the next day and a half, I did what anyone would do: caring for Ally as I'm sure he would for me. I was glad he remained conscious throughout, but during that first afternoon he seemed very faint and cold. I was really concerned, fearing the worst. It was quite an experience to spoon Ally throughout the night, listening to his breathing, already irregular from the altitude. When his breath paused for a few seconds, then more seconds, I'd give him a nudge, my own breath held, waiting for his next.

At some point in the night, Ally suggested we called our new route the 'Great Game', a nod to the power plays of Central Asia during the 19th century. We'd read about them as we travelled through Chitral on our journey into the mountains. The name sounded fitting.

By noon the following day, Ally's condition had improved, and he even tried to hobble a few metres. As he returned to the tent, I heard the distinct *'chop-a-chop-a-chop'* of helicopter rotors: what a beautiful sound! The Pakistani helicopter crew loaded Ally on board at around 1pm and then came

back for me 45 minutes later, flying to a small village where the air force had established a small fuel dump. Here the helicopters refuelled before flying on to Gilgit, which we reached around 5pm or so.

The whole team were reunited in Islamabad a few days later. We enjoyed a final meal with our agent and team, recounting wild stories of helicopters and hospitals, of Will and John waiting in a nearby airbase to rescue us as Uisdean packed up base camp to drive through the night. After breakfast in the hotel restaurant in Gilgit, Ally and I had been driven to Islamabad. As we spilled onto the street, the moon shone over the city, a full lunar cycle completed during our month in the mountains, as we played the Great Game on Koyo Zom.

Summary

North-west face of Koyo Zom (6877m), *The Great Game* (ED+, 1500m), Ally Swinton and Tom Livingstone. Attempt on north-east ridge of Koyo Zom (6877m), four days to 6,000m, Will Sim, Uisdean Hawthorn and John Crook.

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