
Alex Mathie & Ed Douglas

Pakistan 2020



On the first ascent of K6 Central. (*Jeff Wright*)

Against all odds, 2020 saw a number of significant ascents in the Pakistani Karakoram. While it is scant insult to the others to single out the first winter ascent of K2 as perhaps the most ‘historic’, teams elsewhere established significant new lines at a variety of elevations, to unclimbed summits or unclimbed aspects of rarely visited peaks.

In August, when Pakistan’s borders reopened, an opportunistic expedition to the Shimshal paid off for Felix Berg, Patrick Münkkel, Gabriel Stroe (Germany), and Mirza Ali Baig and Arshad Karim (Pakistan). The Germans, who had originally planned to visit the Tien Shan, along with the

Priti and Jeff Wright. (Jeff Wright)

Pakistani climbers, made two first ascents in three days. Berg, Münkel, Stroe, Baig and Karim made the first ascent of the 5,770m AM Peak (800m, AD-) on 20 August. Two days later, Berg, Münkel, Karim and Stroe made the first ascent of the 6,105m Koh e Dhg'hg (1100m, TD-, M4/5, 60°). Berg returned to the Shimshal in late autumn, climbing a possible new route to the summit of Ambarin Sar (6170m) in a one-day push on 28 November.

In October, Jeff and Priti Wright (USA) travelled to the Charakusa valley, along with Colin Haley (USA), who had solo climbing plans in the area. Haley's expedition was cut short due to illness, but after acclimatising up to 6,200m on nearby Pakura peak, the Wrights made plans for an attempt on unclimbed K6 Central (7155m). On 3 October, the pair left ABC and on 8 October made the first ascent of K6 West (7140m) via a line on the west face that Graham Zimmerman and Scott Bennett used to descend K6 West in 2015. A day later, on 9 October, the pair made the first ascent of K6 Central, rounding out both a new route of over 2,000m vertical gain, and an astonishing 'alpine sabbatical' during which the pair climbed all six classic north faces of the Alps as well as the *Ragni* route on Cerro Torre.

Also in October, Pierrick Fine and Symon Welfringer (France) travelled to the Toltar glacier, in Hunza, where they aimed to make the first ascent of the 2,500m south face of Sani Pakush (6951m). The pair spent two weeks acclimatising and then waited for a weather window. On October 16, they left camp and started up the south face, climbing the hardest pitches of the route (M4+/5) at approximately 5,600m. After two taxing bivouacs the pair were able to get a decent rest at a third bivouac a crevasse on the summit ridge at 6,400m. The following day (October 19) they made a lightweight summit bid, leaving most of their equipment at the bivouac and climbing the final 500m of variable snow to the summit. The following day they descended from their final bivouac to base camp, reversing their line of ascent on a combination of abalokovs and down climbing. Their route, *Revers Gagnant*, weighs in at 2,500m, ED+, 90°, M4+, WI4+ and is the second known ascent of Sani Pakush, which was first climbed via the north-west ridge by a German team in 1991.

Around the same time, Muchu Chhish (7452m) – the highest unclimbed peak in the world after off-limits Gangkhar Puensum – saw two attempts, both of which ended short of the summit. Czech climbers Pavel Kořinek,





Nirmal 'Nimsdai' Purja, on the summit of K2 after the first winter ascent.
(Nirmal Purja)

Pavel Bém and Jiří Janák reached an altitude of 6,400m before retreating in bad weather. Philipp Brugger (Austria) and Jordi Tosas (Spain) reached 7,000m but were repelled by dangerous avalanche conditions.

The ascent in Pakistan, writes *Ed Douglas*, that got the most attention was the historic first winter ascent of K2 by an all-Nepali team that reached the summit on 16 January in temperatures of -40°C but also, mercifully and unusually, low wind. Of the 10 climbers, who paused just before the summit so they could reach it together, the best-known in Europe is Nirmal 'Nimsdai' Purja, the former special forces soldier who made short work of the 14 8,000m peaks in 2019, his so-called Project Possible. He was the only climber not to use bottled oxygen. While Purja is a Magar, the other nine were Sherpa, drawn from three teams: five climbing with Team Nimsdai, but with logistics from the commercial operator Seven Summit Treks, three led

by Mingma Gyalje, more commonly known as Mingma G, and one Sherpa from Seven Summit.

Given the scale of the achievement – the last and hardest winter ascent of the 14 8,000ers with attempts stretching back more than 30 years from some of climbing's biggest names – the media coverage was unsurprisingly extensive. There was also a great deal of negative speculation, criticism and allegation around the ascent. As a fluent English speaker with strong connections in the UK and an effective PR team, much of the focus was on Purja in western media, although Nimsdai himself stressed the collaborative effort. In Nepal, the media was more generous, profiling the Sherpa 'stars' rather than simply repeating a list of names.

The charismatic Mingma Gyalje, or Mingma G, an IFMGA guide with three previous ascents of K2, once without oxygen, was particularly visible, as leader of the second team included in the summit party, along with partners Dawa Tenjin and Kili Pemba. While Purja's team, well stocked with formidable *domestiques*, could draw on significant resources, Mingma G's was more piratical, relying on crowdfunding to scrap together the necessary funding. One team member pulled out under pressure from his family, and as Mingma G told *Outdoor Journal*, 'For my remaining team members, I convinced their wives and we travelled to Pakistan before they could change their minds.' Both Dawa and Kili work in Norway in the summers, and their families didn't want that certain income jeopardised.

Arriving in Pakistan on 7 December, they completed formalities and flew to Skardu on 10 December and left Askole on 13 December with what Mingma G descried as our 'invisible footmen', the team's Balti porters. 'They were very strong and always cheerful. Though my team had better food to eat, wore branded gear and carried lighter bags, the porters were happier and faster than us on the snow.' The ironies of the situation were not lost on Mingma G. He grew up in the Rolwaling valley, like many of the strongest modern Sherpas. 'My relatives would bring back chocolates from foreign climbers, and I used to think that if I became a porter, I would also get to eat lots of chocolates,' he told the *Nepali Times*. At age 19 he went to Manaslu and never looked back, with five ascents of Everest, 13 8,000ers under his belt and just Shishapangma to go. Though a professional guide, he climbs outside his work, with the first ascent of the west face of Chobutse under his belt, the mountain he looked up at as a boy.

His trio reached base camp on 18 December, three days before the official season began to find the well-known and popular guide Ali Sadpara and his son Sajid, with their client, Icelandic climber John Snorri, who had previously climbed K2 in summer. This must have been an awkward situation since Mingma G had been expedition organiser with Snorri on K2 the winter before. With a Chinese member anxious to quit because of Covid-19 at home and Mingma G suffering ill health, when a Sherpa was hit by ice he called it quits, much to the annoyance of Snorri and Slovenian member Tomas Rotar, who accused Mingma G of being more interested in the commercial side of things than he was in the actual climbing. The Sherpa denied

that he gave up too easily, concluding: 'When there is success, people try to take the credit, when there is failure, people try to blame.' It is clear from interviews he gave that Mingma G felt he had something to prove.

On 21 December, the first official day of the winter season, the team went up to camp one, which the Sadparas and Snorri had already fixed, then next day continued to camp two, fixing rope as they went. After that the weather deteriorated and they descended to base camp during the Christmas period when scores more climbers and Sherpas arrived, including the large Seven Summit team: K2 was as busy last winter as it often is summer. On 27 December they went back up and on 29 December were fixing rope above camp two to the bottom of the Black Pyramid at 7,000m, where they spent the night.

They had planned next day to fix to camp three (7200m) but while they had 900m of rope, 600m of this was high-quality 6mm Mingma wanted to save for higher up the mountain. So Mingma G radioed Chhang Dawa, leader of the Seven Summit commercial team who was also managing logistics for Nimsdai Purja. Mingma G asked Dawa to ask Purja's team to bring up more rope. After fixing for much of 30 December using what line they had and scavanged rope, Chhang Dawa, part of Purja's team, arrived and they continued fixing to 7,300m where they stashed more gear. On the way down to their previous night's camp, Mingma G met Nims coming up. While they knew of each other, they had never met before.

'All by himself, he was carrying 200 metres of rope for the later part of the expedition,' Mingma G told *Online Khabar*, a Nepali news website. 'He did not complain that he was alone nor did he make a deal of it. That day, I had a lot of respect for him.' In fact, Mingma Tenzi was close by as well, one of the partners of Purja's company Elite Exped. Born in Yaphu village, in Sankuwasabha district close to Makalu, K2 would be Tenzi's ninth 8,000er and Purja had picked him out as someone particularly reliable as a rope-fixer who had worked on Broad Peak and Gasherbrum I. He and Nimsdai descended to camp two.

Back at their higher camp, Kili Pemba was showing signs of altitude sickness and so Mingma G's team returned to base camp where the weather deteriorated. Nimsdai had invited them to a party he was hosting for New Year's Eve and as they walked over from their base camp they met two of Purja's team who had been sent to collect them. Several bottles of whisky, vodka and rum later it was 3am and the teams were firm friends. 'We bonded over booze,' Mingma G said. Purja was anxious to get on with things and proposed starting the summit bid on 2 January. 'He was worried that the foreign climbers would acclimatise and follow us to the top,' said Mingma G. 'I was too. But we were in no shape or form ready for the summit push and with bad weather looming, he agreed.' (Ali Sadpara, of course, was no 'foreigner'.)

Strong winds swept through base camp from New Year's Day to 7 January and when he returned to camp two, Purja discovered that his tents had been destroyed and his paraglider gone. Mingma G, on the other hand,



The K2 in winter summit climbers. From top left: Dawa Tenji Sherpa, Mingma G, Dawa Temba and Pemchhiri. From bottom left: Mingma David, Mingma Tenzi, Nirmal Purja and Gelje. Not pictured: Kili Pemba Sherpa and Sona Sherpa. (Sandro Gromen-Hayes/Nimsdai)

had buried his team's gear at camp three and it was safe. 'It was a good decision. If we had lost that, our expedition was over.' Despite the obvious setback of a destroyed camp, Purja was soon planning a summit bid with Mingma G on 15 January. Nimsdai's team left on 12 January, since it would be carrying more gear, and Mingma G followed on 13 January.



Nimsdai below the Bottleneck. (*Nirmal Purja*)

Apart from Tenzi, Nimsdai could rely on another Sherpa superstar, Mingma Gyabu 'David' Sherpa, born in Faktalung in Taplejung district, far to the east of Nepal. Unlike other Sherpas on K2, there was little tradition in his family of climbing for a living and he started as a trekking porter, then a kitchen helper on Manaslu in 2009. That led to an NMA course and his first break, offered by his uncle and mentor Dorje Khatri, the trades union activist who would perish in the Everest avalanche of 2014. Mingma David gives great credit to his uncle's influence, whose death left him shattered. In his first two years he climbed Everest three times and is currently the youngest Nepali to have climbed the 14 8,000ers. As part of Purja's Project Possible he climbed eight in six months.

On 13 January Mingma G and his team climbed to their camp below the Black Pyramid where Purja's team had also stopped, albeit in a different



Gelje Sherpa proudly displaying the Liverpool FC shirt he took to the summit of K2 in winter. Both he and Dawa Temba are devoted Reds fans.

location. Over the radio they discussed their conflicting weather reports. This would be the crux of the whole attempt. Purja and the Seven Summit team were relying on forecasts from Europe. Mingma G, with a few thousands dollars sourced in Nepal, was using the weather forecaster Krishna Bhakta Manandhar, retired senior meteorologist at Nepal's Meteorological Forecasting Division. The western forecasts said the climbers should stay put on 14

January because the weather would be bad. Manandhar promised good weather. (It was Krishna Manandhar who accurately predicted the storm that killed at least 43 trekkers and porters in the Annapurna region in October 2014. His warnings went unheard in the mountains.)

The Sherpas weren't the only ones agonising over the weather. The Sadparas, father and son, were with John Snorri at camp two and using the same forecasts as Purja and Dawa. Winds at camp two on the morning of 14 January were stronger than at camp three and so the Pakistanis and Icelander descended. 'It was like the mountain gods telling us to have K2 all to ourselves,' Mingma G said. With fine weather that morning, both he and Nimsdai were eager to push on and the two teams met at the site of the summer camp three where tents were put up while Nims and two Sherpas fixed another 300m. Next morning, Kili and Dawa Tenjin descended to Mingma G's earlier stash to bring up equipment and then Mingma G, Mingma David and Mingma Tenzi, with Sona Sherpa assigned to help by Seven Summit in support of their own rope fixing, headed for the site of camp four.

Below the wall barring final access to camp four, the four Sherpas found a wide crevasse that took them precious time to work around, trying first right, then descending and going back up on the left. 'Again it was the same,' Mingma G reported, 'so we descended all the way back just above camp three and then branched out even farther. There we finally found a narrow crevasse covered by some fallen ice where it was possible to cross. At first, I feared that I might fall into the crevasse but I had Mingma Tenzi belaying me which gave me the courage to move forward and cross.'

Reaching camp four the Sherpas all believed their team would climb K2 but it was already 4pm and they now had to descend to camp three, which they reached at 6.30pm. The plan had been to leave for the summit at 11pm but more rest was needed so the climbers woke at midnight. Still feeling tired

from the day before, Mingma G now gave up his plan of climbing without oxygen but borrowing a regulator cost him time and fitting it cooled his hands. Kili, Dawa Tenjin, Sona, Nimsdai and Mingma Tenzi were ready before the others and set off but since portions of the route still needed fixing there was no panic.

Mingma David, Pem Chhiri, Gelje, all from Nimsdai's team, together with Mingma G, now followed the others who were already just below camp four. When Mingma G got there he felt chilled in the wind and wondered about returning. But he warmed his feet kicking the ice, which was prevalent in the winter season, and by the time the climbers reunited at the end of the Bottleneck traverse at 6am, the sun was out and all the climbers were feeling warmer. Mingma Tenzi fixed the route to the summit with the others carrying gear in support. This took all day and they reached the top together just before 5pm. In around three weeks since arriving at base camp, and with only 11 days of climbing, the Sherpas and Nirmal Purja had climbed K2 in winter.

The speed of the Sherpas and Mingma G's confidence in his weather forecaster were two factors in their success. Several Sherpas spoke too of Nirmal Purja's encouragement, despite being the one without oxygen. But weather conditions were also more benign. In her recent book on the 8,000ers in winter, Bernadette McDonald considered the possibility of K2 being climbed in winter. The meteorologist Karl Gabl thought success unlikely in the next 10 years because of ferocious winds but the Polish filmmaker Dariusz Załuski thought otherwise. A veteran of nine winter 8,000m expeditions, he said: 'I think now it's much easier to climb than ten years ago. The weather is much better.' There's a certain irony that climate change may have given the Nepalis a leg up K2 even as it causes such chaos in their homeland.

The logistical support in general and the use of oxygen in particular drew complaints. The noted Russian alpinist Denis Urubko, who has his own history with K2 in winter, said: 'Oxygen is a powerful doping. I'm sorry to find out the really weird way people react. In the event that an athlete in boxing, running, skiing, cycling and other disciplines use doping – he gets total contempt, reactions of disgust. And punishment by the official authorities. But in mountaineering, people who use doping become heroes.' The Polish winter veteran Adam Bielecki took a similar line. 'Climbing eight-thousanders with oxygen is like participating in the Tour de France on an electric bike. The nature of such an achievement is completely different.' Nirmal Purja, of course, was not using oxygen on summit day.

Other winter climbers were not so dismissive. 'K2 in winter has been climbed and now come on!' the Italian Simone Moro said. 'In the future, those who think, want and know they can do better, both the K2 and other 8,000ers are waiting for them. Today the Sherpas have rightly received a well-deserved place in history.' It was that attitude that greeted the successful climbers first in Pakistan and then when they returned to Kathmandu. Almost lost in the celebrations was the tragic news that Catalan climber Sergi Mingote had died in a fall descending on 16 January from camp one, having

been up to camp three to acclimatise. He was alone at the time but teammates spotted a sudden massive change in his elevation on his GPS track. An experienced high-altitude climber, and one who carried his own gear, Mingote had been trying to complete the 14 8,000ers without supplementary oxygen inside a thousand days.

The occasionally melodramatic world of 8,000m climbing now comes with an iceberg of online commentators who were quick to question the integrity of the K2 ascent, fuelled by comments from others on the mountain. For example, Polish climber Magdalena Gorzkowska told Polish television that the Sherpas had threatened to cut the fixed lines if any western climbers tried to follow them. Later she said she had been reporting a joke made at base camp. Perhaps her comment was the source of a seemingly grief-stricken outburst from the well-respected climber Nazir Sabir in comments to Pakistani television about ropes being removed and the suggestion that this might have played a role in the death of the Pakistani hero Ali Sadpara and others in February.

It must have been galling for Sadpara to watch others arrive at base camp and then hurry past him to the summit, even more so when his weather forecast in mid January turned out to be wrong. Bad weather trapped those with ambitions to repeat the Sherpas' success at base camp but another weather window appeared in early February. More than 20 climbers converged on camp three at 7,300m on 4 February but with only a handful of tents available. Ali Sadpara was one of those who had made sure to have shelter available. What others were thinking is uncertain. With temperatures plummeting to -40°C and climbers arriving after dark, climbers were forced to cram into the few tents available, hardly ideal preparation. Chhang Dawa Sherpa of Seven Summit had reported on 1 February that an eight-strong team of Sherpas had gone back up to check the condition of camps and recover any buried or broken fixed ropes as well as depositing bottled oxygen. John Snorri's filmmaking partner Elia Saikaly said promised oxygen was not where it was supposed to be.

Given the terrible night they endured, it's surprising anyone continued to the summit but Ali Sadpara, his son Sajid, their client John Snorri and Chilean climber Juan Pablo Mohr were among a number who did. While the rest turned around, these four continued but Sajid's oxygen equipment malfunctioned at 8,200m and his father advised him to descend and wait at camp three. The wait proved in vain. The bodies of the three men were found during this year's summer season but the circumstances around their deaths had yet to be determined. One more death was recorded that day. The Bulgarian Atanas Skatov, a 42-year-old plant biologist and vegan activist, fell to his death descending from camp three. Seven Summit issued a statement saying he had made a mistake clipping between ropes but that version has been disputed with at least one report of a broken fixed rope. Given the number of ropes now on the Abruzzi and the number of commercial expeditions already offering K2 to clients, the problem of redundant fixed ropes will have to be monitored.