

Gasherbrum IV Expedition 2017

Greater Karakoram, Pakistan, June-July 2017



Mount Everest Foundation Expedition

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Final Report

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Gasherbrum IV Expedition 2017 Report

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1 Aim

The goal of the expedition was to summit Gasherbrum IV (7925m) by its unclimbed East Face.

2 Summary

The expedition was led by Bruce Normand (Scotland), climbing with Billy Pierson (USA). The pair were going to be accompanied by Marcos Costa (Brazil) and Don Bowie (USA), but Bowie cancelled his participation only 2 weeks before the expedition. The remaining climbers therefore worked as a team of 3 throughout. The expedition involved very significant amounts of hard work, preparing the trail for the season through the South Gasherbrum Glacier icefall and breaking a new trail on every move beyond Camp 1 (5 times to C2, 4 to C3, 3 times beyond C3). C2 to C3 involved 7 pitches of low-angle but painful ice. The weather after 26th June was not stable for more than 1 day in a row. When the climbers pushed up onto their route on the East Face, they were blocked immediately (7300m) by a barely climbable polished slab, made impossible by a total lack of protection of any form. The weather did not cooperate for consolation climbs elsewhere in the G3-G4 cwm or on the (still unrepeated) 1958 Bonatti-Mauri route on the NE Ridge. A final effort on “Gasherbrum 4.5” was also closed down by dangerous snow.

3 Introduction

3.1 Purpose

Gasherbrum IV is perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of inaccessible giants. At 7925m “only” the 18th-highest peak on the planet, it has no easy routes, has never been climbed in anything other than an epic, and has seen fewer pairs of feet (10) on its true summit than have walked on the moon. Despite annual expeditions in the 80s and 90s, and sporadic efforts in this millenium, there remain no routes on the South or East Face, only two through the storied Shining Wall (West Face: Kurtyka-Schauer and Central Rib), and the only route ever to have been repeated is the NW Ridge. In 2009, Normand and Pierson climbed into the cwm between G4 and G3 during an attempt on the NW Face of G3, and noticed that the E Face seemed something of a “straight shot” up snowy gullies. This face has the advantage of being the shortest possible route on the mountain, 900m at 55 degrees from bergschrund to summit, and of leading directly to the main summit rather than requiring the awkward traverse of the upper W Face which all the existing routes must make. The plan in 2017 was to put this to the test.

3.2 Geography

The Gasherbrum subrange forms the very core of the Karakoram, the massif from which the Baltoro drains west, the Siachen southeast and the Shaksgam the northeast sides. Not for nothing is its highest point (G1, 8080m), tucked away at the end of 50km of ice and ringed by lesser summits, known as Hidden Peak. Although G1 and G2 both pass the magic 8000m mark, and G2 ranks as an “easy 8000m peak,” their limelight is stolen quite definitively by G4. The W Face, known for good reason as the Shining Wall, rises for 2500 unbroken metres directly to the summit, dominates the trekking nexus of the

Pakistani Karakoram, Concordia, and is visible for days to all who set foot on the upper Baltoro.

The aesthetic fame of G4 is more than equalled among mountaineers by its climbing notoriety. It has indubitably the most execrable rock of any high peak where the climbing cannot stick to snow and ice. Alternately badly fractured marble and impenetrably compact marble, and too high for freeze-thaw cycles to produce ice, most of the surface area of G4 takes in essence no gear at all. The list of world-class climbers who have been repelled quite comprehensively is long. The stories of the first ascent and the Central Rib are of bloody-minded persistence. The story of the Shining Wall suggests that a death-wish is a handy thing to bring along.



Left: the Shining Wall – G4 West Face. Right: G4 South Face (see also P1).

3.3 Access

The most revolutionary change in the last 2 decades to hit the vexed question of getting to Skardu was the decision of Pakistan International Airlines to pay its domestic pilots on a scale similar to their international ones, but on condition that they actually land their plane (previously they were paid only for taking off). Suddenly the reliability of flights to the Northern Areas has reached 85%. Because they are morning flights, but most international travellers connect via the Gulf, arriving well before dawn, it has become possible to get to Skardu in 18 hours from Europe and 28 from the US. While the return journey does usually require 1-2 nights in Islamabad to minimise flight risk, the city has not seen any measure of danger for the last 5 years. The Karakoram Highway has not seen much trouble for the same amount of time, and most tour operators are no longer opposed to their clients going by road.

The road from Skardu to Askole is in the usual poor condition. In late May 2017, the last bridge over the Braldu had been repaired, but the section shortly before this (i.e. beyond Apo Ali Gond) had been removed by a landslide that was continuing to spit rocks on the passing foot traffic. Although a roadway had been hacked out again by July, cracks were appearing, maintenance of a sort was happening every morning and even the jeep drivers were worried. The trek from Askole follows the Braldu to the Baltoro, through Concordia and, in a total of 6 days, to base camp at the foot of the South Gasherbrum Glacier.



Pierson (left) and Costa (right) showing their better sides.



Left: the team with Ghafoor at BC. Right: Pierson's birthday in BC; from left to right assistant cook Mustafa, cook Ayaz, BC supply porters Ali and Abbas, LO Mohsin.

4 Team

The high costs associated with the upper Baltoro (permit, long approach portage and liaison officer (LO)) mitigate against small teams. To realise the project they had been nursing since 2009, Normand and Pierson assembled a team of 5 climbers made up by Marcos Costa (Brazil), Skiy Detray and Don Bowie (both USA); the last was also a veteran of the 2009 G3 trip. However, Detray was forced out by the need for a hernia operation (which turned into a fight with abdominal cancer) and Bowie by financial issues, leaving a team of 3. The agency was Higher Ground Expeditions, Treks and Tours, a new company formed by Abdul Ghafoor in the aftermath of the disappearance of Scott Adamson and Kyle Dempster on the Ogre II in 2016. A long-time friend and tireless servant of multiple US climbers, Ghafoor is possibly the most competent, enthusiastic and hard-working individual on the entire Baltoro. Assisted by his Islamabad-based younger brother, Karim, his new company had no problem providing all the necessary (Ministry, PAC and military) permits, paperwork and visa invitation letters. The sirdar and chief cook was the equally indefatigable Ayaz, assisted by the quiet but competent Mustafa, neither of whom ever needed to provide their surnames.

5 Preparation

5.1 Conception

The idea of trying the East Face of Gasherbrum IV was driven by Pierson, aided and abetted by Normand. The two had taken a good look at it in 2009, on a G3 expedition, and felt that, protection issues notwithstanding, it should be a feasible target for the reasons noted in Sec. 3.



Perspective view of the East Face.

5.2 Objective

The E Face of G4 has slabby marble buttresses at its lower left and centre, where it steepens significantly towards the summit ridge. Its right third is a triangle of black rock of a totally different type, which may never have been sampled by any climbers other than Bonatti and Mauri. In view of the extreme altitude, the two most rapid options are the mostly-snow lines directly beneath the true summit and far right at the pink-black boundary. The former was deemed to be more attractive.

The E Face has seen previous efforts from Americans in 1980, by solo Japanese climber Yasushi Yamanoi in 1990 and by Koreans in 1993. While Yamanoi did not get above the floor of the cwm, both the Americans and the Koreans were repelled low in the central gullies by “spindrift and compact rock.”

5.3 Permission

Permits for peaks in the Karakoram are granted by the Pakistan Alpine Club after due “clearance” of all participating climbers, which requires the approval of the Ministries of Defence and Interior, plus the ISI (intelligence branch). A permit for G4 now costs \$2400, up from \$2000 due to an unspecified extra charge. It is also necessary to pay an “environmental fee” of \$68 per member (per peak), although nobody in the Northern

Areas has yet identified any such funds being put to an environmental purpose. Additional paperwork is required from the Pakistan Army to be allowed into the Baltoro region, and it is necessary to be accompanied at all times by an LO. The LO fee has not changed for decades – an allowance of \$1500, ostensibly for equipment, plus \$30 for every day in the city and \$15 for every day in the mountains.

Rules for LOs and foreigner-protection introduced after the Nanga Parbat massacre appeared to have been rescinded or forgotten, with no requirements for the LO to carry a weapon and no armed policemen accompanying foreigners in Skardu. This year's LO, Capt. Mohsin Ali Nasir of the army engineering wing (mechanical and electrical equipment), turned out to be the most relaxed, competent, aware and effective LO the members had ever encountered. On his watch, Skardu paperwork which took 4 days in 2015 was dispatched in one afternoon and one morning.

5.4 Logistics

Clearance, visa invitation letters, permits, LO matters, domestic flights, hotels, jeeps, BC staff, porters and staff insurance were arranged by Higher Ground. As noted in Sec. 2, PIA has revolutionised the reliability of flights between Islamabad and Skardu. All paperwork involving the climbers, including the *pro forma* (and ever-useless) briefing and debriefing, can be carried out in Skardu. The author advises never, ever trying to send anything to the Greater Ranges by cargo agent, working out instead how to maximise baggage allowances, minimise gear consistent with the alpine style and survive in high camps on food that can be bought in-country.

Climbing equipment consisted of standard half ropes (60m x 8mm), a rock rack mostly of small nuts, offsets, pitons and hooks, a few (mostly short) ice screws, plenty abseil cord and a V-threader. No fixed rope was used. Large tents were brought for C1 and C2, with bivouac tents used otherwise. The team carried one MSR Reactor stove and one Jetboil, a radio for twice-daily calls to BC and a Garmin InReach (satellite text device and beacon) for emergencies, status updates and weather forecasts.

5.5 Medical

No vaccinations are required for Northern Pakistan. Normand coordinated BC and mountain first-aid kits while individuals brought their own preferred minimum supplies. Key antibiotics and painkillers were provided by Pierson. No members used any altitude medication. No accidents, injuries or significant illnesses were encountered.

5.6 Travel

Costa, flying Thai Airways from Kunming in China, and Pierson, flying from Los Angeles, both set out on 27th May local time. Normand and Pierson both found that Etihad Airways had the best prices and baggage options, and thus met in Abu Dhabi late on 28th May. Costa and Nasir met them at Islamabad airport early on the 29th and the team was in Skardu before lunch. On the return, no flight delays were encountered and thus Pierson left Skardu on 27th July (Islamabad on the 29th), Costa, Nasir and Normand left Skardu on 29th July, Normand left Islamabad late on the 30th and Costa on the 31st.

5.7 Finances

Full financial details are presented in tabular form. Numbers are quoted in UK pounds (GBP) at an average exchange rate in June and July 2017 of 1.00GBP = 1.29USD. The MEF-supported climbers were Normand and Pierson. Because Costa is currently employed by a manufacturer of climbing equipment and receives expense reimbursements for climbing activities, it was not appropriate to share grant money with him. Numbers are therefore quoted only for the two-man team of Normand and Pierson. The agency fee paid to Higher Ground included all hotels, meals in town, staff, BC equipment, food and fuel, porter fees and staff insurance (priced, as far as the author can tell from extensive past experience, with no profit margin included).

Expenditures

International travel	1710
Domestic travel	310
Peak fee	1240
Environmental fees	105
LO salary and equipment	1270
Agency fee	4240
Mountain food	385
Mountain fuel	170
New climbing equipment	120
New medical supplies	90
Insurance	110
Satellite device	70
	<hr/>
	£9820

Income

Normand was the grateful recipient of additional grants from the BMC and MACCF.

Donor

Mount Everest Foundation	£1625
British Mountaineering Council	£750
Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund	£865
	<hr/>
	£3240

Out of the balance of £6580, personal contributions from the two climbers were £3050 from Normand and £3530 from Pierson.

The author would like to thank all of the expedition's sponsors for their generous support.

6 Expedition Log

29th May

Costa, Nasir, Normand and Pierson fly to Skardu. Nasir embarks on the paperwork trail. Costa and Normand retrieve stored gear barrels and obtain 30 canisters of gas from contacts at Adventure Travel Pakistan and Blue Sky Treks and Tours.

30th May

Bazaar shopping completes supplies of expedition food, medicine, batteries, toiletries and anchor pitons. The staff prepare and pack all of the BC food and equipment.

31st May

A pre-dawn jeep departure has the team at the road-closure point by 10am. The situation there is chaotic and expensive, and there is no sign that a road existed across the affected scree slope. Bystanders appear to shuttle gear across the 200m of unstable terrain, but activity is slowed by a resumption of stonefall from high up the slopes. The situation is exacerbated by rain and delayed by a lack of jeeps shuttling on the Askole side. Nobody is injured by stonefall, although plenty like Normand's example of carrying a foam roll on his head. Eventually the rain stops, the gear and people are loaded onto two jeeps and the final hour to Askole is completed. As the first team of the season (climbing or trekking), they are greeted by some blank looks and unprepared campgrounds, but the hard-working staff soon put everything to rights.



Left: LO Mohsin considering the unstable slope at the roadblock. Right: horse train on the Baltoro.

1st June

The staff organise porters, who are slow to organise themselves, but the baggage train makes it to Jola by mid-afternoon in thankfully cloudy and cool weather. Rising living standards in Askole are measurable by far more of the porters smoking and far more bringing horses for the heavy work.

2nd June

On a partly cloudy and warm day, the team proceeds uneventfully to Paiju. The camp has not been cleaned since the previous autumn and is a mess.

3rd June

The porters do not want the standard rest day in Paiju. The journey to Urdukas is long and arduous because the team building the horse trail for military fuel deliveries has only worked its way to Koburtse. The day is also warmer and mostly cloud-free. Porters and

the LO trickle into camp until dusk. At camp the installed water is not even trickling and everyone has to use a single meltwater stream.

4th June

On another warm day, the porters and horsemen manage to lose the way on the moraine-covered glacier, but regroup for a relatively early finish at Goro 1.



Throne Room of the Mountain Gods. Left: granite on Lobsang. Right: the Shining Wall.

5th June

The day is cloudy and unstable, and the real work starts as much of the trail is in old winter snow. The horsemen find a better route through Concordia than do the porters. A wind- and snow-storm makes life miserable on the trek to Shama, on an exposed moraine near the junction with the Vigne Glacier, but evening sun allows a reasonable amount of drying out.

6th June

Another cloudy day sees some porters leave early for BC, but after an hour Normand is in front to break trail through the old snow with his mountain boots. After another hour, the route regains the crest of a medial moraine and is snow-free all the way to BC. The Gasherbrum army post has been moved since 2009, and is now located 1km downstream of BC, but in the time since its relocation has nonetheless accumulated a stunning amount of rubbish. The military continues to see no need to clean up its act, despite this being the “Central Karakoram National Park,” and apparently has no shame whatsoever at living in the midst of total squalour. There is not even a 2-rupee bounty on fuel cans, which would give the returning empty horse-trains some motivation to start such a clean-up. Heavy snow-showers accompany the construction of BC, but the team's work is good because the kitchen and mess tents do not need to be shifted for the entire season despite the loss of at least 2m in the height of the ice on which everything is built.

7th June

Rest day to sort gear and continue BC construction operations.

8th June

Ghafoor, who was serving as guide and sirdar up to this point, leaves for Skardu. Costa, Normand and Pierson set out up the Gasherbrum icefall with moderate loads. As the first party of the season, they have to find the route through the ice fins to the less-broken upper glacier. In 2009 Normand and Pierson, with Bowie and Guy McKinnon, spent a week over this task. This time Normand chooses a path that does the job first time: up the

centre-left, hard right and downhill towards the G1 icefall, then back up the trench at centre-right. Snowshoes are the footwear of choice. The day turns hot and unpleasant at the top of the trench, where the trail needs to be pushed back to the left. After cracking the problem of a further 200m of broken terrain, the climbers drop their loads at 5500m and head down (BC is at 5070m).



Costa unable to stand the heat on the glacier (left) and getting out of the kitchen in BC (right), with Ayaz splitting Pakistan-Army bamboo staves for marker wands.

9th June

Armed with another set of moderate loads, the climbers retrace their steps to the gear dump and then push slowly up open slopes and into the final trench on the left of the major icefall below C1. The threat from avalanches coming off G6 is low. The day is hot and the snow deep. The team decides to make an interim C1 at the corner beneath the toe of G5 rather than head across-glacier for the final, nearly-flat 1km to the conventional C1; because the distance to C2 is already short, there is no need to make this day unnecessarily arduous. The crevasses here are deep and covered, but also offer protection from possible large events on G5 and G6. Incoming clouds do nothing to reduce the heat on the descent.

10th June

Rest and snow day in BC. Normand and Pierson are impressed at the progress to date, at least compared to 2009.

11th June

The climbers saddle up with heavy loads and plan to stay up for 1 week. The day is slow and hot again. Some serious digging is required to establish a solid platform, roughly 2' below its surroundings, for 1 large and 1 small tent at C1.

12th June

The team does a quick run back to the gear dump and brings all of the equipment and food up to C1. The afternoon is spent sheltering from the heat, until clouds come in to help with this, and getting used to the thinner air.

13th June

The morning is cloudy and windy as the climbers search for a way around the large and well-covered crevasses to the site of the normal C1. The glacier is very flat and featureless where the team works its way northwest under the face of G2 and G3. A final steep and painfully deep slope leads past some crevasses and up to the foot of the icefall

collapsing out of the cwm between G3 and G4. With some precarious towers above and a large debris field, from afar this does not look like a promising place for a camping trip, but a safe spot is found on a shoulder, protected by a crevasse and far from immediate danger. The tents will be dug in to protect from possible blast waves due to a major collapse. The loads are dumped and the run back to C1 is quick.

14th June

Leaving early, the climbers pack their sleeping equipment and move up to C2. This time the weather is hot and the climb of the final slopes to C2 exhausting. Several hours are spent digging the tents in. Apart from passing headaches for Pierson, nobody is suffering from the altitude (which is not the same thing as not feeling it).



South Gasherbrum Glacier companions. Left: G1. Right: G3 and G2.

15th June

The weather is less than stellar and the climbers take a rest day to watch the iccefall and ponder their options. Arguably the crux of any route in the cwm is getting there. In the 50s, if their sketch map is to be believed, the Italians wandered up the centre of the icefall where now there is a vertical 50m ice cliff from one side to the other. In 1980 the Americans climbed uniform snow slopes on the right side, but by 1985, when Geoff Cohen and Des Rubens made a very spirited attempt on the SSW Ridge of G3, they found it easier to climb the left side. Apparently this is also what Yamanoi and the Koreans did in the early 90s, but in 2009 the side of choice was the right: the snow was uniform and, although deep in places, seemed in no danger of sliding, so apart from a short rock toe it could all be done unroped. The right side is less encouraging in 2017, with more debris, a larger bergschrund and some ice glinting through the snow.

16th June

Starting in the frigid pre-dawn, the team aims to climb the right side with minimal loads in the name of acclimatisation and reconnaissance. However, strong overnight winds have rearranged large amounts of snow and the crust is cracking ominously around every footprint, even below the bergschrund. At least on this day, the right side is not an option. Leaving the loads at C2, the climbers switch their acclimatisation stroll and scouting mission to the base of the left side, and then make a deep snowshoe trench up to 6500m on a bench leading beneath the S Face of G4. Back at C2 the mood is less optimistic: it may be necessary to climb the left side.

17th June

Another windy night makes the right side look as bad as ever. The team decides on an acclimatisation trip to 6800m on the SW Ridge of G4. After following the previous day's trail beneath the S Face, there is a 200m rising traverse to the end of a bergshrund, followed by 200m of 40-degree (apparent) névé. However, the snow on the rising traverse is deep and soft over a hard layer, and has a 400m run-out to the glacier below. With the sun on these slopes, it is not a wise idea. The climbers return to C2 via the crest of the bench, making every effort to reconnoitre the left side of the icefall. By now they are somewhat tired and low on food, so it is time to head back to BC for rest and replenishment. At least plenty time is being spent moving at 6500m, even if progress up the mountain has slowed to a crawl.



The Cwm Icefall. Left: from afar (at lower right of frame). Right: from eye-level with the upper ice cliff.

18th June

The team returns to BC, arriving on time for breakfast. Bad weather is forecast but has not yet arrived. The climbers find a tent and some tracks from the next team on the mountain, a group of Spaniards (Basques) including Alberto Iñurrategi, who are aiming to traverse from G1 to G2. The staff produce a cake to mark Pierson's (60th) birthday, which was on the 13th.

19th June

Rest day in BC.

20th June

Rest day in BC. The forecast is good for the next several days and the team decides to push on up again with an extra week of food and fuel.

21st June

An early departure puts the climbers back in C1 with less pain and deep snow than the previous visits, but much of the trail needs to be rebroken.

22nd June

Despite a cold and cloudy start, the climbers are baked on the final grind to C2. All of the trail needs to be broken again and the snow is deep. The afternoon is spent avoiding the heat.



Left: Costa leading the lower ice pitches from C2 to C3. Right: Normand on the exit beside the final ice cliff.

23rd June

The night is windy again and it seems the day will go nowhere. However, improving weather after dawn leads to a change of mind and the climbers head up the left side of the icefall, working up 45-degree slopes. Still, conditions are very hot and soft, and not conducive to going far. The team digs a hole to deposit the gear and returns to C2.

24th June

The climbers make an early start for the left side of the icefall and end up fighting frostnip on a frigid morning. It is clear and windless and, unsurprisingly, things turn painfully hot once the sun comes over G3. Soon after the gear cache there are only 2-5cms of snow over brittle ice, and it is no longer sensible to solo. Costa leads 6 slow and painful pitches of 45-50-degree ice to a notch in a ridge of rotten rock. Normand leads one more pitch into a long, rightwards snow traverse across a face which is less worryingly slide-prone than feared. The altitude is 6750m, the snow is deep and the climbers are getting tired and dehydrated, so at a rest stop under a serac, with the final 100m into the cwm in view, the decision is made to drop the loads and continue the next day. The return is trip is made by abseiling on 6 V-threads.

25th June

A later start helps with the morning cold, but not the daily heat. Loads are heavier than the day before, and progress equally slow until the snow traverse. The end of the traverse is extremely deep and the climbers are grateful to reach ice and firm snow on which to climb up and past the cliff edge and look down into the base of the cwm. The day clouds up rapidly and wind starts to blow. Debate ensues as to where to place C3; Normand convinces the others that, with the spindrift coming off the slopes and the amount of wind that sweeps the cwm, the only sensible place is a large walk-in crevasse in its centre. The snow is deep and the wind blows through it, but it is possible to dig in. Normand heads back down to retrieve the previous day's gear cache while Costa and Pierson dig.

26th June

Although the wind gusts in several directions and later stops, snow falls for much of the night. The forecast good weather has gone somewhere else. The climbers sleep badly and are weak. A proposal by Normand to walk up the glacier in the intermittent white-out ends after only a few steps due to deep new snow and exhaustion. A proposal by Pierson not to spend the planned final night of this push in C3, but to get out now before weather,

snow and physical condition deteriorate further, is approved. The team packs up, folds down Pierson's tent and trudges back up to the edge of the icefall, Costa barely finding the previous day's trail. The long traverse has not become too much more dangerous but the V-threads have disappeared and need to be redone.

27th June

The visibility is poor and the hike back to BC is surprisingly long and hot.



Left: Costa and Pierson on the traverse from C2 to C3, with G5 behind. Right: Normand and Costa working back across the traverse in storm conditions.

28th June

Rest day in BC. According to Iñurrategi, when it rains in BC the monsoon has arrived. Rain falls in the afternoon.

29th June

Rest day in BC. Snow and rain continue.

30th June

Rest day in BC. The weather forecast has changed abruptly and is now offering 5 days of good weather until the 5th. The team succumbs to a combination of cabin fever and irrationality and packs to head back up again.

1st July

Cloudy weather is welcome for regaining C1, but steady snow all afternoon is less so.

2nd July

Thick clouds continue to blow in from the west but the morning hike to C2 changes from cold and windy to hot and stifling. Before C2, however, it is cloudy again and snow falls all afternoon. Different forecasts are offering different degrees of good weather for the coming days. Normand and Pierson, looking at the incoming clouds and the spindrift sluicing off G3, realise they have seen it all before. The decision is made to pull the plug on this effort in the morning.

3rd July

The climbers are back in BC before noon. Snow and rain fall all afternoon. Other teams on G2 are discovering that the promised window does not exist.

4th July

Rest day in BC. The morning is passable but clouds continue to blow in, and snow and rain showers fill the afternoon.

5th July

Rest day in BC. The weather is like the day before. The forecasts are for more precipitation on the 6th and 7th, and then all sources agree on a long spell of good weather from approximately the 8th to 11th. Given the 2-3 days required to get to the cwm, it is time to move.

6th July

The team takes another 4-5 days of food and returns to C1 in showery weather.

7th July

The climbers continue to C2. Some bright spells in the morning give way to heavy snow all afternoon. Snow and occasional wind continue for much of the night.

8th July

Enforced rest day in C2. All the slopes need time to stabilise, and in fact so does the weather. Normand breaks a new track to the base of the steep climbing, finding debris from a serac collapse covering a section of the old route.

9th July

The climbers make their way back to C3. The ice pitches are more snow-plastered but no more suitable for soloing. The snow on the traverse is deeper but it is still possible to find solid snow underneath. The final traverse pitch is abominable. C3 is well snowed-up but yields to 2 hours of diligent digging. Despite the forecast, the afternoon is cloudy around the peaks.

10th July

The climbers sleep late in the name of rest. The plan is to climb up to the base of the technical terrain and leave most of the necessary gear, ready for a very early start the next day. However, the new snow is soft and slow, and crossing the bergschrund takes some exploration. Normand makes solid tracks for the next 300m up 50-degree snow and digs a cache next to some fractured marble with no reliable gear options. By this time clouds are swirling around the entire upper peak and around the climbers. The day's work has been done and the descent is quick.



Left: Costa and Normand approaching the high cache. Right: Costa setting out for the dead-end slab.

11th July

In the early morning it is digit-threateningly cold. Wind has been blowing all night and the previous day's footprints have gone. Costa makes a new track to the bergschrund and

Normand takes over. The new snow that has sluiced down the mountain all night is much less stable than the previous day's and the climbers are not anxious to be on it after sun-up. Still, sunrise at the gear cache is a welcome chance to thaw. Costa racks up and leads 25m up to the first rock band; Pierson belays in the snow hole and Normand looks fruitlessly for any kind of protection, finally getting 1cm of a piton in a crack in decidedly questionable rock. Costa finds "polished marble that belongs in the foyer of a Chinese hotel." It is going to be M8 (or higher) slab-scratching for 5m. No amount of scraping away the surrounding snow yields a gear placement. He traverses right but the slab gets longer; then he tries to go left up a gully, but the slab gets steeper and still there is no whiff of protection. The game is over before it had started. Perhaps in a high-snow year, or after a high-snow night of wind, the slab would be covered in enough snow (10-15cm) to get over without truly noticing it. However, now and (apparently, from later observation) this summer, it is a showstopper. The team heads back to C3 before the snow gets much warmer. By noon the upper mountain, including all of the anticipated technical climbing, is again shrouded in cloud and blowing snow.



Left: photo of G4 E Face at the time the climbers were at their high non-belay (red circle), taken by Guillaume Vallot from 6550m on G2. Right: view from the same spot towards G1 and Salto Kangri.

12th July

The climbers decide to pick up where Normand and Pierson left off in 2009, and go round the N side of G3. The target is "Gasherbrum 2.5," a 7706m peak in the wide col between G2 and G3. Every step of the way up the cwm is deep post-holing, led by Normand. Costa's feet are so cold that he has to abandon. When the sun comes up on Normand and Pierson, it is soon followed by wind and descending cloud. Normand climbs a snow couloir at the back of the cwm up to approximately 7600m before sinking into bottomless and potentially treacherous snow. A cloud cap has descended over all the peaks, blocking any views to K2 and Broad Peak (and beyond), and threatening trouble on the return. Pierson turns back from 7500m and Normand soon after. The pair need to break a new trail back down the cwm. Costa feels he has rescued his semi-frozen toes, but they remain slightly numb for the rest of the trip.

13th July

The weather is bad. The climbers are completely frustrated with the situation. The decision is made to clear C3, as to do so later would require another 4-day round trip from BC. On the climb down beside the ice cliff and on the first pitch of the rotten

traverse, the wind engulfs the climbers in waterfalls of spindrift so heavy they would be funny were they not so dangerous. To 2009 veterans Normand and Pierson there seems to be a message: which part of FRO did you not understand ? A new set of V-threads is required on the snow-plastered ice pitches and C2 is regained without further incident.



Left: the business – the technical climbing on G4 E Face that the team did not reach.
Right: fleeting view of Broad Peak, Broad Peak North and K2 from the north side of Gasherbrum 2.5 as clouds roll in.

14th July

The team clears C2 as well, with Costa entertaining himself by skiing with a huge plastic-wrapped bag of tents in tow. Normand and Pierson have to break out the snowshoe trail again. Much of the gear is left in C1 and the climbers return to BC in the warm part of the day. By now most of the snow has gone from the icefall, leaving crampon terrain with ever-growing slots.

15th July

Rest day in BC. Despite the bad forecast, half the day is fine at BC (but not on the upper mountain). Costa talks to friends on the neighbouring French team about switching to their G2 permit in order to come away with something to tell his sponsor. Plans are made by satellite telephone with this team's agent, who shall remain nameless here, and who assures them that he can handle all the paperwork for a \$1200 fee to be added to the existing permit plus \$100 to trek out over the Gondogoro La with the members of this extended team (which includes Swiss, Iranian, Ukrainian and US climbers).

16th July

Rest day in BC for Normand and Pierson, who continue to brood over a back-up plan. On an optimistic forecast for the 17th and 18th, Costa heads back up to C1 with Guillaume Vallot of the French team. The weather is as on the previous day.

17th July

The good-weather forecast has switched to 20-21st. Normand and Pierson decide that the appropriate plan is to try to repeat the Bonatti, reaching his 7200m col in 2 days, having 2 days to summit and then taking 1-2 more days to descend the NW Ridge to Concordia, to meet the staff and porters there for the trek out. Plans are made with the staff and with Costa by radio for the clearing of C1. The weather is reasonable in BC but unstable higher on the mountains.

18th July

Pierson is ill and the Bonatti-Mauri plan has to be abandoned before it started. The weather is marginal, but news comes at the end of the day that Matthieu Maynadier and Jérémy Rumebe of the French team summited G2 anyway. Costa makes it to C2 but is exhausted and returns for a rest. Rumebe skis the entire descent and Maynadier most of it, the pair returning to BC at dusk.

19th July

Rest and recovery day in BC. The weather remains mixed. Normand and Pierson still have to clear C1, and come up with another scaled-down plan in the form of "Gasherbrum 4.5," a 6950m peak next to G5 with a snowy northern aspect. The hope is to use the 2 days of good weather for some excellent views of G4 W Face and out across the Karakoram to the west.

20th July

Normand and Pierson return in record time to C1 and pick up gear. At G2 C1 they meet Costa and Vallot, back up for their summit bid. They continue to the end of the glacier arm between G4 and G5. A snow-shower passes through but then the summits are cloud-free towards evening. P6950 has some ice pitches on its snowy face, and a slightly lower neighbour, P6900, appears to be mostly névé.

21st July

At first light the climbers head up to the snow-slopes below P6950. The angle is bad and has accumulated the optimal amount of snow. Normand, breaking trail, finds unconsolidated powder on a hard layer beneath a weak crust. A boom from a settling process makes the situation as clear as necessary. The pair head right and into the slopes of P6900. The going is better but the snow is still deep and questionable. It becomes clear that it is extra-specially bad here due to the location directly downwind of the G4-G5 col. Sunrise is mostly obscured by clouds, which continue to hang over all the summits (the plan for the Bonatti-Mauri would have been executed in a white-out). However, those around the sun then clear obligingly so that the snow under the climbers' feet can warm up dangerously. The upper half of the face is partially icy and partially exposed to a relatively benign-looking serac. The situation is shaping up to be a monumentally bad idea. The climbers abandon their last plan and head back to C1 to eat and pack.

22nd July

At midnight Normand and Pierson shoulder huge loads and head down. The process is painful and is not assisted by the incomplete freeze. Still, the pair manage not to take their last chance to be swallowed by one of the crevasses in the icefall. At dawn they are in BC, where the horses and horsemen arrived the previous night. There is time for breakfast before refining the loads. In no particular hurry, the baggage train works its way to Concordia by late afternoon. The weather is unstable and showery, with one hailstorm around Shama, and conditions look bad on the peaks. Nevertheless, Costa and Vallot do summit G2 on this morning, but do not enjoy expansive vistas.

23rd July

The walk to Urdukas is long. The horses are far ahead of the climbers. The day is only partly cloudy on the Baltoro, with one shower, but poor on the peaks. Urdukas is packed with trekking teams, mostly Chinese and Pakistani.

24th July

The day to Bardumal is again long, despite the military trail. The horses are far behind the climbers. The weather remains partly cloudy and cool, but the skies are very grey towards the high peaks.

25th July

The weather is again partly cloudy and cool, so is ideal for trekking. Askole is reached by mid-afternoon. Only towards evening does blue sky move in, seeming to herald a change in the month-long pattern of unstable weather. Sure enough, K2 is climbed by a large Sherpa-driven team on the 28th and Czech climbers Marek Holeček and Zdeněk Hák complete a new route on G1 on the 30th.

26th July

The jeep-ride to Askole is uneventful, for a change. Pierson packs to leave and Normand packs a barrel to stay. The farewell dinner with the staff and LO at a Skardu restaurant makes Normand ill.

27th July

Pierson leaves. Costa calls from Khapulu to say he has been detained at a military checkpost. His “new agent” has prepared no paperwork at all, which immediately causes problems for Higher Ground. Frantic efforts to resolve the situation in Islamabad result in Ayaz, Mustafa and LO Mohsin driving to Khapulu and back with Costa's passport, which was in Skardu, in order to liberate him.

28th July

Costa packs. Normand returns gear to ATP and Blue Sky, before spending the afternoon sleeping off his illness. Extensive discussion of how to resolve Costa's status yields no firm conclusions.

29th July

Costa, Nasir and Normand fly to Islamabad. Karim has been working the options for solving Costa's problems. Many of the climbers on the same G2 permit as the French, including Vallot, have serious complaints against their agent too. The situation is resolved when some money changes hands between the agent and the responsible party at the Gilgit-Baltistan Council office in Islamabad, at which point Costa is told just to keep his mouth shut. Higher Ground's name is cleared.

30th July

Islamabad is rocked by news of the Prime Minister's removal from office. Luckily all the resulting demonstrations and celebrations are peaceful. Normand and Costa fly out without incident.

7 Conclusion

The expedition was unable to execute its declared aim of climbing the East Face of Gasherbrum IV. It encountered poor weather, challenging snow conditions and ultimately rock of a quality making the undertaking dangerous beyond reason.

8 Acknowledgements

The expedition acknowledges with gratitude the generous assistance of the Mount Everest Foundation, the British Mountaineering Council and the Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund.

Appendix A: Bibliography

There exist many accounts of expeditions to Gasherbrum IV. The AAJ contains the most complete source of information. A particularly useful summary of expeditions up to 2002, accompanied by excellent pictures, can be found in Alpinist 2.

Appendix B: Contact Information

Pakistan Alpine Club

The PAC (www.alpineclub.org.pk) may be contacted at info@alpineclub.org.pk.

Agents for Expeditions in Pakistan

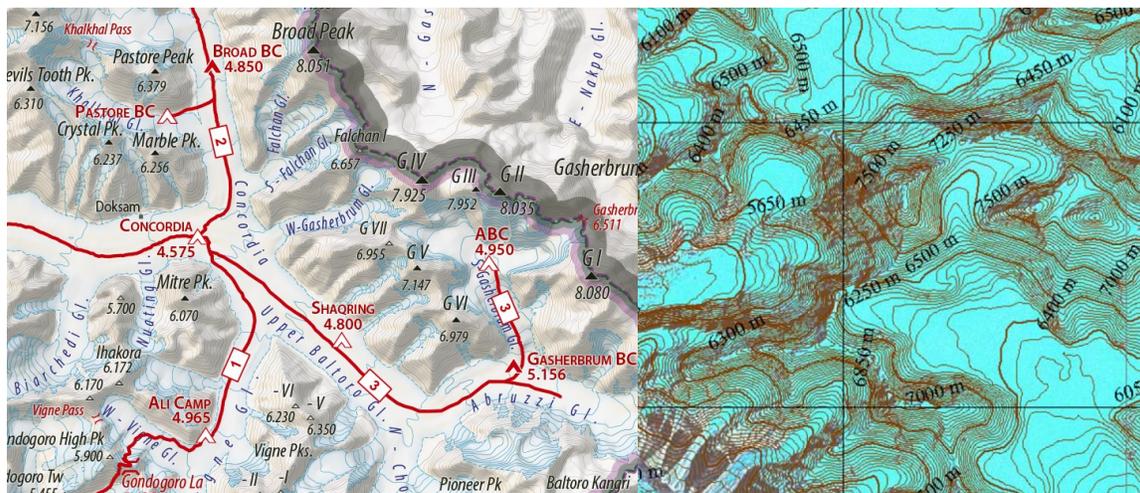
The author continues to recommend Adventure Tours Pakistan (www.atp.com.pk), who may be contacted at info@atp.com.pk. Higher Ground Expeditions, Treks and Tours (highergroundexpeditions.com) can be contacted at info@highergroundexpeditions.com and ghafoor.guide@gmail.com.

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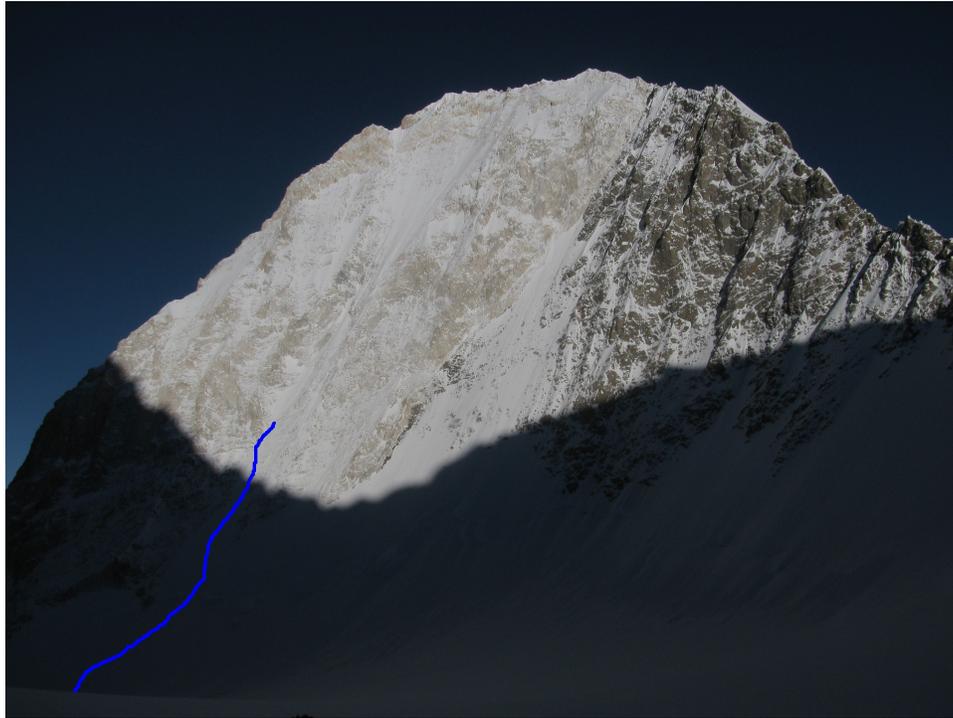
Billy Pierson: billythegrip@gmail.com

Appendix C: Map and Route Diagram



Gasherbrum IV is not hard to find. However, its East Face is hard to reach. The sketch map of the Gasherbrum group (left) shows the approach route, BC and ABC (whose

height should be marked as 5950m). The contour map (right) indicates the actual heights of technical routes on the E Face (from 7000m), SW Ridge (from 6500m), NW Ridge (from 6000m) and W Face (from 5500m).



Gasherbrum IV East Face from the end of the cwm. The blue line marks the completed route.