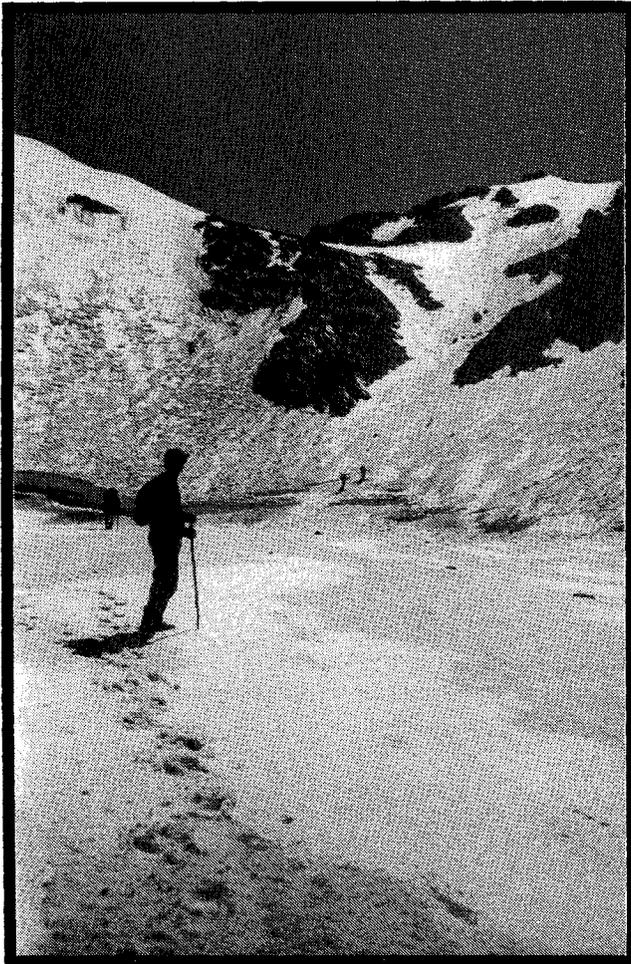


TESTING THE LIMITS

by Carol Rose

Anyone who has lived in this part of the world knows the lure of the Himalayas. The snowy peaks that separate Pakistan, India and China are visible from miles away. They stand like courtesans draped in silky white, beckoning the adventurous to conquer them. Many people have died trying.



My thoughts in setting out for the Himalayas are not to conquer the mountains, but to trek among them. I expect the trip to be an extended walk. It turns out to be much more than that. In the course of a few days in the mountains, I learn a great deal about the Himalayas -- and about myself.

Starting at the Top

The trip starts with a fantastic and terrifying forty-minute flight over some of the world's tallest peaks. The airplane skirts by Nanga Parbat, the eighth largest mountain at 26,800 feet, known as the "killer mountain" because of the number of climbers who have died trying to scale its heights. In the distance are Rakaposhi (25,700 ft), Tirich Mir (25,500 ft) and K-2 (28,500 ft), the second-highest mountain in the world.

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My destination is the Skardu valley. From the air, it resembles a gigantic earthen dish enclosed by jagged granite peaks. As the plane descends into the valley, it banks sharply to the left. The final approach brings us face-to-face with the side of an enormous granite ridge. It appears we will miss the runway altogether. Eyes closed, I murmur what I think is my parting prayer when suddenly -- miraculously -- the plane touches down.

From the ground, I see that the Skardu valley is an enormous alluvial plain adorned with blue-grey glacial streams, slender white poplar trees, and golden fields of corn and wheat. The grey silt that carpets the valley floor is delivered from the mountains by the powerful Indus and Shigar rivers.

This part of the world is known as Baltistan, the people are Baltis. But hundreds of years ago it was known as "Little Tibet." Some scholars believe that Buddhism was introduced to Tibet from Baltistan between the third and seventh centuries.



A suspension bridge over the Indus River.

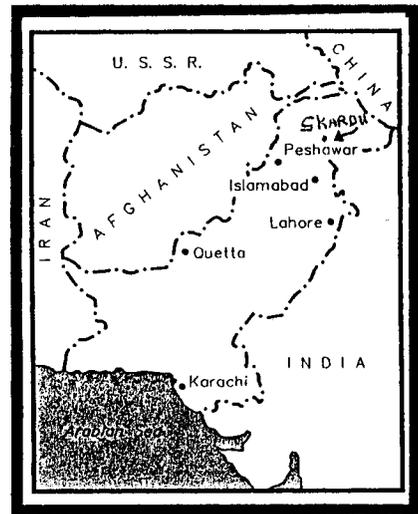
Although the Baltis converted to the conservative Shia sect of Islam more than 500 years ago, remnants of their Tibetan heritage linger. Their speech resembles the Tibetan language and many have inherited the round faces and heavy-lidded eyes of their Mongolian ancestors. They still trade with Tibet, exchanging locally-produced apricots for tea and silks. Our chief guide, a Balti named Mohammed Ali Changazi, says the local people retain a kinship with Tibet despite local interpretations of Islam that forbid them from sharing a meal with Buddhists.

Intolerance is visible in other ways as well. A sign at the airport warns:

"Women should not expose their beauty to others." I sigh and pull my floppy hat tight over my head, weary of the misogyny that pervades Pakistan.

In the center of Skardu an enormous butte stands like a mountain-sized ship run aground on the valley floor. On one side of the butte is a 16th-century abandoned fortress, known as the Askandria Fort. From here, Sikhs from Kashmir, known as "Dogras," ruled over the Balti Muslims for more than a century. They were overthrown in a popular revolution (backed by the Pakistani Army) in 1947.

Driving through the Skardu bazaar, I exchange stares with the local people. Their lined faces seem as weathered as the surrounding mountains.



Skardu and the major cities of Pakistan

The End of the Road

Early the next morning, 11 of us crowd into a jeep. I am traveling with my husband, Tom; his brother, Jonathan; and our Swedish friend, Carl. In addition to my companions and Changazi there are four "sardars" or junior guides, a cook and his assistant. Our destination is the Shigar valley, north and east of Skardu. We then will walk over the Solu and Sokha glaciers and cross the Sokha pass. [Trekking map on page 6.]

The jeep tracks across a moon-scape of powdery silt through the Skardu valley. We traverse the bubbling grey Indus river on a suspension bridge, the first of seven bridges we will cross on this drive. Each one is made from wooden planks suspended from cables. During a crossing these bridges undulate with a wave-like motion that threatens to toss vehicles overboard as they race to the opposite shore.

As we ride out of the river basin, an unpaved road takes us through villages and past fields of wheat, potatoes, barley and beans. We pass mud houses that have flat roofs covered with piles of drying apricots. Stone walls surround each house, but from our perch on the jeep we glimpse women in brightly-colored floral print dresses as they go about their chores. Most of them scowl at us or turn away as we pass -- "covering their beauty" as dictated by Islam. But I hold up my braided hair to one group of women -- showing them I am female despite my manly attire -- and they immediately smile, wave and hold out their braids in a sisterly response.



Balti girls cover their heads but cannot hide their beauty.

Trees line both sides of the road: apricot, chestnut, maple, birch, poplar and cedar. Branches hang over the road, lashing us as we drive by. Our cook, Ali Khan, a petite round-faced man, keeps watch for the branches, yelling: "Batch-key" ("Look out!") from time to time. While we duck for cover, the porters reach up to seize apricots from the trees for us to eat. The fresh fruit melts like sugar in our mouths. The porters then split open the apricot pits and we munch the almond-like seed within.

After four hours, we stop for tea in the town of Shigar, once an independent kingdom and still famous for its beautifully carved mosque, imported from neighboring Kashmir during the rule of the Dogras. The town has tree-lined streets, fresh-water canals and waterfalls that give it a quaint charm. It also has delicious green tea, spiced with sugar, cinnamon and black pepper.

After Shigar, villages become fewer and the land more rocky. Terrifying slopes on one side of the road threaten to bury us beneath boulders and pebbles. A sheer rock wall drops 1,000 feet to the raging Basna river on the other side. At some stretches, the road is a mere six feet across. I cling to the jeep in terror. For a while, my attention is diverted by the appearance of a Kestrel, a small falcon, soaring alongside the cliff. Beauty and danger seem often to meet in these mountains.

We confront the next hazard when the road drops to the valley floor, disappearing into the turbulent flood waters of the river. Our guide, Changazi, says that we must try to drive through the water or be forced to walk three extra days if we fail. I volunteer that walking might be a good idea in light of the amount of water rushing by, especially since we don't know the depth of the river.

My reasoned arguments are interrupted when the jeep lurches

into the water. Water rushes into the cab as the jeep tilts sharply to the left, as if to dump the passengers into the river. It has not escaped my attention that all of the sardars managed to leap out of the jeep before it crossed, leaving the four of us alone on board. For a moment it seems that the jeep will turn completely over, but it shudders and spews black fumes into the water, jars forward and reaches the opposite bank. We stop to dry out the engine and recover our nerve.

In the late afternoon, the road comes to an abrupt end at a large boulder. We are in the village of Zil, where we will spend the night. Exhausted, we tumble out of the jeep and collapse in a meadow. The sardars unload what appears to be an incredible amount of gear for just four people. Soon, the entire town has assembled to see the foreigners and make a bid to join our expedition as porters.

The Doctors are In

We pitch our tents on the roof of a house in the village of Zil. Homes here are made of mud, stone and woven willow branches. The weaving of these branches is both attractive and functional, allowing the wind to cool rooms during the hot summer months.

Villagers gather round to look at us and seem particularly fascinated by the sight of me -- a woman dressed in slacks and a

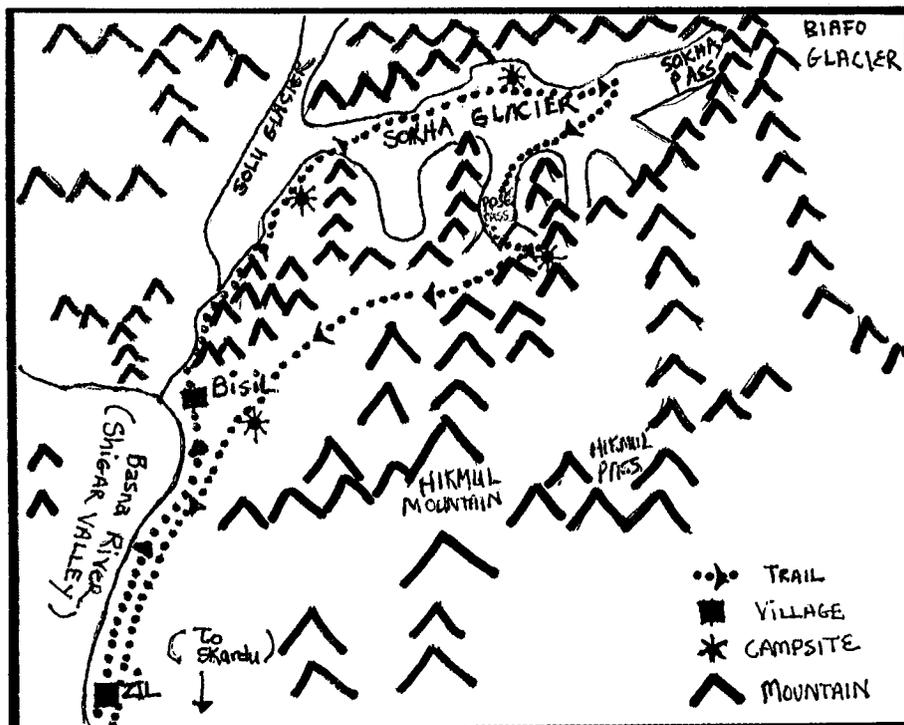


The unusual roofline and intricate carving on this Kashmir-style mosque in Shigar reflects Kashmir's former rule over Baltistan.

T-shirt. But they are motivated by more than curiosity. They want western medicine. Pushing and poking one another to get close to me, they point out their aches and pains. Some have toothaches, others have general pain that I suspect is arthritis, and virtually all of the mothers say their babies have diarrhoea.

I feel trapped: hesitant to give medicine stronger than aspirin but wanting to be a good guest. Finally, I gather everyone in a large crowd sitting on the roof. I distribute aspirin or antibiotic cream to the adults. Then I talk about the importance of breast feeding, boiling water, washing hands and going to the nearest doctor if someone doesn't get well. Thinking that I have made myself clear, I thank them for their attention and stand up to leave. Immediately, they swarm even tighter. They don't want instructions in hygiene. They want pills!

In a room below, another minor conflagration is taking place around Changazi as he sorts out who will be hired as porters. More than 50 local men have put their names forward for a lottery, but only 16 will be selected. One man is so desperate for work that he refuses to leave the room or take his eyes off the lottery tickets. He says he must have the job -- no matter what.



MAP OF OUR TREKKING ROUTE

"They have no other source of money," says Changazi, sighing and he writes the names on slips of paper for the drawing. "They have enough wheat and milk to feed themselves throughout the year, but they need money to buy clothes, shoes, salt, and sugar. That requires money. Many of them sell butter to earn a little, but this [portering] is the only way for them to earn a lot."

Porters each carry around 50 pounds of weight and are paid \$6.40 per "stage" in a trek or expedition, with one to three stages walked each day. As they conduct the lottery, the four of us stroll in the nearby fields, eager to be far away in case there are angry feelings among those not selected. We are at an altitude of 9,000 feet and already the mountain air is noticeably thin.

Leaping over Fear

I awake to the sound of rain rapping on the tent. Not a good day for trekking. From the rooftop I watch the bustle of the village. Men are threshing wheat by using four or five "zoes," a hybrid between a cow and a yak. Tied to a central pole, the zoes walk in a circle and crush the wheat beneath their hooves. In the center of the village women wash clothes in a canal. Others stoop in the fields, cutting and stacking stalks of wheat by hand.

Our destination for the day is the next village -- Bisil -- about four hours walking distance. We have a virtual army of porters: 16 men loaded with enormous metal boxes, plastic barrels or canvas bags. Two porters have live chickens strapped to their backs, which we adopt as pets and immediately name "lunch" and "dinner."

Ten minutes outside of Zil we reach our first challenge of the morning: a rushing stream that we must leap across. The narrowest span is about five feet, from one slippery rock to another. I stare at the water, visualizing how the torrents will hurl my body against the boulders and send my shattered bones crashing down the mountainside.

Looking up from my morbid reverie, I see all 16 porters, four sardars, three companions, two cooks and one guide watching expectantly from the opposite bank. If I don't jump, or die trying, the entire expedition must turn back. After what seems like an eternity, I take a breath and leap. One boot hits the opposite side, the other plunges into the water. Fortunately, Tom is there to pull me to dry land.

"There, that was no problem!" he says cheerfully. I glare at him. I think it is -- or was -- a fairly major problem. But soon my fear turns to pride as I realize I have overcome my terror and am still alive.

We spend the rest of the morning walking alongside the river. The light is soft beneath the gray clouds and mist. The scenery is ever-changing: shimmering fields of golden wheat and green clover give way to meadows of yellow, pink and blue wild flowers. For a while, the land is desert-like, with red soil and enormous boulders streaked with green, black and orange minerals. The air is saturated with the scent of sage. It feels as though we are passing through an enormous terrarium.

Barricaded in Bisil

As we near the village of Bisil, children swarm around us. They act as an early-warning system, alerting the village of our approach. Even before we have entered Bisil, people of all ages are jostling us and asking for medicine.

"What is it with medicine and these people?" I ask Changazi. He says that most major expeditions -- which consist of dozens of climbers -- are accompanied by a doctor who gives medicine to the local people. But few expeditions walk on this side of the river. This year, we are the second -- and last -- group to pass through this isolated valley.

Bisil is the last town before the high mountains. It stands at an altitude of 10,000 feet and is famous for its medicinal hot springs. Dozens of steaming sulfur-water canals meander through the village, filling the air with the scent of rotten eggs. Worse still, the hot springs seem to do little to improve the health of the local people: we are inundated by villagers complaining of rheumatism, arthritis, broken bones, tumors, eye infections, staff infections, diarrhoea, and so on.

Because the rain is falling hard, we take shelter in a local house. A crowd gathers outside the door, waiting to receive medicine. Tom and Carl agree to set up a "clinic" to see villagers on a covered porch while Jonathan and I try to rest in an extremely dusty guest room. It isn't easy to relax because a crowd of villagers is peering in the window. Moreover, many of the women do not want to see Tom or Carl. They want to see me -- the foreign lady. Time and again, they barge into the room without knocking. If I feign sleep, they stand by my side until I pretend to awaken. I tell them I am not a doctor, that I have no medicine. "No problem," they say. "Just look." They eagerly show me their rotting teeth and infected sores.

After three hours, Tom and Carl return, exhausted after having "examined" some 50 people. We agree to bolt ourselves inside the room. Tom wedges a large branch underneath the doorknob to keep out intruders. Within minutes villagers attempt to push open the door and find it locked. The four of us huddle away from the window, desperate to sleep, to read a book, to be



A woman from the village of Bisil requests medicine for her baby, who wears a burlap bag in lieu of diapers.

left alone. After a few minutes, someone batters on the door. The frame shakes, the hinges rattle, and the branch becomes unwedged. As the door falls in, a tiny old woman with no teeth stands at the threshold. Having single-handedly beat down the door, she announces: "I feel weak all over. Give me medicine."

The constant demand for medicine seems particularly absurd after Changazi tells us that there is a local doctor about a half-day walk from the village. "You must understand, they would rather be examined by a foreigner -- any foreigner -- than believe even the most highly-trained Balti doctor," says Changazi. Learning this, we refuse to give out any more pills and tell the villagers to go to their doctor.

Later that night, Changazi brings us a special Balti food item. It is a cake made of uncooked buckwheat dough, shaped like a "Bundt" cake with a pool of oil in the center of it. He demonstrates for us how to eat it: forming the raw dough into the shape of a spoon, then dipping it in the oil and swallowing the dough/oil mixture together. A group of villagers gathers around to watch as we sample the treat. It tastes like sand and oil, but I nod appreciatively as I choke it down.

Changazi then explains that most of the villages in this valley were created when the former King of Shigar banished



Looking down on the junction of the Solu and Sokha glaciers.

criminals here. In effect, it was a jail. The four of us nod, acknowledging that Bisil definitely resembles a jail.

"The villagers do not understand why foreigners go into the mountains," Changazi says. "Some of them think the foreigners are on the Hajj [religious pilgrimage], but others think you are looking for gold because they see the flecks of mica that wash down from the mountain streams.

"But even people who believe there is gold won't go to the mountains," he adds.

I meditate on this ominous note as I drift off to sleep.

To the Mountains

I awake covered with flea bites. It is still drizzling, but at least we are leaving Bisil. Giving warmest thanks to our hosts, we brush past the last crowd of villagers asking for medicine and began the steep ascent to the mountains. As we climb, it seems the entire town has come out to bid us farewell. Men, women and children stand on the rooftops and wave. The sight is so heart-warming that I almost feel sad about leaving, until my flea bites start itching again.

We march steeply up a side valley toward the junction of the Solu and Sokha glaciers. Sharp peaks rise on all sides, whitened

by the newly-fallen snow of the previous day. Never before have I seen such geological massiveness -- not in Nepal, Alaska or other parts of Pakistan. It is hard to imagine the scale of the Himalayas, even when standing among them.

The valley becomes increasingly narrow, with a river rushing through a gorge some 1,000 feet below. The footpath shrinks to no more than eight inches across, with loose rubble on either side and a sheer drop. It is clear that one misstep means death, but still it takes enormous concentration to watch my feet rather than the spectacular cliffs and waterfalls.

The path meanders up the valley, winding back and forth, up and down. We stop at a fresh-water spring to wash our faces and drink. On either side of the path now are steep meadows of wild flowers: edelweiss, lavender, orchids. We have climbed to 11,000 feet: the air is thin but filled with the clean fragrance of flowers and sage.

In the mid-afternoon we enter another arid region, where the red rocks resemble the "canyon-lands" region of the southwestern United States. Carl says that a grove of birch and juniper shrubs reminds him of the Swedish countryside.

In the late afternoon we cross an ice field. The cold wind lashes my face and my feet slip on the frozen ground. My head is pounding and I cannot seem to catch my breath. I am suffering the first effects of high altitude.

We stop at dusk, setting up camp in a meadow at the junction of three glacial valleys. Our campsite is a green carpet of clover surrounded by spiky red granite peaks, like giant fingers pointing toward heaven. The porters have already pitched our tents when we arrive and many are praying, chanting and bowing toward Mecca and the sunset in the West. The two chickens are roped together and fires are blazing near the mess tent. Ali Khan, our cook, brings us tea, biscuits and an apple. Local shepherds give us fresh milk and cottage cheese.

I put on a warm sweater and rest near the fire, sipping tea and writing in my journal. It has been a day of hard walking, but the crisp air and beautiful scenery make me feel content. Life's small pleasures -- a fresh apple, a cup of tea -- seem rare delicacies.

The evening is one of joy. Over dinner, the chickens escape and everyone laughs and cheers as three of the porters chase them around the meadow before finally wrestling them to the ground. The sunset is breath-taking, turning from pink to lavender to indigo. After dinner, the porters and sardars gather around the fire to sing folk songs, clapping out a beat as they sing about a mythical Balti woman named "Gulabi" -- or "rose."

"The sky is clear, the fire is warm," one man calls to us. "Come and sing!"

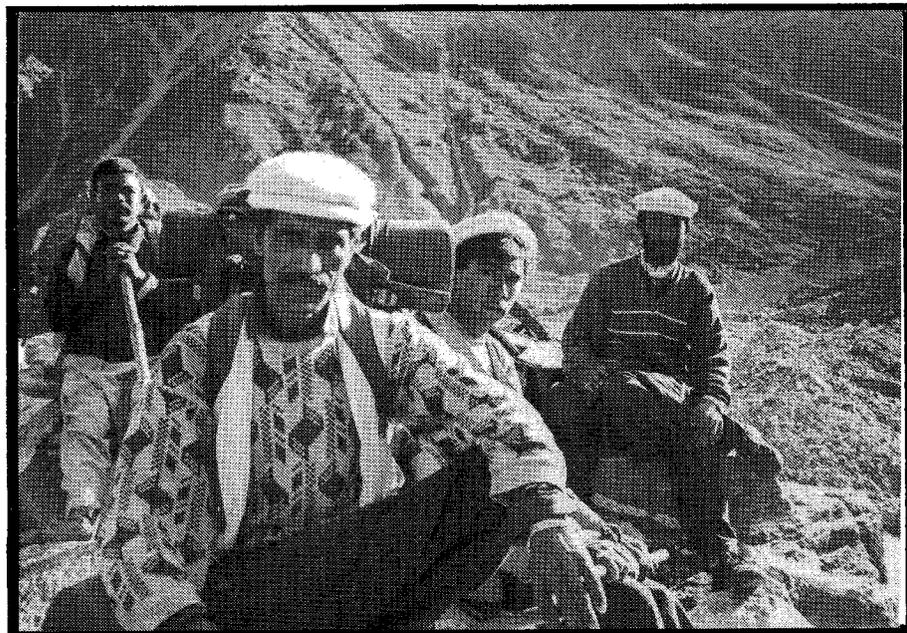
Overhead, I clearly see the constellations: the Big and Little Dippers, Scorpio, Andromeda and the Swan. There seem to be millions of stars -- much better than the scenery at a "five-star" hotel. Later, the stars fade away as a nearly-full moon rises over the mountain peaks like a fresh pearl.

The Trudge

A cold morning wake-up at 5:30 AM; the tent is wet with condensation and I think that I shall never be warm again. Fortunately, Ali Khan has prepared porridge and hot tea to take the edge off the chill.

We need the fuel, for today we spend five grueling hours hiking across the moraine of the Sokha glacier. The moraine is the lowest end of a glacier, where loose rocks, jagged-edged boulders, deep crevasses and slippery mud make walking both tiresome and treacherous.

We are gaining altitude rapidly, making it difficult to breathe and giving me a persistent mild headache. Jonathan has



Balti guides (from left): the cook, Ali Khan; sardar Shukur; assistant-cook Bakhar; and sardar Yousef.

picked up a nasty cold that makes breathing difficult under any conditions and especially at high altitude.

One of the strange things about altitude is that it affects people differently and has little to do with athleticism. A marathon runner may be adversely affected by the altitude at 8,000 feet, while a couch potato may be unaffected at 18,000 feet. Even more strange, it can affect the same person differently at different times. The most important thing is to climb slowly, stopping to sleep at different altitudes before continuing to ascend. We are watchful for the signs of acute high altitude sickness: gurgling sounds in the lungs, loss of appetite, chills and fever. People can die within hours once acute mountain sickness sets in. The only cure is immediate descent.

As on previous days, the views today are spectacular: emerald-green glacial pools, wild flowers, and before us a cirque of knifelike white peaks with snowy cornices waiting to tumble down as avalanches.

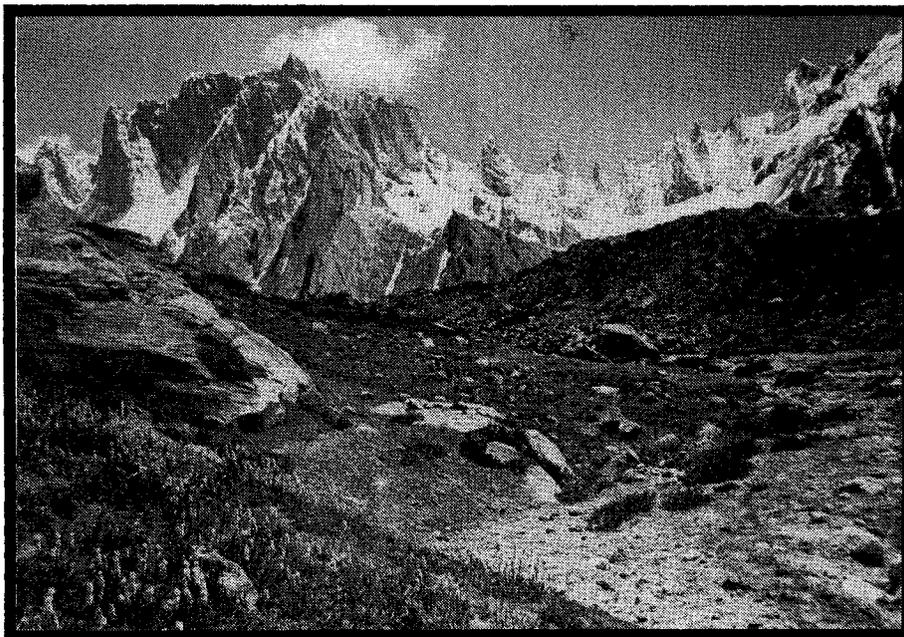
After ascending another 2,000 feet, we camp on an open dried river bed next to the Sokha glacier. There are no trees, so we hide from the intense sun beneath the overhang of a large boulder -- too exhausted to mind the shrews that are nesting with us in the shadows. Pink flowers carpet the meadows on the surrounding hills. There are few sounds: the chirping of a bird, the occasional rush of wind, the murmur of a waterfall on a distant mountainside.

In the evening we eat the meat of a wild ibex, an endangered species whose carcass was sent as a gift from a local hunter. It is similar to buffalo meat, very rich and gamey. That night, I am violently sick to my stomach.

Delirium

Carl says this is the delirium day. The altitude of our campsite is about 13,000 feet and we all awake with headaches or diarrhoea. My resting pulse rate, normally about 68 beats a minute, has risen to 105 beats a minute as my body struggles to function on less oxygen. I cannot think clearly.

This is supposed to be a rest day while Changazi and the four sardars scout the Sokha pass. Meanwhile, we will take a stroll because exercise pumps oxygen to the bloodstream and thus helps the body to acclimatize. But it is with great effort that I put one leg before the other. My blood seems to be filled with lead and my head with cotton. I stop every 100 feet or so to catch my breath.



Beauty and danger combined: a meadow of pink wildflowers in the foreground and a dangerous cirque of white-caps in the distance.

After an hour of walking, I begin to feel better. Soon I feel sick only when I stop to rest. We walk for three hours toward the Sokha pass, which we are supposed to cross tomorrow. In a meadow of wild flowers I spot another Kestrel, this time from up close. I wish I could fly rather than trudge over these mountains. Still, from a distance the pass looks easy and we are cheered that soon we will be on the other side.

Changazi and the sardars finally return at dusk, after a 12-hour day at the pass. They looked sun-burned, wind-burned and exhausted.

"It's impossible to pass," says Changazi. "Only technical climbers could do it. There is no way."

Instead, he says, we will attempt to cross an unnamed pass that leads back to Shigar valley in a loop. Although no trekker has ever attempted that pass, Changazi assures us that the local hunter says it is easy. "No problem. Get a good night rest and we will start in the morning."

The Pass

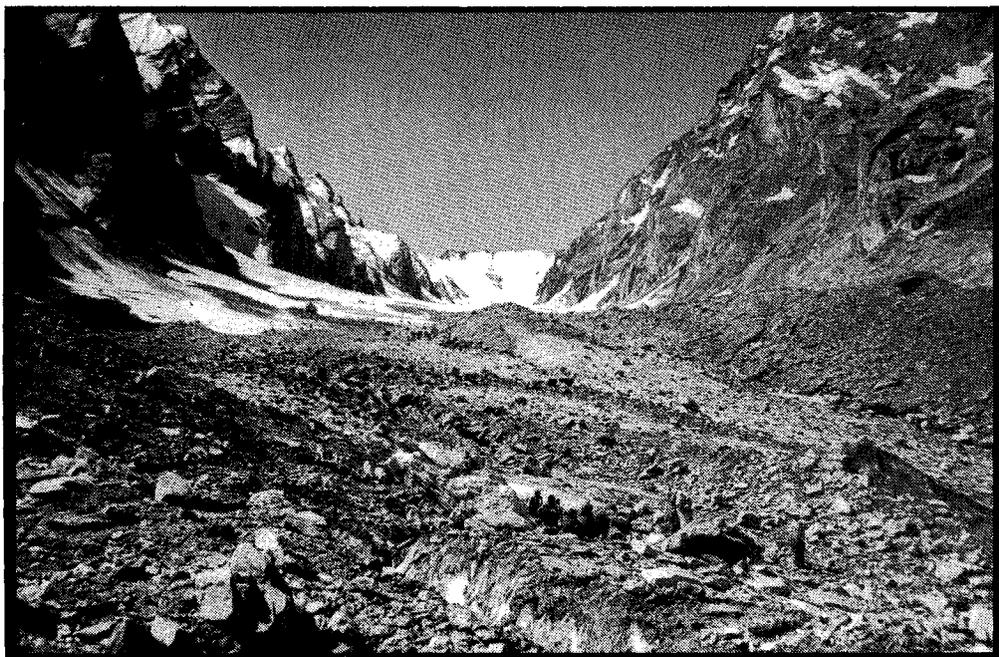
This is the day from hell. We set off at 6:30 A.M., crossing first over a glacier that is covered with ice, rocks and crevasses. By leaping from rock to rock, we manage to cross in about an hour -- before the sun begins to melt the snow.

From the glacier we proceed up a nearly-vertical grassy slope that is covered with purple forget-me-nots, blue violets and yellow butter-cups. The porters stop to put flowers in their hats and present me with a bouquet. After that, the incline of the meadow is so steep that we must wait while the porters climb ahead in case they send down a loose rock or start an avalanche.

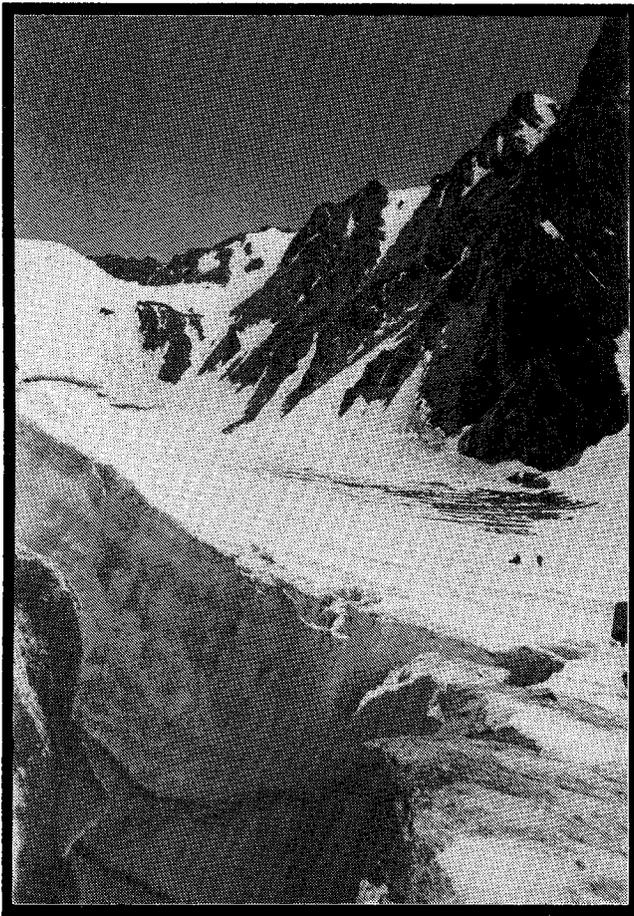
After another hour of climbing, we hit the crest of the first ridge and take in the spectacular view: the Sokha glacier far below us, the mountains behind us, and an enormous glacier of ice and rock rising before us toward the pass. On either side of the glacier are black granite peaks, as pointed as fangs and separated by avalanche-induced fans of snow.

We start climbing over the ice and rock toward the pass, but cannot see the top of it. I tell myself that it is just over the next rise, then the next, and the next...

Around noon we see the pass: a vertical wall of ice about three miles away that rises hundreds of feet from the floor of



Porters are hidden among huge boulders on the glacier that leads to the pass, a white wall of snow visible in the distance.



Tiny specks on the snow are porters, dwarfed by a gaping crevasse in the foreground and the sheer wall of the Gulabi Pass in the distance.

the glacier. The "pass" has not been named, I realize, because it is not a pass at all. It is a cirque, a ridge -- an impasse.

As I ponder the impossibility of crossing it, the porters announce that the pass will be named "Gulabi-la" -- "Rose Pass."

It is a great honor that they named the pass after me. Unfortunately, now I have no choice but to attempt a crossing. The porters, however, are more eager to name the pass than to climb it. They stage the first of many strikes they will conduct that day.

Changazi ignores them. After all, he says, they cannot not turn back without food. Neither can we, I think. But Changazi says crossing the pass is far easier than it looks and promises us that there is a meadow for camping just on the other side.

Pressing on, we cross a snow-covered glacier. The sky is a cloudless plate-blue. Our spirits are buoyed until Changazi suddenly signals for us to halt.

He pushes his walking staff into a strip of freshly-white snow. The stick sinks: a hidden crevasse. The previously lovely glacier suddenly appears ugly and ominous. It is covered with stripes of white snow, each one a potential crevasse waiting to swallow the unsuspecting trekker.

Immediately the porters go on strike again. Changazi urges them on: we are in a race against the blazing sun as it melts the glacier out from under our feet. Forming a line with the guides and porters, we grip a rope and cross the field. The sardars lead the way, prodding the snow with their walking sticks. I focus on stepping into the footprints left by the man in front of me, clenching a rope that has become my life line.

We skirt yawning gaps in the ice that look like the green gullets of a monster. We cross narrow ice bridges that drip water into deep crannies. One man tosses a large rock into a crevasse and we hear it hit the bottom after what seems like an eternity.

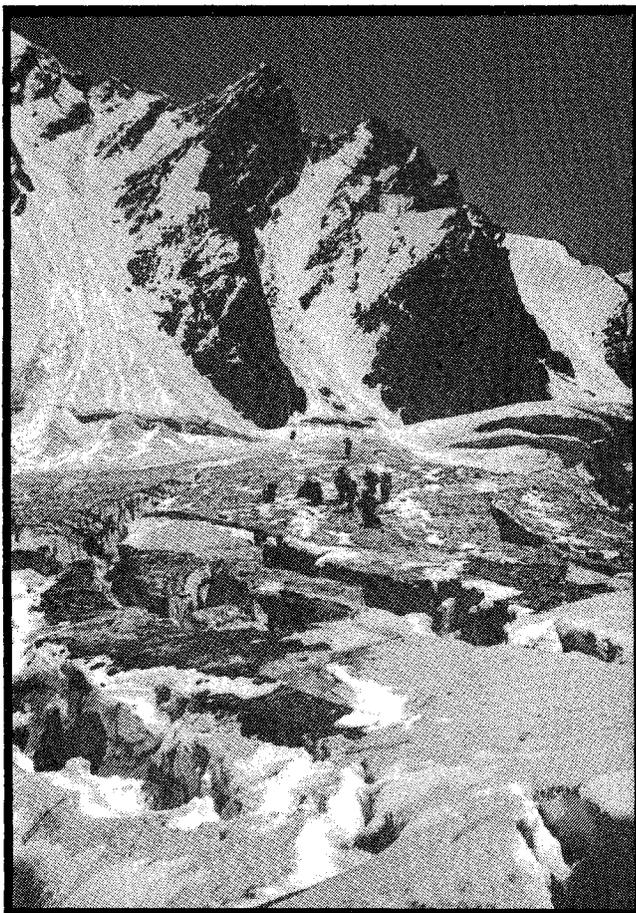
After two hours of walking over this crevasse-covered ice field, we near the bottom of the pass. It looks more and more like a sheer wall of ice, rising straight up for about 600 feet - the length of two football fields. But there is no choice but to move forward; the sun is melting the glacier and the danger of avalanches grows by the minute.

Two guides climb the first vertical snow field, stopping about 200 feet above to tie a rope to a wooden walking stick planted in the snow. We are going to pull ourselves up the ridge. I am the first person in line. At my feet is a four-foot crevasse that I must jump in order to begin the ascent. My mind flashes back to the first day of this trek when I was afraid to jump over a stream. A stream seems trifling in comparison to a crevasse.

Without looking into the icy gap, I hurdle it and grab the rope, pulling myself hand over fist up the icy slope. I kick the snow with the toe of my boot in an effort to create a stair-step in the mountainside. Twice I slip, grasping the rope as I struggle to regain my foot-hold.

This is one of the most dangerous things I have ever attempted, but it never occurs to me that I will fail. My instinct to survive has never been more honed than at this moment.

At the end of the first ice field, Tom and I scramble to a slope of loose rubble and rocks. We stop to wait for the others. I worry that we will send an avalanche of rocks and snow



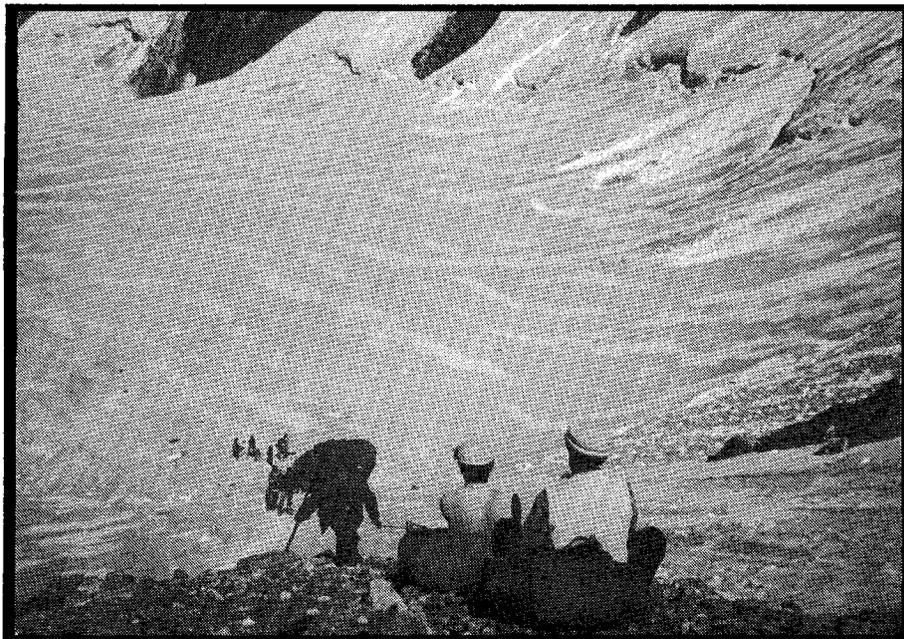
Crossing a glacier full of crevasses on our way to the Gulabi Pass.

down the mountainside. Carl and Jonathan come next and are almost knocked down the slope when one of the porters, driven by fear and impatience, suddenly leaps over the crevasse and grabs the rope in front of them. Carl's walking stick skids down the slope and he clutches the rope in desperation. I shout encouragement and silently vow to strangle the porter as soon as we reach the pass.

As the others reach the rock slope, Tom and I resume our ascent, scrambling on all fours up the gravel. At this stage, we must climb about 300 feet over a "scree" slope of loose rocks. My feet repeatedly skid out from under me, forcing me to cling to the rocky soil with only my hands as I send a shower of pebbles over the people below me. My legs are shaking from the strain, a condition that climbers call "sewing machine leg."

It takes 45 minutes to reach the top of the scree. I can barely breathe. But two of the guides are waiting there, nonchalantly puffing cigarettes and singing Balti folk songs. I collapse on a boulder upwind from them, gasping for oxygen. The view is grand: I can see the snowy ridge of the pass and the tops of the mountains just beyond the it. But I also see an even larger snow field and another rocky ascent between me and the top of the pass. At the summit the hunter is waiting for us. His silhouette appears tiny and impossibly far away. My heart sinks.

But there is no time to rest. The sun is already in the



Guides hold the rope as a porter hoists himself up the ice slope to the top of the pass.

West and my adrenaline is still high. We scramble over boulders to the next snow field. This one we will cross laterally. A misstep will send us hurtling 500 feet into the crevasse at the bottom of the ridge.

"Don't look down," says Tom as we begin to cross. I cling to the rope as we traverse the hundred-foot ice field. I look for stair-steps that the hunter supposedly cut with an ice axe. He must have had a dull blade because the gashes are hard to find. I resort to kicking the ice in an effort to plant my toes in the snow before I shift my weight.

Once we reach the opposite side of the snow field, Tom and I again watch anxiously as Carl and Jonathan make the crossing. Mid-way across the field, Carl slips -- holding himself by the rope as his long legs dangle down the icy slope. They both stop. Jonathan, who is in front and doesn't see Carl, grins at us and waves. I feel nauseated with fear. Thankfully, Carl regains his balance and they reach us.

Immediately Tom urges me to begin the final ascent, a 400-foot climb over yet another rocky slope. I attempt to stand, but the physical exertion, altitude, and adrenaline have made me dizzy. I collapse. The only way I can push myself to resume the climb is by imagining the grassy meadow that awaits us on the other side of the pass.

I slip often now, falling on my hands and knees among the rocks. As I crawl up the mountain, I notice wild flowers growing out of cracks in the rocks. A butterfly flutters by. Once again, danger and beauty meet in the high mountains.

I stare at the flowers and fantasize about remaining in this spot for the night or perhaps forever. Suddenly, Changazi appears at my side. He grabs my hand and begins to drag me up the slope. I am too tired to protest. As he carries me up the mountain I have only enough energy to watch my feet so that I don't trip. I glance back and see the guides pulling Carl and Jonathan up behind me.

Summit

At last, we reach the top. Gulabi La -- Rose Pass -- is a tiny ridge set amid enormous snow-capped mountains. It truly feels, as Edmund Hillary said of the Himalayas, that we have reached the "roof of the world" -- or at least the mezzanine.

We are about 18,000 feet high, looking down on mountains and watching birds soar below us. Peaks stretch to the horizon on all sides. The Shigar valley opens far below, a corridor of green meadows enveloped by endless layers of mountains.



The view from Gulabi Pass

As the sun drops lower, it casts a rosy glow on nearby ridges. We also are glowing, but with relief that everyone is alive and pride that we are the first trekkers to climb the Gulabi Pass. Even the chickens have made it to the top, although they are lying on the rocks and twitching.

Still, there is no way that we can spend a night at this altitude. Jonathan's breathing has become raspy and we fear it may be the first sign of acute mountain sickness. Carl is running a bad fever and we all have headaches. Moreover, there is no water and no place to pitch a tent.

I peer down the ridge in search of the grassy meadow that Changazi promised we would find just on the other side of the ridge. I see only sharp rocks and a steep descent. Changazi also looks concerned, the first time I have seen him worried. The porters want to camp here, but he urges everyone to begin walking down the mountain. He promises that we will reach the meadow in an hour or two.

We start the descent a bit after 5:00 PM. The slope is steep and I imitate the porters' by using my walking stick as a brake each time I begin sliding in the scree. Streams run down the mountain, creating hills and valleys that we must cross laterally to reach the campsite. The four of us cannot keep pace with the guides or porters. Within an hour they have disappeared in the distance, leaving us behind on the mountain.

Panic by Moonlight

Down, down, we scramble, our knees aching and our legs quivering from fatigue. But for a few biscuits, we haven't eaten since breakfast 13 hours ago. Bit by bit the daylight is disappearing. After two hours, there is no sign of a camp nor of any flat place to establish one. The four of us continue in silence, accompanied by two sardars. We are too tired to comment on the carpet of wild flowers beneath our feet or the peach-colored sunset against the mountains.

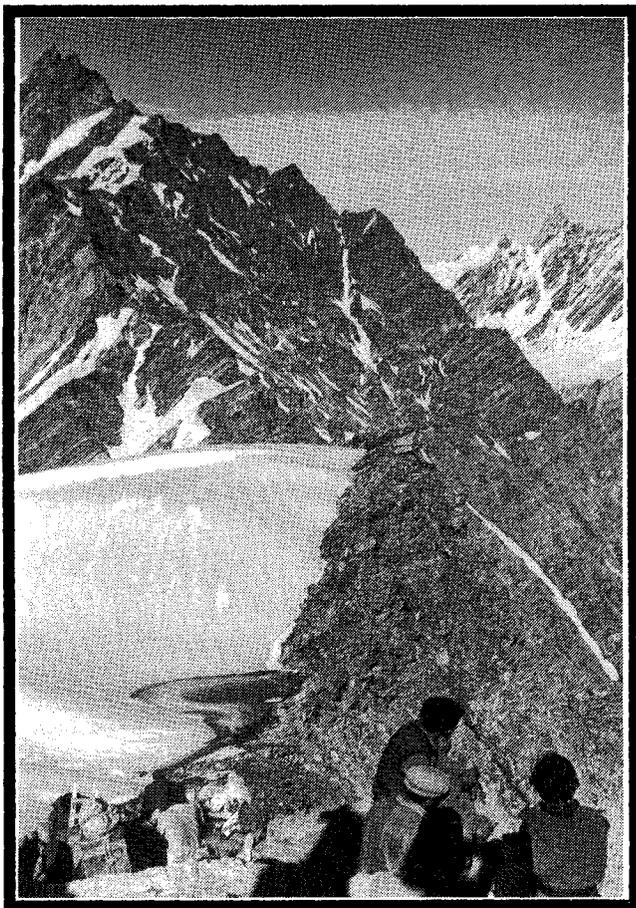
As darkness descends, we wonder aloud if we will be stranded on the mountain for the night. There is no sign of a camp or our porters. We have no food, but we stop at a dirty stream to fill our water bottles. Fortunately, I am carrying a flashlight. Unfortunately, the batteries are dead.

We are in a bad spot. Even if Changazi sends out a rescue team, without a flashlight to signal our position they are unlikely to see us. Strangely enough, I am not afraid. Perhaps having overcome so many challenges on this trek, I know that I can survive dangers I have never before confronted.

More likely, I am exhausted beyond the point of feeling fatigue or fear.

Soon it becomes clear that it is foolish to stumble on in the darkness without knowing the direction of the camp. But tonight is a full moon and there are no clouds; we can walk by moonlight in about an hour.

In the meantime, we must remain calm. I don a shiny silver "emergency blanket" in the hope that it will reflect the moonlight and signal our location to a rescue party. We sit on a rocky outcropping and wait for the moon to rise.



Contemplating the descent, to the right, down the Gulabi Pass ridge.

Half an hour later a tiny light appears in the distance. It must be a search party from camp. I stand and wave the silver emergency blanket, hoping that I won't look like another boulder. We pick our way down the rocky hillside toward the lantern, trying not to fall into the precipice that we know is on either side.

Twenty minutes later, we meet Changazi and the rest of the guides. They had gone ahead to bring back lanterns, but then forgot the kerosene and had to return to camp to get it. The guides offer their shoulders for support, but I refuse. I am filled with manic energy; my body is aching with fatigue but my adrenaline level must be as high as the Gulabi pass.

After another hour, we see the lights of the campsite. As we enter the camp I hear the mournful squawk of a chicken being killed and my heart soars. At long last, "lunch" and "dinner" will be eaten. After a 15-hour day without food, I resolve to stay awake until the chicken is cooked. Two hours later, the meal is served. I make a feeble attempt to gnaw a drumstick, but the meat is too tough and rubbery to pull off the bone. I give up and collapse into a dreamless sleep. The high altitude chickens have gotten their revenge.

Afterthoughts

The next day we descend through meadows, stopping to put wild flowers in our hats, collect rocks along a raging white



High Altitude Chicken at the Gulabi Pass

river and soak our feet in a medicinal spring. We spend the afternoon camped beneath an ancient walnut tree with branches that spread to shelter all 25 people in our party. For the first time in days, I feel out of danger. I gaze up at the granite spires of Gulabi Pass, which now seem impossibly high. I can hardly believe we were there just yesterday.

When the sun goes down, I walk to an isolated hot spring to soak my aching body in its healing waters as I watch the moon rise over the mountains.

Two days later we have retraced our steps through Bisil and Zil, returning by jeep down the Shigar Valley to Skardu. Over breakfast one morning I meet a man and a woman who have just returned from climbing K-2, the second highest mountain in the world and nearly one-third, or 10,000 feet, higher than the Gulabi Pass.

Chantal is a Frenchwoman who reached the top of K-2 after trying for four months. Although her retina was burned by the sun and she remained at the summit only two minutes, Chantal is exhilarated that she made it to the top. It means that she will have sponsors -- mostly sportswear companies -- to finance climbs for the next year. She says climbing is her "passion" and she scales eight to 10 mountains annually.

Thor, an American, was forced to turn back just 100 meters from the summit of K-2. "A voice inside my head told me that I would die if I didn't turn back right away," he says. "It would be easy to get depressed that I didn't reach the top and a lot of climbers would have gone on. But many people have died when they ignored their inner voice. It is a question of knowing your limits.

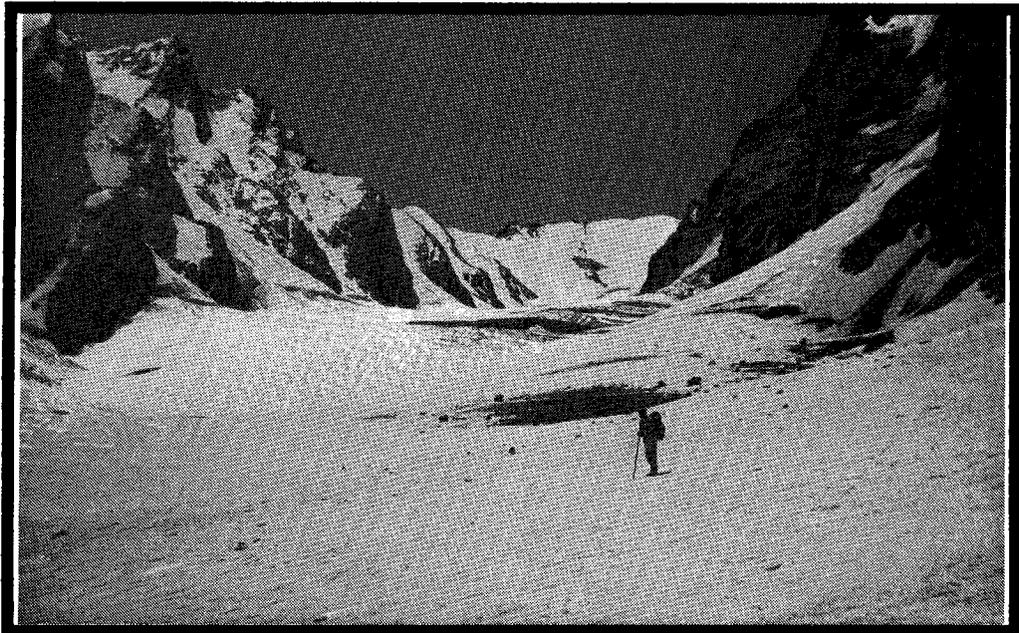
"All of us who climb, and especially anyone who climbs in the Himalayas, were children who felt a need to do something spectacular in order to be noticed," he adds. "To not climb a mountain would make us feel inadequate."

Thor describes the competition between the Americans and Russians to plant their national flags at the summit. He tells how climbers sacrifice fingers, toes, eyes and lungs to reach the tops of various mountains. He also says that climbers have no choice but to leave a tremendous amount of garbage on the mountainside. "You are not going to pack your trash out with you," he says. "Your only thought is to get back alive."

Listening to these professional climbers, I am reminded of what Changazi told me about the difference between a trek and a mountain-climbing expedition: "On an expedition, people are trying to conquer nature. On a trek, they are trying to become one with nature."

It is a nice distinction. But I don't think that I became "one" with the Himalayas. On the contrary, trekking made me fear and respect these mountains. They are cruel, terrible and magnificent. They are beautiful. They are dangerous.

Yet, I think it is natural for human beings to test the limits of their physical and mental endurance against the mountains. And, sadly, it may be inevitable that people will litter the mountainsides, as we seem to do the rest of our planet. But whatever assaults are launched by humankind, I believe the Himalayas shall remain forever unconquered and indestructible -- the Earth's reminder of a force that is greater than ourselves.



photos by C. Rose

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